THE BOOK

By Steven T. King

Chapter 1: Korea 1952

Airman Frank King looked down to check the gauges of his small twin propeller aircraft as he slid into the lead position in front of three B52 bombers.

“This is Sinatra, the road is paved and the skies are clear,” said King into his radio. Frank had received the Sinatra nickname early in his time at the Air Force Academy from his bunkmate who over heard him singing in the shower.

Sinatra led the decent to 6,000 feet and the bombers following behind him opened their bomb doors. The seven-plane squadron quickly approached a dark and silent city. There were no streetlights and no movement on the streets.

“Pyongyang must be the darkest capital in the world,” King thought to himself as he flew over the empty streets.

As the first bombs began to fall, Frank was startled by streaks of light that few past his canopy. Frank knew the sight of machine gun tracer rounds so he instinctively pushed his control stick forward and dove towards the source of the streaks.

“Guns on the ground” Sinatra screamed into the microphone as he continued to dive. “Bombers, stay on target. I’ll take the guns.”

Frank focused on the target and pulled the trigger as he dove through the streaks of yellow passing in the dark night. Frank’s priority was to take out the gun in order to protect the bombers and their mission. He heard the horrible of sound of three strikes to his hull echo through his cockpit but he remained on target and continued to hold the trigger. A huge ball of fire erupted in his sights directly in front of him and he quickly pulled the stick up and to the left to climb back into formation.

“Got’em!” Frank said into his radio. “Returning to point.” The bombers were closing the large payload doors and veering back west as Frank pulled up on his control stick. As he climbed he felt a steady pull against his hand as the stick failed to move the plane to the left.

“Pony Boy, I have a problem. I can’t turn. I think my ruder is shot.

“Coming down to take a look,” Pony Boy said as he dove off the starboard edge of the bomber formation to check on Frank.

“Sinatra, you are loosing fuel and your tale is shot to pieces. Try pulling to the right.”

“Negative Pony Boy, no control left or right,” sighed Frank as silence filled the airwaves and Pony Boy was not sure of what to say.

“Can you get to the sea? We can send a boat after you,” Pony Boy finally said while trying to sound upbeat.

“I am trying Pony. You are going to have to take the lead back to base. Get those bombers home,” said Frank.

“What are you going to do Sinatra?”

“I am not sure but I will figure something out. Just send the Big Mother after me.”

“Will do… May God keep you friend… Returning to base,” Pony Boy hesitated and then eventually pulled away to lead the bombers back to base.

Frank flew North into the darkness over the rural northern point of the Korean Peninsula. His fuel gauge was falling faster than the second hand on his watch and he new he had little time. The ocean was to the east and the North China Sea to the west but he was headed north and unable to turn left or right. Frank hoped and prayed that he would find a soft place to set it down but all he saw in the dark night was miles of forests. As the engines choked out and the plane went silent, Frank took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, “God please help me!” and he pulled the ejection handle. The glass canopy over his head flew off and the one-second delay to allow the canopy to clear before the seat launched seemed like an eternity.

The seat launched Frank out of his cockpit with such force his back popped as he rocked up. As the chair reached it’s peak altitude the chute deployed without any problems. During his slow decent, Frank watched his plane crash into the trees below and burst into flames. The fire illuminated the area and it was the only light he could see for miles. He knew an explosion like that would not be missed and the North Korean army would be looking for him soon. A slight wind blew him east, away from the wreckage.

Surprisingly, his descent was quiet and peaceful as he slowly fell towards the dark forest. As he got closer to the trees, the fall did not seem so slow. Hitting the canopy of the forest, branches scraped and scratched him as he fell through the dense branches stopping suddenly as his feet slammed the ground and his body quickly followed. A sharp pain shot from his right ankle up through his knee and he wanted to scream in agony but resisted, hoping to remain hidden.

Frank quickly pulled in his army green parachute while still laying on the ground. He looked in all directions and listened intently for any sign of the North Koreans. All he heard was the sounds of the forest. His actions were calm and deliberate as if he had been in this situation before but his mind whorled with questions.

*Should I move towards the wreckage or away? Should I turn on the emergency beacon or keep silent? Could I run if I had to?* Hundreds of questions and possible scenarios raced through his mind and he had only been on the ground less than a minute.

Frank patted his chest and thigh pockets with both hands like a guy who had lost his wallet. He was looking for his emergency rescue radio. He quickly found the small green plastic box and turned the only dial to the on position and a small red light began to flash on a steady beat. His location was being transmitted and Frank was comforted by the idea for a brief moment. He just hoped the North Korean’s weren’t able to track him or the Marines would be faster.

He felt around his ankle and figured it was broken. He had sprained his ankles before playing basketball and the pain now was ten times worse than he felt on the court. Knowing he would not be able to move quickly, he pulled himself up to the thick trunk of a pine tree. Refolding his parachute to use as a blanket and for camouflage, he pulled it around him and covered it with leaves, pine needles and dirt. The only sounds he heard was the leaves he rustled as he pulled them around to hide himself incase someone came along. Frank sat under the cover of the forest for several hours startled by every natural sound the forest made that night. He had four hours before light would illuminate his position. He knew he needed energy so he tried to sleep but pain combined with fear made that a difficult exercise. *How fast can the Marines get here?*

When the sun began to rise, amber rays of light peaked through the trees.

“I made it through the night,” Frank whispered to himself as he woke from his restless and fearful sleep. He reached inside his utility vest and pulled out a leather bound book from his inside pocket. Putting his thumbs together, he opened the tattered pages to whatever page he happened upon and began to read.

He continued to read as the forest awoke. He heard birds chirping and saw something like a squirrel dart across the ground in front of him. It reminded him of camping in the woods on his grandparents’ land when he was a boy.

After finishing a passage, he slowly closed the book, held it in his hands and a smile came across his light bathed face. Injured and not knowing who or what would find him, Frank figured he was in the toughest situation of his life but he was surprisingly content, calm and hopeful.

A few moments went by and he heard voices. They were Korean voices coming towards him from behind. He tucked the book back inside his vest and pulled a branch over his face. The voices seemed to be getting closer and were coming directly towards him. Frank could tell it was a man and a woman’s voice meaning probably not military but what would they do if they saw him? Frank lay perfectly still as his heart raced and he tried to control his breathing.

Abruptly, the voices stopped and so did his heart. *Had they seen him?* he thought. Frank held his breath as he felt them approach. The man picked up a stick and poked at the pile of leaves. Frank did not move. The man poked again and then he yelled something in Korean. Frank could not understand a word he said but knew the man was talking to him. Frank held his hands in the air and said the only thing he could think of.

“Hello, Hello, Hi,” Frank said several times quickly.

“I am Frank… from America.”

The man yelled something at the woman who Frank assumed was the man’s wife and she ran back the way they had come. The man was dressed in thick brown cotton pants and a heavy long sleeved shirt that buttoned high on the throat. The man grabbed the parachute and pulled it off of Frank’s legs in a quick jerk.

Broken Korean words and phrases Frank had learned on base ran through his mind as he tried to think of something to let the man know he meant no harm. The only word he could remember was “Help!” which he learned quickly after arriving in South Korea.

“D toh-om,” he said softly somewhat under his breath and then repeated it louder. The man stopped and looked intently at him and turned his ear towards him so he might understand what Frank was saying.

“D toh-om,” Frank said and pointed to his leg.

“D toh-om?” the man repeated in the form of a question.

The man looked down at the injured leg and finally understanding, excitedly said “D Toh-oom!” and knelt down at Frank’s ankle.

He felt around the leg and with every touch, Frank winced and gritted his teeth. Words came fast at Frank and he did not understand a single one but knew the man was trying to help. Abruptly, the man pulled Frank’s arm up, lowered his head under Frank’s armpit and pulled him on top of his back. The man was much smaller than Frank but was built stout. He stepped quickly up the hill and over the rough terrain as if he had walked this hill everyday of his life. The man maintained a steady pace and never stopped to rest. Within a few minutes, Frank smelled smoke from a small fire that was cooking something and he noticed four small huts positioned around the fire.

The man took him inside the first thatch hut they came to and gently laid him on the hard, compacted dirt floor. The woman from before came in through the doorway as the man scurried around looking for something. She yelled something in Korean as she pointed in Frank’s direction but the man did not pause or respond to her. He continued at what he was doing and grabbed a blanket and small stool. She continued to yell as the man worked. He placed the stool under Frank’s injured leg and reached for a jar of dry tea. He pushed past her and walked outside holding a small black kettle in one hand and the jar in the other.

Frank could hear the woman talking outside but the man never responded. After a few minutes the man returned to Frank’s side with a kettle and a towel soaked in dark murky bowling water. He took the tea-soaked towel and placed it around the injured ankle. Frank winced in pain again but tried to calm his reaction because he knew the man was trying to help and was putting his own life at risk by helping him.

“That feels better,” Frank said forgetting momentarily the man could not understand him. Frank’s smile communicated the message when his words could not.

In thick accented English the man in his thirties said slowly, “I… am… Kim.” That was the only sentence he knew in English.

“I am Frank,” he said as he patted his chest. “Thank you for your help.”

The two men smiled at each other and sat in silence, continuing to smile again and again. It was their only form of communication to fill the awkward silence.

Kim’s home consisted of walls made of mud and the roof had straw that was about a foot thick. There was not a traditional bed but only a straw mats and blankets that could roll out of the way during the day.

The woman who Frank assumed was Kim’s wife entered the small room with a bowl and a pair of chopsticks.

“Kiami-Chi,” she said and he answered “Thank you,” in English.

Kim pointed to his wife and said, “Dae.”

“I am Frank. Frank,” he said pressing his palm to his chest as he had before. She smiled and exited with a nod of her head.

Frank ate the fermented cabbage and actually enjoyed it better than any Kiamichi he had ever tasted on base or in the restaurants in the South.

The next morning Frank awoke with this new friend sleeping on a bamboo mat next to him but did not see Dae. The sun had just started to peek over the trees and beams of light entered the room through the cracks in the wooden door. Kim awoke and stretched his arms.

“Good Morning,” Frank said.

“Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” and Frank assumed that was good morning in Korean. He practiced it under his breath and if he awoke there the next morning he would try it out. But Frank hoped help would be there soon. He knew he was in enemy territory and despite the hospitality of his new friend, Frank knew he needed to get out of there. If the North Korean Army found him they would torture or kill both him and Kim.

Kim headed out the door leaving it slightly open and helped Dae start the fire. Frank looked at the emergency radio and it was still transmitting his location. Unable to help them with making breakfast, Frank pulled out the old book and began to read. A few stories in, he heard several men approach the huts and talk to Kim as he stoked the fire. Frank peeked through the cracked door and saw four North Korean soldiers with rifles talking to Kim. Frank placed the book back in his vest and pulled out his pistol. He covered it with the blanket and pretended to be asleep while trying to watch through the sliver of space between his almost closed eyelids.

*There are four of them and I have seven shots*, thought Frank while his heart raced and he listened intently. Dae spoke not a word and Kim was speaking quickly. Frank could see one of the soldiers began to walk around looking into the huts and he made his way towards Frank’s new home. Right as he pushed the door further open and Frank prepared to take a shot he heard Dae’s voice also at the door. She offered him a cup of hot tea and he steeped towards her to take the cup and joined the rest of the group drinking around the fire.

After finishing their tea, the men walked down the hill towards where Frank landed the day before. Frank swallowed hard and knew the woman who did not want him there in the first place had saved his life.

The couple came in and closed the door behind them. Kim wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and Dae gave him a nervous smile.

“Thank you, Komapsumnida,” Frank said and he disengaged his .45 and placed it back in his vest.

Three days later, Frank awoke as the sun beamed in through the cracks as it had every morning this week but Kim was already up and working on breakfast by the time Frank awoke. For the first time, Frank struggled to his feet using a farm tool as a crutch and hobbled out to the cooking fire. To Frank’s surprise, there was a crowd outside going about life. Kim’s parents and sister were all preparing for the day. Kim’s parents lived in the hut on the far end and stayed out of Franks view through the door for the last few days. Kim met him with a smile and pulled up a small stool that was only a few inches off the ground and offered it to Frank. Frank was no longer clean-shaven and his beard was starting to show. He had not had a shower in a week but was unsure if Kim or Dae had bathed either since he arrived.

Frank made himself as comfortable as a 6 foot 2 inch, 210-pound man can on an 8-inch squatting stool. After struggling to say “Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” to everyone in the family, he pulled out the leather book to avoid the awkward stares and silences. As he read, he heard the sounds of a helicopter in the distance.

Kim said “He--lo,” and grabbed a white shirt from inside his hut and the radio off of Frank’s survival vest. Kim then sprinted to the top of the hill above his family village and stood at a break in the trees waving the shirt in his left hand and holding the transmitter in his right. Two green helicopters circled the hill and when Kim realized that he had the attention of the pilot, he hung the shirt in a nearby tree and ran back down to the hut with the transmitter while the chopper started to land.

With excitement in his voice, Kim returned to the hut yelling for Frank.

“Frank, Americans, Frank Americans!”

“*Big Mother had finally made it*,” Frank thought to himself as a feeling of excitement and relief filled his body.

Frank was already to his feet and hobbling along towards Kim. Without hesitation, Kim put the transmitter on Frank’s vest and threw him over his bare shoulder as he had a week ago. Bounding up the Hill, the sound of the helicopter got louder and Frank could feel the wind from the blades as they reached the clearing. Two medics and two other soldiers jumped from Big Mother, grabbed Frank from Kim and placed him on a green stretcher.

“We are here to take you home Captain,” said one of the medics trying to be heard over the sound the helicopter.

“Thanks guys. I am grateful for the lift but I have been well taken care of thus far,” said Frank.

As the medics strapped Frank into the stretcher, he motioned for Kim to come over. Frank reached into his vest and pulled out the brown book from his chest pocket.

“Komapsumnida my friend,” Frank said as he handed the book to Kim.

Surprised, Kim shook his head but Frank pressed the book into Kim’s chest and said “Komapsumnida my friend.”

“Thank you Chin-guu,” Kim replied.

“This book will give you strength.”

Kim nodded as if he understood but Frank knew he did not understand his words. The medics picked up the stretcher and quickly moved him into the helo. Frank and Kim did not break eye contact the entire time.

Frank waved and so did Kim as Frank few off leaving North Korea and Kim forever. Kim held the book tightly with both hands and looked at the cover. It read in Korean, “The Book”

Chapter 2

Kim walked down the hill wondering why the words were written in Korean. He had seen Frank read the book several time and never noticed the cover had Korean letters. He thumbed through the worn brown pages expecting to see unreadable English but he was wrong.

“*This is in Korean*,” Kim noticed. “*Could Frank read Korean? He struggled with three words. There is now way*,” he thought.

Kim arrived back as his home to find his wife sweeping the dirt between their home and Kim’s parents home as if nothing had happened.

“Look at this book. It is in Korean,” he said.

“Is this Frank’s book? How did you get it?” she asked as she thumbed through the pages.

“Yes, he gave it to me before he left.”

“How could Frank read Korean?”

“I don’t think he did,” Kim replied.

Dae handed the book back to Kim and he went inside propping the door open to let in some light. He squatted in the corner, placed the book on the hard ground between his feet and began to read from the first page.

Time passed faster than ever before as he read page after page turning as fast as he could. Dai came to the doorway.

“Dinner is ready, would you like to eat in here or outside?”

Kim did not respond but continued to read.

“Kim, dinner is ready,” she said again.

“I will be right there,” he finally answered.

Dai went back to her kettle and spooned out the boiled cabbage into bowls. Kim finally closed the book, looked up for the first time in hours, smiled and walked outside to join his family.

“The book is fascinating,” Kim said to Dai. “You will love it.”

“Then bring it outside and we can read it together after dinner,” Dai said.

Kim ate quickly and then went back to the first page and began reading out loud.

Weeks went by and as summer turned to fall, the cold weather rolled into the Korean pensile. There was not a lot of work to be done in the fields so Kim used the time to read to his wife. Each night they spent reading together the closer they grew to each other. Kim would also read to his parents outside the huts before they went to sleep.

Life was still filled with the same struggles and chores as before but their outlook on life was different. The war which had found it’s way into their home now seemed a world away.

One cold winter night, Kim was reading in his parents home and his father and mother dosed off. As he finished a passage, Dai slowly reached across him, closing the book and pulling his hand towards her. The couple quietly made their way across the dark lawn to their own hut and pulled the door closed. Not only had the book made them happier during the day, they also enjoyed each other more at night.

A few months later the winter slowly left them and the water began to thaw.

“It is time to set the rice now. My father and I have work to do,” Kim said to his lovely wife who wanted him to come back to the mat.

“I will have a surprise waiting for you when you get home,” she said.

Kim and his aging father walked down the hill to the rice fields and began to work. Slowly moving through the rows, bent over side-by-side, they poked holes in the dark rich soil with pointed sticks about six inches long with a curved handle. They dropped in a few seeds and covered each hole with a kick of their foot. Kim had done this a thousand times and his father had planted thousands more than Kim. They worked quietly but on occasion would speak will continuing the process of planting.

“When are you going to make us some help?” his father asked. “I will not be able to help you in this field forever.”

Kim continued to work without responding immediately. It had not been the first time he had thought about this idea and he knew Dae was ready for a child. He was ready for a child but was not sure when it would happen.

“I am not sure. Maybe next year,” Kim finally replied.

The two continued without another word, taking only a few breaks to stretch and then bending over to work again. They worked until the sun fell below the trees and they could no longer see the lines of the field. The two walked back up the hill and as they arrived home Kim’s mother yelled across courtyard at her husband.

“Come here. We are eating alone tonight,” his mother said to his father.

Kim smiled as this father and anticipated the surprise he had been promised earlier. Dae was standing at the doorway dressed in her best traditional Korean dress. The yellow garment was tight across the shoulders and shined in the moonlight. A red belt tied high on her body and the fabric belled out from the belt. Kim had only seen his wife wear this for weddings and very special family events. It was the only dress she had and she looked great in it.

“You look as pretty as the yellow flowers on the hill,” he whispered to his wife. In a pretend shy way she grabbed his hand, pulled him in and closed the thatch door. Kim was dirty from working in the fields and she led him to the corner of the home to the water basin. She removed his shirt and he sat on the short stool next to the water. Protecting her dress, she knelt beside him and placed a towel over her knees and began to slowly wash his feet and slowly moved to wash his hands, chest, and face in a slow and calming way. Then she gracefully rose, took the towel and dried her husband from behind him. She placed a clean white shirt, his wedding shirt, over his shoulders and he finished putting it on. She handed him his dark dress slacks and jacket and moved across the small room to place dinner on the mat.

“What is all this for?” he said as he buttoned the last button of his collar?

“I told you had a surprise for you,” she quietly and mischievously answered him.

Kim moved the stool over to the dinner mat and sat down after dawning his coat. Dai always knew he was a hansom Korean man but seeing him in his dark suite she remembered just how attracted she was to him.

Dae handed him a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. She took her bowl and the couple began to eat the best meal they had had since New Years Day. Dae prepared some fish she picked up at the market while Kim was in the field. They and most Koreans loved fish but because they lived two days walk from a major river it was tough to get and expensive so they only ate fish only on special occasions.

“This is a wonderful surprise my dear woman,” Kim said smiling.

“This is not the surprise. You will have to be patient for the surprise,” she said continuing in her quiet secretive demeanor.

Kim looked at his beautiful wife in her favorite yellow dress and knew he was the most blessed man in all of Korea. Through the entire dinner they rarely broke eye contact and constantly smiled at each other. Dae moved off of her stool and sat in Kim’s lap with her nose just under his chin.

“Are you ready for your surprise,” she whispered.

“Yes, please.”

She stretched her head so her lips were right beside his ear and whispered the exciting words. “We are going to have a baby.”

“What?” he asked astonished.

“I am pregnant.”

A huge smile came over his face and he grabbed his wife by the shoulders pulled her even closer. She could hear his heart beak increasing with each moment he thought about the new baby.

After a long time, Kim reached over and picked up the leather book and he read her an ancient story about a woman who received some exciting news about a baby that was given to an older woman. In the story, she and her husband praised God for the gift and so did Kim and Dae for they knew a child was a gift from God. They held each other into the night and feel asleep dreaming of the future.

###

After the war ended in 1953, communist rule began to take over even in the rural areas and visits by the local Socialist Party leader became a regular occurrence.

“Mr. Kim, in order to secure a happy life in this world and the next for your coming child you must become a member of the workers party of Korea,” the party leader in a dark black suite said sitting on the stool by the cooking fire.

“What do you mean?” Kim asked. “I know how to secure a happy life for my child.”

“The Workers Party of Korea will provide security and prosperity for your children and your children’s children after you have died,” the party member said as if he had said those words a thousand times.

“I do not need to join your party. My family is strong and we can take care of each other. Besides, I know what will happen for me in the end. I have read and I understand,” Kim said in a confident but respectful way with his agreeing wife kneeling beside him.

“What have you read?” the party member asked.

“The Book.”

“A Korean book?”

“Yes, it is Korean,” Kim, said.

“Where did you get this book?”

Knowing that if the party member knew it came from an American who he called ‘Imperialists’ he would take it away. Kim avoided the question and said, “It was a gift.”

“May I see this book?” he asked authoritatively.

Dae who had been sitting quietly grabbed her husband’s knee and with great anxiety in her voice said, “It’s time!”

“It is time? Now?” he asked.

“Yes, Now,” she answered and beads of sweat beaded up on her forehead.

“Sir, please go fetch the doctor in town,” Kim said to the party official.

Kim screamed towards his parent’s home, “Mother, it is time for the baby!”

The official went running out of the family village and Kim’s mother passed him running towards them. She and Kim helped Dae into the hut and placed her on the mats.

She examined Dae and said, “We can not wait for the doctor. The baby is going to come now.”

“Are you sure?” Kim asked confused.

“Yes. I did not have a doctor when I had you and she will not have a doctor when she has your child. Heat some water and soak this blanket in it.”

Kim ran outside and looked for the kettle. His father sat on the short stool and calmly said, “Relax my son. Slow down and take your time.”

At that moment, Kim stumbled over the kettle he was looking for. He took the kettle, fetched the water and placed it over the ever-constant fire. His father just watched and smiled. While waiting for the water to boil, Kim heard the most amazing sound he had ever heard. He heard the crying of his new daughter.

The moment Kim walked in the door of the hut with the wet towel in his hand, the new grandmother and acting midwife said, “Bring me the towel and water.”

She took the towel from her son who was frozen at the door in amazement, and she cleaned the baby. In a moment he would never forget, he knelt beside his sweating but lovely wife and his mother placed the baby in Dai’s arms. The couple began to weep with happiness and Kim called her “Hea” meaning grace. The three of them hugged together and were so happy and content with each other that they did not notice Kim’s mother leave the room to give them this moment alone.

After a while of holding each other, Kim reached over to the shelf and picked up the brown book and turned to the first page. That night he began the habit of reading from the book every night. Dai enjoyed the nightly readings and could not be happier holding her baby in her arms and hearing her husband’s calm voice read the engaging stories. Many nights, Kim would get so enthralled reading in the story that he would not realize that Hea and Dai had fallen asleep.

When Hea reached the age of five, it was time for her to go to school. The party official that had been there the day Hea was born came to collect Kim’s signature and deliver a red scarf to Hea for her first day of school.

“The scarf is the symbol of the Children’s party who support our Dear Leader. It is required to be worn at school by all good Korean children,” the official explained. The official wanted Kim to show his allegiance to the Workers party and the Dear Leader by signing his name and wearing the colors of the party.

Kim thought for several moments. He did not see a need to sign the document or to be a member of the party but his daughter was five years-old and would not be able to receive an education unless he signed it. She could already read from the book but Kim knew she needed to be educated and needed to learn more than a farmer could teach her. Kim took a deep breath and reluctantly signed the paper, becoming a member of the Workers Party of Korea. The official pined a red pin on Kim’s warn and ragged farmers clothes and gave a red scarf to Hea.

“School starts tomorrow. Wear this and you will be given a book from our Great Leader,” the official said as he stood and moved towards the path.

Hea was excited about receiving a new book. She loved the stories in the one book she knew and looked forward to another one but her father was not so excited. He sat in silence the entire night and for the first time went to bed without reading with his family so Hea took the book and read it to herself.

When the sun rose the next morning, Kim and Dae walked Hea to her first day of school. The school was a two-room building with wooden desks inside. One room was for kids 12 and older. The other room was for kids 5-11 years old. Every child was wearing the same thing. The boys wore navy blue suits with a red scarf and the girls wore a navy blue skirt, white shirt and the read scarf but Hea was wearing the brown skirt and shirt that she always wore in the fields with her father. Kim was getting nervous that his daughter was not prepared and he did not have the money to go buy a uniform. He looked around and other young students arrived with only a scarf and Kim realized that the new students would get a uniform from the school.

Kim and Dae knelt down, hugged Hea and said goodbye. She ran up the two steps into the class, stopped and waved at the top of the stairs.

“Sit down. Everyone Sit down. I am Kyon,” said the teacher of the younger class. The entire class became silent in a moment. Hea looked around to see what the slightly older kids were doing. They sat up straight as if they were sitting at attention with their fingers interlocked and on the desk in front of them. Hea did the same.

The students were seated in rows according to age or class with the older, thus taller ones on the back row and the youngest and new students on the front row. The teacher was dressed in a traditional Korean dress like the one her mother only wore to weddings. Hea wondered if she would wear the same dress every day. The teacher walked over to a phonograph player, a device Hea had never seen before. The sounds of brass horns and drums came from the large metal horn on the device. All of the students rose to their feet and looked to the large portrait of a man Hea had never seen before. Hea followed what the other students did. When the music finished, everyone sat down and the teacher began handing out books to the youngest students. The older students removed their book from their desks.

Hea was startled by the loudly growing sound of the 24 students simultaneously reading from the book behind her. She quickly found the page and joined in. Of all the new students, she was the only one that did so. The teacher sitting at her desk looked at Hea while she read. When the page was finished she walked over to her. “Hea, how did you learn to read?” she asked.

Hea stood up and said, “My father taught me.”

“That is good so you already know this book.”

“No teacher. I read a different book,” she said unknowingly to the problems this would cause.

“You read a book other than this book?”

“Yes teacher.

“Thank you. You may be seated,” and Kyon returned to the front of the room.

The older students in the back began to whisper because they knew the only books they were allowed to read were the books written by the Great Leader.

“Silence. It is time to begin,” and Kyon started class.

###

Hea walked home from school and was met by her mother where the path to her family village met the road.

“How was your day?” she asked her daughter.

“I was the only one in my grade who could ready and the teacher asked me questions,” she said confidently.

“That is wonderful,” her mother answered with a proud smile.

The two walked up the path and inside their family hut. Kim dropped to his knees to hug and speak to his educated daughter.

“What happened at school today?”

“I was the only one in my grade who could ready and my teacher asked what books I read and I told her about the book we read every night,” Hea said excitedly.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing really.”

That night the close family of five, read from the book. Seated in her father’s lap, she listened to the words of her father while she followed his finger across the pages. Quickly her grandparents fell asleep and Hea was soon put to bed as well.

The next morning Dae took Hea to school and Kim went to work the fields with his father. They had only worked a couple of rows when the party official arrived and walked across the dry raised path of the rice field.

“I need to see the book you have been reading,’ he said without a proper greeting.

Kim continued to pull the weeds from around the green stalks pushing though the muddy water at his feet. Kim was using the time to think about the question.

“Why do you need to see my book?”

“Because the only book we need are those given to us by our Great Leader.”

Kim stopped what he was doing, looked at the official and without responding began walking up the hill to his home. The man followed two steps behind. Kim went inside his hut, got the book and brought it to the official who was standing at his door. As Kim handed the book to him, Kim noticed the letters on the cover slowly disappeared fading into the leather.

The man thumbed through the pages and started asking, “Do you read this every ni…” but ended the sentence because of surprise. He flipped through to the end of the book and back to the beginning.

“These pages are blank,” he said.

Kim kept quiet confused as well.

“Are you trying to trick me? I know you read from a book every day and I need to see that book.”

“This is the book I read to my family.”

“Let me see the real book,” he said emphatically.

“This is the only book I have,” Kim answered.

“Then let me in your house so I can see for myself.”

Kim stepped aside from the door and let the man dropped the blank book on the ground outside and entered the hut. He looked around the small room and saw three sleeping mats rolled up, some food, clothing and a fading photo of the entire family. He lifted the mats and moved the other things around but did not find another book.

‘So you just make up these stories and look as if you are reading to your daughter?”

“I do not know sir.”

“I will be back one day soon and then you will become a faithful servant of the workers party of Korea,” he said and turned to leave. Kim watched him walk away, picked up the book off the ground and wiped it clean seeing the letters embossed on the cover.

After he left, Kim found a bag and dug a square whole in the ground about 10 inches deep between his home and his parent’s home. He lined the walls with some flat boards and cut a wooden lid for the hole and coved it will dirt. When Hea came home he explained the power of the book and that the family must protect the book and not tell anyone about it. He walked Dae and Hea over to the hole and showed them how to hide the book in the ground.

Each night after reading the stories, one of them would go outside and burry the book in order to keep it from being taken away.

###

Hea grew older and she realized the ideas and views of her Great Leader she has been taught in school are very different than those her father had been teaching her in practice, his words and through the worn pages. By the time she was 14, the evening reading became longer and more of a question and answer secession. Hea’s mind had many deep questions that were difficult for Kim to answer but he always tried. Sometimes the answer was, “ I do not know. We will have to read again to find that answer.” Other times Kim would use his own life experiences to explain tough answers to his intelligent and intrigued daughter.

Hea never spoke of the book outside of the family but at school her eyes and speech was filled with hope, joy and freedom and her teacher and classmates noticed something was different in her.

While walking home from school down the same road she had walked for the last 10 years, a boy in her class stopped her.

“Why do you think you are better than the rest of us?” he asked.

“I do not think I am better than you our anyone else. I just have hope in the future and I believe in something greater than anything I have ever seen.”

“You mean you believe in our Great Leader? We all do,” he said in an inquisitive tone.

Hea lowered her head and she continued to walk home but the boy followed.

“I believe in something greater than him.”

“But nothing is Greater than our Dear Leader. He saved us from the imperialists and will always care for every Korean.”

She spoke softly and thoughtfully and answered him.

“I respect and support our Dear Leader but I also believe in someone who is greater than he.”

“I do not understand but if you are not carful the Party is going to arrest you for saying these things.”

Hea lowered her head and continued to walk in silence. The boy did not say anything more.

###

Kim and his father were working in the field when they heard Dai scream. Kim dropped the bag of rice seed, ran up the hill and saw four men in dark suits. One grabbed his wife by the arm and threw her to the ground.

“What are you doing to her,” Kim screamed as he ran and two of the men moved towards him and tackled him to the ground.

Hea was walking down the path when she heard the commotion near her home. She saw one of the men grab her mother by the hair and drag her across the dirt. Hea tried to scream out but the at the moment she did a hand reach around from behind her and covered her mouth. Fear ran through her veins but quickly subsided when she heard the familiar voice of her grandfather whispering in her ear to keep quiet. She knelt down behind a tree out of sight and watched as they beat Kim and Dae in front of his home. Her grandfather quietly moved around to the back of the house.

“Where is the book,” they yelled again and again and with each question came another blow. One of the men held him down while the other kicked and punched him. Blood streamed down his face and into his eyes. The third man pulled Dai into a green military truck and the fourth searched the home destroying everything in the process.

“Where is it,” and the question was immediately followed by another blow to the head.

Hea saw her grandfather quietly sneek between the two homes and crawl to the hole where they kept the book. He quietly removed the cover, removed the book and replaced the dirt. Kim saw his father between the homes and behind the man who was beating him so he fought to keep the attention on him allowing his father to get the book and get away returning to Hea without being detected.

“You must take this and run. Get far away from here!” he said. But Hea cried and shook her head no.

“You must go and go now!” Hea remained frozen behind the tree.

“I must try to rescue your mother,” he said as he left her again.

He approached the man holding his daughter and he took a swing at the soldier but the old man was no match for the twenty-year-old government agent who quickly knocked him to the ground with a strike to the head with his club. Hea winced and covered her mouth with her hand to avoid making a sound. She heard the question again.

“Where is the book? We know you have it. But Kim remained silent. The man beating him wiped the sweat from his brow and pulled a black rope or cord from his pocket. Hea thought the man was going to beat her father with the cord but he tied his legs and arms and the two men drug him to the truck.

Three of the men quickly loaded the two into the truck while one of them walked over to the center of the family village. He took some straw, dipped it into the cooking fire and then set the thatch roof of Kim and Dai’s home on fire. The homes burned quickly and a thick black smoke filled the air as they drove away with Kim and Dai in the back.

Hea ran to her grandfather who was slowly beginning to move.

“Grand pa, are you o.k.”

“Yes, you must go,” he struggled to say through the blood that filled his mouth and throat. “You have to run.”

“No, why did this happen? Where did they take them?”

“To a work camp and the men will come back looking for you. They are probably looking for you now,” he said.

“You must take the book and run. Go now.”

“No, I will not leave you.”

“I am an old man and I have lived my life. I am prepared to leave this world but you have an important life to live,” he said.

“But where will I go?”

“I do not know but trust the book to guide you.”

“Hea had the book in the waist of her school skirt and she ran back to her grandparents’ home to find her lying on the floor. She found the little bit of money they had saved, some cabbage and some fruit that had been thrown across floor when the men were searching for the book.

She kissed her grandmother, cried as she said goodbye and then ran back to her grandfather who was struggling for each breath. She knelt beside him. Kissed his forehead and she held his hand. He squeezed her hand slightly, closed his eyes and took his last breath as Hea’s tears droped from her chin to his face.

Chapter 3

The rural area she lived in was entirely supported by the rice crop and the checkerboard fields could be seen for miles in the distance. With only a small sack half filled with some food and the book, she ran down the hill into the rice fields. She marched from one field to another walking along the six-inch mud dam that separates the field into paddies. Hea found some twine left over from a previous harvest and tied the book to her bare back and pulled her shirt down to hide it.

Just before the sun fell below the horizon she reached a wooded area. She had been running for at least four hours without stopping. She sat down beside a tree and tried to catch her breath. As her breathing slowed, tears fell. Her grandparents were killed in front of her and her parents had been taken to a work camp.

“How could this happen?” she asked herself out loud.

She pulled the book from behind her and opened it to the center. As she began to read, tear drops fell from her chin onto the pages smudging the characters a little. Soon the tears quit falling and she was comforted as she imagined her father’s voice reading to her and it was as if he were sitting there with his arm around her shoulders. She read until she could no longer hold her heavy eyes open and slowly placed the leather book under her head and fell asleep against the tree.

Hea awoke to the sound of a large truck driving nearby. She knew the only vehicles she had ever seen in her country were government officials or military. She assumed they must have been looking for her.

She jumped to her feet, grabbed her stuff and ran deeper into the woods away from the road that continued north to avoid being seen. Hea could smell and see smoke from a small cooking fire off in the distance and she made her way towards the beautiful thin line of gray smoke painted on the blue morning sky. When she arrived she saw a woman who looked like her grandmother and she paused for a moment.

“Hello, do you have any water?” she asked the woman.

The woman jumped after being startled by the sound of a stranger’s voice.

“Of course my child. Drink this and I will make you some ginger tea.”

As the woman began to bail some water from the large basin and pour it into the kettle she asked Hea, “I know where you are going but where did you come from?”

“How do you know where I am going?” Hea asked.

“Because you are not the first to cross my fields and I can see the fear in your eyes.”

“I am from just on the other side of the mountain,” Hea said.

“You are a long way from home my child? Why are you running and why are you alone?”

“The Party arrested my parents and killed my grandparents.”

“My dear child, why did such a thing happen?”

“Because my father has a book that was not written by our Dear Leader,” Hea said with a hint of fear not knowing if the woman would turn her in.

“And they killed your grandparents for that too?’

“I saw the entire thing. My grandparents were killed trying to stop the officials from beating my mother and father. When my father would not tell them where the book was, they put them in the back of a truck and I am sure they took them to the work camp in Haengyong.”

The woman poured the steaming water into a clay cup and dropped in some tealeaves and a slice of ginger root. She handed the cup to Hea with her right hand and moved her left arm across her body placing the fingers of her left hand under her elbow which was a sign of hospitality and that she meant no harm to Hea.

“Where is the book now?” the woman asked as she pulled up a small log and sat down beside Hea.

“I have it with me.”

“Then you are not safe. You must give the book to the Secret Police or they will continue to hunt for you and could kill you.”

“I could never give up the book. This book is very special to me. My father died trying to protect it.”

There was a long pause and Hea could read the woman’s disagreement with her idea. Changing the subject, the woman asked, “When was the last time you ate?”

“Before I went to school yesterday.”

“Let me make you some rice in soup. It will give you strength for your journey,” she said as she got to her feet to begin.

Hea ate the soup and continued her journey across hundreds more rice patties. After three days of walking she could finally see a city on the horizon that must be Dandong, China.

Gray buildings rose above the tree lines ten to twenty stories, the largest buildings she had ever seen. There was also a gray haze that hovered over the city. This gray sight was more than a border city; Dandong was a city of freedom. But between her and freedom were soldiers, a rusty barbed wire and a river she had heard was filled with explosives to kill anyone who tried to swim across.

Hea felt her best shot was to try and swim the river but if she failed it would cost her life.

“*Should I take such a challenge?* *Is it worth the risk*,” she thought to her self.

There were no trees to take cover under and soldiers were constantly patrolling the border. She made her way to the middle of a rice field and laid face down till dark. It was almost harvest time so the grain grew high and the ground was dry. Every sound she heard she jumped and fear began to take over. She placed the book on the ground in front of her face and began to read. As she turned a page, she dreamed of a place she could read freely and read this book or any other book she might find without fear.

The sun finally sat and a full moon rose casting a beautiful blue light over the top of the rice and the lights in the distances signaled her freedom so she thought. She crawled through the field on her hands and knees to displace and move as few stems of as possible. Her knees bleed and her palms were cut by dried rice husks and chaffs that laid from a previous harvest. Twelve rice fields later; she reached a barbed wire fence on the bank of the Tumen River.

With her book tied to her back again and covered by the waist of her now torn and dirty school skirt she had been wearing for days she looked for a place she could fit through the wire. The fence had been built more than twenty year ago and was not well maintained so it was not long before she found a place she could raise one wire with a stick, hold another down with a rock and crawl through.

As she tried to fit without cutting her arms and legs the book and her shirt caught the top wire etching a long deep scratch into the back of the leather cover. She lowered her self to get through and quickly pulled her legs through and removed the stick and rock allowing the fence to bounce back into place. She quickly lowered herself into the cold but gentle moving river and gasped as her body was submerged. The water was only about four feet deep but she choose to swim with just her head above water rather than wade so the patrols on the bank would not see her. She swam quickly and quietly rarely breaking the surface of the water with her hands. She swam as fast as she could across the thirty feet of polluted murky water but she did not swim fast enough. A spotlight illuminated the water around her. Guards in a tower behind and south of her were yelling for soldiers to catch her. North Korean soldiers raced towards her running on the bank behind her.

Hea did not see anyone waiting for her on the bank as she approached so she continued to swim for her life as the light followed her every stroke.

Bullets splashed around her at the same time she heard the guns fire. She continued to swim with all she had. The rising bank shortened her strokes and she began to crawl as fast as she could into the brush as the shots continue. She pulled herself through the vines and grass out of sight from the Koreans and the shots stopped.

The silence lasted only a second before she heard soldiers coming towards her on the bank she just landed. Hea ran down the bank in the opposite direction of the sound not knowing where she was running but just ran for the lights. The Chinese soldiers did not fire upon her but gave chase.

“*If I can only make it to the crowded town, maybe I can blend in,*” she thought as she fought her quick breaths and racing heart.

She finally broke free from the brush and stepped onto a concrete street. The men and women walking in the streets were wearing dark clothes with thick pants and she was soaking wet in a torn and dirty school uniform that was dripping water.

Walking down a street lined with apartment buildings and a crazy web of electrical wires hanging above, she was the only person on the street at this time of night. She heard the footsteps of three men walking up behind her. She looked over her left shoulder and saw the outline of soldiers with guns holstered walking only a few steps behind her. She picked up her walking pace but trying to remain at a walk. As she felt the men closing in on her an iron door swung open and a man stepped out and griped her arm tightly. Hea gasped for air and pulled against him but he forced her inside and pulled the door closed. As the door slammed he covered her mouth and said in Korean, “I am here to help you. Stay quiet.”

Someone pulled at the door but it was locked. Switching to mandarin he asked, “What do you want?”

“We are looking for a Korean defector. Open the door!”

He opened the door and placed himself between Hea and the door in order to protect her and hide her wet clothes. Hea bowed her head.

“She is my daughter who stays out at night with men.”

“She looks Korean,” one of the soldiers said.

“My mother was Korean but I am Chinese and she is my daughter. She is going to pay for being out late and is going to be punished.”

Satisfied with his response, the soldiers moved down the street and the door slammed again. The man checked the lock and Hea whispered, “Thank you

“Come with me,” he said as he led her up the dark iron stairway to the 12th floor. Each flight of stairs made her more and more nervous. This was the highest Hea had ever been since she grew up in a village. The man unlocked another door and Hea found six people asleep on the concrete floor.

“There is a blanket over there and here is water and some rice.”

“How did you know I need your help?” Hea asked.

“Shush, I will tell you in the morning. Eat and get some sleep.”

She ate the rice in the dark and looked around the room wondering who all the people asleep on the floor were. She grabbed the blanket and curled up by the door in the only space left.

Hea was exhausted and tried to sleep but her mind raced with all that had happened in the last four days. Here eyes swelled up with tears but she kept silent and eventually fell asleep.

She awoke to find everyone eating rice and in addition to the six Korean men and women was the man who had saved her life. His twelve-year–old son also ate with the group.

“Would you like some rice a Korean woman only about ten years older than her said as she offered a bowl to her.

“Thank you,” and Hea took the bowl and began to eat.

“Are you a defector too?” the woman asked.

“What is a defector?”

“Are you from the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea?”

Hea answered with a quick, “yes.”

“Then you are a defector like all of us.”

She looked around to size up the two woman and four men eating and looking at her. Everyone was Korean and much older than her.

“Do you have a life here?” Hea asked.

“No, we are waiting here to move south to Thailand. The Thai government will deport us to South Korea.”

“When are you leaving?” Hea asked.

“We do not know.”

“Why did you leave North Korea?” Hea asked the woman.

“I was going to be locked up unless I worshiped Kim Il Sung. They took my family and friends and I decided to take my chances at the river.

“Hea told her story about the book and everyone in the room listened. Hea was not sure if it was because it was a good story or if they were all listening because it was a new story to hear in what seemed to be a boring existence.

A few minutes later the man told them that a few could go to the bath house a few blocks away but they must be carful and watch out for each other.

The group left in groups of two and Hea went with Park, her new friend.

“You can not speak to anyone and do not speak in Korean even to me.”

Hea and Park walked with their heads down and tried to not make eye contact with anyone.

“Do you speak Chinese,” Hea whispered in Korean.

“Yes, my father traded with them before the war and I traveled with him sometimes but I speak with an accent and everyone would know I was a defector if I say a word.”

The two walked in silence as they entered the more crowded streets.

Bicycles moved down the street and venders lined the way selling fish and pork both dried and fried.

As they approached the bathhouse they noticed two police officers standing on either side of the entrance. Park leaned into Hea and the two moved away and sat on a dirty curb facing away from the bathhouse. Park listened to the two men seated near by speaking in Chinese. Two other policemen passed them on the street and Park knew they must have been looking for defectors looking to bathe. Hea’s book was in her waistband so she pulled it and hid her face in the pages.

“What are they saying” Hea whispered in Korean.

“Sush!”

“He said the police are looking for a Korean girl who stole military documents from the Koreans. They want her and the documents.”

Hea quickly closed the book and placed it behind her in the place she had been hiding it for days now.

“Are you sure they are looking for a girl with documents?”

“Yes, a leather book I think he said.”

Panic filled Hea’s face and she made sure her shirt hid the book from view.

“Is that you?” asked Park.

“Yes, but I did not steal any documents. This is my father’s book. They killed him for it and I know they will kill me if they have the chance.”

“Then we must hide right now. Quickly, go to the outhouse over there,” and Park pointed at a wooden building about thirty yards away. The two walked towards the public restrooms that were a quickly assembled shack with wooden slats for a floor over a pit of muck. As they entered, Park looked back to see two soldiers following them. The two Korean girls stepped inside the long room and went down the line as far as possible. Hea had grown up in the country and had never smelled something so bad in her life. Hundreds of people must use this each day and she thought she could smell everyone of them.

“They are after us!” Park said.

Hea could see two soldiers standing outside waiting for them to come out.

“We must find a different way out,” Park said as she looked around but the walls were made of concrete with only a small vent near the roof. A Chinese woman who was squatted nearby heard the two whispering in Korean and said, “You must separate and you,” pointing at Hea, “you must change your clothes.”

The woman began pulling off her cotton shirt and said “Quickly, switch clothes with me. If they see that outfit they will know you are recently from Korea.”

When Hea removed her skirt, the leather book fell to the floor and landed face down on the filthy slats.

“You have to get rid of that book,” Park said.

“But I can not! It is very important to me. It was my father’s.”

“If they catch you with it they will give you and the book to the Koreans who will probably kill you.”

Hea thought hard as she continued to switch clothes. As she buttoned the thick wool pants the woman had given her, she heard one of the men yelling at the door. The other women in the room quickly ran towards the door and the three of them were left alone in the corner. The woman, now dressed in the warn, Korean school uniform smiled nervously and ran towards the door but it was too late. The men were coming towards them and Hea knew she was going to be captured. As the solders approached, Hea lifted one side of the book with her toe and let the book slide spine first into the sewage below. At the same time the Chinese woman tried to stop the soldiers but the first soldier hit her across the head with his baton and she fell face down on the wooden slats and did not move.

Hea ran towards the left and Park to the right. The soldiers knocked Park into the concrete wall with such force it shook the entire building and gray dust and rock rained down. The other soldier grabbed Hea’s arm spinning her around and then pulled a hand full of her long dark hair in a tight grip. Hea fell to the floor but the solder held her body up by her hair. The soldiers pulled Park and Hea out of the women’s outhouse and Hea’s already cut knees banged the threshold leaving two bloody marks. Hea knew she was going to be deported and prayed she would be placed in the same camp as her parents.

A few moments later, the unconscious woman, weaing Hea’s damp school uniform awoke with her face against the mud-caked slat floor. She looked down as her vision slowly cleared and noticed that the book the girl had dropped was lying in the brown slop below. The book was less than three feet away and if she could fit her arm through a slat, she could probably reach it.

She began to pull at a loose board. The dried wood split easily and she laid back down on the floor reaching through the hole while stretching her fingers towards the muck. She strained to pinch the leather cover between her index finger and thumb. She slowly pulled the book towards her, rolled over and leaned against the wall. She took the shirttail of the shirt she had just traded and wipe the dark muck away from the cover to revile the title written in Chinese Characters.