

ZONDERVAN

Thunder in the Morning Calm

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**North and South Korea, Seoul,
Osan Air Force Base, Incheon, Pusan, Pyongyang**

PROLOGUE

*Kim Yōng-nam Military Prison Camp
Hamgyōng-Namdo Province
120 miles north of the Demilitarized Zone
the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
early twenty-first century*

The morning sunlight beamed through the barred windowpane above the bunk. Feeling its slight warmth on his face, Keith opened his eyes and squinted into the glare.

Another morning. Another day.

He rubbed his eyes and rolled slowly to his side. The aches and cricks had worsened over the years, but arthritis had not debilitated him. Not yet anyway.

His mission was not yet done.

He pushed himself up from the hard mattress. Hot, searing pain flared and burned within his elbows. He would have bitten a bullet, but four of his teeth had fallen out and three more were half chipped or broken. And even if he had all his teeth, they took his bullets from him long ago. He exhaled, blowing through the red-hot fire flashing from his elbows and his knees.

Mornings were the hardest. He would feel better in a moment. But not yet. He grimaced, grabbed his left knee, and squeezed hard. He glanced over at the two figures covered by gray blankets on the other side of the room. Robert and Frank, his only living links to a happier world, were not yet awake.

The sun's rays had not reached their bunks. They were not yet stirring. Their blankets rose and fell, up and down, ever so slightly, barely visible, providing evidence of the breath of life. For this, the first blessing of a cold autumn day, Keith closed his eyes and thanked his Creator.

Once there were ten of them.

Now, only three.

Death claimed them over the years, one by one, whittling their numbers to a fragile trio of the fading elderly. He guessed that they had reached their eighties by now, although he was unsure even of that. The seasons and the years had marched slower with time. The earth had slowed her axial spin so as to prolong the torture to which they had been condemned. There was no way to track time. Not anymore. Keith never feared death, yet fear had not escaped him. Indeed, the fear of outliving the others, of remaining as the last man standing, loomed always as his greatest nightmare.

Blam! Clang-a-lang-a-clang-a-lang-a-clang-a-lang. The metal trash can bounced across the concrete floor, down the middle aisle between the bunks.

"Get up, old dogs!" The guard loomed in the doorway with a bull-whip in hand. Like every new whipmaster over the years, this one too would prove himself on this, his first day on the job. "Water time! Move! Move!"

The guard clicked his heels. He was standing just in front of two other jackbooted guards with semiautomatic rifles. "Get up, swine! Perhaps today we will shoot you all!" He laughed. "Or perhaps we shall cut you up and sell you at the market."

Self-bemused at his own ranting monologue, the guard stepped into the cell and kicked the trash can again.

Clang-a-lang-a-clang-a-lang-a-clang-a-lang. Then *whap whap* against the concrete floor.

Keith swung his feet over the edge of the bunk.

His buddies shifted in their bunks. Robert's arms shook and his face twisted with pain as he tried to get up. His weathered forehead showed deep lines and wrinkles. He opened his mouth wide, desperately trying to suck oxygen into his lungs. The whipmaster ignored Robert, at least for the moment. He turned and marched back outside the prisoners'

concrete barracks and perched himself at the entrance, where he continued to bark a string of orders.

Keith's feet found his worn leather sandals on the concrete floor. He slipped into them and stood up.

Robert wheezed, coughed, and again tried to stand. His legs shook as he pushed himself up from the low-lying cot. Keith reached out, found Robert's elbow, and helped steady his friend. Frank fell into line.

Wearing only heavy black-garb pajamas, they shuffled out the door toward the waiting guards.

Keith always tried to focus on things of the Creation ... the sunshine, the colors of the trees, the moon and stars when he could see them—

Whap! The whip cracked on the ground behind them. "Faster, old goats!"

These things—the moon, the stars—reminded Keith of the Creator ... somewhere ... still in control ... somehow. But now, each day it was harder somehow than in the years when he had relied on the strength in a younger body to survive. Now each day was—

Whap!

Sometimes classical music played in his mind and gave him inspiration. Sometimes he heard the great hymns of the faith. This morning the lyrics and words of Beethoven's Ninth danced in his head ... "Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory—"

Whap!

"Oooooooooooooooooeeeeeeehh!!!" Keith dropped to the rocky ground. The whip had opened a gash in the top of his foot. He grabbed his foot and lay there. Above him, the world spun in a painful blur.

Angry voices of three guards filled the air. The two with the rifles yelled at the one with the whip, who yelled back. One of the rifle bearers knelt down, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and tied it around Keith's bleeding foot as a makeshift bandage.

Blood soon soaked the handkerchief, its white cloth yielding to the crimson flow.

"Get up, old dog! Get moving or there will be more of that."

The whipmaster's voice had lost part of its anger. Keith thought the strike to his foot probably was an accident. Poor aim. Most of the

guards' tactics these days were more psychological than physical. And this guy was new. Has to show who's boss.

Keith pushed himself back to his feet, grateful the whip had not struck Robert. He limped back into line with his buddies, the aching in his knees now throbbing in a rhythmic, synchronized cadence with the throbbing pain in his foot.

They shuffled up a hill to a long wooden trough, the kind that horses and pigs drank from back home.

"On your knees!"

The three men dropped down and, like dogs lapping from a mud puddle, began licking water from the trough with their tongues. At least the water was fresh.

"Enough!" the whipmaster yelled. "Into formation. To the latrine!"

Keith and Frank got back on their feet. But when Robert pushed himself up against the front of the trough, trying to stand, he lost his balance and tumbled to the ground. He lay there, wheezing and coughing. One of the guards, the one who had bandaged Keith's foot with his handkerchief, laid down his weapon and helped Robert back to his feet.

"*Kamsamnida*," Robert said.

The guard responded with a stern-faced nod.

Robert's wheezing was getting much worse. He had another coughing jag and turned a dusky blue.

The wind brought a whiff of the latrines over to the right. The three old men were used to it and shuffled in line toward the stench of human excrement.

Whap!

Again the bullwhip slapped the ground.

Not far beyond the drinking trough, off to the right, were the unmarked graves of their buddies. Each day as he walked by, Keith prayed for their families. Keith had considered taking his own life, as one man had done years ago. The man had fashioned a makeshift noose from strips of a sheet he tied together and hanged himself.

But Keith could not abandon Robert and Frank. Not now. Robert likely would not survive another frigid Korean winter. Keith was certain of that. And he wanted to be able to bury him, as he had the others. And he wanted to bless Robert's grave with the love and respect he deserved from his countrymen.

No, he could not abandon them, not now or ever. Cowards chose suicide. And suicide was an affront to the very faith that had kept him alive all these years.

They would hang together until the end.

Semper Fidelis.

Once a Marine, always a Marine.

CHAPTER 1

Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) Suitland, Maryland

The massive Suitland Federal Center, located in suburban Maryland just eight miles southeast of the Pentagon, sprawled across 226 acres of grass, well-manicured shrubbery, and brick-and-mortar federal office buildings.

Reachable by subway off the Washington Metro's Green Line, yet unknown to most Americans, the center is home to several federal agencies, the most recognizable being the United States Census Bureau.

From the Pentagon, the ride to Suitland by car was scenic, even on a barren mid-November day. Crossing the Potomac River, the government-issued Ford Taurus passed by the Jefferson Memorial and the Tidal Basin, the reflections in the pools and basins of Washington's great monuments a reminder of the great force for freedom that America had been, still is, and, hopefully, will remain.

But in a few short minutes, the images of grandeur disappeared as the Taurus left behind the glamorous buildings of government and drove into the crime-infested southeast sector of the city, past the Washington Navy Yard to the right and slumlord government housing to the left.

In the front passenger seat, Lieutenant Commander Gunner McCormick, United States Navy, checked his watch. They had departed the Pentagon thirty minutes after the end of rush hour, with plenty of time to spare, unless one of those notoriously inconvenient Washington-area fender benders paralyzed traffic.

“We’ve got a few minutes, sir,” said the senior chief petty officer driving the Taurus. “Be happy to stop and buy you a coffee.”

“Sounds great, Senior Chief,” the commander said. “I could use the caffeine. Come to think of it, I could use a smoke.” He checked his watch again. “But I’d rather be early than take any chances. How about on the way back I buy you a coffee or, better yet, maybe something a little more substantial.”

“That’ll work,” the senior chief said, sporting a sly grin as the Taurus rolled east across the Pennsylvania Avenue bridge spanning the Anacostia River.

Not much was said for the rest of the trip as the commander gathered his thoughts. Three days ago, they plucked him off his ship in the Pacific, flew him to Hawaii, then to San Diego, and then to the Pentagon for one day. And now they were driving him over to Suitland, to the Office of Naval Intelligence, for a top-secret meeting about a top-secret subject. He still had no clue why he had been called.

His boss at sea, Rear Admiral James S. Hampton Jr., had not been too happy about it. But then, Admiral Hampton had not been happy about much lately. Gunner thought the admiral had been on his case over just about anything and everything. He had no idea what was bothering him. Who knew? He’d learned long ago that in the Navy, you don’t second-guess the orders of your superiors. Half those orders never made sense anyway. And you don’t try to read officers’ minds. Flag officers, especially, could change their minds as quickly as the wind shifts directions. So what was the point?

They crossed the Maryland state line into Prince George’s County. They made a right and then a left on Branch and Alabama Avenues, then stayed to the right for the final stretch along Suitland Road Southeast. As they approached Gate 1, the driver slowed down, then turned in. After presenting their credentials, they drove onto the grounds of Suitland Federal Center. The road dead-ended at Swan Road, the main corridor within the center. Most of the signs pointed to the left, toward the buildings of the giant US Census Bureau. But the senior chief clicked on the right-turn signal and made a sharp right turn.

A moment later, they reached Gate 9, with its armed Marine Corps guards. A Marine staff sergeant snapped to attention and shot a sharp salute.

“Good morning, sir,” the sergeant said. “May I help you?”

“I’ve got a meeting with the admiral at ONI,” Gunner said, referring to the Office of Naval Intelligence.

“Aye, aye, sir,” the sergeant said. “Your identification and orders, please.”

“Senior Chief,” the commander said, “show the sergeant our papers.”

“Aye, sir.” The senior chief passed the orders out the window.

The sergeant studied the papers, then passed them back. He shot another perfectly stiff salute with precision-like bearing. “You may proceed through the gate. ONI is in the building straight ahead. The duty officer is awaiting your arrival, Commander, and will escort you to the admiral’s spaces.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Gunner replied, and the *Taurus* rolled through Gate 9 past two other Marine guards and parked near the National Maritime Intelligence Center building.

Gunner stepped through the double doors into the marble-floored foyer. Flanking the entryway to the left was the flag of the United States. To the right was the US Navy flag.

“Lieutenant Commander McCormick?” A Navy lieutenant smiled and extended her hand. The gold cord hanging from her left epaulette designated her as an aide to an admiral.

“That’s me. My friends call me Gunner.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.” Hers was a dimple-accentuated smile. “I’m Lieutenant Mary Jefferies.”

“You’re the admiral’s aide?”

“That’s right.”

“Nice to meet you, Lieutenant.” He released her handshake.

“You too, Commander. I’ll take you up to the conference room on the sixth deck. We have some background information for you to read. Then the admiral and I will brief you.”

“Excellent,” Gunner said and followed her onto the elevator. “But you can call me Gunner if you’d like.”

Lieutenant Jefferies punched a button and the elevator lifted quickly to the sixth floor—the sixth *deck*—where the doors parted and Jefferies stepped into the hallway just ahead of Gunner.

“Right this way,” Jefferies said, holding her hand out to the left.

They walked down to the end of the long hallway. Jefferies stopped in front of a door, punched a combination lock, and pushed open the door to a windowless rectangular conference room, complete with table and chairs. In the middle of the long table was an 8-by-10-inch envelope with the words *TOP SECRET* in red.

"In the envelope you'll find your orders, Commander, along with general background on the political and military situation surrounding your next assignment. I'll leave you here to go over the material. I'll be back in a few minutes to let you know when the admiral will be ready."

"Excellent," he said, "but you can call me Gunner."

Jefferies beamed at him. "Very persistent, I see. Just like your dossier says."

"You've read my dossier?"

"Would you expect otherwise?"

"I think you're bluffing, Lieutenant. You don't have an actual dossier on me."

"Oh, I'm bluffing, am I?" She raised one eyebrow.

"So just what about me have you read?"

"Hmm. Let's see what I can recall. Graduated from Virginia Tech. Four-year backup quarterback on the football team, but didn't play much. You got to carry a clipboard and wear a headset and send in plays to the starter."

"Ooh, that hurt."

"Did it now?" She smiled at him. "You got tired of not seeing any action, so you joined the Navy."

"I just want you to know I'm in better shape now than I was when I played on the football team. We had a wimpy strength-and-conditioning coach. The guy didn't know how to teach power lifting. An hour a day on weights now does more than two hours in the gym back then."

"Okay. Let's see. You attended Officer Candidate School in Newport, and after OCS, you got picked up for intel, where you finished, unimpressively I might add, in the middle of your class at Dam Neck."

"Unimpressively? Hey, I was a football jock! At least I passed."

"Then you got yourself assigned to a Cruiser Destroyer Group, where you met your surface warfare obligations. Again bored, you got out of the Navy. Took a high-paying job as a commodities analyst in New York. But then you got bored with that too."

“What can I say?” Gunner quipped. “I get bored easily.”

“Yes, of course you do. This time you tried something a little less boring. You returned to active duty from the reserves and volunteered as an intel officer attached to a SEAL unit in Afghanistan.”

Gunner shrugged. “I flipped on the TV one morning and saw the commercial that said, ‘The Navy—it’s not just a job. It’s an adventure.’ Guess I missed that the first time.”

“You certainly made it an adventure the second time, Commander. Let’s see. What did it say? While attached to the SEALs, you jumped in a hole, grabbed a live grenade tossed in by the enemy, and tossed it out half a second before it exploded, saving the life of the injured Marine waiting to be medevaced out. You were cited for heroism and bravery and awarded the Navy Cross.”

“You’re embarrassing me, Lieutenant. Why do you bring this up?”

“You’re the one who said I hadn’t read your dossier. Just proving I did my homework.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“Well, then, I’m sure you know the admiral will expect you to have these papers read prior to your meeting.”

“That your way of telling me to shut up and get to work?” He chuckled.

“That is correct,” she said. She opened the door to step out, then turned back. “I hope you will find a suitable level of excitement there.”

“You did nail me.”

She tried suppressing a smile but failed. “I’ll see you in a few minutes, sir.” She stepped out of the room and the door closed behind her.

Gunner sat down. Time to get to work. He opened the envelope and spread its contents on the table.

Date: November 17

From: Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information Dominance (N2/N6) and Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI)

To: LCDR Christianson Pendleton McCormick, USN, Staff Intelligence Officer, Carrier Strike Group Ten

Subj: Initial Intelligence Briefing Carrier Strike Group Ten Yellow Sea Deployment

Classification: TOP SECRET

1. Due to increasing hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea has requested joint naval exercises with the United States Navy in the Yellow Sea as a show of unity, solidarity, and force between the US and the ROK to deter possible aggression from North Korea.
2. The National Command Authority has ordered Carrier Strike Group Ten (USS *Harry S. Truman* Battle Group) into the Yellow Sea to conduct joint naval exercises with the ROK Navy. Commander Strike Group Ten shall be informed of these orders imminently.
3. As senior intelligence officer for the Strike Group, the purpose of this communiqué is to brief you on (a) the historical and political situation of the conflict as relevant to the Strike Group's mission; (b) the positioning of North Korean shore batteries that may pose a threat to the Strike Group; and (c) the positioning of North Korean naval and air forces that are a potential threat to United States naval forces.
4. A summary of the historical and political background is as follows:

KOREAN CRISIS HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In 1910, Japan attacked and conquered Korea. The brutal military occupation ended more than one thousand years of Korea's sovereignty as a nation and was a major source of shame to Koreans.

Thirty-five years later, Japan lost Korea in World War II. Just as Europe was divided along the "Iron Curtain," Korea was divided along the 38th parallel into the American-backed Republic of Korea in the south (ROK) and the Communist-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north. The DPRK was led by a young rebel and disciple of Joseph Stalin named Kim Il-sung.

In 1950, Kim Il-sung invaded the South to unify the country. North Korean Communist forces rapidly drove south, gaining control of almost the entire country before American and United Nations forces, under General Douglas MacArthur, executed a daring amphibious landing at Inchon, which decapitated the Communist supply lines into the South.

After Inchon, the military pendulum swung to the West. American forces pushed the Communists back, driving them back into North

Korea—their goal to obliterate the dictatorial regime in Pyongyang. But the surprise entry of overwhelming Communist Chinese forces secretly crossing the border into North Korea changed the dynamic of the war. The US and Korean forces that had advanced north toward the Yalu River border with China on the western side of the peninsula were driven back by the surprise entry of Chinese soldiers, who had crossed secretly into Korea. On the eastern side of the peninsula, Chinese forces attacked the First Marine Division commanded by Major General O. P. Smith near the Chosin Reservoir on their push north. Surprised and surrounded by Chinese forces outnumbering it eight-to-one, the division, fighting in subzero conditions, rallied around General Smith and battled through Chinese fortifications, inflicting mortal damage to the enemy before returning south. Many have said that the Battle of Chosin Reservoir was the Marines' finest hour.

In 1953, after three years of fighting, Korea remained divided in almost exactly the same place it had been divided before the war began.

The 38th parallel.

The armistice kept the two heavily armed warring armies separated, 2,500 yards apart, by a no-man's land now known as the "Demilitarized Zone," the DMZ.

As many as four million people died in the Korean War, which had some of the most brutal warfare the world has ever known. The US dropped nearly one million gallons of napalm on North Korea. Eighteen of twenty-two major cities in the North were at least half obliterated.

While most people think the war ended almost sixty years ago, there never was a peace treaty. More than 21,000 days later, the long cease-fire continues.

North Korea remains the most oppressive regime on the planet. Although intelligence is somewhat sketchy, best evidence from eyewitness reports suggests that North Korea maintains several dozen forced-labor prison camps, reserved primarily for political dissidents who dare to challenge the regime. These camps have been used over the years to dissuade political opposition.

Even to this day, rumors have circulated and circumstantial evidence from the North has suggested that North Korea may be holding a few elderly American prisoners never returned from the war.

“What?” Gunner mumbled aloud. He rubbed his eyes and reread the last paragraph.

Even to this day, rumors have circulated and circumstantial evidence from the North has suggested that North Korea may be holding a few elderly American prisoners never returned from the war.

“I can’t believe this.” He looked back at the communiqué.

Due to the highly sensitive political nature surrounding enforcement of the tenuous nature of the armistice, the US has been unable to confirm or deny the validity of such rumors.

“What the heck is that supposed to mean ... ‘Unable to confirm or deny’?”

A knock on the door. Gunner heard someone working the combination lock, then the door opened. Lieutenant Jefferies was standing alone in the passageway. “The admiral is ready for you now, Commander. If you will come with me, please.”

Gunner stood, grabbed the folder, and joined Lieutenant Jefferies out in the hall. His briefing with the admiral would be interesting. But he knew that nothing the admiral could say would erase the idea growing in his mind.

American Marines could be alive in North Korea. And he intended to find them and bring them home.

CHAPTER 2

Kim Yōng-nam Military Prison Camp

Keith knelt on the concrete floor, leaned over the cot, and laid his hand on his friend's forehead. The skin was hot, dry. Over the last few days, Robert's hacking cough had grown worse. His lungs sounded full of phlegm that he couldn't cough out.

"That you, Keith?" More coughing. More wheezing. "Mama? Mama? You there?"

"He's delirious," Frank said. He was sitting on a bunk across the aisle.

"It's the fever talking," Keith said. "He's on fire. If we don't get his temp down, it's over." He lifted Robert's wrist and felt for a pulse. "His pulse is firing like a machine gun."

For Keith, the thought of losing Robert triggered a flash of memories—memories of bygone days when they were young, strong, and idealistic.

Robert *was* a Marine. And in his younger days, he was a Marine's Marine.

It happened in November 1950 at a place called Chosin Reservoir near the border between Korea and China. The First Marine Division was pinned down, surrounded by overwhelming Chinese forces. Their situation was hopeless. But Brigadier General O. P. Smith, the commander of the division, had rallied the leathernecks with a jolting war cry: "Retreat, hell! We're not retreating! We're just advancing in a different direction!"

Although the Chinese had the Marines surrounded, the Marines rallied around their general and began a daring and thunderous advance through enemy lines.

That day, Keith was covering the rear of his advancing platoon. They were moving south, back toward the 38th parallel, and his job was to provide the first line of fire if the Chinese or North Koreans attacked from the rear. He had cocked his M-1 carbine and was moving low and swift just behind his leatherneck comrades. They had just fought through a North Korean platoon when a deafening shot rang out behind his head.

Startled, he pivoted and brought his carbine into firing position.

A Chinese soldier lay dead on the ground from a bullet to the head. Robert was off to one side, pistol in hand, barrel still smoking. That sight would forever be burned in Keith's memory.

Somehow, the Chinese soldier had slipped into the Marines' rear guard and was about to shoot Keith in the back of the head at point-blank range when Robert fired, killing him. Robert saved his life.

They left the body on the ground and moved out, trying to catch up with their platoon. But suddenly, out of nowhere, they were surrounded by Chinese soldiers with rifles aimed right at them.

Had the Chinese witnessed Robert shoot their buddy, both Keith and Robert would have been shot. Instead, the Chinese turned the two Americans over to the North Koreans, dooming them to an eternity of hell on earth.

At first, hope lived. Hope of release. Hope of a rescue. Hope of a prisoner exchange.

But as months turned into years, and the years into decades, their hopes and dreams of freedom faded and finally vanished. America, the beacon of light among nations, the hope of freedom on earth, morphed into a faint and distant memory. Images of family frozen in time at first haunted the deep recesses of their minds. Crazy wonderings—whether family was dead or alive, whether a spouse was remarried or still waiting, whether markers had been placed on their empty graves in some lush green war cemetery somewhere back in a place they once called home—had once tortured them. But as the decades passed, their thoughts of ever returning home had dimmed.

Now they had only each other—Keith and Robert and Frank. They had become closer than brothers.

Two quick knocks on the door brought Keith back to the present. The door swung open and a swirl of snow rode in on a gust of cold air. Two guards were standing out in the yard smoking cigarettes. A petite woman, perhaps midthirties, walked in with a large wooden tray that held three bowls of beans and rice and three tin cups of water from the trough. She held out the food and said, “Eat, eat, eat.”

Keith’s eyes met the woman’s, and he said, “*Ahn yang haseo, Pak.*”
“Hello. Hello. You hungry?”

“Very sick.” Keith pointed to Robert, who groaned and rolled over toward the wall, away from the food and the water.

“Oh, sick?” Pak leaned over and touched Robert. She frowned and looked concerned. Pak had been bringing them food for the last few years, and unlike the whipmaster and the other uniformed guards, she often showed kindness to the men, but only when the guards were not looking. “Oh, hot,” she said. “Needs drink.”

“Right,” Keith said. He took a jar of water and put his hand behind Robert’s head. “Can you lean up, buddy?”

Robert’s head shook and bobbed as Keith raised him to a slight angle off the hard pillow. Fighting the burning pain in his own arms, Keith brought the jar of water to Robert’s lips.

“Take a sip,” Keith whispered, tilting the jar up. A small amount, maybe two or three tablespoons, drained into Robert’s mouth. A gulping came from his throat. “That’s good. Drink some more.” He tipped the jar again.

“*Uh-kuh ... uh-kuh ...*” Water poured from the sides of Robert’s mouth. Keith jerked the jar away.

“I think he got some in his lungs,” Frank said. “Easy. It’s gonna be okay.”

Keith eased Robert’s head back down to the pillow.

“*Uh-kuh ... uh-kuh ...*”

Keith rolled Robert on his side and popped him between the shoulder blades a couple of times. More coughing was followed by fast, heavy breathing. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Keith, your foot.” Frank pointed down.

Keith looked down. "Oh, crap." Blood oozed from the lash mark on the top of his foot. "I must've caught it on the edge of that steel bar under the bed."

"Here, here." Pak removed her apron, knelt on the floor, and pressed the folded cloth down on the foot.

"Thank you, Pak," Keith said. "I'm okay." He reached down and pushed the apron against his foot and looked into her black eyes. "Please, Pak. Robert is sick. Can you get medicine? Please."

She stood up. Her face flashed a nervous look.

"Please," Keith pleaded. "Whatever you can bring. We won't say anything."

Her eyes shifted to the left and then to the right. "I try," she whispered, then turned and walked out of the barracks.

"She's worried about sticking her neck out," Frank said. "I don't blame her."

"Me neither," Keith said. "Let's pray she does it, though." He dabbed cold water from the jar on a towel and laid the cool, wet towel on Robert's forehead. "I'm worried about him making it through the night, let alone dealing with Sergeant Jack-Thug when he barges in here in the morning." He pulled the blanket up and covered Robert's neck, leaving only his head exposed. "Robert's in no shape to march down to the pig trough, and that guy's gonna have to back off."

"Maybe he'll cool his jets by morning," Frank said.

"Somehow I doubt it. We'll see."

Colonel Song Kwang-sun, the senior commander and military warden of the prestigious Kim Ying-nam Military Prison Camp, opened his eyes and squinted at the shapely silhouette hovering over him. When his blurry vision sharpened, he saw a smiling Mang Hyo-Sonn leaning up, her chin supported by her hand and her long hair draped over her shoulder. She gazed at him with the look of a teenager in love.

Colonel Song pulled clean white sheets up over their shoulders to break the slight chill in the air. He looked into Mang's black eyes and gently pushed a lock of brown hair from her face.

As she gazed into his eyes, a slight smile teased the corners of her mouth. "Have I not been enough to keep you warm?" She ran her fin-

gers across his arm and moved her lips to his. Her kiss, as luscious as the sweetest vial of pure honey, made him feel half his age.

"You are more than enough to keep me warm, my dear, but that is not the question."

"No?" She toyed with his chin. "Then what is the question?"

"The question is whether I keep *you* warm," he said, chuckling at himself.

She smiled and whispered, her lips right next to his ear, "Of course my big strong man keeps me warm."

"This is good to know, but just in case"—he pushed himself up and reached for the clear bottle half full of soju on the small table beside the bed—"have another sip."

"Thank you, my colonel." She took a gulp. "You are a most generous commander."

"Of course I am." He laughed. "Give me that." He snatched the bottle from her and brought it to his lips. Delicious, potent soju poured down his throat. He capped the bottle and turned to Mang, his aide and his lover.

"I have a prison to run. We must return to work before someone suspects something."

"Of course, my colonel," Mang said, running a soft hand across his forehead.

He sat up on the side of the bed and stuck his legs through his long Army-green uniform trousers. His feet went into his boots. He stood up and put on his Army jacket, buttoning it carefully and adjusting the red pin bearing the photo of Kim Il-sung, the "Eternal President" of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Finally he buckled the shiny belt carrying his holstered pistol.

"Get dressed. I will leave first. Wait ten minutes, then leave. Make sure that no one sees you."

"Yes, my colonel."

Song stepped into the hallway and turned right. He headed for the WC to get rid of some of the soju.

Pak walked into the commander's office. A silent testament of braggadocio adorned the walls, various photographs of goose-stepping

soldiers, military medals and citations framed in boxes, and pictures of a younger Colonel Song Kwang-sun smiling and shaking hands with dignitaries and accepting whatever awards they gave out to high-ranking Communists of the North Korean Army. His sharp eyes, emanating a steely and evil glare, seemed to follow her from every photograph.

“They are only pictures,” she mumbled softly. “Fear not, for I am with you.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Three o’clock. She knew the colonel usually was out of his office at this time of the afternoon. Still, she needed to hurry. He was not far away.

The worst-kept secret in all the prison was Colonel Song Kwang-sun’s daily rendezvous with Mang Hyo-Sonn, the twenty-two-year-old North Korean flower half his age. A staff sergeant, Mang had been detailed as a guard in the military prison system. But because there were no female prisoners to guard, Mang served as administrative secretary to Song. She arrived a month ago.

Their daily midafternoon dalliance had started two weeks ago. They would slip into the small sleeping room down the hall, ostensibly on their lunch hour. Sometimes he would return in an hour. Sometimes he would not.

Everyone knew. Even the colonel’s wife knew, they said.

The only secret was what Mang Hyo-Sonn didn’t know. When the colonel grew tired of her, and he would, she would be shipped off to another facility—if she was lucky. One of his four mistresses wound up a few miles from the prison with a bullet in her head.

Pak prayed that Mang Hyo-Sonn would be especially distracting today.

She walked across the outer office, through another door, and into the office of the colonel-warden himself. More photographs on the wall showed the colonel in Pyongyang. Several showed the colonel standing between the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, and his son the madman heir apparent, Kim Jong-un. Others showed Kim’s father, the “Eternal President” of North Korea, Kim Il-sung.

With a feather brush in hand, Pak dusted the colonel’s desk, then his chair, and then along the inside of the barred windows looking out onto the courtyard. Finally she darted into the small bathroom next to the office and pushed the door closed behind her. After turning on the

faucet to muffle the sound, she pulled open the door to the medicine cabinet.

The colonel normally kept several bottles of aspirin on the bottom shelf. But the bottom shelf was empty.

She reached up and felt on the second shelf. A razor. Another razor. A bar of soap. "Please, Lord Jesus, help me find something," she whispered. Her hand moved to the top shelf. She felt two plastic bottles. She took the bottles off the shelf and examined them. Aspirin. Penicillin.

She heard the sound of boots walking in the outer office. A door closed.

Cold panic rushed through her body. She had planned to take just a few pills. No chance of that now. She put the aspirin back on the shelf and stashed the penicillin bottle in her pants. She turned off the running water in the sink.

What could she do? Climb through the window into the courtyard? That is crazy, she thought. One of the guards would see me. Or the colonel would come in here. She muttered a fast prayer, put her hand on the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door.

"Colonel!"

He stood there in the office, an angry look on his face. Fear gripped her at the sight of him. She noticed his vein-bulged neck, his drab-green officer's uniform resplendent with all his medals pinned upon his chest. His look was cold, his glare menacing. "You are still here?" he asked.

"Yes, Colonel. I was cleaning in your bathroom."

"You always clean this late?" He pressed his hand against his forehead.

"I was just finishing, Colonel."

"Very well," he snapped.

"I must attend to other duties," she said. "Please excuse me." Without awaiting his permission to be excused, she walked past him, past the large desk in the outer office, and out into the hallway.

Her heart was pounding like a battering ram. She quickened her pace down the long hallway, praying that she would not hear his footsteps behind her. The empty offices along the hallway were closed and dark in this antiquated facility that now had more guards than prisoners.

A door on her left creaked open.

Pak saw the young woman in the drab brownish-green North Korean uniform step out into the hallway.

The colonel's mistress eyed Pak as she walked by. But Pak ignored Mang and, pretending not to see her, kept looking straight ahead and walked briskly toward the door at the end of the building. A moment later, she pushed open the door. The air temperature had dropped since the morning. Swirls of snow greeted her as she stepped outside. She walked down the four concrete steps, then glanced behind to see if she had been followed.

Nobody was there.

Thank God.

She headed up the hill toward the concrete barracks that housed the prisoners. The front door would be unlocked this time of day. Everyone knew the old men in the barracks could not get through the fence surrounding the compound even if they wanted to.

Three armed guards in long greenish-brown trench coats stood in a circle about a hundred feet from the barracks, smoking cigarettes and laughing and chatting. A fourth stood a few feet away, smoking on his own.

She prayed again as she approached the door of the prisoners' barracks, then she stepped into the barracks and closed the door behind her.

The old prisoner named Keith was sitting on a wooden chair at the bedside of his sick friend. He was holding a wet towel to his friend's forehead. The other prisoner, Frank, was lying on his cot, watching Keith sponge Robert's head.

"Pak." Keith stood up.

"*Shhhhhhhhhh!* I bring medicine," she said. She pulled the bottle from her pocket and thrust it into Keith's hand. "Penicillin."

He looked at the bottle. His old eyes gazed into her face. "God bless you, Pak."

"I go. I must go."

"Thank you," he said. Then he turned to his friend. "Robert. There's good news. We've got medicine. I need you to try and lean up for a second."

Pak started to walk out, but turned and looked back. The sight stopped her in her tracks. Keith was cradling Robert's head in his arm

and, almost like a father cradling a baby son, he was speaking tenderly to his old friend. "Here, open up." Robert opened his mouth, barely, and when he did, Keith dropped a penicillin tablet onto his tongue. "Hang on, I'll get you some water."

Propping his friend's head with his left hand, Keith reached for a tin cup half full of water. "Here, drink this."

A splash spilled down the side of Robert's face. Keith poured a little water into his mouth. The old man coughed twice, then swallowed.

Keith looked at Pak. "Thank you."

She stepped back out into the thickening snowfall.

Now what? Stay and finish cleaning? Perhaps. But, of course, no one would know if she left now. Unless . . . if the colonel noticed . . . Her instincts took over. She took a scarf from her pocket and draped it over her shoulders. Through the thickening snow, she walked a straight line across the camp toward the front gate.

As she approached the gate, two stone-faced guards stood at the entrance. Were they looking for her already? Her breathing quickened.

The wind whipped up and blew cold snow against her face. The first guard seemed to lock eyes on her.

Walk straight. Look normal, she told herself.

"Leaving early today, Pak?"

"Finished already." She smiled, nodded, and kept walking.

The second guard stared at her, then, without saying a word, swung open the gate. She walked straight through and hurried onto the road in front of the prison camp. Across the road, two steel poles rose perhaps ten feet into the air, and five bicycles were chained to them. She reached for her bicycle and felt for the combination lock.

Her hands shook as she fidgeted with the combination: 14-16 . . .

"Pak! Halt!" boomed a voice from the guard shack.

She looked back. One of the guards, his rifle strapped on his back, was marching toward her through the wind and snow.

The colonel has discovered me, she told herself. They will shoot me for rendering aid to the enemy.

"Wait!" he ordered, now so close that she could hear his jackboots clicking as he walked. "Something is missing?"

"I do not know what you are talking about, Sergeant." She felt herself shaking.

The sergeant extended his hand and held the scarf out to her. "You walked so fast through the gate that it blew off your shoulder. You did not notice."

She reached out to take it, hoping he would not see her panic. "I did not notice. Thank you, Sergeant."

"The snow is getting worse. You should go before the road gets too icy." He nodded at her bicycle. "We will see you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sergeant." She turned back to the combination lock: ... 18-27.

The lock opened and the chain fell off the post. She unthreaded it from around the wheel, put it in the basket, and pedaled off into the wind and snow.