CHAPTER

26

Young-bum's death was a turning point for me, and not a positive one.

I'd been on the streets for more than three years.

My *kotjebi* gang, *Chang-pa*, which had started out as seven, was now five.

Our voice, Myeongchul, went first, followed by our heart, Young-bum. I was angry, bitter, and full of so much sorrow that I found the only way to cope was to seal myself off from feeling. I consumed *sool* like water at the end of a dry day. Anytime a memory popped into my mind, I'd smoke a cigarette, take another sip of alcohol, or fight to get it to go away.

If a *kotjebi* in the Orang Market, where we lived for several months, brushed my arm, I turned on him with such rage, he didn't know what hit him. He'd be down, kicked, and punched before he could even lift an arm to fight back. I became everything the merchants thought I was before I arrived, if not worse. I searched for ice, asking everyone coming from out of town if they knew where I could find some. I knew I'd take it until I reached heaven, if God would let me in.

Sure, I still had dreams of my parents, but I'd always tell myself sometime during the dream that I was just having a nightmare. My parents were gone, likely dead, and I was an abandoned street child.

THEN ONE MORNING BY THE TRAIN STATION WHERE I WAS sleeping, as some magpies woke me with their haughty chatter, I heard Young-bum whisper to me: "Go back to Gyeong-seong." I awoke, startled, thinking for a moment that he was still alive and that the past few months had just been a dream.

I had this burning determination inside me to honor that promise to Young-bum to find his father and tell him that his son was brave and kind and the best friend I ever had. He was my brother. I needed to tell him that Young-bum had simply just left the group.

Chulho, Unsik, Min-gook, and Sangchul felt it was time to go back to Gyeong-seong, too. We'd been gone now for more than a year and a half, enough time that surely some of our parents had returned.

So that's how we ended up back there in the middle of the harvest season in 2001, at the Gyeong-seong train station, standing on the platform near the grassy knoll where Sangchul used to sing and Myeongchul would act, searching every face for our mothers and fathers.

SOON ENOUGH, THOUGH, WE DISCOVERED THAT NOT ONLY were our parents not there and hadn't ever returned but also that the *so-nyon-dan* manager, the teacher, our neighbors . . . all had gone, too.

Even the merchants had changed.

It was as if our families had never existed.

It was as if *I* had never existed. My mind started to play tricks on me, especially when I was drunk, that maybe we'd returned to the wrong town. Maybe this wasn't even Gyeong-seong. Maybe we were actually dead and this was the land in between.

One person was still there, though: the old woman who sold nightflowers. Long lost were my and my brothers' morals around the selling of women. For every male customer we brought the old lady, we were given ten won, enough to buy two steamed buns or ten candies. Sometimes we collected as many as six men in a night and received sixty won. We partied on those nights with *sool* and opium.

My boys and I also found work guarding some of the merchants' things. At night, we sold women to these same merchants.

Truth: I had no clue how old I was anymore. I felt like an old man, though. I had forgotten my real name because I hadn't used it in so long. As back in Orang, I slipped into darkness. There was nothing left inside me but a big hole waiting for the *yu-ryeong* to fill, since, as in other markets, I couldn't find ice.

With my brothers, we became men. "You are the man! You are the real man," we would even tell one another. We did grow into men on those streets, and not very nice men.

Sometime that fall of 2001, we headed to the mountain to pick mushrooms. We met up with some peasants who lived in the caves.

They prayed, as my mother had, to the stones and the trees, believing in the power of *shan-shin-ryong-nim* to grant them their wishes, which were usually for more food, to get their houses back, to find their missing sons and daughters, and an end to their poverty. Most blamed the Americans, who were still trying to invade us. Chulho and I would shake our heads while listening to these folk stories. Some of the peasants talked as if Kim Il-sung were still alive and fighting the greatest battle of his life.

"He's a god," said a grandmother living in a mud hut she said she had made herself. "His very spirit is guiding my son, who's in the military, to kick the Americans back once and for all."

"When was the last time you heard from your son?" I asked.

"Two years ago," she said with sparkles in her eyes. "He's doing great work, my son, my *adeul*."

I started laughing so hard I fell to my knees and rolled around on the ground holding my aching stomach. I knew this woman's son was dead, either from fighting or from famine. But she still clung to the legend of Kim Il-sung.

A just death, I thought.

I laughed so hard the woman started to cry, thinking I was some possessed spirit. As Sangchul and Unsik dragged me away, Chulho kicked me hard in the groin. "You're really scaring me," he said. "You've become like a demon."

"Like that guy in Rajin-Seonbong," Unsik added. "You will kill, Chang. Very soon, I know you will."

"Whatever," I said, shaking them loose. "I am what I am!"

"And what is that?" Min-gook asked, stepping toward me. It was the first time in all our years on the street that he got in my face. His arms were crossed, and he was staring me down. I stepped toward him, pounding my fist into the palm of my hand.

"Wanna fight . . . Wanna make it *your* death?" I snapped back at him.

He shook his head and spat.

"You've become a ghost, Chang," Chulho chortled. "Go cool off in the river. Don't come back until you're part of this group again."

Needless to say, I did cool off, or warm up. I needed my brothers, and they needed me, too.

CHAPTER

27

In February 2002 we made up our minds to leave Gyeong-seong again at the start of planting season. Back to the coast, maybe—mackerel, dreams of being a shipmate, I didn't care. Anywhere but Gyeong-seong. All I knew for certain was that there was nothing left for us in this dead town.

I was in the train station near the end of February, having just stolen some twisted bread sticks from the market, when an old man with bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows looked right at me and pointed.

"Come here, boy," he said in a strong, gruff voice.

I sized him up and down before moving toward him. He wore pressed pants the color of the sea on a winter's day and a matching cotton shirt and cap. I hadn't seen clean clothes on anyone since we left Pyongyang. His cheeks were not sunken and hallow, either. He was full and glowing from the winter wind. There was something about him I recognized. Something about him felt familiar. Yet I couldn't quite make out what.

I pushed the feeling away. *This is a rich man*, I thought, instead, slinking up beside him. I held my hands up, cupped together in front of me, and tilted my head, hoping to look innocent and desperate.

He shook his head. "I don't want to give you handouts," he said. "What is your name?"

I was startled. His accent was from Pyongyang.

I glanced at the poster beside him. On it, in the neat handwriting of an educated man, he had listed the Chinese medicines he was selling: elm tree powder for stomachache, *woo-wong* for the liver, and dried *omija* for bronchial problems. The poster also said the man could make medicines upon order to cure headaches and menstrual cramps.

"You a doctor?" I asked, letting my hands fall to my sides.

"I am," the man replied. "But I asked you a question. What is your name?"

"*Chang*," I said, puffing out my chest and holding my head high. "I'm very fast and accurate at throwing metal chopsticks." I wanted this old man to be scared of me like everyone else. "Want me to work for you, guard your things?"

"What is your real name?" he said, seemingly unimpressed with my attempted bravado or my invitation to work for him.

I shook my head and turned away from him. I refused to answer. If he wasn't going to give me food, won, or a job, he was useless.

"Is your mother Jeongwha?" he asked. " Is your father Seong-il?"

I turned back around and stared at him. His brown, almost amber, pupils drew me toward him. He reminded me of something . . . an animal perhaps. Yes, he had the eyes of a brown bear. No . . . the eyes of a person, someone I knew.

"What?" I finally said. My arms began to tingle, and my face became flushed. "You're a fortune-teller," I spat. "The last seer I met told me death was around me, and it was. My best friend in the entire world, my brother, died."

"What is your real name?" he continued, ignoring me. "Is it Sungju?"

I stared at him for a long time. "Only people who see the dead would know these names," I finally said.

"You're Sungju from Pyongyang, and your mother is Jeongwha. Your father is Seong-il."

"Only those who speak with the dead know these names," I repeated.

"I'm your grandfather," he then said, taking a step toward me.

"No!" I said, stepping back from him.

"Come with me to my home," he continued, folding up his poster and placing some glass jars into a large backpack.

"You're a sorcerer—I can't trust you," I said, flicking my fingers in my nervousness. I wanted to hit this man, to beat him up, to tell him to go away. How dare he say those names to me.

He stopped what he was doing and stared at me, his face soft.

Unsik, Sangchul, Min-gook, and Chulho sauntered over, having taken my flicking fingers as a sign that we were about to engage in battle.

"I'll be back in a minute," I told the old man as I pulled my brothers into a huddle.

"Let's go with him," Unsik said after I explained what was going on. "Steal his things. He's wealthy! Look at his clothes."

"Yes," I said, rubbing my hands together. My initial fear had turned to greed. This man was using me for something. Instead, I would use him.

THE LIGHT ON THE FRONT OF THE OLD MAN'S BIKE DANCED across the snow as we made our way from the train station, through the main town square, and past the monument in honor of Kim Il-sung, with red lettering that said the great leader is with us forever. While there was a nearly full moon hanging low in the sky, clouds kept drifting over it like waves in the sea.

I listened to my shoes crushing the ice, the howl of a dog, and the hum of the motor that generated the old man's light.

"What are your friends' names?" he asked me.

"None of your business," I snapped.

"That's a funny name," he replied.

"How much longer?" I asked after we had walked for what seemed like a few hours, the snow-covered fields replaced by the sloping hills and forests of the countryside. The few wooden houses we passed were in complete darkness.

"About another hour," he replied. "It's quicker on the bike. But I can't take you all. Do you—"

I grunted to cut him off. "Don't ask me any more questions," I hissed.

WE FINALLY TURNED INTO A DRIVEWAY THAT LED TO A house at the foot of a tall mountain. Kerosene lamps had been placed in the windowsills, casting light out into the courtyard.

I followed the old man as he moved toward the house as my brothers tailed behind me. All the while, I surveyed the scene. There was a shed that clearly housed goats. I snapped my fingers on my right hand three times, indicating to my brothers to steal the goats. Then I spied the chicken coop. I snapped my fingers again to indicate that the chickens had to be taken, too. Then I saw the rabbit cages. We would be feasting for months! I thought.

Just as the old man reached up to turn the doorknob, the door opened. A woman stepped outside. She squinted as her eyes got used to the dim light, and I watched as her expression moved from joy to shock when her eyes landed on me. Wearing only socks, she stepped into the snow and headed straight for me.

"*Yaeya*, we've finally found you! You're alive," she said, reaching me and embracing me in her warm arms. My heart started to race.

"No, I am not your grandson," I replied through clenched teeth. This woman was crazy, just like the girl who told me dragons would fall.

"What kind of game are you two playing?" I demanded, pushing the old woman away.

"Come inside," the old woman said in a kind voice. "We'll talk there." She wore her gray hair in a tight bun and a rabbit fur collar over her sweater. She took my hand and pulled me into the house, which smelled of burning cedar.

"I'll get you and your friends some hot water and honey," she said, leaving me standing in the doorway. I looked around at the bookshelves as the old man pushed his way past me. There was one full of Chinese medicines in glass jars and another with leather-bound books. My gaze moved to the kitchen, the open shelves of which were well stocked with rice, noodles, chopsticks, dishes, and spoons. I saw a few chests in the corner of the main room. *So much to steal*, I thought.

Then my eyes landed on a portrait hanging on the opposite wall.

I stopped breathing.

Without taking off my shoes, I inched my way into the center of the room, as if learning to walk.

As I neared the picture, my legs shook, and I tried to breathe, but I couldn't. My chest had become tight, as if a fist had just hit me hard. I felt dizzy and had to reach out to steady myself against the wall. "Am I dreaming?" I asked out loud. No one answered, but I could feel the old man move right in behind me.

I pinched my legs. "Am I awake? Am I dead now? Is this what happens on the other side?"

"You are awake," he whispered. "You're not dead."

I stared at the portrait, first into the eyes of my mother, and then at my father. The black-and-white photograph had been taken on their wedding day. It was a copy of the photograph I had wanted from my mother's wedding chest.

I managed to whistle to let my brothers know to abort our plans. Unsik came rushing in the front door wanting to know what was going on. I whistled again, and he ran outside to get the others.

I then turned on legs that felt like rubber and faced the old man, the old woman, and soon my brothers, all staring at me wide-eyed with mouths agape.

I opened my own mouth to speak. But before any words came, my knees gave out, and I collapsed to the floor.

"What is it?" Min-gook asked, coming to my side.

"This man is my grandfather," I said, my voice faint and weak. "And this woman . . . is my grandmother."

She had fallen to the floor, too, and was sobbing. And my grandfather—the man who had told me that before every storm is a calm, who lay with me in Bo-Cho's house and told me the story of Heungbu wa Nolbu—smiled.

"You may have grown since I last saw you. You are not a little boy anymore. You're sixteen. I would never forget your face. Every Sunday, I went looking for you," he said as he slid down beside me on the floor. "With every falling star I saw, I knew I was getting closer."

MY BROTHERS AND I TOOK OFF OUR SHOES AND SAT IN A circle around my grandfather as my grandmother finished making us hot water with honey.

"I wrote your mother every week in Pyongyang," he began to explain. "I got worried when she stopped replying. And so I came to look for you. You weren't there. Another family with a little girl about your age lived in your apartment. I asked the block party head where you had all gone. I had to bribe him, but he eventually told me you had moved to Gyeong-seong. I paid him a lot of money for the address, and for nearly a year he refused to give it to me. Finally, he did. But when we got here, it was too late. The people who had taken over your house said your father had disappeared, that your mother had gone to look for food and she had never come back. The man who owned the house said you were a *kotjebi* at the train station and had never come back."

"But I *did* go back to the house," I exclaimed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "If the man who had taken over our house had just said, had just told me, that my grandfather—someone—was looking for me, the past four and a half years wouldn't have happened."

"I never gave up hope I would find you," my grandfather said.

"Hope," I whispered. Something I had lost.

"Is this your gang?" my grandmother asked as she shuffled into the room, carrying a clay pot of steaming water.

I nodded.

My grandfather rolled a cigarette while my grandmother poured each of us a cup of hot water and then spooned in honey.

"I have honeybees now," my grandfather said as I took a sip of the drink. Then he quickly asked, "Where is your mother?"

I could tell by his creaky voice that he wanted to know, and yet, at the same time, he was not ready for the answer.

I shook my head slowly. "She went to Wonsan to get food from Aunt Nampo," I said after a long pause. "She never came back. I don't know where she is."

My grandmother spilled part of her drink on her sweater.

"Aunt never mentioned that your mother was ever expected there," my grandfather said, his voice full of tears.

It came to me then what was so familiar about my grandfather's eyes. They drooped in the corners the same way my mother's did.

CHAPTER

28

My grandfather slaughtered his best goat to celebrate my being found. "You need to know that even before the famine, killing a goat was done only on special occasions and showed the highest respect for those it was being cooked for and served to."

With the famine, of course, few people had livestock anymore. I had heard stories over the years at the markets of the military killing entire families just to take their pigs and sheep. The military was hungry, too, you know. That my grandfather slaughtered a goat for my brothers and me . . . that gesture alone made me at least feel human again.

We were no longer wild animals who stole, who found customers for nightflowers, who fought, who had become so hardened we forgot our real names. Needless to say, I wondered how my grandfather had so much livestock up here, in the hills, deep in the countryside, miles away from any other home. It was as if his home was that lake in Baekdu Mountain: placed there from heaven.

My brothers and I spent much of the second day vomiting because we were not used to eating so much meat. Our diets had been mostly breads and rice, after all, and lots of insects and bugs and worms that came attached to the food. But being sick didn't stop us. Since we didn't want to appear disrespectful to my grandfather by not eating, we'd throw up and then eat another dish. Vomit again, then eat some more, feasting on the tender goat that was roasted on an outdoor spit and served in bowls with baked radish and potatoes. We boys grew lazy, smoking cigarettes with my grandfather, drinking *sool*, sleeping, and eating. As we relaxed, we recounted many of our journeys, including the gangs we defeated and the brothers we lost.

"Myeongchul was the best actor in Joseon," Chulho told my grandfather.

"And Young-bum was the most loyal of any brothers," I whispered. "He saved me after *abeoji* and *eomeoni* left."

My grandmother stopped listening early on. "I hate hearing how you suffered," she told me as she busied herself in the kitchen, cutting more vegetables. She wanted to give us an endless stream of food for all the meals we'd missed over the years. A tear dripped down my cheek then. She really did love me. Someone, somewhere, was listening to my prayers. Someone, somewhere, still had hope when all of mine had gone.

* * *

MY BROTHERS TOLD ME THEY WERE LEAVING ON THE MORNING of the sixth day. They first said it was because they didn't want to see my grandparents with no food. All of us had managed to finish off the goat, and my grandfather was about to kill two chickens and a rabbit for us. But I didn't believe this was the reason.

"We want to live in the train station," Chulho said, pulling me outside so my grandparents couldn't hear. "The merchants in Gyeong-seong are paying us to protect their goods. We have nothing to do here, and soon everyone will go hungry if we keep eating the way we are. In Gyeong-seong, we have work and food."

"My grandfather has lots of food," I said.

"We want to go," Sangchul cut in.

"Maybe you can come back and forth?" I asked, my voice sounding desperate. I didn't want to lose them, but I also knew I wasn't going back to street life, either.

Sangchul placed a warm hand on my shoulder. "We'll miss you, too—so much you don't even know," he said. "But it's two hours each way from here to Gyeong-seong. We'll die of exhaustion if we try that every day. We need to live in the train station."

"It's all we know," Min-gook added. "We want to see if our families might come looking for us, too. We've only ever kept moving and looked for them. What if, like with you, we all keep missing each other?"

"We had a rocky start," Unsik said, stepping toward me. "*But . . .*"

"But you'll always be my brother," I said, finishing his sentence.

"The best brother I could have," he said with a smile.

"Can you make us a promise?" Chulho said, moving in close.

"Of course, anything," I replied, wiping my eyes.

"Can you come to the train station every Sunday to see us, as your grandfather did looking for you?"

"Yes. Of course."

I then watched my four brothers walk side by side down the road, wearing clothes that my grandmother had washed and sewn. I choked back my tears and swallowed the hurt and sadness swelling inside me. Even before they disappeared from my view, I missed them. I felt hollow all over again, like when my parents left.

FOR THE LAST MONTHS OF WINTER I HELPED MY GRANDfather make his medicines, grinding herbs into fine powders with a wooden pestle-and-mortar hand grinder he had made himself. He taught me the exact amounts of powder to mix with honey or sticky rice powder. I also boiled his syringes and cleaned his glass jars.

A few times every day, someone would pop in: an aging grandmother, a sick child. In one of the many sheds, which he had built himself, he would see the patient, never turning anyone away, even if they couldn't pay. He'd administer whatever medicines were needed, and I'd help him bandage wounds and set broken bones. His patients often gave him food—an animal or vegetables. The men would come by on another day and fix a fence or replace a beam in the chicken coop. Unlike the doctors I'd heard about in Gyeong-seong, my grandfather always gave his medicines to the people along with treatment.

When spring came, I helped my grandfather till the land of the small farm he ran. My hands became calloused from the friction of heaving the shovel up and down. But the land was fertile, and soon I saw the stalks of corn and the soybeans and potatoes pop forth from the ground.

After that, I became a shepherd. Several days a week, I'd take my grandfather's goats to the hills. I'd sing, "'The roll of thunder of Jong-Il peak,'" trying as hard as I could to sound like Sangchul when he performed in the train station. When I was bored of singing, I'd recite myths, including the one of Heungbu wa Nolbu.

Being a shepherd meant having a lot of time to myself; so when my voice grew hoarse from singing and I'd recited the few myths I knew, I'd point my long staff at one of those little creatures in my charge and name it. "You are so much like Min-gook," I said to the beefiest buck. "And you, lean and mean billy, you are Chulho." Half laughing, half crying, I'd then recount to these animals stories of my brothers and what we did together, leaving in the parts I'd left out for my grandfather, including my using opium, kicking other boys when they had already surrendered, and finding men to have sex with the nightflowers.

Since the area where my grandparents lived was deep in the countryside, I could see more stars than I ever had anywhere else. When spring finally moved over to let summer in, I'd lie on the flat roof of one of my grandfather's sheds and stare up at the sky.

One night, my grandfather asked if he could join me. We lay side by side, our hands behind our heads, and stared at Ursa Major. I wanted to tell him the story of Chilseong and her goddess children, but as before when I thought I wanted to share something, I couldn't. The last time I had been this close to a grown man was when my father told me about Chilseong. That time felt so very far away now. It's funny how, after a time, not just a person's scent but also his or her face leaves our memories. All I had left was his story of Chilseong, and I think I didn't want to give that away, not yet.

"Do you remember when you were little, my telling you that if you make a wish on a falling star, the wish will come true?" my grandfather said, and just in the nick of time. I was about to cry thinking of my father.

"Uh-huh," I replied.

"Make a wish now," he said, pointing to the northern horizon as a star blazed across the sky, fast and faint, like the final fizzle of a firecracker on Parade Day. If I didn't hurry, I'd miss it.

I pinched my eyes shut. "You brought me my grandparents," I said aloud to Chilseong and *shan-shin-ryong-nim*. "Now I want to find my parents. Please lead them to me."

MY GRANDMOTHER HAD BEEN A HIGH SCHOOL MATH teacher when she married my grandfather. She stopped working in her midforties and ran an after-school program for elite math students—that is, until she and my grandfather left Pyongyang to come looking for my family and me.

One rainy afternoon, I found my grandfather in one of his sheds, nailing planks of wood together, and then those planks onto a flat piece of plywood, creating a box. Then he poured sand into it. "We have no notebooks," he explained as he waved his hands over the contraption. "This," he said with a wide smile, "will be how you study at the house of your grandmother."

After I did household chores or in the evenings on those days I had to shepherd, my grandmother would take me to that shed. For hours, she had me doing math equations and writing paragraphs in the sand.

I soon slipped back into study mode, replacing my need for cigarettes and *sool* with words and algebra. In the hills, while tending the goats, I'd use my walking stick and continue my studies on my own in the dusty earth.

At night I'd fall asleep in down bedding and wake up to my grandfather's snores filling the house and my grandmother's porridge cooking over slow heat on the stove. I could exhale and relax and sleep so deeply I wondered if I had slept at all in the past four years. On some days that hole inside me was filled, and time didn't seem to move.

On other days, though, I'd wake to the sound of a magpie cawing or the call of the rooster, panting, not quite sure where I was, patting the bedding down and calling for my mother. My grandfather would calm me by stroking my back and then giving me hot water with honey. As he rocked me in his arms, he sang:

"Hushabye, hushabye baby
sleep well
go to a country of dream
my lovely baby
go to a country of dream
my lovely baby."

EVERY SUNDAY, THE MOMENT THE ROOSTER ANNOUNCED dawn, I'd jump into my pants and sweater and head out the front door with the big gray canvas bag full of food my grandmother packed the night before. I'd race, more times than not running the entire way to Gyeong-seong, to the train station to see my brothers. By the time I got there, I'd be perspiring, and my feet would be blistered. But I ignored my discomfort. I had discovered I had two homes, you see, two places that drew me to them, as metal does a magnet. My grandparents and my brothers.

On hot, humid days when the cicadas hummed and the crickets sang, my brothers and I went to Gyeong-seong River to swim. We'd swing on an old tire tied to a tree on a fraying rope and leap off into the stream. We'd play tag, too, during which we would chase one another, splashing and singing at the top of our lungs.

We'd end our days by my buying them twisted bread sticks in the market using won my grandfather gave me from selling his medicines. We'd sit on the broken stone steps leading up to the train station and stare at the sunset. One time, I thought about Pyongyang and wondered why I was ever in such awe of our capital city, why everyone held it in such great esteem. I came to realize then and there that gilded castles in the sky aren't ever buildings. They're people. My gilded castle was here, all along, with my friends, my brothers, Chulho, Min-gook, Sangchul, Unsik, Myeongchul, and Young-bum.

Inside, we already know the things that will happen to us in life. We spend our days just waiting for them to be revealed . . . I remembered my grandfather's words then. I guess as a child, when I played with my toy soldiers under the baby grand piano and wished for a sibling, I had known I had some, somewhere out there. I was just waiting for time to reveal them to me.

I guess, also, I always knew that I'd have to leave my brothers for good . . . at least in body.

In spirit, my brothers and I would always be one.

CHAPTER

29

On a late fall day, when the air outside was crisp and smelled of my grandmother's cooking fires and damp leaves and the wind bit into my cheeks as I walked with the goats, I arrived home in the evening to find my grandfather pacing the driveway.

When he saw me, he motioned for me to leave the goats and follow him. His face was drawn. I could tell, even in the dim light, that he was tense.

In his examination room, which smelled of disinfectant, a man was seated in the old wooden chair where my grandfather usually sat. The man seemed nervous as he folded his gray cotton cap into his hands and stood up. "You must be Sungju!"

I stared into his black eyes and nodded slowly.

"He says he knows your father," my *hal-abeoji* said, gesturing for me to sit on the patient's cot.

I turned to my grandfather and tilted my head, unsure I had heard correctly.

"He says he has been sent by your father, who is living in China," my grandfather continued. "The man wants to give you something."

My hands trembled as I carefully opened the letter the man passed to me.

> *Dear darling son,*
>
> *I'm living in China very safely. Please come to China to see me. This man will take you. I have looked a long time for you.*
>
> *My love,*
>
> *Father.*

My eyes filled with tears, from relief that my father had found me but also from anger.

My mother was missing.

I had spent four years stealing, begging, and living on the streets. And he'd been in China the entire time? He finally sent me a letter addressed "Dear darling son," as if the years had not grown like a sea separating us?

I wanted to scream. I fought the impulse to tear up the letter. *Who cares where he is?* I wanted to lash out.

Instead, I started to pass the letter back to the man, my hands shaking more than ever, when I saw that my father had written more on the back.

> *In case you do not believe this letter is from me . . . When you were little, we used to picnic on the banks of the Daedong River. Afterward, we played war games. I taught you military tactics, remember? One of those tactics was to have a secret code. If we ever got separated in battle, we would use that code to identify each other. One of us would have to start the code, the other had to answer it. I will start: the Korean consonant N.*

The tears came crashing down my cheeks. It was the start of the code, what my father was supposed to say or write, to identify himself. I leaned over, unable to breathe. For a moment I couldn't see, blinded by my crying. I knew this was my father. In our secret code game, father would give me a random consonant, and I had to answer with a word that began with that consonant.

The man finally spoke. "I'm a friend of your father's." I didn't look up, and I started to shake. "I will take you to him," he continued. I wished I hadn't heard that. I didn't want to.

Fury, love, hurt, and guilt had all rolled themselves into one tight ball that got stuck in my stomach and threatened to choke me.

"Give the boy time to think," my grandfather said, I guess sensing something wasn't right with me. "Come back in two days' time. We'll have a decision by then."

ALL THAT NIGHT, I TOSSED AND TURNED, TRYING TO SLEEP but waking at the faintest of sounds, including a twig falling on the roof, the rustling of leaves from the wind. *Tomorrow I will tend the goats. Tomorrow will be a normal day, like any other*, I'd tell myself. *Tomorrow I will forget completely about this strange man's visit.*

But then my mind would drift to that letter. *I'm living in China very safely. Please come to China to see me. This man will take you. I have looked a long time for you. My love, Father.*

I wanted to see my father—that much I came to realize. But not to run into his arms and hug him. Instead, to ask him why he left and never came home. "Why, why didn't you honor your promise and return in a week? *Eomeoni* once told me that you could brave anything except the thought of my thinking of you as a failure, too."

"I WILL GO WITH THE MAN," I TOLD MY GRANDPARENTS THE next morning as we sipped hot water with honey and I ran a spoon through a bowl of porridge.

"What if it's a trap?" my grandmother whispered. "What if this man doesn't know your father and wants to hurt you?"

I explained to her that in the letter something was written that no one else in the world but my father would ever know. "At least the letter is real. It's my father's handwriting. He used our secret code."

My grandfather cleared his throat. "I, too, am worried about you going to China. I don't trust this man. For four years we have not heard a thing from either your mother or father, and now—"

"I'm coming back," I said, cutting him off, reaching over and taking first my grandmother's and then my grandfather's hands in my own. "I want to live here and grow old with you."

My grandmother gasped, and my grandfather sighed and lowered his head. "We want that, too, but . . ."

"But what? I thought this is what you wanted. I thought this was the reason you came looking for me."

"There is no hope for Joseon," my grandfather said, looking up, his eyes a pool of tears. "If you can get out—I mean, out of Joseon—you should go. I just . . . I just . . . I just want to make sure this is the right way with this stranger."

Now I was really confused. The Chinese hunt us down like rats, wanting to exterminate us, and the South gets information from us, then kills us. "Where is there to go?" I finally said.

My grandfather shrugged.

I pressed on, trying to be as reassuring as I possibly could be. "Look, this isn't a trap. This man has a letter from my father. That much I know for certain. I survived four years in train stations and back alleys. I can survive this."

* * *

MY GRANDMOTHER SLIPPED A BAG WITH RICE BALLS AND honey over my shoulder. My grandfather, whom I knew well by now, chain-smoked when he was nervous, and he lit up one after another of his hand-rolled cigarettes as we waited for the stranger to return to take me to China.

When the man, who looked as though he was in his early thirties and who reminded me of Chulho, arrived, he reassured my grandparents that we could trust him.

I didn't cry as we walked down the road or look back after I had bowed to my grandparents, even though I could hear my grandmother sobbing at the doorway. I had to fight every nerve in my body that wanted me to turn around and run back into her arms.

And then they were gone. All I could hear was my feet crunching the snow underneath me.

"Why didn't my father come sooner?" I asked the man.

"He tried. He sent people to look for you and your mother." His speech was curt. I got the sense he really didn't want to talk.

"Why didn't he come back?" I pressed on.

"We're all in hard times, even those in China," the man began. He was thin, but I could tell by his strong gait that he was fit. I was breathing heavily to keep up. *This man has walked many mountains,* I thought. *He's well trained.*

"What does that mean?" I asked. "My father couldn't come home? He got stuck in China for four years?"

The man stopped and spun me around so I had to look at him.

"The less you know, the better," he said sternly. "Just trust this: Every arrangement possible has been made to ensure your security. Your father has done a lot to find you and bring you to him and avoid being caught."

"By the border guards?" I asked. The man was walking again and grunted. I reached out to him and held his elbow, getting him to stop again.

"Can I at least say goodbye to my brothers in Gyeong-seong before we leave?" I asked him. We studied each other's faces. I was looking particularly into his eyes to see signs of deceit. There were none. He was a hard man, for sure, but I felt he could be trusted.

"Yes, you can see your brothers," he finally whispered, shifting from one shoulder to the other the bag of food my grandmother had given him, saying it was for the boys. "But you need to listen to me at all times. If I say jump, you ask how high. This is one of the most dangerous journeys in the world you are about to take. You're a street boy, so you know people, whom to trust and whom not to trust. You know danger. You also know how to act calm in the face of danger. That's why I know we'll be okay. But stop asking questions. That's your first order."

"What's your name?" I asked as he huffed off.

"None of your business," he called over his shoulder.

I smiled then.

He reminded me of . . . well, me.

MY BROTHERS WEREN'T ANYWHERE AT THE GYEONG-SEONG train station. The man started to get impatient as I searched for them, snapping at me at one point that I couldn't waste any more time. We had to go.

"You seem to know what it's like as a street boy," I said. He glared at me, but I didn't care. "Everyone in these boys' lives has let them down. Everyone. And you know that. So I'm not leaving until I find them. You can leave if you want, but I'm staying."

The man sighed, stepped back, and said he'd wait for me by the willow tree by Ha-myeon Bridge. It was the same tree where Chulho and Min-gook sat that late-summer day in 1997 when I sold my textbooks.

I finally found my brothers in the market. I waved them over and gave them my grandmother's food.

"But it's not Sunday," Chulho said, tilting his head and eyeing me up and down. "Something up? Everything okay with the grandfolks?"

"Yeah," I replied slowly. "I have to go to Hweryeong. My mother's sister, Nampo, now lives there. She's ill." I felt sick inside from the first and what would become the last lie I ever told them. I wanted to take it back, swallow it, and start all over. Tell them the truth.

Then I reminded myself that what I was about to do with this strange man was illegal and considered treason by the government.

"We'll come with you," said Sangchul, tossing his bag over his shoulder.

The others nodded.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I have to go on my own. But I will try to be back, if not this Sunday, the Sunday after. Soon . . . very soon."

"Okay . . . ," said Chulho.

I could tell by the way he looked at me that he knew I was lying. But then his eyes moved to a woman carrying a basket of boiled eggs a little too loosely in front of her, as though she was new to selling and unprepared to face *kotjebi.*

Min-gook, Sangchul, Unsik, and Chulho all grunted goodbye to me and were then gone in a flash, following the woman.

"If not this Sunday, then the one after I will come and see you," I whispered as they disappeared into the crowd. "A promise is a promise. And I mean that. Whatever I face in China, whatever man my father has become, I will be back here in a week to see you and live with my grandparents again."

THE STRANGE MAN PAID AN OLD TRUCK DRIVER, WHO looked as beat-up as his vehicle, to let us hitch a ride in the back.

We got off the truck around midnight in Hweryeong. "We'll stay here at a friend's house," the man said. And I mean that's all he said. This stranger had gone mute on me.

I spent the rest of that night and all of the next day inside this so-called friend's house. I was unable to eat my grandmother's rice balls, unable to sleep, unable to do much but stare out at nothing and think about all the things I wanted to tell my father, every detail of my life over the past four years that he was responsible for. At least my anger toward my father, I thought at one point, made me not think about what I was about to do: Smuggle myself into China. I should have been way more worried about that than I actually was.

Toward midnight, the man and I were on our way again. There was no moon, and it was cloudy, which the man said he was happy about. "So no one can see us," he said. At least he was talking again.

We met a chain-smoking border guard at the edge of the Duman River on the outskirts of Hweryeong, far from the bridge that connected Joseon with China. The guard spoke fast and in a low voice. "You have to cross the river as quickly as you can," he said as I slipped off my shoes and tied them together. I then draped my shoes around my neck to keep them dry. The stranger handed the guard a wad of won. "Go," the guard said, turning around and walking up the hill.

I waded into the cool water, cooler than the snow I would put on my feverish head in the winter as a child. I held my bag of food from my grandmother over my head as my feet began to slope downward and I slowly sank into the mucky part of the river.

"Follow me," the man ordered, obviously having done this before. I walked right in behind him, my toes gripping the bottom of the river like the talons of ravens grab their prey. The water was low, but the undercurrent was strong. A current, I thought at one point, that could wash me right out to the East Sea.

On the other side of the river, I put my shoes back on, and then, soaking wet, followed the man as he walked at a very fast pace into the woods and then into the hills.

We walked so far, so fast—a steady march; run is the best way to describe it. I was on my own *arduous walk*, but going in the opposite direction than Kim Il-sung had gone as a child. I was going into China, a China full of steep mountains with crags and holes.

At sunrise, the man stopped at the door of a wooden farm shed on top of one of the mountains: a shed like the one in which Myeongchul died. A shed that overlooked a pear and sunflower farm. We went inside, and he told me I could lie down. I did. Within seconds, I fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER

30

Wake up, *adeul*,” I heard my father’s voice say. I sat bolt upright, my body shaking from the tremor of having been disturbed deep inside a dream. For a moment I thought I was back in Pyongyang and everything I had lived in the past four and a half years was a dream.

But then I smelled perspiration mixed with greasy, boiling soybean oil and cigarette smoke. I looked around. The shed was lit by a kerosene lamp set to low, and I saw the faces of two men. The stranger who had led me across the river was sitting closer to me than the other man, and his face was lined in stubble and his eyes dark, as if he hadn’t slept a wink. He was dressed for outside, wearing his thick wool coat. Night had fallen, I could see that much as my eyes darted toward the small window and then back at the man. I must have slept all day.

The other man, who was older, with gray hair and a round, full face, waved to the table beside me, on top of which was a steamy twisted bread stick, a bowl of rice with pork, and some candies.

"What is this?" I demanded as the men moved the table toward me.

"Food," the man who led me across the river said. "You need to eat to keep your strength up. I'm returning to Joseon," he said matter-of-factly. "This man, who also will not tell you his name, will take you to your father."

All of a sudden I felt sick. "I thought you said you were one of my father's friends?" I was filled with the heavy weight of knowing that this was a trick, just as my grandparents had feared. I had gone along with it because I wanted to believe, deep down, that I was wrong. "You don't know my father at all," I said before the man could reply, my voice weighted with hopelessness.

"No," he said, passing me the steaming twisted bread stick and gesturing for me to eat. "I never met your father. I'm just a delivery person, and I have my own family in Joseon. This is my business, taking people back and forth. I'm what you call a human smuggler. A broker."

"Take me with you," I pleaded.

"No," he replied, a little too quickly. His mind was made up. He was a brick wall.

"Are you taking me to jail?" I turned and asked the other man. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"Shush, boy," the second man said, coming over and stroking my shoulder. I brushed his hand away. "I really am your father's friend . . . your father's best friend. Your father is in Hangook. I am taking you as far as I can go, and then shortly after that you will meet your father. I promise you can trust me. I know that people have let you down."

"You mean my father has let me down," I snapped, though I did not intend to.

"People have let you down," he repeated. "Trust will be hard. But do try to trust me. If we are to make it to your father, you need to."

"Where is Hangook?" I asked. I wanted to go back to Joseon right then and there. I wanted to hear my grandfather's deep voice and my grandmother's sweet singing when she thought no one was listening.

"It's in Daehanminguk," he answered as he gave the man who had brought me over the river some Chinese yuan. "I need you to change." He passed me a pile of neatly pressed clothes. As he turned up the lamp, I pulled the clothes apart and saw a pair of navy-blue slacks, a light blue cotton shirt, a new wool coat, and a pair of shiny black loafers. As I examined the clothes, the man who had brought me over the river opened the door and shut it quickly, sending a gust of air and a golden leaf around the room. He didn't even say goodbye.

"Why do I need to change?" I asked, pinching my eyes shut, remembering Young-bum and his school uniform.

"Promise not to ask too many questions," the man said with a smile.

The man brought me a bucket of water and then helped me wash my hair. After I cleaned the dirt from the crossing from my face and body, I changed into the new clothes.

The man then took a photograph of me. A flash on the camera nearly blinded me.

"What's that for?" I asked as he tucked the camera into a bag. "Jail?" Maybe I was in prison now.

"Remember, knowing less is more in this case," he replied, smiling again. He was a heavier man, with soft eyes that danced in the light from the lamp. Any other time he might really be one of my father's friends, I thought watching him. I might even trust him.

"Just go along with everything I say, and you will be safe," he repeated.

THE MAN MADE ME STAY IN THE SHED FOR NEARLY A WEEK, where I was left alone during the days. I wasn't allowed to go outside, light one of the lamps, or peer out the window. At night, the man would come and sleep beside me on a mat. I did have plenty of blankets and meals, delicious meals, of noodles and pork, tofu and seaweed, even moon cakes.

On the morning of the eighth day, or rather before dawn on the eighth day, the man and I traveled by foot down the mountain and then along dirt paths and on a road to Yanji. "Yanji is in the Yanbian Korean prefecture," he explained, "where many Korean families have lived since before Kim Il-sung, escaping the Japanese."

The Yanji train station was bustling with people, many of whom spoke Korean in dialects my ears strained to understand. As well, I heard a choppy language, which the man whispered to me was Mandarin. In Yanji, there were also cars, trucks, tractors, and motorbikes. The exhaust and all the people made me feel nauseated. I gripped the man's arm tight, fearing I would faint.

In the train station, there was electricity and shining lights all around me, lights I had not seen since Pyongyang, lights that hung low from the ceiling. Many of the people at the train station wore bright colors, too, as they did on parade days in Pyongyang. The women wore tight dresses that revealed every curve of their bodies, in shiny satin materials, in blues, reds, and yellows. I tried to pretend nothing was a surprise to me, that it all was normal. But in truth, my sense of sight was on overload. Everything was overwhelming, and I started to feel as though I was getting a bad headache.

"After we take our seats," the man whispered into my ear as the whistle from an approaching train and the sound of screeching wheels drowned out most other sounds, "just pretend to sleep. I will do all the talking. Keep your eyes shut at all times."

As I sat back in my seat, my head pounded. I heard a ticket taker come up to the man and say something in Mandarin. I heard the ruffling of papers and then the ticket taker's shoes shuffling off.

I didn't open my eyes until the man who claimed to be my father's best friend nudged me. He leaned over and whispered into my ear that we were getting off at the next station. I rubbed my eyes, pretending that I had really slept the entire way. As an announcement in Mandarin came on the loudspeaker, the man slipped a small envelope onto my lap. He whispered again into my ear when the intercom overpowered other noises. "Inside is your passport. It's a book that will help you travel. You show it to the people who ask to see it. We're going to take a taxi to the airport. I will walk you through the airport to your gate. After you get on the airplane, do not say anything, not even a word. If you do, your accent will reveal where you are from, and you will be caught and sent to jail—you will be sent from China to North Korea. As soon as the airplane lands, you can say anything you like. Your father is waiting for you when the plane lands."

I swallowed hard, nodded, and bowed with a smile, as if this man and I had just had a lighthearted conversation.

At the airport, people moved past and around me, not noticing me or seeming to care.

The man and I finally reached a point where he needed a ticket to pass.

He had me take out mine and the little book he said was a passport. He then pushed me toward a woman standing behind a tall desk. I looked down the entire time she examined my passport and plane ticket until I heard her say in Korean for me to move on.

I followed the other people, people who I hoped were on my plane, down a bridge and onto a vehicle, a big bus with wings, a large white swan. I'd never been on a plane before. I'd only ever seen airplanes in the sky, in Pyongyang. I found the seat number that matched the number on my ticket. I sat down, clutching to my chest the bag my grandmother had given me, filled with food, including a jar of my grandfather's honey.

"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" I HEARD AN OLDER FEMALE VOICE say in Korean. I opened my eyes and looked over. She was sitting beside me, looking at me. Middle-aged, I thought. A mother, but a mother wearing bright red lipstick, and her eyes were lined in heavy black pencil. Her hair was long, stretching down her back. I'd never seen a woman wear makeup like this before.

"Where are you from?" she repeated, smiling, revealing straight, perfectly white teeth.

I started waving, remembering not to speak until the plane landed. She furrowed her eyebrows. "You don't talk?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Mute?"

I nodded.

I could understand her Korean, but it was hard. It moved the words up and down, rising at the end, not lilting like a flower past bloom. She passed me a piece of paper and a big fat pencil with a red tip. "Write," she said, "where you are from."

I started to perspire. This was a trap. The woman was the police. I looked over again, and she was smiling at me.

I wrote down the only place I knew in China. The place the man said my father lived: Hangook.

She looked up after reading and smiled.

She then turned away and looked out the window.

I gripped the sides of the seat as the airplane started to move, inching away from the bridge and then moving faster—soon so fast that I felt sick all over again.

I closed my eyes as the wheels left the ground.

For two hours, I felt every movement, the back and forth, as when I floated in the East Sea in Eodaejin.

Then down.

"Welcome to Daehanminguk," a voice said over a loudspeaker.

This time the words were in an even different Korean dialect than what I'd been hearing, one that was more full, robust, the syllables of the words more drawn out. As the plane came to a stop, I remembered what the smuggler had said about my being able to talk as soon as the plane landed. I turned to the woman who had been sitting beside me, smiled, and said hello: "*Annyeonghaseyo.*"

She made a *tsk-tsk* sound with her mouth and said I shouldn't play games. She then pushed her way in front of me as we lined up to get off the plane.

I followed the people into the terminal, staring at all the signs in Korean that lit up the walls, thinking we must still be somewhere near Yanji. I was confused as to why I had to take an airplane if I wasn't really going anywhere. But I brushed the worry aside, reminding myself that my brothers and I took the train just to get from one end of Cheongjin to the other.

In the terminal, I searched every male face for my father's, but I couldn't see him anywhere. I wondered if maybe after all this time I wouldn't recognize him.

I got whisked up in the crowd, which was headed somewhere, so I followed.

I came to a stop at the back of a long line, where people were showing their passports to people behind more tall desks. This time I handed my passport and ticket to a man, slim and tall, whose hair was cut short, his bangs pushed off his face. He was wearing a skinny tie with his button-down shirt. I stifled a laugh. His costume looked funny.

The man opened my passport and looked at the picture and then me.

He then stared into my face, as if studying every line, making me uncomfortable. I blushed and looked down. "I have to meet my father," I eventually said, just wanting to speak to fill the silence between us, to get him to allow me to go.

"You have to come with us," he finally said.

"No, why do I have to go with you? I have to meet my father," I said, looking up.

"Because your passport . . . Sir, you need to come with us."

Two men in black uniforms emerged from a door behind the man and headed straight toward me. I turned and ran, at top speed, like Chulho and Min-gook racing toward the moving freight train.

I saw a door, over which was a lit-up red sign, and ran up to it, hoping it would just open and I could escape. But when my body hit the door, it wouldn't budge. I couldn't find the doorknob. I slapped at the door, hoping somehow it would open, as the two men caught up to me.

I felt their heavy hands on my back. They grabbed my arms, and before I knew it, they had me lying facedown on the floor with my arms behind me and my wrists cuffed together in some metal device from which I could not escape.

"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" ASKED THE MAN BEHIND A METAL desk in a brightly lit room.

"Joseon," I said in a low voice. I wrung my hands together. They were no longer cuffed but were sore. "Joseon," I repeated.

"You're from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?" he asked, his face and voice heavy with shock.

I nodded.

"How did you get here?"

"By airplane," I said.

"How did you get on the plane?"

"With that," I said, pointing to my passport that was in front of him.

"Where did you get this passport?" he asked, waving it in the air.

"Well . . . I found it on the street," I lied. I didn't trust this man, that's for sure.

"This passport is fake," he said.

"No, it must not be true. There is my picture in it. See." I opened it and showed the man the photograph that was taken of me in the shed. "I have to meet my father," I pressed on.

"What is your father's name, son?"

"Why do I have to tell you?" I was now afraid. Maybe this was Joseon and I was in prison. Maybe this was my interrogator, prying me for information about my family.

"Do you know where you are now?" he asked.

"Of course. I am in Hangook," I answered with confidence.

"Do you know where Hangook is?"

"Yes, it is in Daehanminguk."

"Do you know what Daehanminguk means?"

"Yes," I replied more slowly, cautiously, trying hard to hide my growing distress. Where was I really? "It's the name of a city in China," I finally said, hoping, so hoping, that this was true.

"No, Daehanminguk is what you would call Namjoseon."

I stopped breathing and found myself slipping off the chair and onto the floor. When I was in North Korea, South Korea was called Namjoseon, not Daehanminguk. When it finally hit me that I was in South Korea, I remembered the stories I'd heard on the street about how police in the South got us to like them, tell them our secrets, and then killed us. I shimmied onto my knees and put my hands up into the air the way I did when I prayed with my mother. Trembling, with saliva now dripping down my chin, I pleaded with the man to send me back to Joseon. "Don't hurt me, just send me home to my grandparents. I am just a child," I begged. "Please do not kill me."

The man got up then and said I was going to be transferred to Daeseong Gongsa, "the investigation center for people from North Korea."

He then departed, leaving me still kneeling.

THE DINNER I HAD THAT NIGHT AT DAESEONG GONGSA WAS the best I'd had since my birthdays in Pyongyang—chicken and pork and many side dishes. But the meal tasted bittersweet, for all I could think about was that this is what police in the South did: Fatten us people from Joseon up, then slaughter us as the Chinese do their dogs.

The next day, another tall Korean man led me to a room with a big desk in it. A man wearing a skinny tie sat on one side. This time, I didn't laugh at his outfit. He had me sit across from him.

He passed me a pad of paper and some pencils and said he wanted me to write down everything I knew about North Korea. "You can draw or write . . . whatever it is you can. A map of your home, your city, the names of your relatives . . ."

I stared at the paper and pencils as the man stared at me, tapping his foot and glancing every now and then at a clock on the wall. At midday, I was given *yukgaejang*, a hot spicy meat stew.

"Please give us anything," the man finally said midafternoon. My pads of paper were still white. I hadn't written or drawn a thing.

"We want to help you," he pressed on. "We're not your enemies."

Exactly what the interrogators in Joseon told prisoners to get them to spill their secrets, I wanted to snap at the man.

I finally wrote that my family was from Gyeong-seong; that my parents and grandparents were poor potato farmers; that I went to school only until grade four; after that, I had to work the fields; and that I was illiterate and unable to write anything more. I lied about everything, even my family name.

After the man looked at the paper, he asked me again to write about Joseon. "Tell me anything, just something truthful this time," he said in a kind voice.

"Lee Seong-il," I finally blurted out my father's name. "My father, the father I was supposed to meet, who is waiting for me somewhere."

"Come with me," the man said, standing up. He was smiling now. *This is it*, I thought, *I am being sent to my death.* I moved on trembling legs, just as the prisoners I'd seen back in Gyeongseong did before they were executed. I'd said my father's name, and that was enough. Death. Death to me and soon to him, wherever he was.

I collapsed just outside the door, weeping. I didn't want to be hung in the basement or taken to a courtyard and shot.

The man had to carry me under my arms down the corridor, which was lit with long bulbs that made the man's skin look green.

We passed many doors with windows beside them. My eye caught something inside one of the windows. Something made me stand up straight. I pulled myself away from the man. Whatever it was, I felt a magnet pulling me inside.

All I could see was the back of another man.

I didn't need to see his face.

I could tell by his broad shoulders and stocky stance.

My father.

The man who was interrogating me showed me how to push the metal bar to open the door. When I did so, my father turned. I couldn't even say the word *father*, tears and hurt and pain flooded out of me. I did love him, after all. I was never as happy as this to see him.

He ran to me and pulled me tightly into his arms. "Son, *adeul*," he said, sobbing harder than me. We both fell to the floor, like when *eomeoni* and I collapsed the day Kim Il-sung died, and in each other's arms, we rocked back and forth.

Unlike that day when Kim Il-sung died, this time I did wail, harder than I ever had, inhaling my father's musky scent that as a child made me feel safe at night. So many images passed in front of my eyes as we cradled each other: my brothers, my mother, my grandfather, my grandmother, Bo-Cho . . . I was pretty sure, too, I even saw in my mind's eye those floating blue and soft white lights I first saw in the forest. The *shan-shin-ryong-nim*.

"Home," I whispered in my father's ear when we finally stopped crying, "is not a place, but people. I came to realize that as a street boy. You are one of my homes. And this time I am never letting you leave again."

EPILOGUE

I left North Korea at the age of sixteen and have never returned. I can't. As a North Korean defector with South Korean citizenship, I would be considered a traitor by the government of Joseon and would be imprisoned.

Not long after I arrived in South Korea, my father told me why we were kicked out of Pyongyang, but I cannot write it here. You see, my father was in the military. He and his story are known by the regime. Disclosing the reason would identify him and put the few relatives of my family still in North Korea at risk. I will say that if he had done what he did in a free country, such as the United States, his actions would be viewed as merely part of the democratic process. But in Pyongyang, they resulted in my family's expulsion from the capital city and eventual separation.

When my father left Gyeong-seong in the winter of 1998 for China, he did become trapped, as my brothers and I on the street speculated. Our Gyeong-seong neighbors didn't have border guards working for them, contrary to what they told my father. Trafficking people and goods—going back and forth between North Korea and China—was, and still is, very dangerous. Had my father done so, it might have been his execution that the schoolchildren watched.

My father met a human smuggler in China who said the best thing for him to do was to go to South Korea and then send for my mother and me. South Korea recognizes North Koreans as citizens, and despite rumors I had heard in North Korea, South Korea does not kill defectors. My father thought South Korea would be the safest place for us. Believing that the journey from China to South Korea would be just a few weeks, my father agreed. Unlike my journey, which my father paid a small fortune to orchestrate, my father's exodus from North Korea to South Korea took six months. When he finally arrived in South Korea, it took another year for him to settle. By the time he was able to afford to send a smuggler back to find us, my mother and I had both left Gyeong-seong.

My father, like my grandfather, never gave up hope that he would find us. For four years he used all his income to pay for people to look for my mother and me. To this day, he still pays human smugglers in China and North Korea to search for my mother, whom we have never found. In fact, no one has even been able to find a shred of evidence as to where she went when she left Gyeong-seong.

I didn't integrate well in South Korea, at least not at first. I was angry all the time. I had lost my childhood on the streets, and all I knew how to do was fight. South Korean children were not kind to me, viewing all North Koreans as their poorer and less respected cousins. I had been in South Korea for a year and a half and going to a Presbyterian church every Sunday with my father. I didn't really like it. I didn't understand Jesus at that time, and I felt the hierarchy and rules of the church were too similar to North Korea's. But after a rich South Korean boy, the school bully, egged me on in a fight and I won, and the principal of my school threatened to have me expelled, I went to the church. It was a weekday, and I skulked around the outside. The pastor was clearing the garden. He saw me and asked what I was doing. I told him I wanted to study. I wanted his help. He took me inside his church and gave me a sheet of paper and a pencil.

"Write why you want to study," he told me. "Then I'll think about helping you."

Being a street boy, I had learned how to lie to get what I wanted from merchants. So I wrote a long, flowery essay about how I wanted to be a judge in his society. I wanted to protect justice. I wrote a beautiful dream about how I wanted to protect defectors from North Korea, because even though they have a good place to live in South Korea, they have difficulty in school and landing a job because of prejudice against them. Someone has to protect them from injustice, and that person would be me.

But as I was nearing the end, I looked up, and my eye caught some dust floating in a beam of light streaming in from a stained-glass window. I remembered Gyeong-seong then, and I suddenly thought: *This essay is not from my heart.* (At least not then. Yes, it did become my dream, but I didn't know it at that time.) I put the pencil down and remembered something my mother told me while she prayed over her bowl of water: *If you truly, truly want something, you have to be honest. That's what the water represents in my bowl. Try to empty your mind. Clean it of impure thoughts. Be honest and tell the truth.*

"I just want to study," I wrote the pastor. And that's all I wrote.

The pastor asked not to be named in this epilogue because he does not want praise for what he did after he read these words. It was all part of his selflessness, a selfless path of service that he eventually taught me. The pastor has two daughters and one son. His second daughter was supposed to go to the United States to study. She deferred a semester to teach me. As my tutor, she helped me pass my middle-school examinations so I could go to high school. In high school, I graduated high in my class—Oh, and after my fight with the rich school bully, I never fought again . . . ever.

On my entrance interview for the university, my professor asked me two questions, the second of which was: How can we prepare for the reunification of the two Koreas?

"How we are to reunify keeps changing," I told him. "As a result, so many youngsters have no interest in reunification. They don't know what to believe. But reunification is coming, so we have to prepare. We have nearly thirty thousand North Korean defectors in South Korea. We have to work with them, not isolate them. If we cannot be their friends, we cannot prepare for unification. The key, then, is in South Korea. First step: Unite all the Koreans within South Korea. Get rid of this mentality that South Koreans are superior and North Koreans are inferior. This cannot solve any problems. Approach each other as friends and learn."

For a while in my freshman year, studying political science and journalism at Sogang University, I began to struggle with my studies. My grades were poor. I lost focus of my dream of friendship and reunification. I lost hope I could make my dreams a reality. I was depressed with all the work. I was anxious and overwhelmed. I felt for a while that studying was a waste of time: studying and taking exams, studying and taking more exams. I found the process very boring. But I had learned a valuable lesson as a street boy: "You can't wait for hope to find you. You have to go out and grab it."

By the end of my freshman year, I began to get involved in public-speaking contests and I gave speeches. If I participated, I felt I could learn from others in these debates and meet people with similar dreams, who could inspire me. By the start of my sophomore year in 2011, my hope had returned to help in the reunification of the two Koreas. I realized that to achieve my dream, I had to study and find some way to enjoy studying. I knew, after everything I'd been through and how far I had come, I couldn't drop out. I learned how to deal with the stress, and soon I came to love school. The more I study, the more I see what I don't know and want to learn.

I grew up being brainwashed that America was evil. As a result, I didn't trust Caucasians. In 2010, though, I was given the opportunity to study English at Arizona State University. At first, I was worried to go, because America was my sworn enemy. Yet I went. I saw that Caucasians don't have horns on their heads. I now have so many American friends. I feel the only thing different about us is our skin color. Oh, and our politics. Real freedom to me is democracy, in which you can do what you want, but you also have to take responsibility for yourself. I came to understand in America that this is what I never had. I feel the first sixteen years of my life were stolen from me. Stolen by the government of North Korea, and that's why I study so hard, to make up for all the lost time.

In October 2015, I started my master's degree in international relations at the University of Warwick in England on a Chevening scholarship, which is funded by the UK government. I was also accepted to the London School of Economics.

After my master's degree, I hope to pursue a doctorate in the same area. While there are many experts on Korean reunification, there are few who are from North Korea. Yet our voices are needed. To help gain diplomatic experience, I interned in 2014 with Canadian member of Parliament Barry Devolin as part of a program funded by HanVoice, a North Korean advocacy organization. In the late summer and fall of 2015, I worked for the UK Embassy in Seoul, South Korea.

MY INTEREST IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF DEFECTORS CAME BY WAY of personal experience. My father and I have never given up looking for my mother. In 2009, a smuggler gave us a lead of a woman living in China who was very similar to my mother in both appearance and background. My father and I went to China to meet her.

It wasn't my mother.

My father and I were silent in the taxi on the way back to the airport until, as we were pulling into the departure zone, my father turned to me and said, "*Adeul,* that woman is not your mother. But she has a husband like me and a son like you somewhere. If we leave China without rescuing her, she will lose her hope. We don't have a lot of money. But we have enough. Let's save her."

My father and I hired a broker, a human smuggler, and moved the woman to Thailand and then to Seoul. To this day, we are all close friends.

Since then, my father, other defectors, and I have, on our meager salaries, helped rescue other defectors trapped in China. China views North Korean defectors not as refugees fleeing severe human rights abuses but as illegal work migrants. North Koreans caught in China are still deported to Joseon, where they are imprisoned. North Koreans in China live perilous lives, flirting in an underground work economy and suffering abuse, poverty, and depraved living conditions. All they want is freedom.

In the spring of 2015, I became the consultant for the rescuing team of Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, a nonprofit group that helps rescue defectors trapped in China. I speak around the world, raising awareness and money to rescue North Koreans in China.

A portion of the proceeds of this book are being donated to the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights to help North Korean refugees in China.

IF MYEONGCHUL WERE STILL ALIVE, HE MIGHT SAY, *Don't judge a man until you've walked in his boots.*

Every Falling Star is my boots. And the boots worn by thousands of other street boys in North Korea and around the world.

This book is for my brothers, Young-bum, Chulho, Mingook, Unsik, Myeongchul, and Sangchul.

For my grandparents, who never stopped looking for me. They have since died, or so my father and I believe, from natural causes due to old age.

Finally, this book is for my mother. She is still missing. My father and I search for her every day. I will never give up hope that we will be reunited.

"WHEN WE STOP DREAMING,
WE'RE JUST AS GOOD AS DEAD."

EVERY FALLING STAR is the memoir of Sungju Lee, who at the age of twelve was forced to live on the streets of North Korea and fend for himself. Sungju tells what it was like to be separated from his parents; to be alone; to have to create a new family with his gang, his "brothers"; to be hungry every day; and to fear arrest, imprisonment, and even execution.

In this compelling true story, Lee grimly reveals that many of the freedoms taken for granted in the West do not exist in other lands . . . and that hope is often all there is to cling to.

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