

PROLOGUE

On June 25, 1950, the armies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and attacked their brothers in South Korea. The Inmun Gun, as they were popularly known, swept over the mountains, and through the valleys of South Korea, and within two months reached the Naktong River, the last major obstacle in their drive to Pusan, which would complete the occupation of South Korea. At the Naktong River, the United Nation's armies, led by the Americans, halted their advance and on September 15, 1950, the Americans turned the war around with an amphibious attack at Inch'on, outflanking the North Korean forces in the south. Within a month the Inmun Gun were routed and the UN armies fought back up the peninsula toward the thirty-eighth parallel and beyond. On October 20, 1950, they entered P'yongyang, the North Korean capital. One week later the UN armies stood on the Manchurian border at the Yalu River. Three hundred thousand Chinese troops swarmed across the Yalu and counter-attacked. Seoul was recaptured by the Chinese in January 1951. They were finally halted near P'yongtaek, fifty miles south of Seoul and eventually driven back across the thirty-eighth parallel later in March, where the battle stalemated.

Thus, in the course of nine months, Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, as well as the village of Samkuju, situated five miles east of the Yellow Sea, and some forty miles south of Seoul changed hands four times.

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PART I

THE WAR

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Seoul, South Korea

August 1, 1951

On any given Saturday night, several hundred painted women in high heels and tight Chinese dresses wait across the street from the entrance to the *Chosen* hotel, a solid, stone and brick structure that had, for the most part, miraculously survived the worst of the bombing and artillery exchanges between the UN and the Communist armies. As such, it served as the UN headquarters and provided the only decent facility for accommodating UN diplomats and the officers of the UN armies, who, with the exception of a few British and Turkish officers were almost all American. Korean pimps brought women into the hotel for the senior grade officers. The junior grade officers, the captains and lieutenants, were left to their own devices to find a woman. It was these officers who walked amongst the women, touching, fondling—self-assured buyers in a buyers market.

A broad shouldered second lieutenant slides a hand across a young woman's breasts. The woman slaps his hand playfully. "You likee, I very good," says the woman hoping the lieutenant will escort her into the *Chosen*. He walks

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around her as if he is looking for dents in a second-hand car before making up his mind whether he wants to buy it.

At the entrance of the hotel, armed guards carefully examine identifications. Communist spies are everywhere. No woman is allowed into the hotel, unless accompanied by an officer. Once in the lobby, she will attempt to negotiate a deal with the officer who brings her in. If the negotiations break down, the girl will then try to solicit another officer, but she must remain in the lobby. If she attempts to go upstairs or to the restaurant unaccompanied by an officer, one of the patrolling guards will rudely escort her out of the hotel. Once in the street, she must take her place back in the lineup of girls wandering around the perimeter of the hotel, or call it a night.

Standing inside the main core of women on the street is a young girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years of age. She possesses dark, inquisitive eyes, and a small, perfectly formed mouth set into a chiseled oval face that could have been carved by a great sculptor attempting to recreate a special, mystical beauty of an Asian goddess.

Unlike the other prostitutes, this girl is less aggressive, almost shy, and depends upon her splendid looks to attract officers, which in the past had often proved successful. Not so in recent weeks since her swollen abdomen had begun to bulge out of her Chinese dress revealing a seven-month pregnancy.

While preparing for the night, the girl had contemplated wearing her traditional Korean white cotton blouse and a loosely fitted skirt that fell to her ankles, the only other clothes she owned, which would disguise her pregnancy. Such a sexually unattractive dress would probably eliminate any possibility that an American officer hanging around the *Chosen* would want her. Since the Korean soldiers had no money and it was said that the Turks were brutal, she ultimately opted to wear the Chinese dress.

She had been waiting almost an hour for an officer and reluctantly considered going over to the USO where the

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enlisted men and non-coms would hang out. This is a desperate consideration given her last experience with an enlisted man two weeks ago.

In the morning, the corporal had refused to pay her, claiming that he was broke. Next week he'd come back and pay up. She didn't understand his explanation and in a broken English demanded her money. His response had been to push her aside roughly, knocking her back against the wall. As he was leaving, she rushed up behind him and smashed a ceramic water jug over his head. The man toppled over unconscious. She reached into his pocket and from his wallet removed three thousand hwan, which had been their negotiated price. Afraid to risk the man's rage once he recovered his senses, she left him lying in the corner of the room, blood pouring down the side of his face and ran out the door.

For the next two days, she wandered around the city, afraid to return to her room, fearful that the corporal might be waiting for her. When she finally went back, she was relieved to discover that he had left, but not before he had flung around the room her clothes, pots and pans, and tore up the straw mattress that she slept on.

Moving amongst the lineup of women is an officer with a flight surgeon's insignia on his chest. Ignoring the other women, he stares at her.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. Though he speaks clearly and slowly, Yung Sook doesn't understand what he is saying.

She touches his arm. "You takee me into *Chosen*?" she begs in her broken English, this phrase being close to the limit of her English vocabulary.

"Not tonight, sugar," the captain replies. "I haven't delivered a baby in years."

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By the tone of his voice, she decides that he has no interest in her and turns away from him to look for another man.

“You mustn’t be doing this,” the captain says to her.

This is a different voice, a kinder one, and she wonders if perhaps he would take her into the hotel after all.

“We go *Chosen*,” she says and tugs at his arm.

He touches her abdomen. “Go home, girl. For chris-sake, go home and take care of yourself.” He pulls out a five-dollar greenback and thrusts it into her hand. “Take it and get out of here.”

Though inwardly furious that he has defiled her child with his touch, she, nevertheless, grabs the five-dollar bill and nods her appreciation. She then turns and sidles her way through the crowd of girls. A few laugh at her. One girl shouts, “Fat, pregnant whore.”

She is humiliated, but the five dollars compensates for her embarrassment. “Stupid, ugly pig,” she whispers back, but her angry retort is spoken without any special animosity toward the girl, whom she has seen around before and knows that she must make it through another desperate night no different than the one she would have been forced to endure.

Slowly, Yung Sook treks down the muddy roads toward her house. After awhile she stops to rest her legs that are beginning to swell around the ankles. She is grateful not to have had to spend what could have been an unpleasant, even painful evening. There is no way to stop a man once he gets started on you. Every time she spends a night with a man this late in her pregnancy, she knows she risks damaging Yang’s unborn child, perhaps the son that would give her back a little bit of Yang.

She continues to walk the narrow road toward the river where her house is located. The mixed smell of urine and feces is overpowering. At least in the countryside the odor

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of human waste used as fertilizer in the paddies is diminished by the open spaces and tranquil breezes that blow in from the sea.

It occurs to her that the Air Force captain had not touched her abdomen to humiliate her, but in fact had touched her with a certain tenderness, as if he recognized the importance of the life within and respected her for it. She wishes that he had chosen her for the evening. His kindness made her think of Yang. If given the opportunity, she would have tried to give the man a moment of honest love, something she doubted that he would be able to find with any of the other girls.

She stops once again. She wonders if the swelling in her legs has something to do with the child growing within her. How soon would the baby come? Last year in *Samkuju*, she had witnessed the birth of puppies. Her neighbor's dog, a small black and brown mongrel with a big, white spot on its forehead had simply rolled over on its side and the puppies began to slide out of her one every ten minutes, six in all. Several weeks later, the owner of the dog, gave her and Jung Ho, her eight-year old brother, one of the puppies. Within a month, the puppy began to foam at the mouth and, after wobbling around as if it had been hit on the head by a club, fell over and died. After the war began, the neighbor's dog and all the puppies had disappeared, probably eaten by the family after the North Korean soldiers had stolen their rice crop.

Tonight, in front of the *Chosen*, no man had wanted her. As her abdomen continued to swell, her chances of finding a man were not going to improve. On the other side of the river, just outside of *Yung Dung Po*, a prostitute could pick up a thousand *hwan* doing almost anything to please a passing soldier. Only the lowest of the low would do that, but would she have a choice? She could try the *Chosen* again in a few days, and in the meantime buy a dress that would better hide her pregnancy. She would have to spend most of the five dollars that the captain had

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given her for such a dress and wonders if she might not be wiser to hoard the five dollars, which would better enable her to survive for another two weeks. When she had spent all her money and there was no food left, she could then go down to *Yung Dung Po*.

Several youngsters run by. One stops and begs for money and candy. The boy is eight or nine years old, close to the same age as her brother. Though there is little chance of this boy knowing Jung Ho, she carefully describes him. The boy is confused. He knows no one of that name and description.

She breaks a piece of chewing gum in half and gives it to him. Moments later another dirty-faced, little beggar appears. Does she have any more chewing gum? The other boy had told him about her brother. Yes, he knew a boy by that name about a month ago. They had run together for a while. He had heard from another boy that he was dead, that his hand had turned blue and had become swollen and then he had died. That's what he had heard and he was sorry to tell her such bad news.

She gives him the other half of the chewing gum. He thanks her and says that maybe it is a different boy than her brother, but it sounds like the one he had known. If she has any more gum, maybe he could find this other boy who had told him about her brother and then she could ask him herself.

Her room is small and damp with little light and dirty, brown walls. The landlord charged all the prostitutes who lived in his house twice what the rooms were worth. After the house she had been living in had burned down, she knew she was fortunate to have any room at all and gladly paid the price. She had considered trying to go to her uncle, but even if he were alive, and by a miracle could find him, how could she go to him now, a pregnant whore.

She lies down on her straw mattress and closes her eyes, exhausted from the walk from the *Chosen*, a walk that seemed to be getting more arduous every day. She thinks

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about what the boy had told her, that Jung Ho was dead, but she refuses to believe it. The boy himself wasn't sure. These boys running around in the streets with no home and no family would say anything for a piece of candy or gum.

There is a sudden movement within her. She touches herself. "Little one," she whispers.

She sees her baby's handsome face and within that face is the face of Yang, his father, the two faces fusing within each other and becoming indistinguishable. She opens her eyes to catch a glimpse of the stars through the one small window next to her bed. She wonders if anyone's dreams ever come true.

There is a sharp rap on the door. Mr. Park, the landlord wants his rent money. He speaks bluntly, without manners. He is a stupid, uneducated man.

She sits up to face him. "Tomorrow," she says.

He tells her that he is not an impatient person, but he has to pay his bills too. He could rent this room to a hundred different girls. It isn't his fault that she's pregnant. Business is business. Either she pays the rent or she'd have to get out in the morning.

"I have no place to go." She is appealing to the more sympathetic part of his nature, though she is not optimistic of the result. In the five months she has lived in his house, she has more than once witnessed him physically throwing a girl into the street because she wasn't able to pay the rent.

Unexpectedly, his tone becomes conciliatory. "Perhaps we could work out an arrangement." He complains that Mrs. Park has a woman's problem and is no longer interested in sex. Yung Sook could not only continue to live in his house, but could do so for less money if she would agree to be a little kind to him now and then. And then he adds, with a nervous laugh, that pregnant women excite him.

Though Park disgusts her, she supposes he is no worse than the soldiers. But could you trust him to keep his word about the rent she owes him? She squeezes the five-dollar

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greenback that the captain had given her. It might be worth as much as ten thousand *hwan* on the black market. After she exchanges it, she could give Park two thousand, which would be enough to shut him up for at least the next month.

She tells him that she will have the money tomorrow. If she doesn't, she promises that she will do him the favor he is asking. For the moment, he appears satisfied. After giving her a long, hard stare, he licks his thick lips and leaves the room.

Lying on her bed, she once again gazes out of the window into the night. Dark clouds have drifted across the sky blocking out the moon and the stars. The baby kicks again. With one hand, she caresses him, with the other she clings to Yang's father's watch, which Yang had given her on the day he had left *Seoul* almost a year ago.

She thinks about praying to Jesus Christ, but decides that praying is a waste of time. Jesus Christ's spirit seems to have no real power. Since Yang had left, though she has prayed frequently to Jesus Christ, she had no choice but to spend all the money he had given her for food. After the house he had rented for her had burned down, she had gone back to her old life, though she had sworn to Yang that she never would.

The clouds pass and the moon glows back at her. She closes her eyes and in the darkness of her mind she imagines a different glow, one more brilliant than any she has ever seen before, and she believes it is a good sign from a spirit, perhaps her father's.

With a hand lying across her abdomen, she whispers, "Yes, yes, little one. Soon. Very soon."

She hears Park shouting at his wife downstairs. She speaks to her unborn child that she would give herself to Park to help them stay alive. Park is a pig, but at least he is real, unlike Jesus Christ, who was a foolish man with no strength, which was why he wound up being nailed to a cross a million years ago and bleeding to death.