

**SMUGGLING
LIGHT**

ESTHER CHANG
WITH EUGENE BACH

SMUGGLING LIGHT



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

Names, places, and dates have been altered to protect those still living and serving in China and North Korea.

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SMUGGLING LIGHT:
One Woman's Victory over Persecution, Torture and Imprisonment

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Prologue

*Near the border of North Korea and China.
About eight years ago.*

Hello?"

Esther answered the phone uncertainly. Although she recognized the number, she could never be sure who was on the other end. She always tried to pretend confusion until she was positive the caller wasn't the police.

"Esther," said a desperate voice. "Please help! I've been shot!"

Then the line went dead.

Esther immediately recognized the voice: it was Peter, a North Korean she had been discipling for over two years. She pressed the phone to her ear for a full thirty seconds in case the call was reconnected, but she heard nothing but silence.

Peter was one of the many North Koreans who illegally cross the Tumen and Yalu rivers into China in order to buy food and earn money to support their families. The rivers are heavily

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guarded on both the North Korean side and the Chinese side, and border guards often shoot first and ask questions later.

To cross without being seen, Peter would lie in the field by the river during the day and remain as still as possible, moving only a few inches per hour so that he would not draw any attention to himself. During the black of night, when he was least likely to be spotted, Peter would move faster through the bush until he got to the edge of the river. Once at the riverbank, he would take off his clothes, slowly slide into the icy water, and slip across in the darkness while holding his clothes above his head to keep them dry. He knew it was dangerous, but he also knew that if he didn't go back and forth to China, he and his whole family might die of starvation.

Either way, he was risking his life.

On this particular night, everything was proceeding as planned. Once he reached the Chinese side of the river, Peter was going to call the only person he knew could help him—Esther. She had been the first person to tell him about Jesus and he had come to saving faith through her ministry. She had spent several months training him at her home. She had also given him money, food, clothing, blankets, a mobile phone, audio Bibles, and video players containing *The Jesus Film* to bring back to his village. Once, Esther had even managed to recruit three former American servicemen to help smuggle him back into North Korea. But after distributing all the audio Bibles to the people in his village and using up all of the food and money, Peter needed to make another trip to China.

As he approached the Chinese bank, Peter suddenly heard a soldier yell out in the darkness. Because of the echo over the water Peter could not tell which direction the yells were coming from, but he knew he had been spotted. He moved faster through the frigid waters, rushing to get to the China side so he could hide in the forest. As soon as he made it to the frozen riverbank, a shot

rang out. He whipped his head around in time to see a flash from the muzzle of a rifle before a searing pain bit into his leg. Wounded but alive, he managed to crawl into the forest and call Esther.

Several miles away, Esther was worried. There was no way she could have predicted this sudden turn of events. She prayed for Peter as she wrapped herself in a shawl to go find him.

"Where are you going, mom?" her son asked. Esther didn't know how to answer. She didn't know where to look for Peter, how she would find him, or what to do if she did. But her mind began forming vivid images of Peter lying in a field somewhere, bleeding from a gunshot wound, and she knew he needed her help now more than ever.

"Where are you going?" her son asked again.

"I am not sure. Just stay here with your grandmother," she said as she swooped out the door and waited for a taxi.

At the same time as Esther was getting into a taxi, the Chinese border guards were already closing in on Peter.

Because so many North Koreans attempt to cross the border into China every year, the border guards have become very skilled in tracking them down, like hunters honed from years of sporting. In fact, the Chinese authorities view refugee-hunting as one of the best ways to break in a rookie border guard. New guards are often forced to stand the longest portions of duty during the early morning hours. If they are unsuccessful in spotting illegal border crossings, they are punished at the end of the week. However, whichever rookie captures the most "illegals" is declared the winner for the week and is allowed to make fun of the other guards while on duty.

The tragedy is that these border guards are not hunting animals. They make a game of hunting starving human beings who

are harmless and merely looking for a way to survive. Even worse, these refugees are usually easy to shoot and capture once spotted because their severely malnourished state causes them to move lethargically.

Peter was no different. They found him soon after he had called Esther. He was immediately arrested and forced to walk to the nearest road even though his leg was severely wounded.

At the road a police officer was ready to take him to the main jail just outside Tumen City. "Did you search him?" one of the police officers asked the border guard before taking Peter into custody.

"He's a bag of bones. What could he possibly be carrying?" the border guard snapped back, showing that he didn't have to answer to the police.

"It doesn't matter. Procedure must be followed. Who knows what these dogs might have?" the officer retorted as he began to search Peter. He pulled out Peter's mobile phone from an inside pocket and shoved it in Peter's face. "Who have you been talking to?"

The officer looked through the calls and redialed Peter's most recent number. Esther picked up the phone on the other end. "Hello? Peter? Where are you?"

In a whispering voice, the officer replied coolly, "Is this you?" He had evidently done this many times before.

"Yes, it is me. This is Esther. Where are you?" She paused. Something didn't seem right. There was a long silence on the line.

"Where are you now?" the officer asked in a whisper.

Esther realized it was not Peter on the phone. She hung up, but knew that the damage had been done.

"It's her!" exclaimed the police officer.

“Who?” asked the border guard.

“Esther! We have been looking for this woman for years!”

He was right. Esther had just been released from Chinese prison after being charged with human trafficking of North Koreans. But a few nights ago, her name had come up again when the Chinese police arrested a North Korean assassin. It turned out that China wasn’t the only country hunting Esther.

The North Korean government has long attempted to solve the problem of Chinese Christians who live on the border of North Korea and are sympathetic to the plight of North Korean refugees. As the refugees sneak out of North Korea in droves to find food and money in China, they have learned that homes with crosses on their doors are places of refuge. Through the brave acts of the Chinese believers, large numbers of North Koreans have been coming to faith in Christ for decades.

One of the worst of these Chinese Christian offenders, in the eyes of the North Korean government, was Esther. They had imprisoned her before (as had the Chinese) and were planning to execute her. No one was certain why she was released, but the North Korean government was determined not to let that happen again.

They had even gone as far as to hire an assassin who traveled to China and attempted to infiltrate Esther’s circle of Christian workers in order to find out who her contacts were. He was ordered to then kill everyone involved by stabbing them, one by one, with a syringe filled with poison. However, the assassin’s plot was discovered when he was accidentally arrested in China on unrelated charges and the Chinese police found a list of names on him. He was tortured until he gave up the information they were looking for and that is when the Chinese government discovered he had been sent to kill Esther. That aggravated the Chinese police

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because it was proof she was once again illegally aiding these refugees—or as they called it, human trafficking.

After Esther hung up the phone with the police officer, she knew she and her family were in grave danger yet again. She had just been released from prison, so if she was arrested again, she would surely be executed or given a life sentence of hard labor, which is almost the same thing. She knew she had to dispose of the phone, find a new way to contact her family, and go on the run.

As she sat in the taxi, Esther left everything in God's hands. She was a wanted criminal in China and still the main target of a North Korean government assassination plot.

Following Jesus had put her in prison in both China and North Korea, but He had also led her out. Only Jesus could help her now.

CHAPTER 1

Part of a Third Culture

*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed
you; I have called you by name, you are mine."*

—Isaiah 43:1

Upon arrival to a certain small rural village on the border of China and North Korea, a visitor would immediately notice how different it is from anywhere else in China. With a local population made up of primarily Chinese-born Koreans, the village's signs and billboards are all written in both Korean and Chinese. Korean culture is a part of the village's everyday life. To the dismay of visiting Chinese, many local taxi drivers and waitresses speak only Korean when conducting business transactions. It is actually possible to live in this region without ever having to study the Chinese language.

The Korean-Chinese who live in this area are fully Chinese citizens, but are distinctly set apart from the Han Chinese majority and are one of China's many ethnic minorities. The food, language, cultural ceremonies, and customs in this region of China are all uniquely Korean. Yet, at the same time, these Korean-Chinese

have also embraced their Chinese identity, seen most dramatically in the large number of Korean-Chinese soldiers who lost their lives while fighting for China in the Korean War. Their involvement in the war gained them great respect from both the Chinese and North Korean governments alike. In many ways the Korean-Chinese are not fully Chinese, nor fully Korean. They are in essence a third culture, a blend that contains elements of both.

Esther Chang

In 1967, a little girl was born into this unique village who would be used greatly by God for His work. Her name was Esther. And as will be seen, her third culture identity plays a vital role in the evangelization of North Korea today.

The 60s were a difficult era to be born in China. The Cultural Revolution was still in full swing. The ruler Mao Zedong had started the Revolution to prevent any possible drift toward capitalism. Through an intense propaganda campaign, China's youth were led to declare war on the "four olds," zealously destroying (1) old culture, (2) old customs, (3) old habits, and (4) old ideas. Mao Zedong was convinced that because his revolutionary army of Red Guards were instructed not to touch the working class and agricultural communities, the economy of the nation would not be affected by the Revolution. He was wrong. The huge social upheaval caused millions of deaths from violence, starvation, and exposure. The self-inflicted poverty of Mao Zedong was plaguing the whole nation.

Esther was the third child of four, with an older brother and sister and one younger brother. She came from a long line of Christians. Her grandfather had grown up in the Soviet Union and immigrated to China right before the Chinese Communist Revolution. He had managed to leave the USSR before ethnic

Koreans like himself were put on trains and sent across Siberia to be forcefully relocated to Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although his Soviet medical education was a valuable asset to the community in rural China, he and his entire family were often singled out for persecution due to their Christian faith and the rampant hatred for educated people in those days.

Her grandfather and his family also suffered for their ethnicity. Chinese children were not very kind to ethnic Korean children and would often call them derogatory names and throw stones at them. Among his Korean peers, Esther's father completed the most schooling—but even he only lasted to the end of elementary school because of the intense and cruel bullying he and all Koreans endured there day after day. The most valuable education he received came not from school but from his father, who taught him rudimentary medicine.

Medicine became the family business, and, by the time he was an adult with three children of his own, Esther's father was the only doctor in their entire village. His job was not an easy one. He worked for almost no pay and had very few medical supplies. He actually had to work at another job by night, doing hard, laborious work, to keep his family fed. He had no support staff, no midwives, and no professionally trained orderlies to care for extremely ill patients.

Sanitation was so deplorable in the village clinic that it was actually possible for people to come to the clinic healthy and to leave sick. Small cuts got infected easily. Family members that accompanied their loved ones to the clinic could leave with an airborne disease from the germ-infested air inside. Without the right supplies, there was no way to disinfect the rooms, the examination tables, or even the medical equipment in a proper manner. There was no running water or electricity and the conditions were hazardous.

But there simply wasn't any funding available to change the situation. It would have been a crime to charge patients in order to replenish supplies, and although the village clinic was completely dependent upon the government, the government did not provide it with any funding. In those days, roughly 90 percent of childhood deaths in China were due to common diseases contracted from others. In 1967, the average life expectancy in China was only 57 years old.

Brought Back to Life

One day, the germs and bacteria that her father brought home with him from the clinic caused three-month-old Esther to suddenly become deathly ill. When her father realized that his little girl was seriously sick, he immediately began looking for a way to take her to a better hospital with more advanced facilities. He needed a car or an ambulance to rush her to the hospital, but no one in his village owned a car or even knew what an ambulance was. All he had was a bicycle. The hospital was miles away, but he knew his baby would die without proper treatment. So, seeing that he had no other options, he scooped her up in his arms, adjusted himself as well as he could on the bicycle, and took off.

He pedaled his bike as fast as he could down the rural dirt roads. Every minute counted but every mile seemed to be going by slower and slower. He was exhausted but did not stop pedaling. His survival instincts and love for his daughter kept him going. He pulled up on the handlebars in order to push the pedals down with even more force. Time was not on his side and he knew it. Whenever he started to slow down or even think about stopping, seeing the child's worsening condition was enough to keep the adrenaline pumping into his exhausted legs. He pedaled for hours until he finally arrived at the hospital. As soon as he arrived, he

dropped his bike, pulled Esther up to his chest, and carried her through the hospital doors while yelling for assistance.

“My daughter! She needs immediate medical attention. Where is the doctor?”

The staff heard him yell and looked confused, but as soon as they noticed the little baby lying limp in his arms, they ran to assist him. Someone called for the doctor who rushed out to see what all the excitement was about.

Esther’s father’s adrenaline was giving him life even as he watched the life leaving his daughter’s face. He quickly and carefully told the doctor about her condition. The doctor went into immediate action, yelling out directions to the nurses.

Frantically, the hospital staff began to work on stabilizing her vital signs, but her condition only worsened. Her stomach became inflated and wasn’t releasing air. Soon she stopped breathing altogether. Her father watched in horror as her little three-month-old body became lifeless. He helplessly looked on as other medical staff worked hard to save his daughter’s life. He wanted to help, to jump in the middle of it, but he knew that they were professionals. He also knew that he was exhausted, close to collapsing from exhaustion and dehydration, and could be no good to his daughter if he was unconscious.

He glanced around at the hospital as he tried to catch his breath. The hospital was not much better than his little rural clinic. The concrete block building was bare and not very well lit. The air was so damp, the corners of the room were black with mold.

Any other day at the hospital would have filled him with a bit of excitement. He would have been evaluating the tools and procedures used by the better-educated medical staff. Each room of the hospital contained objects and items that would have been nice to have at his rural clinic. After examining all of her vital signs and

evaluating the situation, the head doctor finally realized that there was nothing they could do for the little girl. He focused his gaze on her to see if there was any improvement. He took her hand and held it for a minute to see if there was a pulse. He paused, shook his head, and then pulled back. After taking a moment to think things through, he gathered the nurses. After the brief meeting was over, one of the nurses walked over and pulled the IV out of the child's arm. Another nurse began to clean up the area to prepare for another patient. Her condition was hopeless. The father, who had been slumped in the corner of the room, suddenly stood erect.

"What? That's it? You aren't going to try to save my little girl?"

"She's dead. There is nothing else we can do for her," the nurse coldly replied.

"Move back! If you aren't going to fight for her, I will," he said.

Suddenly the large hospital and better-educated staff didn't seem so smart anymore. He methodically went through all of the life-saving steps that he could remember from his father. One by one, he exhausted each step by instinct. It was almost as if he could hear his father coaching him through it. He used every method he knew to try to bring his little baby back to life. The medical staff had never seen anyone come into their hospital and take over in this manner. They were half amazed and half annoyed. He threw his arms out as they approached the bed and kept them from removing Esther.

"If you aren't helping, get out of this room!" he demanded. The nurses retreated and watched the desperate father trying to save his baby girl. For a while, nothing seemed to work. Then, all of the sudden, she began to breathe again. To the amazement of everyone present, the little girl had miraculously come back to life!

God indeed had many plans for this child. This was the first of many miracles her family would witness in the years ahead.

Esther's life was extraordinary from the beginning, and it would be filled with many miracles that her family would witness in the years ahead as she bore much fruit for God's kingdom.