

# ACT ONE



## Chapter 1

Luke Stevens stared into his fireplace with the radio playing in background. The yellow flames danced around the newsprint that he pushed under the split wood. Hot fingers reminded him to pull his hand back, which he does with koala-bear urgency. *Why did Sarah talk so much about collecting firewood and so seldom actually burned it? Even on a Saturday night in January, McLean, Virginia is seldom cold. Who leads such a leisurely life that they can light a fire and sit long enough to watch it?*

A radio news reporter broke into the set. "This just in. A Taiwanese freighter, the New Moon, navigating the waters off the Columbian coast burst into flames without warning and sank with all hands on board. We will keep you informed of any further developments." The radio returned to its usual set, offering jazz from the 1930s.

Luke stared at the radio, not processing what was just reported. His cell phone buzzed and he picked it up.

“Hello, Alex?”

“Luke, how are you doing? Are you ready for the memorial service tomorrow?”

Luke poked the fire with the iron, tossed another piece of wood on top, and glanced at the three-by-five-foot portrait of the former Sarah Stevens, then Sarah Gomer, leaning against the wall.

“I toyed with the idea of torching the house for insurance money, buying an RV, and taking off for Alaska. Instead, I lit the fireplace and decided to pretend that I did.”

“Good choice. Are you sure you are ready for this service?” Alex Sunday spoke with the authority of a counselor, a surgeon, and a major in the U.S. Marines, all of which she was.

“I’m sure that I’m not, but the guests have been invited, the eulogy is written, and, now, I’m steeling myself to say goodbye, this time for keeps—Sarah has haunted me long enough.”

“How can I help?”

“You mean, outside of wearing your dress blues,

bringing your family, and watching my dad?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes... Yes, I do. It's enough for you to be there."

"What happens if *she* shows up? Are ready to face her?"

"No. That's why you are going to wear your sword."

"Ha. Ha. Get serious."

"If RJ—Miss Randy Jefferson—shows up, I'll invite her to sit up front with the family. Everyone knows that she is the former Miss Teen USA. What else can I do? I'm still a pastor and have to model forgiveness, painful as it might be. Why couldn't Sarah have just found a nice NFL player, Arab prince, or real estate mogul?"

"It sounds like you have some unresolved issues that I suspect will not make it into the eulogy."

"That's an understatement. Sarah cut herself off from me in the divorce, but the shame also isolated her from her family. Christians are quicker than Muslims to forgive, especially in the case of unconventional

relationships. In an honor-shame culture, the path to reconciliation is very nonlinear because difficult and shameful topics are handled with a deafening silence.”

“Who will attend the memorial service?”

“Good question. I called her office; I informed her family. Only members of the church, which she disavowed when we divorced, are likely to show up and they may only come out of respect for their grieving pastor.”

“Why is it so hard for you to let go?”

“I failed as a husband and as a witness.”

“None of us is perfect or a perfect witness.”

“My head accepts what my heart rejects.”

“Then on faith you must give it over to God—especially if you hope to love again.”

## Chapter 2

Yong Dae Chŭ—Ruth—leaned against the ivy-covered library at her law school in Washington D.C. She held her arm unnaturally high in a pose wearing a red knit cap and scarf, and a white sweater.

“Hold up that law journal.” The photographer from a Korean fashion magazine instructed her.

Ruth grabbed a journal from a leather bag setting on a nearby step. She righted herself, held the journal near her face, and smiled.

“Seems odd to me that Americanized Koreans only want the fashion photos, while folks back home want to hear that I’m also editor of my school law journal.”

“It’s a head scratcher for sure,” The photographer replied. “But we both know it’s a real thing—the magazine will print both. The only unsettled question is which photo will make the cover.”

“An American audience would prefer to see me holding a Russian Blue or playing with a French Bulldog.”

“For sure.”

“Be sure to mention that the feature article in the law journal this month is about artificial intelligence (AI). AI is a hot topic, not only in law, but in business and military procurement. My editorial has already received several reprint offers in commercial publications.”

“You are too smart. How will you ever find an American husband, assuming you want one? American men find smart women intimidating.”

“You are too mean. Why do you think I agreed to this photo shoot?”

“You are killing me—I assumed that it was just because you wanted to see me again.”

“That too! But you know fashion helps a single girl live into her feminine mystique.”

“Right. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, kind of thing, to quote James Howell.”

“People forget the simplest things.” Ruth turned to the photographer and put on a serious face. “Let me ask a more difficult question: Is the magazine planning

to write about my escape from North Korea into China last fall and the human trafficking issue?

“I like how you are always straight to the point.” The photographer relaxed, lowering the camera from his view. “The editor told me that political topics are normally off-point in a fashion magazine and won’t be cited in your article.”

He paused, then continued. “Because you have become the poster-child of the North Korean immigrant issue in the Korean press, every time people see your face, they think about the suffering of North Korean women in China sold into brothels and marriages with leftover men. If they forget, the next article after yours will focus on the problem of repatriation of North Koreans caught in China, but it does not mention you by name.”

“Oh, good. I feel so much more desirable. In any case, thanks for being honest and letting me know.”

## §

As Ruth walked back to her dorm, she noticed a short, thin man with crew cut, black tie, and green-

tan suit standing with a woman dressed in a matching suit-skirt combination across the street and watching her. She laughed as they crossed the street and came up to her.

“What are you laughing about?” asked the woman.

“I’m going to recommend a new fashion consultant to Director Parks the next time I see him.” Ruth replied.

“Not funny. We’re here on business,” The man said.

“Oh, what business? Are you lost in the 1950s?”

“Ha. Ha. Director Parks sent us to remind you of your debt to the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB).”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m an American student now, not a visiting scholar from Kim Il-sung University. I have even been given a green card.”

“Your family remains our guests in Najin.”

“I understand. I hope that means you will issue my family extra rations and my mother a cell phone so

that I can call her.”

“You are most greedy.”

“Not at all. Everyone here has a cell phone and can buy whatever they can afford. Why are North Koreans any less worthy than Americans to enjoy their lives? Come back to me when you have my mom’s number.”

“Director Parks will not be pleased.”

“You misunderstand Director Parks. He is a decent man in an indecent time. He will thank God that I have given him the opportunity to undertake an ounce of charity while a pound of uncharitable duties disgusts him. I respect Director Parks and wish him well.”

“You will hear from us.”

“You know my name. Who are you?”

“Goodbye, Ms. Chŭ.”

## Chapter 3

*A*t their home in McLean Virginia, Natalie heard her mother knock on her bedroom door: “May I come in?”

“The door is open.”

Natalie turned from her desk chair to watch her mother walk in. She moved some of the books piled up on the desk and placed them on the floor. Turning back to her laptop computer, she saved a half-completed essay and closed the closed the lid to give full attention to her mom.

“Working again? Classes don’t start for a couple weeks. You need to give yourself a break.”

“Mom. I get bored just sitting around on my days off from work. The high school gang seem stuck in the past. I would much rather read my class assignments, write my essays, and get ready for the term.”

“I understand, but tonight you need to get ready for the memorial service tomorrow after church. Pastor Luke is single and you don’t want to

be forever.”

“Pastor Luke has morphed into his father, Phil. Luke was fun; now, he has become all serious like his dad. I preferred the old Luke.”

“Perhaps, but he is still single, available, and decent. Old fashioned, decent men are hard to come by these days.”

“Okay. You have made your point. I think if I were Muslim that you would still send me to church on Sundays.” Natalie turned off her surge-protector and tidied up her desk. “Could you help me with my hair? I need a trim.”

“Sure, dear. I love your long, blond hair.”

## *Chapter 4*

Still sensitive about being seen in the company of other Christians, Ruth organized a small gathering of Korean students on campus for worship on Sunday morning. She arranged for local Korean congregations to support the group with a rotating schedule of visiting pastors that helped them remain accountable to one another and advance their knowledge of scripture. She suggested that the cafeteria outsource Sunday lunch by contracting for a local Korean restaurant to cater the meal, which gave the cafeteria workers a bit more time off and boosted attendance at the luncheon. Ruth thought of this group as a house church, but they simply called themselves the Korean Alliance.

After lunch, Ruth returned to her dorm room, slipped into a black dress with matching shoes, white sweater, knit cap, and scarf. She brushed her teeth, put on some bright-red lipstick, and arranged for a car to drive her to Luke's church in McLean for the two p.m. memorial service.

As Ruth got into the car, she handed the driver the address of the church. “Can you take Canal Road up to Chain Bridge?”

“No problem,” the driver responded. “Actually, it’s the most direct route.”

“I love to watch the river flowing over the rocks and to take in the relaxing scenery of the park.”

Traffic on Canal Road proved to be light. The Potomac River raged with winter thaw from up in the Allegany Mountains. Still, Ruth could see afternoon hikers along the canal occasionally through the woods. Once across the bridge, it was all metes and bounds—Old Glebe, Chesterbrook, Kirby, and Great Falls Roads. Charming, scenic, relaxing.

As the car pulled up to the rear entrance to the church, Ruth asked the driver, “This is the church? It’s so big.”

“This is a medium-sized church. There is a much bigger church a couple miles across town. It’s like an indoor shopping mall with confession stands, breakout rooms the size of normal church sanctuaries,

and its own gymnasium, just for kids," the driver said.

"Are you sure this is the right church?"

"Yes. This is the address that you provided."

Ruth opened the car door. "Thanks." Nervous. She got out, closed the door behind her, and walked up the steps into building.

## §

Once inside, two little girls, ages five or six, ran past her and down a staircase. Ruth could do nothing more than simply stop and watch.

"*Maria, Pilar—donde están?*" Ruth heard from down the hall.

The two girls looked up and giggled from down the stairs and ran off.

A teenage girl hurried down the hall towards Ruth. "Have you seen a couple of kids running around?"

Ruth lifted her hand to point. "They ran down the stairs."

"Thanks," responded the teenager as she hurried down the steps.

“Do you know where to find the memorial service for Sarah Gomer?” Ruth asked.

The teen stopped and looked back. “Keep going down the hall and around the corner to the left. Then just follow the crowd into the narthex.”

§

Ruth wandered down the hall to where she heard people conversing as they walked up a small set of stairs into a narthex. Before she got there, Maria and her friend, Pilar, ran up another staircase into the narthex and threw their arms around Tom Roberts, the first person that Ruth recognized—the CIA agent in charge who helped her leave China and get settled in the United States.

“Tom, so good to see you again. I see that you are quite the ladies’ man.”

“Ruth. I wondered if you would show up today. How is school?”

“It’s good to be out of the limelight and back to studying law. Have you seen Luke?”

“He is up front in the sanctuary. The service is

about to begin, so perhaps you can catch him afterwards at the reception downstairs in fellowship hall.”

“Of course. Do you mind if I sit with you during the service?”

“No problem. Let’s go in.”

## §

Ruth entered the sanctuary with Tom and the two girls as the organ prelude began playing *Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling*. The packed church forced them to sit in the back pew with the two girls between them giggling and squirming. In a vain hope to settle the girls down, Ruth offered them some peppermints that she kept in her purse. Looking ahead, Ruth could barely see the portrait of Sarah standing up on an easel because of the people sitting in front of them.

Ruth leaned over the girls to whisper to Tom. “How come Sarah is having a Christian service? Wasn’t she Muslim?”

“Yes, she was, but because Luke and his father, Phil, both pastored at this church for most of her marriage, Sarah served as pastor’s wife here in this church.

Everyone remembers her, and there is a family plot out in the graveyard behind the church.”

“So her relationship with this church was solid, but complicated?”

“That’s a good interpretation. Things got even more complicated when Sarah left Phil to live with a woman, Randy Johnson.”

Ruth flinched when she heard about Sarah leaving Phil. *Oh my*, she thought. *No wonder Luke was knotted up about bringing Sarah back from Beijing and losing her when their plane crashed in the Korean East Sea.* As Ruth wiped a few tears away, she noticed that Alex Sunday came in with an old man and forced a smile at her. They both wore colorful uniforms and sat in folding chairs immediately behind her.

## §

The music stopped. Ruth saw Pastor Elizabeth Robbins step up in front of the communion table dressed in a creme-colored robe with a black stole. Her eyes surveyed the congregation very deliberately.

“Friends in Christ, today we’re here to honor the

memory of Sarah Gomer, whom many of us remember as Sarah Stevens. Sarah passed away this past month during a visit to Beijing, China, as a result of an aggressive case of ovarian cancer. Her remains were later lost in the Sea of Japan in a typhoon plane crash that claimed the lives of numerous passengers. Thankfully, dear Pastor Luke, who was also on the flight, survived the crash and was rescued by a North Korean fishing boat. He will now share a few words about his mom.”

Pastor Elizabeth extended her arm towards Luke, and took a seat behind the reader’s pulpit on the right side of the sanctuary.

Ruth watched as Luke stepped into the preaching pulpit on the left side of the sanctuary. His face appeared as if he had been crying. “Thank you, Elizabeth. You have been a great comfort to the family in the midst of these trying times.”

An old man in Navy whites stood up behind Ruth and shouted: “Phil—You can’t fool me. You are the only one who comes to visit me. You are not Luke. Luke died in a shootout with terrorists in Baltimore.”

Alex hustled Commander Stevens out of the sanctuary and into the Narthex.

Ruth gasped with her hand over her mouth. She thought, *Phil wasn't even in Baltimore, and he assumed his son, Luke's, identity.*

Pastor Elizabeth Robbins stood up again, "Please excuse Commander Stevens. For those of you unaware, he suffers from Alzheimer's Disease and as a retired naval officer, normally resides in the memory care unit on Kirby Road." She turned to Luke looking so as to say—*I'm so sorry...go on*—and sat down.

Flustered, Luke mumbled a few words about Sarah's life and sat down. Ruth noticed a young woman with beautiful long, blond hair sitting up front following Luke's every word, every move, however awkward, *You are not the only one who looks on Luke with soft eyes.* Ruth thought.

Pastor Elizabeth stood up again. "Would anyone else like to share a memory of Sarah?"

Ruth noticed that Elizabeth's eyes seemed to float around until they came to rest on an attractive

black woman sitting off to the side. The woman averted her eyes, disdainingly the invitation. *Who is that woman?* She thought.

Not a peep could be heard.

Elizabeth scrutinized the room. She then offered a prayer for Sarah and dismissed the congregation with a blessing.

## Chapter 5

Ruth followed Tom and the girls down the steps to the fellowship hall reception. She was searching faces for Alex when she ran into the young blond, who held out her hand.

“Hi. My name is Natalie. How do you know Sarah?”

“Good to meet you, Natalie. I’m Ruth. Sarah and I were not acquainted; we never even met.”

“Then you must know Luke. How did you meet?”

“Luke and I traveled together in Korea last fall after his plane crash.”

“Oh, you are *that* Ruth. I saw one of your interviews on television. You are too modest—you smuggled Luke out of North Korea against all odds in the middle of the night. So are you two dating?”

“No. Dating is out of the question. My mother would like me to find a nice Korean boy. Luke and I haven’t seen each other since my uncle’s church reception after we arrived in the United States. How do you

know Luke?"

"We live in the same neighborhood, and my family attends this church."

"Luke is your pastor?"

"Yes. My mother has been after me to go out with him."

"Who was that the attractive black woman that Pastor Elizabeth was prodding in the service?"

"That was the former Miss Teenage USA, Randy Jefferson. Sarah divorced Luke's father, Phil, to move in with her, which is probably why Pastor Elizabeth was encouraging her to speak."

"Poor ... Luke." Ruth said stumbling over the words, wishing she could rephrase her comment. "He lost both of his parents this fall."

Natalie just smiled at her.

## §

Ruth winced at Natalie and continued searching for Alex, slowly wandering around fellowship hall and avoiding the desert table. Lost and lonely in the crowd, she caught a glimpse of a light-green suit

coat and a man who looked like Lei Han, but she felt light-headed and convinced herself that she was just hallucinating—*Why did I ever leave my family in Korea to come to the United States?* Then she noticed Commander Stevens sitting in a chair against the wall while Alex helped him eat a piece of cake without soiling his dress-whites. She walked over and sat next to Alex.

“Alex. It’s good to see you again,” Ruth began.

“Back at you, girl. Have a seat. How is school?”

“School is great. American students have it so easy. My scholarship pays all my expenses, so I have a private dorm room, plenty to eat, and money for books.”

“I hear that you are doing some modeling on the side. Is that true?”

“Guilty as charged. My agent arranged for me to get a credit card and takes me on shopping trips to pick out fashionable clothes.”

“Neat. I used to model for *Ebony* magazine, but they were never that generous.”

“I’m sorry.” Ruth suddenly looked distracted

and aloof. “Alex, tell me about Commander Steven’s little outburst. What was that about?”

“Commander Steven’s Alzheimer’s affliction leaves him disoriented at times. You never know what he will do or say.”

“His comment was rather pointed. Why did he confuse Luke with his father?”

“Phil Stevens lost a lot of weight after Sarah divorced him so much so that Luke and Phil could wear the same clothes. A lot of people confused them, not just Commander Stevens.”

“Oh. Phil must have really loved her.”

“Seriously.”

## §

As Ruth was talking with Alex, Luke walked up with a couple of paper plates with cake and forks.

“Is anyone hungry?” Luke handed Ruth a paper plate and sat down. Ruth looked up and her radiant green eyes twinkled when their eyes met.

“Now that you mention it—I was eyeing that cake.”

“This cake is special; I picked it out myself. The baker specializes in wedding cakes using old-fashioned pound-cake recipes that are hard to find in this age of ice-cream cake and low-calorie, pseudo-cake deserts. I hope that you approve.”

“Absolutely. You are a man after my own heart. My hobby back at home in school was baking. Actually, I had a small catering service side-hustle.”

“Is that right?”

“No. I’m lying—cake ingredients back home were nearly impossible to obtain at any price. The main staple in most kitchens was low-quality corn meal. Wheat products, as well as sugar and refined flour, were luxury items.”

“Well perhaps you should re-evaluate your side-hustle now that the ingredients are readily available.” Luke set his paper plate down on a chair without having touched the cake. “Ruth, can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I’m organizing a *Mardi Gras* (fat-Tuesday) par-

ty next month at church to draw people's attention to the beginning of Lent. I was wondering if you would join me as my guest? I know it's a school night, but I would be happy to come pick you up and bring you home. What do you say?"

"What day is that?"

"Tuesday, February 13th."

"Okay. Give me your cell-phone number so we can hammer out details later that week."

"Super."

Ruth's mind raced with excitement, but she almost immediately regretted getting caught up in the moment. *How can my relationship with Luke go anywhere? How can I be honest with him? What would Director Parks say?*

"Ruth, so you know—this party is something of a going-away event for me. My office is sending me to the FBI Academy at Quantico Marine Base for three months of training starting the first week in March.

"Oooh. Sounds like fun!"