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Beneath Cuoï's Tree

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Beneath Cuoi's Tree

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
English

Master of Fine Arts in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Zachary J. George

BA, Simpson College, 1999

December, 2012

Dedication

Dedicated to my father, who taught me what it means to be a man.

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Prologue

Fire rained down on the mainland. Shadows flashed on and off the South China Sea and through the trees around Cam Ranh Bay, casting light across Trong See Lon's ballooned belly. No amount of turning or twisting would take away the pain, so she lay with her hands pressed into the earth and begged for somebody to come before the contractions got too close.

Her house was another hour away by foot, but she did not have the energy to get up; she did not have the money to pay a moped taxi; she did not have the strength to make it to the base where one of William's friends might take her away in a jeep. She was stuck because of what a sage had told her, and the voice kept ringing in her ears, the way the medium had spoken in a slow-rolling rhythm meant to calm her nerves, but it didn't matter now. There was no petrified wood to be found, and William would never return.

Stabbing pains shot through her stomach every minute. Mosquitoes bit her legs and feet, but she could not reach them. She could think only of William: smiling in the green mist with grains of rice stuck in his moustache, pulling her up and swinging her from one side of his body to the other, gripping her waist and spinning until they tumbled together. She would pick rice from his moustache and nibble, and before she could swallow he would pull her face to his and kiss her bottom lip, and she would kiss back, and there was security in the way he held her neck in his rough hands. There was security in his burly shoulders. In the way he lowered her. In the way his legs moved between her thighs. In the way she wrapped her calves behind his back, as if the two of them might stay locked together forever.

See Lon tried to sit up. She didn't have the strength. "Grandfather, please," she begged.

So many people had come in these last few months—helicopters like swarms of dragonflies in the sky, airplanes landing, trucks the size of twenty water buffaloes, machines with claws that pulled up earth and spread it back out to make roads—and so many men had gone away to train.

Explosions burst through the sheet of black sky. This might be the end, and this might be the answer, the easiest way: for her to leave the world before exposing her child to the awaiting cruelties. In the midst of these thoughts other ideas came to her. Foremost was Uncle's rule about never giving up because we are stronger than what our minds tell us.

See Lon tried to keep her eyes open as bombs exploded, as if by closing them she was giving up. The mud seemed to reach for her face and fill her nose with the scent of mushrooms and lichen, but she could not lift her head from the ground. She could only look to the clouds and the way they changed from silver to orange and back again, the way they covered and uncovered the moon. She wanted to believe all of this was a dream, and that after the heavy blasts began, the American military would put her in a plane with her lover and fly them away.

Something rustled through the trees. In a flash of light, she saw what seemed to be a person coming toward her.

She tried to rise. "Who is that?"

It could have been a ghost.

She turned sideways. "What do you want?"

She was grateful to see Uncle's dented head coming toward her, but wondered if this was just a wishful vision.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"I went looking."

"He is coming," she said. "I can feel it."

"Stop that."

"Not William," she said. "The baby."

"Let me help you." Uncle squatted between her legs and lifted her dress. "Push."

She grunted.

"Push. You must push."

She obeyed. Pain shot between her legs.

"Push."

In this forced exertion she became determined to love her baby no matter what. The two of them would leave all of the people who taunted her and said she was a foolish girl, a naïve girl, a capitalist slut. They did not understand what real love was. They didn't know fate.

She pushed—*the baby will grow strong on the milk of my breasts*—she pushed harder. A burn like knives slicing between her legs, and this was only the head. An explosion lit up the sky. It lit the whiskers on Uncle's face. It lit up the tree trunks.

Uncle pulled. "Push," he said.

She could not feel anything, could only smell her own blood and hear a crying that was a part of her. She reached out.

“You must wait,” Uncle said, holding the baby with one arm and taking a bone-handled knife from his pocket.

No: what she thought but could not say.

Uncle balanced the infant in his lap and sliced through the umbilical cord. See Lon felt the vomit come up and then out and down her cheek. Uncle cleaned her face with his shirt. She thought of William and the freckle-faced girl he once loved in Omaha. Vomit came up again, but it was only water and bile.

She didn't know how she had gotten from there to here or how long it had been since Uncle had lifted her up. Somehow her house looked different, as if she had never lived there. As she lay on her back and stared at the thatch roof, she wondered whether or not the entire night had been a dream. How could it be so silent and dark when only hours before the world seemed like it might end?

See Lon lifted her head from the jute mat and pulled aside the mosquito netting. All that could be seen through the window was black. A beetle crawled across the wooden planks near her thigh, but she didn't have the energy to reach over and throw it out.

“Stay brave,” Uncle said. “He is healthy.”

Uncle lowered the infant between her arm and breast. See Lon was careful. She put one hand under her son's head and cradled his body with the other. He had a hard time keeping his eyes open, but they were bright blue like William's.

Each intake of breath produced a bubble at the corner of his lips. With the flicker of the candle flame, the image of his face came and went.

She wanted to name him Horse—strong, sleek, characteristics of a teacher—but that name would not protect him. The spirit world would come after a horse, and he would already have enough to fight against, so she needed something the ghosts would not want, something ugly. Bò. “Ox” in English. William might say the Vietnamese “Bò” rhymed with the American word “*saw*” and that word might also scare away the bad ghosts.

“Bò,” she said, running a thumb behind his ear.

It sounded good. Bò.

Chapter 1

I stop in a patch of trampled elephant grass and reach for Mommy. She tells me that four year olds don't need to be carried, that I need to be a big boy, and then she pulls my wrist until it burns. We bump into bodies. Legs and canes. Dogs and babies. If I fall, the people will circle around us and shout *half-breed* until Mommy makes them leave me alone.

“Hurry up,” she says, pulling harder.

I tuck in my elbows, but I don't know what is in front of me. I wish I could see the ground and the sky at the same time because up there paper elephants and tigers dance beneath pink and purple fireworks like they are real, and if we could stop, just for roasted watermelon seeds, I would run as far and as long as Mommy wants after that. I would never tug on her dress again. Never ask her to carry me.

Mommy finally stops before green legs the size of tree trunks, and I know these are GIs, like Daddy. She talks to them with their words, and I can't understand anything except for Daddy's name: William.

I squat. The green legs lead up to bodies twice as big as Uncle. I want to see their faces, but I'm afraid what will happen if they catch me looking. Each man has white hands, but his feet are shiny and black. They don't even have toes. Maybe this is why the kids call me a ghost, and maybe all GIs are ghosts.

Mommy bends before me.

“Let's go,” she says.

I don't move. "Does Daddy have toes?"

"Of course," she says. "Why?"

"Those men didn't have toes."

"They have toes," she says, pulling my arms until I stand.

I don't believe her, and I don't want to keep searching for Daddy. "Where?"

"Under their shoes."

"They didn't have shoes. They had shiny black feet."

"They wear boots," Mommy says.

"What are boots?"

"They're shiny," she says. "For GIs. I think I know where Daddy is."

We walk slower now, toward the umbrellas lining the road. GIs stand in groups, drinking beer from bottles, surrounded by young girls in silk pajamas. The adults look like children next to the GIs' giant heads and wide shoulders. One GI is black, the skin on his hands and face almost as dark as the feet Mommy told me were boots. I don't want to go any further, but Mommy speeds up. Then she runs and yanks my hand so hard that I crash into the dirt. She keeps running. My elbow burns. I call out Mommy's name. I can't see her. I don't know where I am. I look up to the road and try to hold in my tears. There is blood on the side of my hand.

I think I see Mommy's dress beneath a green umbrella. I rush over. A GI spins Mommy around, and I know this is Daddy, but I want to turn back because she doesn't care where I am. Daddy's hair is the color of sand, his fingers the size of bananas. Mommy and Daddy press their lips together. They move their heads around like both of them are looking for something. Their eyes are closed. They aren't looking for me. They aren't looking for anything.

Mommy pulls back and reaches for Daddy's shoulders. She looks back to where I fell. Then they see me, both of them at the same time.

"What happened?" Mommy asks.

"Nothing." I look at Daddy's black feet and decide he must have toes beneath these boots because I have toes, because Mommy has toes, because everybody I know has toes, probably even ghosts.

Daddy bends over. I wish that Uncle would have come, but he is home, making sure our village is safe.

"Bo," Daddy says.

Mommy says, "Bò," and Daddy says something to her.

"Let him look at you," Mommy says.

I raise my head. Daddy's is almost as big as a watermelon. He doesn't even look like a real person to me.

I duck from pops that sound like gunshots.

“They’re just firecrackers,” Mommy says. “See.”

A teenager lights a fuse and runs. The strand pops repeatedly as tigers and elephants fly above us. Kids kick rattan balls and chase each other. The adults eat and drink and laugh.

Daddy moves closer. His moustache is the same color as his hair, but it looks like a caterpillar, sleeping on his lip. Stubble pokes out all over his cheeks and chin. Is this what a ghost looks like?

“You are beautiful,” he says, using the word meant for a woman.

A grasshopper lands on a weed and flies to another. Daddy opens a cloth bag and takes out a mango.

“For you,” he says, but Mommy gets it before me.

She digs into the skin with her thumbnail. Her lips open to a circle, and her voice slows. I only know how to sing the song with the letters, the ones she taught me, and doing this tickles my mouth. If I knew more then I could hear what Daddy says that makes her smile and laugh, but maybe they want to keep their words a secret, to leave me out.

“Can Daddy pick you up?” Mommy asks, dropping the mango skin onto the ground.

A dog walks over, sniffs the skin, and walks away. I want to pet him, but Mommy is looking at me, and I know what her eyes mean.

“Yes,” I say.

Daddy's thumbs dig into my armpits. He holds me against his chest, like Mommy used to do when I was little. I feel small. His eyes look like mine. He takes my hand and rubs it against his cheek. I pull away because his face feels like coral; his moustache is not soft like a caterpillar.

"I want to get down," I say, but he doesn't let me, and Mommy just smiles.

He lifts me above his head. I suck in my stomach, but this doesn't stop the pee from sliding down my leg. Daddy bends his knees and pops back up, pushing my body into the air, and I'm terrified, floating alone, and then I'm back in his hands. I want to go up again.

"Don't be afraid," Mommy says.

Daddy throws me again. I land back in his hands. If he throws me higher, maybe I can fly with the birds and the elephants and tigers. He and Mommy could come up there, and the three of us could stay in the sky forever.

"Eat this," Mommy says.

Daddy sets me on the ground, and Mommy gives me the mango because she wants to kiss more. She cries, but it is different from the times she pounds on the floor and yells,

"How could you leave us!?"

I take small bites of the mango so that it will last longer.

Daddy says something that I can't understand.

Mommy repeats the words, speaking slowly. "*Come on, kid,*" she says. This must be American.

“*Come on, kid,*” I say, and this makes them laugh, so I say it again. “What’s it mean, Mommy?”

“It means he likes you,” she says. “It means ‘don’t be afraid’.”

I run after pigeons, yelling, “*Come on, kid!*”, and jumping as high as I can, trying to follow them into the sky until Mommy calls me back.

We walk to the edge of the road, away from the crowd of people, and sit near families who have brought jute mats and baskets of food. Smoke rises from joss sticks. Daddy puts an arm around Mommy and twists the jade fishhook pendant that she says I used to reach for when I was a baby. I scrape my teeth against the mango pit. A blue elephant jumps higher than all the rest, and this elephant looks alive, like we are alive, but what is inside of it? What is inside of me? I guess there is part of Mommy, part of Daddy, and even part of a French great-grandfather I never met, who I know about only because Uncle told me. He told me you can’t divide a pool of blood, but I don’t know what this means.

“Is America up there?” I ask.

“Where?” Mommy says.

“That blue spot,” I say, “on the moon.”

“Cuoi lives up there,” Mommy says. “Not Americans.”

I look closer and wonder why it is out at the same time as the sun. There is a blue puppy, hiding in the white. Maybe Cuoi has walked to the other side. Maybe that is why I can’t see him. I stare harder until I hear the puppy bark.

A blast rings through the voices and firecrackers. Daddy holds Mommy tight. GIs shout words I can't understand. Republican soldiers grab guns from the jeeps along the road. The people under the umbrellas run from their stands into the screaming crowd.

“What’s happening?” I ask Mommy.

Daddy kisses her right before a GI pulls him away.

Daddy yells, “Go!”

Mommy grabs my hand. I run to keep up. The ground explodes. Dirt flies into my face. We turn and run the other way. A girl screams. Her arm is gone. The ground keeps exploding. The air smells like burning chicken. We pass an old lady whose chest is covered with blood. She reaches up, but there is nobody above her.

We run into the jungle. Branches scratch my arms and face, but I keep running, following Mommy. We lie on the ground, and she holds me. Between every tree, orange lights up the sky. I plug my ears.

“Don’t be afraid,” Mommy says, but I know she is afraid. Her body shakes, and I can feel her heart pounding.

I need to be a big boy.

GIs and Republican soldiers in jeeps race past the fallen bodies. Daddy has a gun, and he’s running, shooting, chasing the Viet Cong. They fall to the ground like they’re diving forward. Daddy jumps into the back of a jeep.

Mommy screams, “William!” She yells, “Stop!” She says, “We’re going to be okay.”

She takes my hand, and we run out of the jungle. She keeps telling me: *We have to get out of here.* We run through smoke. My eyes burn. I trust her feet because I can't see. The blasts have stopped. The gunshots are far away. Small fires burn around charred weeds and bodies.

"Come on," Mommy says.

"No." I run over to a crushed elephant and pick it up. I blow into the paper.

"Put that down," Mommy says.

"I can fix it," I say, reaching into the belly.

She knocks the elephant out of my hands. I did so good, went so long without crying, but now I can't stop myself. Her face scares me. Her dress is covered in dust.

A truck rushes toward the road with so many people hanging on that the tires are almost flat.

"Get on!" a woman yells.

We run toward the truck. Mommy lifts me up and into the arms of a man I don't know. Then she climbs in. I cry for the dead people and animals. Everybody talks at the same time. The truck bounces up to the red road, and I hold onto Mommy's leg with one arm. My thumb tastes like mango. Clouds drift past the moon. I can't hear. I can't see. The puppy is gone.

Chapter 2

Mommy sleeps, curled up under her sheet. I open the door quietly: gray sky, just light enough to see; nobody is outside, and I feel safe. I search beside the fire pit until I find a cricket for my frog, Linh Foo. The legs twitch as I pinch the body, open my box, and drop it in. I sneak past Sook's house to the bran barn, and I dig my fingernails beneath the base. Flies buzz around the mud-coated whiskers of the sleeping pigs. Chickens peck through poop. A cricket jumps onto Sook's cactus fence, but I'm not going to put my hand in there again.

I walk under their family clothesline, reach up, and punch Sook's shirt like his fat belly is inside of it, like this punch could knock all the air out of him, and that skin that looks like birds bit from it would shrivel up like a worm on hot dirt. We would never have to hear him get drunk and sing songs about cutting up half-breeds for soup. He wouldn't wake us up screaming about dried fish that Phoung and Suong didn't share with him. That night he was sitting with Dic and Hoi— gone off to fight now—and they were singing around the fire. They were licking their fingers. The bones of Phoung's dog cast aside, lying on the ground.

Sook shouted, "This is what happens when you deny me food. Do it again and this one will die." He threw their other dog to the ground.

The kids called him a monster, even Dung, who is the best friend of Sook's son, Luong, but these same kids will sit around Sook and listen to his stories of killing hundreds of Frenchmen and hanging their bodies from trees with notes that said *C'est La Vie*.

I move on to the rocking chair in front of old Mr. and Mrs. Thanh's house. Bees land on the roses that snake around the fence post where Dung lives with his Mommy, the woman everybody calls Swan because of her long neck. She is nice to me. My mommy tells me that I should try to make friends with Dung because he's the only other five year old in the village. When I tell her that he's mean, she says it is because his Daddy died fighting the Viet Cong, but I know that he just wants to be like Luong.

The hammock in front of Phoung and Soung's house hangs, lifeless. Gold light shines through the trees around our village. I want to draw a picture for Daddy, so that he can see where we live and come find us, so that he can beat up Sook. I'm good at making heads and bodies, but hands and feet are too hard for me. Mommy calls them my circle people and says if I'm not careful they'll float into the sky. But I could draw our village: all the houses in a circle, the banana trees around them, the fire pit in the middle, the garden beside the jungle with cassava and peanuts and potatoes, the trail that leads to the rice field and further on to the road where jeeps pass. I could draw the creek in the jungle that runs through the patch of wild pineapple and up to the punji stake around the area where the kids said they found dead Viet Cong with American cards on their chests. I will draw Phuong's little dog, the pigs, the chickens, maybe even Uncle, sitting on the ground outside his house, blowing on a flute. I'll draw the Thanks and their teeth stained purple from betel juice. I would make our house the biggest, even though it is the smallest, and I wouldn't show him how ours is set back further than the rest, almost into the jungle, with no banana trees around it. I could draw Mommy. And, maybe, if he sees all of this, then he will come, and if he does I can sing him the songs Mommy taught me.

I walk along the trail that leads into the jungle. The air is damp beneath these palm leaves. I avoid the sharp spines of the pineapple plants. White moths rise from a rotting log as I bend in to search for crickets. Somebody or something is coming. I hide behind the root that stretches as high as our house and looks like the back of Mr. Thanh's ankle.

"We know you're in here," Luong shouts.

I can hear Dung and the others. "Half-breed soup. Bò eats poop. Chinese. Bò's knees. In the soup."

Twigs crunch as they get closer. I duck out from behind the root, run past the spot where three rocks meet, and sprint toward our house. Luong tackles me. I fight to escape his grip, but he's too heavy. He pins my arms beneath his knees. The other kids hold down my legs. Rat-faced Dung throws dirt into my face. I spit and try to move my head to the side, but Luong's knees stop me.

Luong pushes his finger into my eye. "Ghost baby."

I try to get an arm free. Dung unzips his pants.

"Do it," Loung says.

"Older brother, stop," Van Le says. "You're hurting him."

"Good," Luong says. He slaps me. "He is a dog."

My face stings, but I don't cry.

Dung shoots out pee. I can't move. I tighten my lips and push my tongue against the roof of my mouth. The pee burns my eyes.

Van Le pulls her brother's sleeve. "That's enough," she says.

Luong spits at her. "Shut up."

"I'm getting Mom," she says.

This Van Le is the girl I want to think is really her. The same girl who helped me feed bran to a dying rat; the same girl who picked thorns from my foot and scratched the mosquito bites I couldn't reach; the same girl who snuck rice out to me and Mommy after Sook fell asleep.

Dung pushes Van Le to the ground, and Luong laughs—her own flesh and blood just laughs when a dirty rat pushes his sister down. She shouldn't even be here; the only reason she came is because she is afraid of Luong.

"Let's throw him in the pit," Luong says.

Dung grabs my legs, and Luong grips my arms. I shake as hard as I can as they carry me toward the stake pit. I scream. I can see the stakes, and this makes me crazy. I wiggle and punch until I break free.

"I'll kill you," Luong says, jumping on top of me.

I try to crawl out from beneath him.

"Get up!" It is Sook.

Mommy and Uncle stand beside him. Swan stands behind them. It's hard to believe that she could be the mommy of Dung: this woman whose neck is so long and whose legs stretch higher than anyone in the village.

"You get over here," Swan says.

Dung walks with his head down. Mommy grabs Luong's ear and pulls him back to Sook. It looks like Sook is going to hit him or yell, but he smiles. He looks right at his son.

"You stay away from that boy," he says. "You want to get fleas?"

I wipe the pee from my face.

Van Le's eyes seem to say, 'I'm sorry. I don't understand either.'

I look up at Mommy, but she's looking into the jungle, like there is a bird or monkey out there she's trying to see.

Sook puts a hand on her shoulder. "You need to keep him on a leash," he says, running his fingers down to her waist until she knocks his hand away.

Mommy is silent.

"This doesn't have to happen," Sook says, reaching out for her. "It's up to you."

I look at the dent in the side of Uncle's head and wonder what he used to look like before he went out to fight. I wonder if he used to be stronger, if the old Uncle would have punched Sook in the face.

Uncle says that rice is life, but it feels like death. Surrounded by hot water and mosquitoes, my feet sink almost to the knees with every step. It is March, so we have to cut the rice all the way down by the soil, and this is harder but necessary for it to keep growing until August when we cut again. Mommy bends with the sickle. I cut what she misses with a knife, and we load the stalks into the baskets hanging from the pole on her back. Swan and Dung and Van Le walk to our left, the Thanks two rows over, and the rest of the village spread out to Phoung and Soung at the other end. Uncle walks back and forth behind all of us, getting what we missed, so that we can move faster, get more, and help Sook and his wife spread the stalks around the fire pit to dry in the sun.

As GIs patrol the road, I wonder if one of them might be Daddy. Mommy says that when we go to America we won't have to do this kind of work, but whenever I ask her when we're going to go she says we'll talk about it later.

I step as hard as I can, let the mud squirt through my toes, and pull them up before they get stuck. We fill both baskets and walk over to unload them on the wagon behind Luong's bicycle. If I was big enough maybe I could ride the load up to Sook and Tram instead of him. Maybe next season, Mommy says. Right now, I just want to get all the stalks pulled so we can dry them out and jump on them to get the rice. I'm good at separating the light-colored grains from the dark, and this year I'm big enough to help Mommy shake the rice in baskets to get off the husks. I will help her pound the grain to get that last layer of bran away. It's no good, but the pigs and chickens will eat it. They even eat the stalks.

The good rice is for us, but it is stored in bins inside Sook's top house and distributed by him, and his family always gets the best. During my third summer, Mommy and I had to

eat bran and bamboo shoots for almost a month, like pigs, because Sook said the bad harvest was a punishment from the gods for harboring a half breed. Uncle told Mommy that forgiveness brings gentle favors, and he told me that Sook makes a point not to waste anything, to use everything we find, and the spirit world will smile upon this. He told me that I must be strong for Mommy, that she is doing the best she can, that I am the sapling she waters so one day she can sit beneath the shade.

With the basket empty, Mommy walks proud and strong with her face pointed straight ahead. She never complains, so I never complain to her. I don't tell her about the cuts on my feet and how it feels like there is salt on them. I don't say anything about feeling dizzy or how I just want to go to the creek and wash my body and go inside until the morning. She doesn't know anything I'm thinking. She doesn't know that I follow behind her and pray to Grandfather that he will deliver Daddy to our village. She doesn't know that I look into the mirror after she goes to sleep and hate what I see. She doesn't know that if the kids did let me play war with them that I would want to be a Viet Cong because they wear all black and nobody can see them; they walk through the world invisible.

The ball of sun reflects in the water, all the way from us to the jungle, and the water is cooler. Dusk is about to come. We have gathered enough for the day, but we aren't done until Sook says we're done.

I bend to pull up a clump of stalks. Mommy turns her head and looks at me like I've done something bad.

“Why do you let them do this?” she asks, chopping beneath the water.

I want to tell her that I'm only one boy, that she and Uncle should have come sooner, that she doesn't know what it is like, but my shoulders burn, and I know what will happen if I try to tell her any of these things.

"I don't know," I say.

"You need to stand up for yourself," she says, reaching over her shoulder and dropping stalks into the basket.

"I tried. I try to be good." I move ahead and chop off the stalks in front of her feet, to hurry, to let her see how much I can do.

Her knee knocks into my head, and she falls on top of me. I shake the water from my hair. Mommy wipes a hand across her muddy face. Her eyes close and open quickly. The line on her forehead scrunches up.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"I'm sorry."

"You stupid boy."

I don't even see the hand coming, just feel it hitting my face, feel the sting setting in, feel the tears in my throat, but I hold them in and cough instead of crying. I look across the rows, but nobody has noticed except for Mr. Thanh, and he just looks at me and then looks down, like what she did was right, like I deserved it, like it's none of his business.

I can't sleep because I can't stop thinking what it means to die. I know you stop breathing, and the people who love you put your body underground, and the family who is still living lights incense and offers you fruit and prays to you. But where does the part that's not the body go? What if I die? Will Mommy pray to me? Will I be able to hear her? Will I live in the sky, on the moon? What might it be like where Cuoi flew to so long ago? Is there dirt in the sky? People? Do they speak American or Vietnamese? Maybe they speak neither. Maybe they speak the way dogs speak. Or the way birds speak. Or the way I speak to Grandfather when I ask him to help us without opening my mouth.

I stand over Mommy to make sure she is sleeping before tiptoeing over to the drawer where she keeps what Daddy has given her. I look back at her, chest lifting up and down, and try to open the drawer without it squeaking. I take out her silver-handled mirror—I'm dead if she catches me—and walk to the ancestral altar, use the lit candle to see myself. The circles around my eyes go deeper into my face and are rounder than the other villagers'. Wild blue dog eyes. I'm ugly. Everybody tells me so, and Mommy knows. Uncle does too. But they lie to me.

Linh Foo hops up to my foot. I cradle the frog in my palm. A lizard stops in a strip of moonlight on the wall. The head and partial wing of a dragonfly twitch in the side of its mouth.

I run my hand across the bumps on Linh Foo's back. The frog's mouth opens, like its chicken-flesh-looking tongue is going to whisper something.

What can I do? I ask without speaking. I don't mean to make her cry. I don't want to be like this.

Cicadas screech. Wind blows in. Mommy coughs.

I run my fingers along Linh Foo's belly. I don't have any friends.

Words that can't really be coming from Linh Foo—maybe Grandfather's spirit, the one Mommy prays to, or maybe the god people call on when the sky fills with fire—as loud as though someone is in my head talking: What about Van Le?

Chapter 3

I open Mommy's trunk, the one I used to hide in when I was only five, and fish out the ball of twine. The room smells like lavender, and there is murky water in the basin. This means she washed her hair before I woke up. This means she is in a good mood. Mommy takes the spear down from the hook on the wall. She turns the sharp blade, end over end, to make sure it is securely fastened.

“My lucky boy,” she says.

“Are Phoung and Suong going?” I ask.

“Just us,” she says.

“Good.”

I open the box of hooks, check them, and put them in the basket with the twine. I tell myself that this time I'm not going to lose anything, even if a fish bites through the line and tries to swim away. I'll dive in after it, and Mommy will tell everybody how I caught a fish with my bare hands, and they won't say anything to me, but I'll know they know I can do something, that I'm not a stupid half-breed, and sometimes this is enough, like when I thought to use dried weeds inside cloth to sleep on for Mommy and me and then everybody else started doing the same thing.

Mommy spins the end of the spear around, checking for spots where the twine has popped loose. I get the poles from the corner along with the can we use to store worms. I know how much Mommy wants Daddy to be here, but, lately, when she says the word “daddy”, my throat feels so tight I can't swallow. I know that Daddy planted a seed in

Mommy's belly and that's how I grew, but I want a daddy like Luong and Van Le have a daddy. Even though I hate Sook, he is good to them. He is there every day.

"What's going on out there?" Mommy asks.

I stand and walk to the window with the fishing pole in hand. The kids take turns trying to throw rocks into the can I found, the can that Dung stole from me and says is his. Sook shows his son how to throw with his palm up, and this helps Luong land one in the can.

"They're playing," I say. "When's Daddy going to come?"

"We can talk about this after fishing," she says. "I can hear them."

Rocks ting against the can.

Luong yells my name. He yells, "Half breeds have twelve assholes! They eat potatoes and beg! They eat in hiding because they're afraid of ghosts!"

Mommy tells me that nobody wants to be like everybody else, and that's their problem. She says *they* want to be mixed race, but I don't believe her. Why would anybody want to be like me?

She runs her thumb against the edge of the spear. "When I was a little girl," she says, "everybody loved my French nose. It's okay to be different. In Saigon and Nha Trang, you can find people who would love your eyes."

I hear Luong shouting: 'Dog boy. Come out, dog boy.'

I don't know whether or not Mommy is lying, but I know that I'm getting bigger. My fists are bigger than Van Le's, and my legs are so strong I can work all day without them hurting. Soon nobody will pick on me.

I wrap the excess line around the end of one pole then the other. I lift a coconut to put into the basket we will take with us.

“Mommy, why do coconuts grow hair?”

“Why do you want to know?” Mommy asks.

“Because it’s not a person, but it has hair.”

“Dogs have hair. Monkeys have hair.”

“That’s different,” I say. “Oranges don’t have hair.”

She stands up and cocks back the spear, staring me down like an old time soldier running into battle. I like it when she plays like this.

“Coconuts need hair,” she says.

“Why?”

“It gets cold in the trees at night.”

“*Mom.*”

She reaches for my feet and tickles them. “It’s so they can run faster.”

I try to say, “Coconuts don’t run,” but I’m laughing too hard.

“Sing for me,” Mommy says.

I sing, “The monkey climbs,” and Mommy puts her hands under her armpits and howls. She pretends like I’m a tree, and she’s climbing me, and I can’t stop laughing, but I continue the song, and as I sing, “The tiger runs,” Mommy growls and gets down on all fours, bites my ankle, and I’m laughing, and I fall down and grab her, and she says, “Keep singing,” so I do. She whistles, jumps up, and flaps her arms as I sing, “The bird flies.”

“Don’t ever stop singing,” she says.

There is a knock on our door. I crawl over and pull it open. It’s Uncle.

“Are you coming fishing?” I ask him.

He holds the door with his foot. There is a box in his hands, a heavy one.

“He’s been working as much as us,” Mommy says. “He probably doesn’t want to do anything. What’s that?”

Uncle lowers the box onto the trunk.

“I didn’t open it,” Uncle says, taking his flute from his pocket.

As Uncle blows a note, I watch the way the light shines on one side of his face, and, from this angle, he doesn’t look any different than anybody else. Does he know what the kids say about him? Can he hear Dung when he walks with his head bent to the side, talking like a sick person and saying, “I make flutes because my head is filled with air”?

Uncle bends and reaches beneath Mommy’s bed. “I still have my eyes,” he says, unclenching his hand and showing us a dusty peanut.

I try not to look at the dent, almost a perfect circle, like his head is made of clay that somebody punched in and it stayed that way. I try to imagine what he looked like before the bomb and if the skin is soft or hard.

A fly lands on Uncle’s nose. Mommy runs the spear through the tape along the flap. Uncle slaps at his own face. The fly buzzes off and returns. Maybe this is what Mommy calls *destiny*, and maybe Uncle and that fly are supposed to be together, or maybe the fly is just trying to hide from Linh Foo Number Two.

Mommy pulls open the box and takes out an envelope. I move toward her. She tears open the envelope and unfolds a letter.

“Well?” Uncle says.

Mommy stares at the paper. Her hands shake. The page drops, and she stands with her fingers and thumbs still bent, like she doesn’t even know it has fallen. I want to ask her what

it says, but I know it's better to keep my mouth shut. Uncle pops open the shell he found and offers me one of the peanuts.

"Daddy's going to come for us," Mommy says.

I say nothing because when Mommy starts thinking about him it's like she doesn't even know I'm around. What if Daddy does come and the two of them want it to be only them? What if Mommy leaves me like the day when the sky rained fireworks and elephants and monkeys danced?

"What else is there?" I ask.

I need to keep my mouth shut. The last time a package came and I begged, Mommy slapped my face and didn't let me eat any of the candy until the next day.

She lifts a dress from the box and inhales the Brut cologne that Daddy always dabs onto what he sends. She holds the dress in front of her body.

"It's the color of his eyes," she says.

I feel alone, even though Mommy and Uncle are inside with me.

"I told Sook I would feed the pigs," Uncle says, opening the door. He leaves.

Mommy unfolds the new dress. Dust spins in the light between us. I turn away as she lifts off the old one, and when I turn around the blue silk sparkles against her skin like a shiny jewel. Linh Foo Number Two sleeps in the corner of his box.

"What do you think?" Mommy asks.

"Very beautiful," I say.

"The dress? Or me?"

"Both."

The moon has changed from a big ball to a fingernail since she last took the bottle of Brut from the table and smelled the cap. I know what is going to happen now, that this smile will last only as long as she believes that he is going to come, and then she'll be silent again, and when she is silent the room feels different. It feels as if neither of us is even inside, as if our bodies are there but the rest is somewhere else, gone.

Mommy walks over and kneels before the ancestral altar. She lights a stick of incense and waves it over her head. I rub Linh Foo Number Two's back and watch him come to life.

Mommy holds Daddy's picture, the only one we have. I have picked it up so many times I have it memorized: Big head. Big eyes. He is smiling, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Thick moustache. Barrel chest hairy like a monkey's. His belly button goes in like mine.

I pet Linh Foo Number Two. Mommy turns and stretches out her legs, reaches for her toes. Her jade fishhook necklace looks blue.

"Bring me the box," she says, and I obey. "These are for you." She pulls out a pair of white shoes. "Try them."

I put a foot in each one. It's like stepping in hard mud. Mommy presses her thumbs into the front of each shoe. "You'll grow into them," she says.

When she bends to tie the strings, I know she loves me because I am all she has, that later might be different, but there is something else in the way her fingers cross over each other, as though the scent of Brut isn't on the table or her dress, but around the corner, on Daddy himself, and he will walk up any minute and take us to America, where you can fill a bucket with hot water just by pushing a button.

"Try them," Mommy says. "The tiger runs," she sings.

I run in place. The fishing poles fall down. The tables shake.

“That’s good,” Mommy says. She tells me that the animals on the shoes are called kangaroos, that they hop around a big island called Australia, and that their babies live in a pocket on their stomach, but I already know this from the alphabet book that Mommy reads with me each night, the one Daddy sent in his last package.

I bend and touch my toes, and, like a super Linh Foo, pop up as high as I can.

“Sit down,” Mommy says. She hands me a Tootsie Roll, and I pull open the wrapper.

I hope that everything in America tastes this way because I could eat hundreds of these and Daddy can buy as many as he wants. Americans are rich.

Mommy holds up another envelope with my name written on it. “This is for you,” she says, giving it to me. “Go ahead. Open it.”

I tear off the end and reach inside.

There are three green pieces of paper, all with the same old man drawn on the front: a funny-looking guy with puffy white hair like a girl’s and a big forehead. He looks very serious, has the face of an American, but his eyes are not big and round. Maybe he’s an old man mixed race. Maybe this is why Daddy sent me these drawings.

Mommy gets up and retrieves the letter she dropped. I turn in circles to get a better sense of my shoes and think that this must be what it feels like to walk on a cloud. I pick the poles up from the ground and lean them against my shoulder.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

Mommy says, “There’s one more gift for you.”

She reaches in the box and moves aside clothes. I try to see what she is getting. It looks like the handle of an ax. She gives me this along with a soft stone. It is white with red threads.

“What do I do with this?” I ask.

“Find Uncle,” she says.

“Now?”

“Yes. It’s baseball. He’ll show you how to play.”

“But what about fishing?”

“Later,” she says, but this means that we’re not going to go because she will sit inside and read that letter a hundred more times, and she’ll go before the altar, again and again, and she’ll take off the cap and put it back on, and even when I do get back she’ll have me write “daddy” at the top of the page and won’t be able to hear anything I say.

The thought comes again, like a punch in the stomach: What if Daddy comes back and then Mommy makes me go away?

As soon as I open the door, Luong and his gang come forward like ants attacking, but I can’t go back inside. Sook sleeps in his hammock. Uncle carries the bran bucket to the pigs.

“We come to eat Linh Foo,” Luong says.

“You can’t,” I say. “My Mommy’s in there.”

“The slut and the retard,” Luong says, breaking a stick over his knee.

“Shut up!”

“What’d you say, half-breed?”

Luong tries to grab the bat. I yell for Uncle. He drops the bran bucket.

“Great,” Luong says, “The retard helping the bastard.”

Uncle steps in front of me. “Stop it,” he says. “Is that a baseball bat?”

“What is it?” Luong asks.

Uncle takes the bat from me and swings like a hunter chopping a path through the jungle.

“It’s a game,” he says. “Let me see the ball.”

I toss it up and am surprised when Uncle catches it with one hand. I think the rest of the kids are too.

“We will go from oldest to youngest,” Uncle says, handing the bat to Luong. “The rest of you will catch.”

We follow Uncle to the dried up rice field. Everybody crowds around him, and I can see that it makes him feel good to be teaching these kids he must know make fun of him behind his back. Luong listens when Uncle tells him to bend his legs. Uncle shows him how to only swing forward instead of back and forth.

“The Americans have many good things,” Uncle says.

Van Le runs beside me and the others, further out in the field. Mr. Thanh stands and spits a glob of betel nut juice off his porch. He digs his cane into the dirt and walks past Swan’s house toward the field. Clouds the size of helicopters drift and protect us from the sun. Uncle pitches the ball, but Luong keeps missing. He grunts and slams the bat against the earth.

I want to tell him to stop, but this wood is solid. Luong can try, but he will not break it. It is strong. Like Daddy. Like what I’m going to be.

I hate Luong. Why does he always talk about Mommy’s sex? Sex is taking off your clothes and making loud noises. Sex is special kissing, the way Mommy kissed Daddy, turning their necks from side to side and making sounds like sad dogs locked out in the night.

“Bò!” Van Le yells.

The ball sails right for me. I stretch out my hands. It hits: smack! Stings like fire. I can't hold on. The ball rolls away. I beat the other kids to it, pick it up, throw it toward Uncle, and when it falls short, I run up and retrieve it.

Some of the other kids take turns hitting the ball. I wait. I let the younger ones capture it, but then Luong forces them to let him throw it.

I run up to Uncle because it's my turn. I have to grip halfway just to swing.

"Wait for it," Uncle says. He lobs the ball.

I swing, expecting to feel the contact.

Luong screams, "The blue-eyed ghost can't see!"

"Stop," Uncle says. "You missed too. Concentrate," he says.

I swing and miss. On the next pitch I imagine the ball to be Sook's head, and as it floats toward me, I cock back my arms and come forward with everything I have. A sting shoots through my palms and up to my elbow, but I can see the ball flying over all the kids, further than any one Luong hit.

Mr. Thanh raises his cane. "Good work, child."

The kids chase the rolling ball past the edge of the rice field and into the jungle. I look to our house. Mommy stands behind the window, smiling. She looks like a different woman in the blue dress. I wave, and she waves back. Next time, I'll swing even harder and hit the ball so far it gets stuck in the sun.

Nobody comes out of the jungle. I join in the search, brushing past branches and under grass until my body gets sticky. If they find it before me, one of them will steal it.

"It's not here," Dung says.

Luong says, "What an idiot. He lost his own ball."

The other kids follow him out into the field. Van Le helps me.

“That was great,” she says.

We use sticks to push aside the pineapple spines and check between the rocks where I hide and in the punji stake pit, but it’s gone, as if the sweaty jungle opened its mouth and swallowed.

After Mommy goes to sleep, I take out the flashlight Daddy sent me and sneak outside. The jungle makes different noises at night, like *clik-clik-clik* and *shee-shee*. Flying ghosts rustle the leaves of the trees, and I can feel water ghosts, people who drowned, in the wet puddles around me, and I want to believe what Uncle told me about people like Luong, that he’ll come back as a ghost as stupid after death as he was in life, and the spirit world will be even harder for him. I walk with the light steps Uncle taught me in order to respect the ants and crickets and spiders I can’t see, and as I brush away vines and sticks, I think about the birds sleeping in the branches.

A typhoon of flies darts away from my beam of light. I stick a finger in each nostril and move closer.

It is a GI, a black man, his skin the color of ash, lying on his back with his legs wrapped around a tree trunk. Ants crawl around where his eyes should be. He is dead. The jungle sounds like it is whistling. I feel ghosts all around me, but I am too afraid to run, too afraid to move. This is why I shouldn’t sneak out at night. What if Mommy finds me? Or somebody else? What if they think I did this? Inside my head I ask the man what happened, as if he can answer me from the spirit world. I should not look. I should not look, but I can’t stop.

What if he stands up because he's not really dead and has just turned into a monster that eats half breeds? There is movement beneath his pants, from waist to knee. A rat skitters around his foot. The sounds won't stop. *Clik-lik-lik*. The jungle whistles my name, and I think I hear Viet Cong creeping through the trees. Branches bend above me. The moon is almost nothing.

I reach down. The GI's hair feels like the inside of French bread. A chain with a cross at the end hangs from his neck. I want to keep it. I want to put it into the doppel kit William sent me long ago, but I know it isn't right. Something tells me to turn the head over—maybe God—and when I do, wood lice scatter from the other eye socket.

I reach into the GI's pocket. There is a photo. All of his face is there. His eyes, brown like the color of water after soaking rice, look like there is light coming out of them. The eyes of his wife shine, too. She is white. Between them a baby smiles the only way babies can. All of them look happy, and maybe this is why Mom wants to go to America. Maybe there it doesn't matter if your parents are different.

I keep the photo. It feels wrong reaching into this man's other pocket, like Grandfather is watching me from the spirit world. The steel is cold in my hand, and I can tell it's a Zippo before I pull it out, like the one Daddy gave Uncle, and I know how to spin the wheel and make flame.

Chapter 4

I can't remember the last time I closed my eyes for the night and didn't open them before the sun came up. A year? Maybe more.

In the small hours of the morning, crickets scream outside the window. I want to get up and look at the moon—to believe that we are going to be okay, that there is something bigger that will always protect us—but I need Mommy to think that I am sleeping; I need her to think that I don't know, that this is her secret.

The dream of only seconds ago won't come back, but it is still with me, somewhere on the other side of a wall, blowing away like a cloud.

A moth flies in circles above the framed photos of Daddy and Grandfather, each dive bringing it closer to the candle flame on the altar. Light flashes on and off: Mommy's clothes in a pile on the floor; my frog box, empty in the corner; a spider spinning a strand from wall to ceiling, trapped wings sparkling in the web. I should get up, take the spear down from the wall, and hide it beneath my sheet.

The door creaks. Mommy shifts from her stomach to her side. She whispers my name. I hold my breath and pretend that I am a baby kangaroo, nestled safely inside Mommy's stomach, ready to pounce out and strike and save her, but I never get out.

Sook stumbles in and falls. He sings, all his words mixed up and drawn out, like an owl. The candle flashes on dried scabs and hardened pus on his face. Strands of wet hair on his forehead. Beads of sweat on his flabby back. He pushes himself up and stands in front of the trunk, rubbing his belly like a hungry man.

“Please,” Mommy whispers. “Be quiet.”

Sook takes a finger and lifts the sheet off of Mommy. She spreads her legs to the edge of the bed. Light flashes on and off the black hair between her legs. I should not be looking. I should never look. I should forget I even know about this. Sook pulls down his pants and falls on top of her. Her head moves to the side of his, and I can hardly see any of her, only her legs on the side of his and her hair hanging over the edge of her bed.

Tomorrow I will wait beside the house, and after Sook opens the door, I will walk over to his home and wake his wife. I say this every time. What if his wife already knows? What if she knows and doesn't care? What if the entire village knows and they're laughing at Mommy and me behind closed doors?

I pull the sheet over my head and peer through the cloth. This might be what the world looks like before a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. The stupid moon shines on Sook's pimply butt and legs. His flesh bounces as he moves faster and harder into her like he's trying to make sure no more ghosts escape from between her legs.

Sook's breathing turns to wheezing. What if she suffocates beneath his fat belly? I close my eyes. Everything turns gold. No way to stop the sounds of Sook's skin hitting Mommy's. I want to get up and grab the spear from the wall or bash his head in with my baseball bat. I imagine the machete Mr. Thanh uses to chop paths through elephant grass. I can see it now. This was my dream: raising the blade above my shoulder and chopping off Sook's arm. Sook turning to hit me and falling. Chopping off his other arm. Holding down his ankles while Mommy chops off his dick and stuffs it into his asshole. Pulling out the poop-covered dick and jamming it into Sook's mouth and down his throat with a bamboo pole. Stabbing his chest over and over with the spear until he doesn't move.

Sook rises and puts his pants back on. "See you soon," he says, closing the door.

Mommy twists up the end of her sheet and screams into it. She stands, dips a rag into the basin, and washes between her legs. “Why?” she asks. “Why did you do this to me?” She pulls on her long shirt, walks to the altar, and blows out the candle.

Only screeching crickets. Moonlight. The smell of smoke. I feel her coming towards me. I close my eyes and breathe the breaths of the sleeping. Her hand warms my neck. I feel her lips kiss the back of my head.

She whispers, “I love you. No matter what.”

I can feel the rise and fall of my chest against the mattress. A bird calls out to others, and they answer back. Mommy puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Uncle is saving,” she says. “He’s going to get us out of here.”

And I think of Uncle, riding the bicycle into the market with his basket filled with flutes, and I think of his hiding place in the secret box beneath his stove, and I wonder how much money it would take to get us so far away from here that we would never have to see any of these people again.

Chapter 5

The stories passed around by Luong's followers are all lies. GIs do not hang children in trees by their ankles. They don't tie babies to the backs of jeeps and drive down the road, and I'm sure they don't dissect the bodies of children and study the parts in order to better understand the enemy.

I follow Highway 1 along the South China Sea, yards from the road, inside the jungle, safe beneath the treetops where nobody can see me. Trucks speed past, kicking up cool air that smells like water. I run harder because it is the only way to stop my mind, to stop the constant thoughts of what will happen if Mom and Daddy never get back together, or what I can do to make her feel better, or how I will talk to the kids in America.

Let them shoot me. I don't care anymore. I run like a soldier, ducking under branches and jumping over puddles and downed limbs. Sweat covers my face and burns my eyes. I scream to the tops of the trees: "Come get me."

Life scares me, and sometimes I think that death might be easier, like sleep, but what happens when you can't talk and nobody can see you? Can the dead really communicate with the living? Even though life seems like torture at times, there is always the hope it will get better, whereas death, no matter what people believe, is permanent. Just dig into the earth where grubs and worms eat everything that ends up beneath the surface. See the feathers of a bird turned into ants. Feel the scratchy bone of a dog's leg, a dog that once ran with fur and flesh. All gone. All nothing. Death exists everywhere beneath the ground, and if you move into this house in the dirt, you never see the sky again; you never see anything.

Helicopters turn and twist with the laziness of dragonflies. The jungle floor ends, and I am here. It's time. Jeeps pass through an open fence where the earth is flat and gray, hard like

rock. Yellow lines and yellow arrows point to different spots. They stand out against the gray, like somebody has painted them over this solid ground. Men wave what look like oversized orange flashlights. An airplane flies so low the sound burns my ears. I take my sandals with the tire soles from my bag and put them on.

GIs load and unload boxes from trucks, the backs of which are covered with green canvas. Black wires stretch between poles. I take Daddy's photo from my pocket, as if I haven't seen it hundreds of times. What was I thinking? Why didn't I leave it at home? I walk between two poles and beneath what looks like a house without walls, the canvas roof set at an angle like ours. I march along and try not to make eye contact with the Vietnamese workers who crouch among jute baskets filled with clothes. I tell myself that I am scared of nothing, that I will die if I must, but this isn't true.

A helicopter lands. Another takes off. What does this place look like to the men behind the windows of the helicopters? Like turning over a rotten log and catching hundreds of ants? Is this how God sees me? Just the top of my head. Just one of many. No different from the thousands of other heads dotting the land.

Women and children pull clothes from a rope line, load baskets, and carry them to the crouching ladies. These must be the same ladies Mom worked with before Daddy's superiors realized what was going on. This is one of the stories she tells that makes her laugh, even though it was the end of everything. I was a baby, not even big enough to crawl. She used to hide me inside the laundry baskets when the captains and generals came around. I was in there with all their underwear and socks. Mom used to give the wrong underwear to a captain who hated her and then play dumb when he came around looking for his own.

As these ladies chatter and fold and their children play with bottle caps and roll cans back and forth between their outstretched legs, I can imagine this angry GI, pushing these little ladies around and digging through baskets before finally finding his underwear in the very one where Mom had hidden me when I was a baby. He didn't find me, but that was the day he started watching her every move, counting the amount of food, and paying off the women she worked with to tell him something, anything. And they did.

GIs walk past trucks and jeeps, a constant stream of traffic in and out of the fence. Every white man who has a moustache looks like Daddy, and every man whose face I can't see must surely have a moustache. If they look harder, maybe the laundry ladies will recognize my blue eyes and help me.

The laundry women seem more interested in the skittering cockroaches. They've seen mixed race kids before, maimed and begging in the market, dropped on the doorsteps of orphanages, thrown away and left to die in the back alleys of Saigon and Nha Trang. These are stories Uncle has told me, and then it hits. I understand. Mom calls me lucky because I am, because of what she has done, because she didn't leave me somewhere to die.

The grandmother of the bunch leans into the sun. She doesn't wear a hat like the others, and there are so many lines on her face it looks like bark.

She looks right at me. "Be careful, blue eyes."

I look over my shoulder for the first time since putting foot on this gray ground. Two GIs sit at the top of a wall next to a set of steps. One is black, the other white. They are watching me, waiting. I face forward and walk, but I can feel their eyes on my back.

The only thing familiar about this place is the white trucks with red crosses on the side.

Similar trucks came to our Khanh Hoa village when I was little. White women in white

dresses poked us with needles. They told Mom I was cute. They looked in our ears and mouths with a hollow reed attached to string. One lady made me cough. She put a flat strip of wood on my tongue. Then we never saw them again.

I look over my shoulder. I swear they are following me, the men from the steps. If they are anything like Daddy there should be no reason to be worried, but Mom told me that not all Americans are good. Some who stay on this base polish their guns each day and cannot wait to get into the jungle and murder anyone who crosses their path. Some live like animals.

They cut off ears and eat them. These GIs kill. They drop poison from the same airplanes that takeoff and land, poison that burns away people's skin, poison that killed a whole village in Trang Bang. In places called free-fire zones everybody gets shot—from an old lady with a cane to a baby in his mother's arms—because everybody is considered the enemy.

I know what to say if somebody stops me, the same special words Mom told me to use if I ever lost her or Uncle and was found by a GI. *I am lost. I live Cam Ranh Bay.* "Lost" is a word I can't define. "Live" means the place where you sleep each night; it also means not to be dead.

I pass GIs.

Some say, "*Hey, kid.*" Their voices are hard and low.

I remember Daddy throwing me into the air. I remember *Come on, kid.*

Without lifting my head, I sneak peeks at the GI's faces. Some eyes are blue, like mine.

Green, too. Black and brown like those I have known all my life. What is behind the eyes?

How am I supposed to know who is good and who is bad, who wants to eat my ears and who wants to save us from the communists and the Viet Cong? What if these GIs see my eyes and know there are two parts inside me? What if they know that if the kids let me play with them I

would choose to be Viet Cong because they can hide like they're invisible? Which side would the GIs see? Maybe they have two people inside of them, too: savior and killer—the same as the way Van Le can be nice one minute and cruel the next.

The GIs behind me walk faster.

A helicopter hovers before touching down. Wind blows my cheeks tight. When I find Daddy, and we go to America, I will get my own helicopter, shaped like a dragonfly and painted blue and green, with clear wings so that we can look through them and see the sun. It will have two seats, one behind each eye, where I can control the motion and Uncle can sit beside me and help. Mom will be happy, riding in the tail beside Daddy.

Maybe there could be another seat on the outside where Uncle could strap me in with rope so I can touch the clouds and see how they feel, and maybe, way up there in the sky, birds and people speak the same language, and they will tell us about all the things they have seen.

Fingers wrap around my bicep. It is the hand of the black GI. He speaks with his partner, but I can't understand. I try to remember the special words. Maybe the man I found was his friend. Maybe he will search my pockets and find the Zippo. I don't want to die. Think, I tell myself.

"Come on, kid," I say, but that's not it. I can't remember.

The black GI slaps the white GI's back. *"Come on, kid,"* he says.

The white GI bends over. *"Come on, kid."* He's laughing, and the other GI is laughing, but I don't know what's so funny.

The black man cups my chin and lifts my face so the white man can see my eyes. He says something. I should look down or away from him, but I don't.

I couldn't show them the photo even if I wanted to. Each man holds one of my hands, and as we move along I have to run in order to keep up. They lead me inside a tent and past a long table. This room is dark and smells of mold. Part of the canvas roof has faded gray and other parts have been patched. Spiders spin webs between the lamps that hang from the steel frame that holds up the roof. I rub my arms to warm them. A machine blows wind against a balding GI who sits behind a desk with his hand on the knob of a lantern. His muscles look like they might tear through his shirt sleeves, and his belly is bigger than Sook's.

My stomach hurts. I've had nothing to eat since last night, and here this pig cuts away hunks of meat the size of fingers and swallows without chewing. His eyes are blue: in them the look of an animal that would eat my ears. Maybe blue eyes really do come from ghosts. Maybe I have no choice.

"Who are you?" Pig Ghost asks, raising his knife like it is part of the question. He licks juice from the blade.

I try to hold in the pee. "*I am lost,*" I say. "*I live Cam Ranh Bay.*"

"This is Cam Ranh Bay."

I think he's telling me that we are in Cam Ranh Bay and he knows I don't live here. I want to tell him "the village," but nobody taught me how to say this.

Pig Ghost can do anything he wants, and nobody will know. What if he hangs me from a tree and beats my back with vines, or cuts up my body and sells it to the Chinese restaurants, or buries me alive with only my head sticking out of the ground, or runs a hose into my mouth for so long that my stomach bursts and all the fish and rice and manioc I ate that week shoots out? Maybe Mom will be better off, and if the Buddhists are right, maybe I'll return as a

crow and eat so many berries that my belly swells, and I'll fly over our village shitting purple diarrhea onto all their faces.

There is no door but the one I walked through with the GIs. They stand in front of it, smoking cigarettes. Cold air blows. Sweat chills my flesh. Pig Ghost is going to eat me and leave only the fatty gristle on his plate.

A man speaks Vietnamese somewhere behind me. I want to turn my gaze away from Pig Ghost's desk, but I can't. I have to watch him. A Republican soldier walks up to the side of the desk. Pig Ghost nods. The Republican soldier's forearms are thin and covered with veins beneath the rolled up sleeves of his uniform.

"What are you doing here?" the soldier asks.

"I was walking." I speak respectfully. "Just walking."

"Do you live on this base?" the soldier asks.

They will hurt me worse if I lie. "No."

"Why are you here?"

"I don't know."

The soldier leans against the corner of the desk. He pulls at the tips of his cat-whisker moustache.

"You have blue eyes," he says.

I cannot respect this man who says the obvious. It is like saying, "The sun is in the sky" or

"Fire is hot."

"Your father is American," the soldier says. "Who is your father?" The way he speaks is not mean like Pig Ghost. His manner is slow and kind, as if his only reason for asking is to gather the information. Maybe he can help.

“My father is gone,” I say. I put my hand in my pocket and feel the photo. “My father is William.”

“You must wait.”

This soldier must know from my accent that I am not North Vietnamese. A boy with blue eyes wouldn't try to hurt Americans? I like them. The only American who has ever made me angry is Daddy, and that's only because he won't come to see Mom. The Vietnamese are the ones I hate: Sook and Luong and Dung and all the others who make me feel like I'm not even human.

Three men enter. One hands the GI an envelope. Maybe it is the paperwork from when they found out about me. Their shirts have four American letters on them. *N-A-V-Y*. I know the second letter because it is always the first one I write and the first one I sing. “A.” To figure out the rest of the letters, I would have to write down all of them and then point to each one as I sing. Maybe the word “*army*” is spelled out on their shirt. This would be good. Daddy is *army*. Maybe this is the paperwork to finally take Mom and me to America.

Pig Ghost stands and says something to the two GIs. He follows the *NAVY* men out the door. Flies attack the fat and gristle on his plate. My stomach feels the way it did the first time I tried coffee, and were it not for those watching, I would lean over and eat all the fat in one bite.

The soldier introduces me to the GIs. The black GI is called Cheech, the white, Dole Bananas. Cheech takes a small box from inside his shirt. They are cards, maybe the same ones the kids said they found stuffed in the mouths of dead Viet Cong soldiers. I make a move for the door, but the soldier grabs me.

“Sit,” the soldier says.

I lower my head so that they can't see me wipe my eyes. "What are they going to do to me?" I ask.

"You will be okay," the soldier says.

A dim light passes through the high windows. Dole Bananas says something to the soldier who then slides his chair so close I can smell his body odor.

"He says you remind him of his baby brother," the soldier says.

"I'm not a baby," I say.

The soldier smiles. "He says you have the same eyes."

"Please let me go," I say. "It was a mistake."

"Why did you come here?" the soldier asks.

"I am lost."

"You can tell me the truth."

"To find my daddy."

"Stop that," the soldier says. "Strong boys don't cry. You're strong, right?"

"Right," I say, wiping my cheeks.

The GIs put coins onto the middle of the table. Maybe they are betting, using the cards to find out which one of them will shoot me. The soldier reaches into his pocket. A gun hangs from his belt. When he opens his palm it is filled with coins. He adds two to the pile. Then he hands me a coin I have never seen before. It is silver. The man on the front looks sideways. His hair is long, pulled back and tied with ribbon. It is the same man from the green paper that Daddy sent me.

As Cheech gives each man a card, I count in American, "*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.*" The men laugh at my counting, and if I knew more words then

maybe they would let me go. I vow to learn everything I can if I ever get out of here. I promise Grandfather.

The men pick up their cards and spread them before their faces like rich ladies opening and closing fans. Cheech puts his cards on the table. He makes a sheet of paper into a ball. The soldier adds two more coins to the pile. The GIs do the same. "Pretty good," the soldier says, holding his cards so only I can see.

"*Think fast,*" Cheech says.

Half a second later, the paper ball hits Dole Bananas in the face.

"*Come on, kid,*" I say.

Dole Bananas throws the ball at me.

I hold it in my lap while the guys turn their attention back to the cards, and just as the soldier reaches to put more coins in the pile, I raise my hand. "*Think fast.*"

"Respect your elders," the Republican soldier says, but he speaks like a teenager joking with his younger brother.

Cheech picks up a magazine from beneath the table and hands it to me. A white woman with lips the size of jumbo shrimp smiles.

Inside, the faces and chests and spread open legs of women invite me to the tables where they sit beneath giant umbrellas, like they want to offer sips of drinks from strangely shaped glasses, like they want me to join them. One long page, double the length of the entire magazine, falls toward the ground, exposing a woman with hair like fire. It is burning between her legs. Her breasts are the size of coconuts, and the pink of her nipples like bubble gum.

Dole Bananas says, "You want sucky, sucky."

“Shut up,” the Republican soldier tells him.

Dole Bananas rips a gun from his belt. The Republican soldier’s face turns red. Dots of sweat shine on his forehead. Dole Bananas takes the Republican soldier’s gun from his belt. Then he gives it back and laughs. I can’t tell when these guys are serious and when they’re joking. All three of them are crazy.

“Please let me go,” I say. “I’ll never come back.”

“We must wait,” the Republican soldier says.

Cheech rakes in all the money. The Republican soldier and Dole Bananas call him *mother fucker*. I learn more English by listening and trying to repeat the words: *pussy, chow, Charlie, mother fucker, hot as a mother fucker, pussy, mother fucker*.

Cheech says something to the Republican soldier who takes out his gun. Dole Bananas takes out his. This is where it ends. The men whisper and look back and forth between the table and the door. All of them speak fast English, even the soldier.

“Come on,” the Republican soldier says, pulling me from the chair. The GIs follow. The Republican soldier opens the door.

“Go,” Cheech says.

“You are a good boy,” the Republican soldier says. “Go help your mother.”

I stand at the door between the cold indoors and the heat outside.

“Go,” the Republican soldier says.

It has to be a trick.

“*Come on, kid,*” the GIs say.

“*Come on, kid,*” I say. I turn, and run toward the gate, turning my head the entire way, thinking each fat belly might be connected to Pig Ghost. Two helicopters hover above the

tree line. The laundry ladies won't look at me. What might life have been like if nobody ever found out, if I grew up around Daddy and all the other GIs?

As soon as the ground is no longer gray, I duck into the jungle and run as fast as I can. I hear footsteps but don't turn around. I run until I'm so deep in the jungle I can't even see the road. Crickets whine, and night birds sing in the trees beneath the purple sky.

If I can get back in time, and put Daddy back on the altar where he lives, Mom will never know.

Chapter 6

The rain wakes me. Voices outside the window or ghosts left over from my dreams. Water pouring from the tips of thatch like a constant sheet. I want to read the song book that Mom gave me so I can sing to her later, but there is something going on outside.

GIs march side by side down the path from the rice field. They hold their guns across their chests diagonally with one hand on the butt and the other around the barrel. Rain drips down their helmets, bounces off their black boots, slides along the guns. Rain pours down so thick there is a sheet of light between everything. Rain shoots out from the gutters like a waterfall and overflows the rain buckets.

Mr. and Mrs. Thanh stand outside their front door with arms folded. Other doors open. Dung stands behind Swan. Van Le and Tram peek out their window.

The GIs group up around the fire pit. I look for Daddy, for Cheech or Dole Bananas, but none of them are there.

A black GI kicks down the fence in front of Swan's house. "Where are they?" he demands.

He yells again with his terrible accent. "Where are the Viet Cong?"

I move to the corner where I can see out the window but nobody can see me.

A white GI rams the butt of his gun into the clay pots outside the Thanks' house and walks up the steps and through the door. He barks out English words, and another GI carrying a box that he talks into walks toward the house. Mr. and Mrs. Thanh don't flinch.

"Get up." I tap Mom's arm. "Get up."

"I can't," she says.

"Mom."

"Leave me alone."

“There are GI’s outside,” I say.

Her eyes open. She wipes away the sleep.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Dizzy.” She walks to the window. Looks back at me. “Get everything,” she says. “Get everything and follow me. Don’t say anything.”

We have had these bags packed for as long as I can remember. I have a yo-yo, a Zippo, a flashlight, and a change of clothes. I don’t know what she has in hers. Mom takes the photo of Grandfather from the altar, slips it into the middle of a book, and puts this in her bag. With her attention on the altar, I use my silent voice to quiet Linh Foo Number Six and sneak him into the bag between my pants and shirt, above everything that is heavy.

Outside the GI’s yell American words. Republican soldiers scream at the people to get out, to show them where the Viet Cong are, to obey before it gets dangerous. Mom puts Daddy’s photo in her bag.

Quiet, I tell Linh Foo Number Six.

I can hear the men shouting outside and demanding that the people lead them to the Viet Cong, but the only Viet Cong who ever came around just talked to Sook and collected his money.

The door smashes open, and all of it happens so fast. A GI grabs my bat, drags Mom by her hair, and throws us into the cold ashes of the fire pit.

There is so much rain I can taste it. The sky like milk. The people around us balled up and shivering. Mr. Thanh sits beside his wife with his chest pressed forward like he’s taking a

deep breath. The others huddle close to each other, brothers and sisters squeezed together with mothers.

GIs go into the houses and throw out pots and bedding and bowls and cups. Mom stands and reaches for a GI's arm. The GI turns without looking at the photo and rams his gun into Mom's chest. I try to jump up, but Uncle presses down on my thigh.

"It will be okay," he says. "Do not resist."

The rain carves streams into the ground, and I imagine Daddy shrunk down to the size of an ant, waiting in a boat for the rest of us to get smaller and follow this secret passage around to a place where everybody can get big again and not have to worry about anything.

Sook stands and walks out from under his roof. His pig snorts and sucks up wet bran. A GI rams the butt of his gun into Sook's stomach. This should make me happy, but it doesn't.

"We need to help Mom," I say.

"Stay here," Uncle says.

GIs open the doors of every single home, drag out the people and throw them into the mud with the rest of us. Some of them wear sunglasses, and I wonder why they would send blind men to fight. The GI who took my bat swings it over the people's heads. The closer his swing, the tighter the people squeeze and cling to each other, and the children won't stop crying. A tall GI with drips of rain covering his glasses tries to take the bat, but Bat GI pushes him away. He then pushes a girl into a puddle.

"No VC," we all keep saying. "No VC."

All of this is Sook's fault for taking food and money in exchange for hiding guns. I hope that one of the GIs stabs the end of his gun through Sook's neck and leaves him bleeding in the rain. None of this makes any sense. When the Viet Cong come Mom hides me in the trunk

while they make the other kids sing songs about Uncle Ho. One time I sneaked to the window and saw one of the men in his black pajamas, like night, and he didn't see me, but I could feel a rush come into my body, like he knew I was there, like he could feel me. When they come everybody hates the Americans, and when the Americans come everybody hates the Viet Cong. I don't know who I hate.

"Where are the Viet Cong?" Bat GI demands.

A black GI picks up Tin and his brother Ting by their ankles. They're just toddlers. He holds one in each arm and swings them around until they are motionless. Then he swings them to opposite sides so that gravity slams their heads into each other, and they fall onto the ground and don't move.

Black GI yells at Bat GI who nods his head up and down. Black GI lifts the bamboo bowl in front of Sook's house and grabs a drenched chicken. Mud spreads against his green shirt and drips down his pants. Black GI throws the chicken in the air.

Bat GI cocks back and swings. The bat crashes into the body and knocks it all the way to the edge of the jungle where the chicken slams its head into a puddle. Two GIs rip away Van Le's shirt. One bites her neck and drags her into the bran barn. They are going to grab me next. One of them is staring at me; water drips from the beard on his chin. Another GI jabs the butt of his gun into Tee Chi's back. Tee Chi is only eight, my age. What if I'm next? Will Mom be able to protect me?

Tee Chi's mother hits the GI's back. The GI turns, throws her down, stomps his foot into her chest, and yells something I can't understand as he drags Tee Chi by her arms. A black GI the size of a tree pulls at Swan's collar until she stands. Dung reaches up for his mom, but the

man kicks him in the face. Swan does not struggle as the GI jabs her in the back with the barrel of his gun and forces her into the Thanks' house.

“Stay here,” Uncle demands.

He sneaks over to the bran barn and pulls open the door. Van Le lies beside the bags of food, naked and shivering. Uncle jumps onto a GI's back and snaps his neck. The GI falls to the ground. Van Le stands frozen. Uncle turns and walks toward Van Le with his arms spread as if to cover her up, but another GI throws him out of the barn and closes the door.

I see Bat GI coming, and I try to yell out Uncle's name, but he doesn't hear me. I yell again.

“Uncle!”

Bat GI has already come forward, and just as Uncle turns, the bat smashes into his nose and knocks his body back, but he is still standing, rain and blood soaking into his olive shirt. His chest leans out further than his legs. He's falling forward, and all of this is happening in seconds but feels so much longer. Uncle's head hits the ground. I crawl across the mud, looking up to make sure nobody can see. Bullets hit the ground beside me.

A white GI shoots into the pile of people. I stop moving, and press my hands into the mud.

Everybody screams. Limp bodies lean against each other. It is hard to know who is dead and who is alive. Mom is in there somewhere.

“No VC,” Uncle says. His mouth is thick with blood. “No VC.”

Bat GI cranks back and swings as hard as he can. The bat cracks against Uncle's skull. Bat GI laughs like an insane man and bashes in Uncle's face until it looks like just another part of the mud around his body.

Mom is alive. She sits cross-legged with her bag inside her lap. She runs her hand through the hair of a bleeding toddler. Everything I need is in my lap, except for one thing, and that bat I never want back.

The pile of people presses closer together as the popping of guns becomes the only sound. It is not the GIs shooting. The sounds come from somewhere further off in the jungle, but the noise seems to get louder. Mom reaches for Uncle with her eyes but does not move her body. She caresses the children curled up on the ground next to her.

Guns pop in the distance. Bat GI leads the others away. Some GIs duck into the jungle. Some talk into boxes the size of shoes. Soon there are only villagers, most of them on the ground, most of them dead. I run over to Mom. I will never let anybody hurt her again.

Van Le crawls out from the pig storage. She is Van Le, but she is not Van Le, as if the minutes in the barn aged her twenty years. Blood covers the inside of her legs. She stands, shivers as if the rain is really cold. Glue covers the bumps on her chest. Glue on her stomach, in her hair. Thick white glue that has no reason to be there.

Sook walks to his daughter and stands in front of her so the rest of us cannot see. He folds his arms over his chest. Veins throb beside the scar on his neck—his purple pockmarks seem ready to pop—as he lifts his head and looks at each of the villagers as though one of us did this. Tram wipes away the glue and blood. Mom digs through her bag and pulls out her old silk dress. She puts it over Van Le's body, and this makes her look like she has no legs.

Chapter 7

I tell Mom I'm afraid to go inside Sook's house, but she says that it isn't about me, that I'm not going there for myself, that I must be strong and try to give Van Le hope no matter how I feel. She also tells me that feelings aren't real, that thinking she needed Daddy to be happy was killing her, that we don't need anybody but each other, and that we're going to get out of here. We're going to Saigon where we can live in a room with a sink—this is a machine with handles that makes water—and there will be a lot of mixed race children, and people will accept us.

I peek out our door to make sure that Sook's bicycle is still gone. It is. Swan stands beneath her thatch roof, patting the back of the baby that everybody calls Burnt Rice. He has different eyes than mine; black and narrow like any other Vietnamese, they seem to be the only thing Swan gave him. The rest is from that horrible GI: skin darker than a muddy river, darker than sweet milk coffee; his nose flat, like a regular nose that has been smashed down. When he lifts his hands and feet they are white underneath, and I wonder if this comes from Swan or is because of all the crawling he does.

I walk outside. Sook should be the one to give us hope somehow, but he is hopeless, and the sooner we can get away from him the better. He was the one who hid the weapons for the Viet Cong, and I don't feel safe living above this tunnel they once used to hide from the GIs. I don't feel safe walking past our houses and testing every step to make sure there are no punji stake pits beneath the fallen leaves. I don't agree with Mom when she says that we have to look at the bright side, that we can go to Saigon now as soon as we save up enough money from selling flutes, even though mine aren't as good as Uncle's. Mom also says that she has a

small piece of gold buried in the spot where four trees come together. She says, ‘Trust me’, and I try.

Tram lets me in their house. The room where they keep Van Le smells like mold. Rags float in a bowl beside her bed. The blood in the water gives it a rusty color. Flies circle above a bowl of chicken livers meant to restore her sight to what it was, but she must have been too weak to eat them. If I saw this same Van Le on the street—the thin stringy hair, the gray face, the way her bones don’t even look like they’re covered with skin—I might mistake her for an old beggar lady. They say that she has tuberculosis, but I know that what those GIs did caused this, and it doesn’t matter what anybody else says.

Van Le shivers.

Tram pulls a chair from the corner and brushes away cobwebs. “Sit,” she says. “She wants you to sing for her.”

The chair back forces me to lean forward, closer to the bed. One of Van Le’s feet sticks out from under the sheet. All five toenails are gone. Her ankle is gray, the color of ash. I wish we could be in the other room, only feet away, where the walls are not covered in dust, where there are carved tables with dragon bases and jade lamps with gold leaf twisted to look like water coming down rock. The nice room.

I open the box I brought for Van Le and hold it before Tram. She ignores the butterfly, walks to the window and sneezes. I take Van Le’s sweaty hand. Chills shoot through my arm.

“Everything will be okay,” I say. I want to leave.

Tram taps her foot against the floor, seemingly unaware of what her leg does. “Are you going to sing?”

Particles of dust spin in the sunbeams. The floor boards have popped where they meet the wall. Nails stick out around the edge.

I want to sing a song that will bring back the Van Le who used to stand up for me, but I feel uncomfortable with Tram sitting there, watching me. I squeeze Van Le's hand and sing, "One duck opens its two wings. It says, 'quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack.'"

"Stop," Tram says. "Say something that will help her."

"Linh Foo loved you," I say. "He told me." I'm trying to make her laugh.

Van Le doesn't move, but her grip gets tighter. Clouds drift so that light comes and goes on her face. Her skin is the milky color of fog on a rainy day.

I loosen my grip. Van Le squeezes tight. Her chest and shoulders rise from the bed like ghosts have taken over.

Van Le exhales: a soft whistle. "They're right," she says. "I deserve this because I'm a disgrace." She coughs and dots her own face with grains of blood.

Tram wipes it away.

Van Le falls back to the bed with the rag still on her face. Her mother takes it away and puts it in the bowl with the others.

"Go," her mother says. "Please." She wipes Van Le's lips and rests her other hand on the girl's forehead.

I put the lid on the bottom of the box.

"Will you give this to her?" I ask.

"Leave it," Tram says.

"For when she gets better," I say, taking a bamboo splinter from my pocket.

Before Tram turns back around, I pin the butterfly to the wall. Maybe it will be the good luck Van Le needs in this stinky room. Maybe the spirit of this insect will protect her. It is amazing how something that is dead can look so bright and alive against the dusty cracks in the wall.

I put a hand on Van Le's leg. Her mother doesn't say anything, and as I run my hand from Van Le's knee to her ankle, I realize her calf is no wider than the bottom of a baseball bat.

The tops of the trees turn the dark pink of sea coral. Mom will be back soon. Any moment now she will walk back toward the house with frogs and crickets. The purple of nightfall will make her look bigger, and she will smile because I will be there, waiting for her, and before we go to sleep she might ask me to sing a lullaby.

Phoung and Suong walk into the village first. Phoung carries the mushroom basket. Suong holds the bug can. Mom follows with a net filled with frogs hanging over one shoulder. Her bicep is hard like the top of a lime.

I run up to her and take the bag of frogs.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

I tell her that I cleaned the bran barn and fed the pigs. "Then I went to see Van Le. She doesn't even make sense."

"Maybe she just needs to know you're there," Mom says.

I can hear the crickets jumping against the tin in Suong's hands. I want Mom to tell me what I'm already thinking: It doesn't matter if I go over there or not; Van Le doesn't even know what's going on.

Mom follows the sisters to the fire pit where Swan has made a grill from fresh bamboo. I carry the sack of frogs with one arm and set them next to the killing rock. Mom runs a hand through my hair and puts her mouth to my ear. She whispers, “Phoung and Suong are going to go with us.”

Sook squats beside the bag. I keep quiet. Keep from saying that I thought it was just going to be the two of us or that we will never get enough money to take them too. My arms stick to my sides. I stand in the path of the smoke to dry my body, far enough from the fire that I don’t have to feel the heat.

One by one, Sook takes the frogs from the net, grabs the legs, and slams their heads into the rock. I imagine hands big enough to do this to him. I imagine dropping him from a tree onto the punji stakes. I imagine the places Daddy used to tell Mom about, where the air is always cool and you never sweat.

Dung waits beside Swan. He holds his baby brother. I think that Dung loves him, even though all of us hate Americans now. It’s so confusing, not knowing who to trust, afraid of every sound that comes from the jungle. I don’t know how Mom does it, how she pretends that everything is okay, and sometimes I think she only does this for me, that when she’s in the jungle looking for frogs and bugs or foraging mushrooms, that she admits to Phoung and Suong that she is just as scared as the rest of us.

Mrs. Thanh slices open the frogs and pulls out the guts.

“You’re lucky to get this,” Sook says.

Nobody says anything. Most of the food has been going to the market in exchange for the money Sook gives to the Viet Cong who comes by with the big box Mom said is called a radio and lets him talk to people who carry the same box far away. Mom says the money

goes to pay for our protection, but she hasn't seen the jade and gold inside Sook's house.

That man does not care about protecting anybody but himself. He doesn't even care about his own family.

When the frogs have been turned over and cooked on both sides, Mrs. Thanh takes the pot of boiled cassava from the rocks and mashes it down. The crickets crackle in the hot oil. She serves Sook first, even though her husband is older and should be given more respect, but they are stuck here like the rest of us. Once everybody is served, we sit in a circle, back away from the fire, and Mom looks at me and then the others, like she is proud to be able to feed all of us.

The first bite makes the moon shine brighter. Mom's face looks fuller, as if the flesh around her cheekbones has grown. I hold a cricket between my teeth and gums and squeeze out the juicy garlic. I will eat until there is no more of anything.

After everybody eats and cleans the space around the fire pit, we go inside.

"I feel like a man," Mom says. "Look at my hands."

Dirt beneath her nails. Scratches and dry skin on the tips of all her fingers.

"Help me," she says, holding up two lime rinds.

I find the bamboo she uses to clean beneath her nails, take her hand in mine, and rub the rind over every single finger. Then every single toe. Then she shows me where the last bit of the red paint Daddy sent her is. She paints her nails.

"You want Mommy to look beautiful, right?"

"Right, Mom."

"You know I love you, right?"

"Right," I say.

“Blow.”

Together we blow her fingernails. I blow on her toes and lean in to make a farting noise on her ankle, but there isn't enough skin.

“It's good,” she says. She means her nails, I know.

The rest of it is not good. The rest of it is something I try not to talk about unless she brings it up. Mom stands in the light before the altar. The moon shines through her dress and traces the outline of her legs against shadow. She turns to me.

“Fire,” she says.

I light the Zippo. She holds the stick of incense over the flame. Now would be a good time to tell her that I don't think we're ever going to get out of here. I should tell her about my dreams of getting shot, of bleeding and then waking up right as I began to rise and look down on my own body.

As the agarwood burns, I remember Uncle telling me how pine trees get infections and this produces the sap that people use to make agarwood. Uncle told me this story every time I complained about how Mom didn't pay me any attention, about how she sat all night praying to Daddy's photo. Uncle said that things are not always what they seem and that sometimes when bad things happen to us they are the spark of light in the darkness of our lives. Now I don't even know where Daddy's picture is, and even though she thinks about me and is there for me, I feel like in giving up on him she has given up on a part of me.

Mom lies on the ground. A curl of ash hangs from the red end of the stick. How does something so light hold on and retain its shape?

We both lie there for a long time, listening to the sounds of crickets and night owls.

“You awake?” Mom asks.

“Yes.”

“Come sit beside your Mommy.”

She pulls me toward her.

“You know Grandfather watches us, right?” she says.

“Yes.”

“Uncle does too.”

Sweat slides down my armpit.

“I love you more than anything in this world,” she says.

This is not true.

“You know this, right?”

“Right,” I say.

“Sleep,” she says.

“Here?”

“Just sleep.”

But I cannot. It is too hot for sleep. I close my eyes and try to see Uncle’s face. Where are you? I ask Uncle. Can you hear me?

I hear a voice. It says, *Trust me*. It says, *Hold her*.

Maybe this is just my mind, but I listen. I wrap both hands around Mom’s forearm. She stirs but does not speak.

“Mom,” I say.

“What!” she says. “I’m sorry. What?”

“Can Uncle hear me?”

“Yes,” she says. “Now sleep.”

I do what I do every night: stare at the square of black beyond the window and imagine being sucked through this hole and rising higher and higher through the black until I land on a puffy cloud, a cloud that wraps around and holds me, soft on every part of my body; a cloud that lifts me up and delivers me to the spot on the moon where I can sit with Cuoi and know that everybody down below is okay. My eyes blink, and I know that it is about time. I'm here now. Floating. In the dark.

The door slams open. I blink my eyes and try to see, but everything is blurry. Sook sings nonsense words about having all the gold in the world and all the fish in the sea.

"Bastard," he mumbles. He slurs more words that make no sense. "American lover." The heavy steps lead to Mom's bed. He slaps her face. "Whore. Why did you do this to me?"

Mom screams. There is a loud bang, but I can't see anything. She keeps screaming, yelling that she's going to kill him, yelling that she's going to tell his wife, and I realize that the sounds of hitting are her on top of him, beating his head in, and he's too drunk to do anything, too drunk to fight back.

The sounds stop. Sook breathes heavy like he has been riding his bike. I can't see anything but the motion of Mom moving back and forth over him. I light my Zippo.

Sook's face is bloody. He looks like he's lost, like he doesn't remember how he got here. Mom moves to the corner and grabs the spear. She puts the point into his chest.

"Get the fuck out of here!" she screams.

Sook tries to stand, but his pants are around his ankles, and he keeps tripping, falling while trying to pull them up.

Mom kicks him.

“Come back and I’ll kill you,” she says, her voice calm, like saying this is no different than “Let’s pick the vegetables” or “We need to wash.”

“Get out,” I say, as Sook pushes against the door and crawls out into the night.

Mom walks over to my bed and sits down beside me. I lower the cap of my Zippo. Gold afterglow hangs between us. I want to tell her that I’m proud of her, that she is my hero, that we can go now, that nobody will ever hurt us again, but I’m waiting for her to say something because she’s the one who did what I only wished I could. The silence feels like it is going to last forever, and, finally, I can’t take it anymore.

I say, “Mom.”

“Go to sleep,” she says.

Chapter 8

When Sook made us dig the tunnel longer and deeper, I thought that it was all pointless, but they're coming now. We're going to have to go down there, and I don't want to be down there again. I thought I was going to die that first night, battling through thousands of mosquitoes. My body was one big welt, and all I wanted was to be above ground like Luong, pulling up the buckets of dirt.

The fear of the earth crushing in went away after a day of work. Then the boy died, and then I came to wish for my own death. My back burned so much I couldn't even stab the wall with my shovel, but every time Sook yelled the word "worthless bastard" something happened; everything turned white; it made me crazy; I couldn't feel anything, and I dug like I was possessed.

The night sky fills with orange light. Mom runs around the house, stuffing what we need into the emergency bag.

"Hurry," she says. "Get everything," she says. "We need to go!"

The constant pops of gunshots seem to get closer. Mom slides the framed photo of Grandparents into the emergency bag. I follow her out the door.

Dung carries Burnt Rice even though he just started walking on his own.

"Let me hold him," Mrs. Thanh says. "You help Sook."

Swan stands next to her. Her stomach has not been big for a long time, but she is no longer who she was before the birth. Red spots on her face and arms. Her hair wiry like dried weeds. The children say that part of the ghost stayed inside of her, and this is how it is trying to come out.

Loung and other boys gather the iron pots filled with red hot coals from beside Sook's house. Everybody is moving so quickly that I forget what I'm supposed to do, even though we have practiced this many times. Phoung and Suong twist the necks of the chickens. Luong ties together the feet of the bleating family pig. The squeals sound like sirens. Sook kicks the belly. The pig whimpers and closes its eyes.

Sook lifts beneath the head, Luong beneath the tail, and they run toward the mangosteen tree. Everybody runs in circles like they don't know what to do.

Sook brushes aside leaves and unlocks the trap door that leads into the tunnel. The pig breaks loose from Luong's grip. Sook screams as people reach down and try to catch his pig, but it slides through hands and legs and into the jungle.

Sook screams, "Get him!"

Luong sprints off.

"Take my hand," Mom says.

I'm not a baby. That's what I'm thinking. I can take care of myself, but they're coming, whoever they are; they're out there, shooting at each other, and we need to get into the tunnel, and maybe my hand makes her feel safer.

We wait by the trap door. Luong returns, winded and alone.

"Damn it," Sook says. "I'd run away, too. Even a pig knows to stay away from bastards."

Swan lowers her head and moves closer to Mr. Thanh.

"He was your pig," Mr. Thanh says.

The pig was what Mom called their insurance, and the reason they never ate it is because they were waiting for an emergency. Maybe this loss is the spirit world paying Sook back for all that he has done. He should be the one barely breathing, lying on his back in front of the

bamboo fence instead of Van Le. She never did anything, had no choice in what was done to her, and yet she feels like this was her fault.

Tram brushes away flies. She wipes Van Le's forehead with a rag. Sook and Luong lift her as they did the pig and hurry to the mangosteen. Only a handful of us have been down there.

Not even Mom can understand. She has never been bit by the underground spiders and mosquitoes or had to kill snakes before they crawled up her legs; she has never come up the ladder and had her eyes suddenly burned by the sun, turning the entire world black.

She doesn't know what it is like to see the dirt ceiling cave in on a boy. Nobody cared if we lived or died. Nobody ever thanked us for the work we did down there. I got paid in beatings and demands to work faster.

Sook yells, "Bò!"

I look at Mom.

Sook yells again.

"Go," Mom says. "I'll take it."

I hand her the emergency bag and run toward the mangosteen tree. The jungle explodes. Trees flash orange. Everybody ducks, hands over heads, except for the Thanh's. The old couple doesn't flinch.

Sook grabs my arm. "Get in there!"

I step onto the top rung of the ladder and feel the clinging humidity.

"Come on!" Luong yells from below.

Van Le leans against her father. The tops of her feet drag against the earth as he pulls her toward the hole. She looks like she has no idea where she is, no idea what is going on, no idea what it means to be alive anymore.

I climb down. In the darkness, the whole world smells like worms and dead wood.

“Hurry!” Sook yells.

I light the Zippo and search out the torch on the wall. Scorpions skitter past the paraffin coated rope. Firelight casts Luong’s shadow on the opposite wall and exposes cut roots sticking out from every surface. Rats scurry into dark corners.

“Pay attention, half-breed. Please,” Luong says. “It’s my sister.”

Van Le’s feet dangle near the bottom of the ladder. Sook holds her hands and lowers her body. Her shins hit the ladder. We grab her. Sook lets go. The top of her body crashes forward. We all fall.

We lift her together, carry her down the tunnel entrance, and set her on a table in the middle of the big room. Van Le screeches like a monkey. She tries to spit, but it’s just white foam stuck to her lips.

Sook climbs down. His wife follows. Then others come. Each one stops at the bottom of the ladder and looks to the others. They push past each other and search for the right spot, but there’s nowhere to go besides the table and the chairs around this.

Almost everybody has come down. Mom was close to the front of the line. What if she ran? What if this is her plan for finding Daddy and getting rid of me?

Sook speaks into his radio. I move closer to hear what the Viet Cong says.

“You must hurry,” the man on the radio says. “They are coming.”

“Everybody quiet,” Sook says. He slaps children on the heads and paces around the people. Water drips, but I cannot see where. Everybody sits around the table, either on the ground or in the bamboo chairs. The communists will be here any minute, and there is still no sign of Mom. Nobody else is coming.

“What about my mom?” I ask.

“Shut up!” Sook yells.

“But she was—.”

“Shut up,” Sook says. “We have humans who need help.”

There is no way I am going to stay down here if she is up there. I run to the ladder and climb.

Sook yells, “Stop him!”

Luong pulls me down by his feet. I hit the ground. My head rings. The trap door opens and floods this hole with light. Mom lowers herself. A baby wrapped in a blanket cries in her arm. Burnt Rice.

Swan covers her face with a scarf and walks away from the ladder. Her beauty is still there beneath the red splotches, like looking at a sunrise through dirty glass.

“This is your responsibility,” Mom says to her. “Come here.”

Swan digs at her hair and then looks between her fingernails. She must have lice. Her gaze doesn’t move from the ground as she brings her hands to her sides, and it isn’t until Mom presses Burnt Rice into her chest that she reacts at all to what Mom has said.

“You were going to leave him there,” Mom says.

“They wouldn’t kill a baby,” Swan says, accepting the wrapped infant from Mom but refusing to look at him. She looks past Mom’s face to the roots poking out of the wall.

“You think you’re special?” Mom asks.

I dig my fingernail into the top of my hand, hard enough to draw blood, because I know what Mom means.

“Stupid women,” Sook says. “Shut up. What’s wrong with you?”

“She tried to leave her baby,” Mom says.

“It’s a half-breed,” Sook says. “Not a baby.”

“I’m sorry,” Swan says.

Mom stands close to Swan. She takes Burnt Rice’s hands and rubs them together. “I know how hard it is,” she says.

Swan holds him tight to her chest and bounces up and down until the baby stops crying. She rubs the crust from Burnt Rice’s eyes.

“Everybody listen,” Sook says. “There must be no sound.”

Mr. Thanh slaps a mosquito.

“No sound,” Sook says.

Mr. Thanh’s slaps his shoulder. “You shut up,” he says.

Sook kicks his chest. The old man slumps forward and wheezes. His wife wraps her arms around him. Rubs his head and back. Sook walks back to the table and pours water into Van Le’s mouth, but it just dribbles out the corners of her lips and down her neck.

The people gather on the ground, looking around like night owls, afraid to say or do anything.

Is this what death is like? Stuck in a place where you must remain silent, but you can see and feel the people around you?

When I was little, I loved to get under whatever I could—the low branches of a tree, the base of the abandoned jeep, the hammock where Mom dozed—and sometimes, when Mom was gone, I would pull my sheet between her trunk and the bedside table and crawl under, like a home of my own inside our home, where I could pretend I lived in a cave somewhere in

America. But now, in this dark corner, I want only release, a light, a fresh breeze, the sounds of animals and insects, what I know as home.

For a night, a morning, and another night now everybody has had to relieve themselves in a hole not more than fifty feet away from the table where we eat, and though a lid covers the spot it does not stop the stink.

I plug my nose and hold my breath. A rat skitters past. They come to this corner because there is a small puddle where water drips. I come to ignore the ones who say that Burnt Rice and I have brought this hiding upon all of the rest. A black scorpion hangs from a root. The claws grip and move, one over the other, ready to slip with one wrong grasp.

Mrs. Thanh walks around the table where Van Le lies wrapped in sheets. The old lady bows at every corner. Tram puts two fingers on her daughter's neck.

"I don't feel anything," she says.

"We must get rid of the bad blood," Mrs. Thanh says.

"Get away," Sook says. "Everybody move back."

His radio goes off.

It is the Viet Cong. "They are nearly out of range," he says.

"How long?" Sook asks.

"Calm yourself," the man says. "I said I would let you know."

Sook shuts off the radio. He punches at the air and squeezes the radio like he's trying to squish it. Van Le's head rolls to the other side. Sook takes one of her hands and wraps both of his around it. "We'll be out of here soon," he says. "I promise."

Sook's eyes have the same look I used to see in Mom's when she would tell me that Daddy was going to come.

“Bò,” Tram shouts. “Come.”

I count my steps and concentrate on my breath the way Uncle taught me. Mom runs her hand across Tram’s back. Van Le wheezes. Tram rests her head on Mom’s shoulder. Sook walks away from the table with his hands over his eyes.

“She asked for you,” he says, stomping away.

The stink is visible above Van Le, like a haze has drifted from the spot where everybody shits and pisses and has collected above her. Her face has turned the gray of water buffalo skin.

“Do something,” her mother says.

I put my hand around Van Le’s. Her eyelashes blink. Her cold, sweaty palm does not grip back, does nothing to show she knows I am there.

“Gather everything,” Sook says. He turns to his wife. “He promised they would help. That they would find a doctor.”

“When can we go up?” Tram says.

Sook presses the side of his radio and says, “Respond.”

No response.

“She needs to bleed,” Mrs. Thanh says.

“Nobody asked you,” Sook says.

“Please,” Tram says. “We must let her.”

Sook nods.

Mrs. Thanh reaches into a satchel made of catfish bladder and removes the same wooden handled knife she used to carve the last wild boar that Luong and Dung captured. She walks to the cooking box and runs the blade through the coals.

Her husband comes forward with a paper necktie, and though I have seen and heard Sook admonish the elders before about their old world superstitions and medicine, he accepts the paper tie and puts it on Van Le's neck. Maybe he realizes this might be the only option left. I let Van Le's hand drop.

"Where are you going?" Sook asks. "You have that little respect? A dying girl asks for you and you abandon her?"

"I thought—."

"You thought nothing. That's the problem with bastards."

"Stop," Tram says.

I pick up her hand. Holding the cold flesh makes me sick, but I keep my grip and try to squeeze life into her. Her sweat gives me hope.

Sook climbs the ladder and looks down over all of the people. Flies land on Van Le's face. Mrs. Thanh steadies the ashy knife with a piece of cloth. She runs the hot blade through the flesh of Van Le's temple, then the other temple. Van Le doesn't move. She doesn't make a sound. Mr. Thanh bends and puts his lips against the cut. He spits purple blood. He spits again. The people move in closer and poke their heads over each other's shoulders. I want to run past all of them and sprint up the ladder, knock Sook off, and get as far away from this place as I can get, but it is my duty to hold her hand, like Mom said. This is what makes me a man: coming when she calls, being there for her. And it doesn't matter that I'm only nine years old. Now that Uncle is gone, I am the man in our family. I am no longer the sapling Mommy watered to gather shade beneath later. I am a tree.

Tram twists water from a rag. She wipes blood from Van Le's chin and lifts her eyelids. No more pupils. Only white. Not even white. A filmy gray surface on eyeballs unable to see

anything, and all the chicken livers in the world won't be able to bring sight back to these eyes.

A warm rush runs through Van Le's hand. Her spirit rides from my wrist to my arm to my chest. Then all of this energy leaves, and I feel light. Her palms are dry, like hands held up in the wind.

Sook stands at the top of the ladder. "It won't fucking open! What is this?" He bangs his fist against the trap door and yells, "You dirty communist pigs!"

Chapter 9

The air is thick with the smell of shit. Sook will not share the bits of dried fish that are still left. Mr. and Mrs. Thanh eat the jelly they squirt out of black scorpions. The coals no longer burn, and the rats have all been eaten.

Swan scrapes her fingernails against the wall. She drags dirt to the ground and butts her shoulders into the earth. People have stopped trying to pull her away or hand her the baby. For hours now this is all she has done, stopping only to pinch worms and squeeze them into her mouth.

“I see light,” she says. “Help.”

Burnt Rice cries. Dung flicks his ear. I grab his hair and pull his head back so it faces the dirt above us.

“Do it again,” I say. “I dare you.”

Dung’s eyes turn red. Burnt Rice cries harder, so I let go.

Dung swears under his breath. “Bastard. Nigger baby.”

“You should be ashamed,” Mom says. “Both of you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Dung doesn’t say anything.

Mom says, “Get away.” She picks up Burnt Rice and bounces until he stops crying.

Swan digs as if nothing has happened. “We’re almost there,” she says.

I chew up a root and swallow the bitter juice. My stomach burns. It hurts to bend.

Luong unravels the sheet from around Van Le’s head and looks in again. Mom will tell me

I’m selfish if I let her know that I don’t want to go anywhere near Van Le.

Sook takes his radio from his pocket. “Respond,” he says.

Nothing.

Sook puts the radio in his pocket and walks between the sleeping people. He kicks dirt at their faces as he steps past, but nobody moves, as if they know they will die down here. They have tried, climbing the ladder in pairs and trying to budge the trap door, but it's too heavy. It won't move.

Sook takes out the radio. "Respond." He pushes Swan into the wall where she digs.

"Respond." He kicks the empty food pot. "Respond."

I need to get up before Sook kicks me again, but my legs are too weak. I need to save my strength in case a way opens up and the trap door loosens. I thought it was happening yesterday, thought I felt it move after banging a rock against the bottom for hours.

"Respond!" Sook throws his radio at the wall. "Pick it up," he tells Luong.

Luong walks past Swan. She digs at the ground with her fingers and clicks her tongue like she's trying to imitate the sound of spinning helicopter blades. Mom sleeps. Her dirty shirt sticks to her ribs. Luong lifts a shovel in each hand from the wall no more than five feet away from where Swan scrapes her fingernails against the ground.

I push my doppel kit under the banana leaves so Luong won't find my worms.

"I need your help," Luong says.

"With what?"

"Father says we must bury her." Luong hands me the shovel. "Over here."

Sook squints as if there is sunlight down here. He won't touch Tram; he refuses to even look at her.

I follow Luong to the spot where Swan digs. "I'm almost there," she says. "We're almost free."

“You’re doing good,” I say, because sometimes it hurts when you tell people the truth, but it also doesn’t feel right saying things that aren’t true. Maybe that’s why people don’t care about hurting me with the truth. Maybe that’s why the truth hurts so much.

“Shut up,” Luong says. He turns to Swan and holds the shovel like an ax about to come down on her head. “Get out of here, nigger lover.”

Swan bangs her head into the ground. Luong stabs the shovel into the dirt a foot away from her. “Go!”

Swan crawls to the corner where Mr. and Mrs. Thanh sleep beside shells of scorpions crawling with ants.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say to Luong.

He lifts his shovel, and it looks like he’s going to swing back and hit me, but he doesn’t. The blade stabs down, and he jumps onto the top. I should say more, tell Luong everything that is wrong with him. Instead, I put my anger into digging. I dig until my shoulders and arms burn and try not to look at Luong’s face because it reminds me of Van Le.

It’s not fair, I think, throwing dirt. Luong stands on the top of his shovel and pushes. He unearths a mound bigger than his shoulders. Worms wriggle and rush to hide back inside the solid ground. Luong pulls one up and eats it.

Sook yells into his radio, but it is no longer a radio. It is broken in half. Wires hang. The end meant for listening is all crushed in.

I bend and try to use my leg muscles. Luong stops to wipe sweat from his forehead. He leans against his shovel. Even if Sook wasn’t watching and telling us to carry on, I would keep going. The pain helps me forget that Daddy will never be found, forget the last time I saw Uncle, and, for moments, forget why we are digging.

“That’s good enough,” Sook says.

My arms are black like Burnt Rice.

Sook shakes Tram. She wakes Mom, and they walk through, waking the others. The people push them away. They cover their faces. They say, “Leave me alone.” They say, “Are we rescued?” They say, “Just let me die,” but when they are told that it is the time to bury Van Le, each one of them gets up and gathers before her body.

Sook holds a shovel. “No longer speak her name,” he says. “She will be called Thuan.”

Tram rubs her hands against each other. “Let her be the harmony between us and the rest of the world.” She kicks her toes into the earth and fights back tears. “If we live, remember her.”

Mrs. Thanh opens Van Le’s jaw and places a chopstick between her teeth. Sook makes a move to step towards her but stops. Luong waves Van Le’s shirt in the air like he’s shaking a rug, screaming out for her soul to return, and in his words there is crying though his eyes remain dry.

“Please!” he screams.

Mrs. Thanh and Tram squeeze out the bloody rags and wipe away the layer of mosquito larvae from Van Le’s cleaning bowl. Together they wash her naked body, careful not to let anybody see beneath the sheet, cleaning away the dust of this world. It’s wrong, but I want to see what she looks like.

Tram tries to hide her cries while clipping her daughter’s fingernails. The toenails are already gone. Mrs. Thanh spreads a clean white cloth along the table. Sook and Luong lift Van Le

atop this. Sook then places two coins in his daughter's mouth. Tram puts rice into Van Le's mouth so the spirits know she did not leave this world hungry.

"Mom," I say.

"What?"

"I want to give her a coin."

"I don't have a coin."

"I do," I say, walking over to my banana leaves.

I zip open the dopp kit and find the coin the GI gave me on the base, the silver one with the long-haired man facing sideways. I don't know what to say before putting the coin in her mouth, so I just repeat "I love you" inside my head.

"What are you doing?" Sook demands. His wife puts a hand on his shoulder.

"I want the ghosts to know I gave her something," he says.

Sook slams down his broken radio. "It's American!"

"At least it's not communist," Tram says. "The Americans didn't trap us."

"I'll be damned if that bastard thinks he can get away with this." Sook lunges away from his wife, but before he can get to me, Tram grabs the back of his shirt and spins around in front of him. "It's time you listen to me," she says.

"I don't know what to do," Sook says.

Tram closes her daughter's jaw. Luong runs a thumb across Van Le's forehead. Mr. and Mrs. Thanh tuck the cloth around her body and roll her up. Luong and Sook carry her body to the hole and lower her down.

Sook throws the first shovelful of dirt over his daughter. He throws another. And another. Keeps scooping and throwing even faster until he can't breathe. He falls to his knees and seems to be crying into his hands.

Luong shovels the rest of the dirt until the spot looks much the same as it did before we began digging. Like nothing happened. Like there is only more dirt beneath the dirt. I can't stop thinking of her name, not Thuan, what she is to be called from now on, but the other one, the one I will never forget.

I grab the shovel and climb the ladder so fast I almost fall.

"What are you doing?" Mom asks. "Stop."

I ram the blade of the under the trap door and hang from the handle. The door moves just a little. Light creeps in, then darkness again.

I hang from the handle of the shovel and kick at the trap door. The handle moves down. I kick harder.

Light shines through. The handle moves down. Whatever is stuck on top has moved some. I kick. The trap door lifts. Light floods in. I kick as hard as I can and feel the weight lift from the door, and I'm falling. I hit the ground

A ray of light shines down like a gold slide. I lie in Mom's shadow.

"You did it!" she says.

It is a cool winter night without a star in the sky. Wispy clouds drift around the moon. Mom says that my life is beginning, that everything I have been through has made me a man, that I have the body of a kid but the vision of an elder. She says change will come with my tenth year.

I stand beside the fire pit until it gets too hot. A wild dog roasts on a spit. Juice pops from the browning skin and drips onto hot coals with a hiss. Mrs. Thanh sets a plate of sweet rice on the table with the other food like this is a holiday. Burnt Rice rises from Swan's lap. She hands him a bar of sugar-glazed peanuts. He jumps and runs in circles. Swan scoops him up in one arm and carries the laughing boy to me. Burnt Rice hands over the candy.

Behind Mom, the moon looks close enough that she could lean her head against it. She smiles. Luong comes forward with a box of fishhooks. His eyes face the ground as he sets it alongside the fruit and nuts and other gifts. He looks more and more like Sook—the way his belly sticks out past his chest and the marks starting on his face around his lips; he is becoming a smaller version of his father. I guess I am too.

“This is for you,” Luong says without looking up.

Tram made him do this, I'm sure, but it still makes me feel good. Mr. Thanh and Mrs. Thanh stand from their jute mats. Mrs. Thanh gives me a candle.

“Light this when you need to see,” she says.

I bow and accept the gift with both hands. Sook paces in a corner before the barn, taking swigs from a bottle of liquor and spitting on the ground. He mumbles and grunts, and when nobody pays him any attention, he slams the bottle onto the ground.

Mr. Thanh puts his hand on my shoulder. “Uncle would be proud,” he says. “I am proud.”

“You know what little Ting said?” Mrs. Thanh asks.

“What?”

“He said, ‘How do I get blue eyes?’ I said, ‘Why do you want blue eyes?’ He said, ‘To be like big brother Bò.’”

“How is your cough?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about me,” Mrs. Thanh says. “Eat.”

I offer Mom a slice of mango.

“No,” she says. “That’s for you, your majesty.”

“Have some,” I say. Mom eats this slice and then another.

Mr. Thanh places a hand on her shoulder. “Your son is a man today,” he says. He pulls the cork from a ceramic bottle. “Drink.”

The fumes alone burn my nose, but I don’t want to dishonor him. Mr. Thanh grins with his purple teeth and holds a bamboo cup before me. I take a short drink. My whole chest fills with fire. The more I cough the more my insides burn. Mr. Thanh laughs.

Sook walks with a new bottle. He screams into the bran barn even though there are no pigs, even though there is no bran, even though nobody is in there.

“I want you to have this,” Mr. Thanh says, handing me a coin. Chinese characters border the hollow square in the middle. “My grandfather gave this to me when I was your age. He told me to give it to my first-born son. Well...”

“I can’t take this,” I say.

“I can’t take it with me.”

He could take it with him. They could put it in his mouth before he is buried so the spirit world understands he did not leave this earth in want of anything, but I do not say this. I smile and bow my head as low as I can. Dung and Luong remove the dog from the spit and lay it out on sheets of banana leaves. Mrs. Thanh cuts long strips of juicy meat and serves me first. Mom carries over a tray of fish. She removes two eyeballs and sets them on my plate.

“I am honored to give these to my son,” she says. “The boy who you all thought was a curse.”

The villagers look down.

“We were wrong,” Tram says.

A girl brings forth a bowl of fried crickets. I smile and chew the eyeballs because Mom has never shown me this much respect in front of everybody else. The outsides taste like gristle, and when they pop open I choke down the muddy liquid. I take a slice of meat, and as the dog melts in my mouth, I remember the times Van Le stood up for me and shared what she had. I remember telling her I would never have a father, and how she said I was better off.

Families huddle together and pick meat and fish from the banana leaves. I lean against Mom’s side and tell her I would give up all of this if it meant that Van Le could come back to life, if it meant that I could speak her real name, if it meant the two of us could always be real friends, all of the time.

Sook kicks a plate of dog meat and knocks over cups of coconut water. He stumbles into Burnt Rice and Swan. Tram takes his arm, and he follows behind her like a sick, old dog.

“Stay inside,” she says, pushing him through their door. Glass shatters inside the house.

Tram enters. She shouts, “You crazy man.” Then she comes back through the door and around the cactus fence, carrying something in her hand. She walks toward me.

“This is for you,” she says.

I accept the frame with both hands. The butterfly I gave to Van Le is encased in glass. Snail shells and blue beads cover the wooden edges. The blue eyes look back at me from the wings.

“It was meant for you,” she says.

I thank her.

Sook runs out of the house and through the people. He pushes past his wife. Tram stumbles but catches her balance. “Why?” Sook shouts. He collapses onto a plate of meat and fruit. His pockmarks have broken open. Pus and blood stick to his chin and cheeks. He reaches into a bowl of sweet rice, scoops out a handful and throws it at me.

“You bastard,” Sook shouts. He licks his fingers, and his eyes open wider. Sook lunges, and I jump back just in time. I stand, ready to fight.

“Fuck you,” Sook says, but he doesn’t come after me.

Chapter 10

I lie in bed, listening to the morning calls of the rooster. The door slams open. Sook, his face red like a plum, only one eye open, falls against the wall. He rubs a hand around his belly.

“The bastard and the whore,” he says, falling forward and running like his steps are trying to catch up with his body.

He comes at me. I jump up and punch him in the stomach. He grabs my neck and slams me against the wall. I struggle to break free, to breathe.

“Get out of here,” he screams, “or I’ll kill you! Go. You go with Phoung and Suong.”

Mom grabs the spear from the wall. Sook turns from me. I try to get a deep breath. He knocks Mom to the ground with one punch, stomps his foot on her arm and pries the spear from her hands. I jump on his back and beat my fists into his head. I look around for something I can throw or hit him with before he gets both of us with that spear. He shakes like the pig did before it ran away, and I can’t hold on. I fall to the ground. Sook kicks me.

As I’m getting up, he presses the tip of the spear into Mom’s neck. “Get out,” he says.

“Now!”

Mom lies on the ground, curled up like a baby. Her eyes say, “Go.” Then, “Don’t go.” Then, “I love you.”

“Get out!” Sook yells.

I open the door, stand there watching Mom, take a step back inside.

“Now!” Sook screams, coming at me with the spear.

I run through the heat and into the jungle until my legs hurt so much I can’t go on. I scream.

My throat burns. I scream more, like this might kill my voice, might kill everything around me. In the shadows, a trail of ants follows one another around the side of a log to the place

where three rocks meet. I sit with my back against the biggest one and try to breathe. I try to forget everything.

For hours I pray for Uncle. I ask him to deliver Daddy and take us away from all of this; I ask him to turn my eyes black; I ask him to make sure Sook dies.

In my prayers I must have fallen asleep, and when I wake my mouth is dry, my body sticky. The monkeys make their last calls of the day. In the jungle, daytime knows no difference in light, but when I step out from under the trees and back into the village, the pink sky tells me it is dusk.

Sook looks worse than he did that morning. He stands between me and the door to our house, holding our spear like it is his. Dried spit sticks to the corners of his mouth. Dirt coats the stubble on his chin and above his lip. He takes a long drink from his rice liquor bottle and laughs the same evil laugh that came when people would kneel before him begging for their lives or asking him to please do something for a dying child or a relative who had been taken by the Viet Cong. I stare into his eyes to let him know that if I was a man, I would fight him, fist to fist, and I would win, but he is twice my size.

“Where do you think you’re going, half-breed?”

“To see my mom,” I say, still refusing to look down, but he is so drunk he doesn’t even seem to notice.

“That slut is dead,” Sook says.

“Liar!”

“Don’t scream at me, half-breed.”

Sook lies to try to hurt me because he knows his beatings can no longer make me cry. The door of his house opens, and Tram walks out. There is compassion in her eyes, as if they

say, "It's going to be all right. He is a sick man." It is this expression that causes the twisting in my stomach.

"Where is she?" I demand.

"The slut killed herself," Sook says.

"You're a liar!"

Sook slaps my face.

I know that he's lying. She would never kill herself, but I can also see in Tram's face that

something is wrong, that something has happened to Mom. Ants ravage a dead worm.

Thousands of them work together to survive, and they are all I can concentrate on.

Tram puts her arm around my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she says. "We all loved her."

"He! Raped! Her," I scream.

"You little bastard."

Sook grabs for my head, but I'm too quick. I punch him in the dick, duck to the side, and keep punching. This fury I can't control. I'm screaming and punching; everything turns white. Sook gets a hold of my head and squeezes, but I can't feel anything. I break free and lunge into his leg. I bite his thigh and refuse to let go. The sting of the blows only makes me clamp down harder.

My ears ring like the late night sirens that used to go off on Cam Ranh Bay. Sook tears at my hair. My teeth pierce the skin, and I hold on like a rabid dog that will not let go. Tram beats my head with a broom. She pulls my hair. I dig in harder and pull until the skin is in my mouth. I jump up and slip through Sook's grasp. Run as fast I can. Trip. My head hits

the ground. Luong jumps on me, and I can't move, can't do anything. I free an arm, punch him in the neck and roll away, and I'm running, again, to the spot between three rocks. My breath is dust. I lean against the cool stone and dig out blood boogers. My lips taste like nails. What am I going to do now? Sook will find me. I can't go back there. Sook will kill me. I can't believe any of this is real. I want to know where she is, if she can see me, if I will be able to see her when I die.

Every ten minutes I tell myself to get up and find water, but the pain is too much. A torch bobs. Somebody's coming. Amidst the honking of frogs, sticks crunch beneath each footstep. I hold my breath. It's over. So what? Nothing will change. As I duck and try to be quiet, I realize Sook will never find me under here. His fat body won't fit between these rocks. But what if he has his gun?

"Bò." A woman's voice calls out. "Bò."

It's Tram, but what if he is close behind? What if this is all a set up? But she felt bad; she knew it was wrong; I could see it in her eyes. She might hate Sook more than anyone.

There is a voice inside me: *Trust her.*

"In here," I say.

A cotton bag hangs across her chest like a soldier wearing a round of bullets. The strap splits her breasts. Tram stubs out the torch.

"You cannot come back," she says. "He will kill you."

"Where is she?"

Tram removes a back pack from her bag. She gives me two rice balls wrapped in banana leaves.

“I got everything for you,” she says. “Your mother is beneath the spot where four trees grow together. Go there. A man named Tung will come with a saw.”

The punji stake pit is only yards away from the four trees, but I don't have the courage to ask if this is where she is. Tram promises that Tung will meet me beneath the full moon. She says that I should stay awake and wait beside the grave, that the man will be wearing all gray, and that I should not look him in the eye when he speaks, and if he happens to be wearing clothes that are not gray, I can be sure it is him by looking at his toes. The man has only four, but he is not bad. She assures me that since he was caught stealing he has lived to help people.

“She was my friend,” Tram says.

“He killed her.”

Tram unclasps her hands. “I must go,” she says. She cups the candle and moves through the trees.

“He raped her.”

A flash sparks in the darkness. The tip of the torch silhouettes Tram. The flame bobs from side to side between trees and out of the jungle. I run my fingers between my toes and scrape away ants.

“Fuck you, Tram.” Fuck all the Vietnamese. Fuck the Americans too. They're all gone. Everybody is gone. There is nowhere for me to go. Not now.

I eat the rice balls like a jungle rat sneaking around the houses and looking to make sure nobody sees. The air grows heavy. Lightning strikes. I suck on the rice. Clouds continually cover and uncover the light. There was something about being around the

villagers, even though I was hated, and I realize that if the choice were my own I would stay with those people forever. Tomorrow I will be alone.

Mom faces the earth, her body at the base of barbed stakes, blood on her dress where they poke through. Her hair looks so dark it's almost purple. Her face looks bleached. I have to step back. Sook did this; I know it. He found this hole and stomped on her body until it slid all the way to the bottom of the stakes. It's not real. This is not real. Not the rain or the moon or any of this. I'm going to wake up next to her, and it will all be over.

I take my flashlight from the doppel kit, turn the button on and off, but nothing happens. I kneel on the ground and punch the mud. Splatters hit my face. I keep punching and screaming until my face is covered.

My knuckles throb. I should be crying, but I can't, and that makes me feel worse. I was the reason this happened. Where's Daddy? He was supposed to come and save us. Look what he did.

I spin the wheel. Flame sways atop the Zippo. Mom's jade pendant shines against her shoulder. I slam my head into the ground. If she really loved me then why didn't we run away a long time ago? Because of Daddy. Because she thought he would find us. Fuck Daddy. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm so, so sorry. I know you didn't do it."

Rain comes down harder and drives up the smell of rot and fat worms. I plug my nose and close my mouth. My head fills with pressure and builds behind my nose. I keep holding until my mouth pops open, and all is released: all of my breath, all the dizziness in my head, all my ideas of death.

"Are you with Uncle?" I ask.

A chorus of frogs answers with honks. Maybe that's what happens. Maybe peoples' bodies go into animals.

Mom, where are you? I turn onto my back and let the rain hit. What does it look like where you are? Please come back. Please tell me it's not real.

The sky cracks like an explosion, flashes gray. Then black. Raindrops the size of lychee pits strike my face.

I turn and look over the edge. A thin layer of water collects beneath her, and as I stare into her purple hair, I remember a story she told me about how people's hair and fingernails keep growing after they die, and how some mountains started with the fingernails of the dead poking up through the earth at the same time and collecting what the salt water wind blew onto them. Maybe mountains will grow from her, and some day I will have my own son, a son I never leave, and the two of us might climb all the way to the top, and when the boy wants to stop, my stories of Mom—of the full-fleshed one who smiled the day before she died—will carry him on. Maybe this will be my way of saying good-bye. I never even got to say good-bye. I never got to say anything.

The clouds drift like paper lanterns in the wind. I am too afraid to climb down in the hole alone, but I must get the pendant in case grave robbers come. My feet sink into the mud beside her, the same as they did when we worked in the field. The rain comes down so hard I can't see anything. I can't pull Mom out of there on my own. This must be what Tram meant when she said the man would come with a saw.

I pull the necklace over her head. Her face is cold.

The sky cracks. Flashes gray. The jade spins. Hair hangs from the chain. Rain settles around Mom's body and covers her hands and forearms. A bolt of silver lighting strikes down a tree. The sky dumps sheets of rains.

I grip the cold pendant and roll onto my back. Water puddles around me. I jump up and run to a fallen tree. I gather armfuls of wet leaves and branches. These fall from my chest as I run back and forth to the hole until she is covered.

I say, "I love you."

I lie down and wonder if I'll ever sleep again.

Chapter 11

Though the morning heat has turned to sweat, the nightmares of this floating skeleton will not stop. It's like there is a force pressing me into the ground. I don't want to dream anymore, but I also don't want to move or open my eyes. I don't want to be here or there.

In my dream, a red glow surrounds her. Mom hovers like a bird above water stalking its prey, her skull and bones surrounded by flame.

Do not come closer, she says.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Many things.

“No,” I say. “Right now. What am I supposed to do right now?”

I must go to Grandfather's grave, she says. *With our ancestors.*

“But I am not strong.”

You are.

“What if they kill me?”

I'm sorry.

“Don't go.”

The weight of her hand keeps me from falling back even though her arms remain at her side. “Mom,” I say, but she is no longer here.

Only the heat and trees and the blue sky where buzzards circle. Only ants biting my legs. Only the mosquitoes. What if Tram lied to me? What if nobody comes? How will I move her?

I lower my feet into the hole and slide down. I push my shoulder against a stake and reach through them to turn Mom's head. I brush away the leaves. Two teeth are missing from the

top row, and her nose bends off to one side. Bruises run from the bottom of her eyes to the bridge of her nose. I cock back and drive my fist into the mud inches from her face. I was going to punch her. I don't know what's happening to me. I puke up spit. Flies circle Mom's eye sockets. Warm water rises up my legs and into my crotch. I dig a foot into the mud wall and try to climb out, but my foot keeps slipping down.

I run my hand against the tip of a stake. Blood and muddy water mix on my skin. The pain feels good. The sun turns the tree tops into shining balls of gold. The light burns my eyes, but I keep staring. Something moves in one of the lower branches. A monkey pulls himself up a vine, one hand after the other, a single leg dangling beneath his waist.

I yell, "Come here!" like I'm calling a dog.

The monkey flips to another tree and stands on a branch, using the only leg available. It scratches its beard and appears to be looking right at me. I wonder how quick it is before a spirit enters a new body. Whether they have to enter a newborn or can use any living body I'm not sure, but this would be Mom's sense of humor, on her happy days, to return to me in the body of a one-legged monkey.

A moped engine putters. I push against the edge and yell for help.

As the man in gray cotton steps down from the seat, I look at his feet. It is Tung. He reaches in and pulls me out. His skin looks like it has been dried and stretched and then scratched with pins.

"So this is our problem," Tung says, looking down into the hole.

"She is not a problem! I will do this myself."

Tung says, "You can't do this yourself."

He is ugly—his scratchy face covered with pockmarks bigger than Sook’s—and he talks funny, but he’s right, and he’s all that I have.

“I didn’t mean anything,” Tung says. “You cannot solve this alone.”

He walks to his moped and unties a bag. “Hold this,” he says, handing me a saw. Tung empties the rest of the bag. He removes rope and a white sheet. I stand over the hole. If I had a gun, I would aim for the sky and blast away every single buzzard.

Tung approaches. “Do you want to say a prayer?” he asks.

“For what?”

“For your mother,” Tung says.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Whatever your mother would want to hear,” Tung says.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Just say what you feel.”

“Terrible.”

“I meant what you feel for her.” Tung reaches for the saw.

I give it up. The clouds drift. Hawks fly even higher than the buzzards. The moon still appears in the sky like a milky platter stained by berries. Tung lowers himself into the hole.

“I miss you,” I say, trying to stop from crying, trying to be a man. The tears come up, and nothing stops the release of sobs. Snot hangs from my nose. I throw up, but nothing comes out. Maybe this is what Tung meant when he asked whether or not I wanted to pray, because when I finally stop heaving, a weightless feeling takes over my body, like I’m not even there anymore. This must be what Uncle meant about letting everything go. This must be what allowed Uncle to always have that half-smile even though his entire head was dented

in, and this must have been what Uncle wanted so much to give to Mom, but like he told me, it is not something that can be given or found outside of yourself.

Tung has removed the tops of all the stakes. He tells me to get in the hole. I do. Tung squats down and pushes his hands under Mom.

“We must lift,” he says. “Bend your knees.”

It hurts to remember working in the rice field, to remember her tickling, to remember leaning back to back and her telling me how proud she was, how I was the man in her life, how even if she never met another one, I was enough.

“You got her?” Tung asks.

“Yes.”

Together we push her body up and above the stakes, out of the hole, and onto the muddy ground. Veins show through the skin around her temples. The smashed lips and nose make her face look like a woman I have never seen before.

“What did Tram tell you?” I ask.

“About what?”

“About how she died.”

Tung climbs out from the hole and walks to his moped. He lights a cigarette and offers one. I spin the wheel on my Zippo and pretend like smoking is normal.

“They said she killed herself.”

“That’s a lie,” I say

The smoke sticks in my lungs. The more I try to hold my mouth shut, the more I cough. Why would anyone do this?

“Easy there,” Tung says, tapping his palm against my back.

“I’m okay.”

The stars look so close I could reach up and smear one against his hand like we used to do with lightning bugs. What if this light could suck me up to the sky and I could lie atop the moon for nights on end? If I could look down and see how and why it all worked together? Then maybe I would never have to sleep again. I would never have to dream.

Tung wakes and looks in every direction. It is as if the ghost of a dead soldier just passed through him.

“We must go,” he says.

Tung lifts Mom up and over his shoulder like he’s carrying a tree trunk to the chopping block. I breathe easier with the sheet around her body. I can pretend she is sleeping. I know it’s not real, but I can pretend, and this is all I have right now.

Tung leans her against the moped seat. “Steady her,” he says. He rolls the sheet up from her feet to her thighs. He bends and lifts one of her legs over the seat.

“Let me get on first,” Tung says.

I hold around her waist and make sure she doesn’t lean forward as Tung gets on and grips the handlebars.

“Put her feet around me,” Tung says.

I lift one leg to Tung’s waist, but bending the knee is difficult. I walk around the moped and raise her other leg. Tung takes twine from his pocket and ties it around her ankles.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“It’s safer,” Tung says. “Get on.”

I climb behind Mom. Tung starts the engine. I wrap my arms around Mom’s waist. We bounce along the dirt and over sticks and rocks, out of the jungle and onto a red dirt road. I hold Mom’s body as we come around a curve, lean, and turn the opposite way. I squeeze my legs into hers. Tung swerves past holes in the road. Stars dot the sky—everywhere—and I imagine meeting Mom beneath Cuoi’s tree and stepping from star to star, one foot at a time.

Tung hugs the side of the mountain. If the moped gets too close to the edge of the road we will plummet to the sea where the moon shines in the reflection of Cam Ranh Bay.

Tung lets off the gas. The moped coasts with such speed it feels like there is no way it will ever stop. Constant hum of tires. The sea and sky and entire tree lines passing in blurs of shifting moon light.

I try to speak to Mom without talking. I ask her to forgive me for leaving. I was afraid, and she told me to go, but I should have stayed. I ask her to please come back to me, even in a dream, even surrounded by red.

I untie Mom’s feet and help Tung lift her off the moped. We find the large stone that marks Grandfather’s grave. As we dig, I remember Mom telling me how she and her sister used to live in a house right between these two trees and how they would run to the beach and collect shells. I remember Mom telling me that she once sneaked me over to Grandfather’s grave when I was an infant. The houses, now burned down, were her village before I was born, before they made her go away.

Tung leans on his shovel. He tells me to take a break.

“It’s not deep enough,” I say.

I could dig for days, and it wouldn't be enough to give Mom what she deserves.

"Ten more minutes," I say.

"I don't have all day."

I jab through roots and dislodge stones. This is where Mom will lie forever.

"Are you ready?" Tung asks.

"Yes." I peel back the top layer of the sheet to look at her one last time.

"It's okay to cry," Tung says.

I dig in my pocket and find the gold coin Mr. Thanh gave me. Mom's mouth is hard to open. Her tongue is gray; her gums black where the teeth are missing. I rest the center of the square against her tongue and shut her jaw. I wrap the sheet around her face.

"I'm sorry," Tung says, bending to help me lift her up.

"Me too."

We lower her body into the hole. The shovel shakes in my hands as I dig into the pile of dirt and rake it into the hole.

"We must release her spirit," Tung says, leading me past the village to a creek where sun shines through to the bottom and minnows swim in schools. He gives me a toy boat made from a coconut husk.

Maybe her spirit can live inside of here—in the water, in the air, everywhere—but as I follow Tung along the creek and try to speak to her no words come back. A monkey screeches. A crow caws. Maybe silence exists until the worms and bugs eat what holds back her soul. Maybe these animal sounds are the only way she has of saying goodbye.

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The creek rolls past tree stumps and bends around stones.

"This will give her direction," Tung says. "You must release the boat."

“Is she in there?”

“Her spirit is.”

I crouch down. “Should I say something?”

“You can say anything you like.”

I run a finger along the smooth base. “Can she hear me?”

“Yes,” Tung says.

Please help me.

I take a deep breath and drop the boat. It floats sideways to the other shore and gets caught up in a pile of sticks.

“I can’t even do this right,” I say.

“She will return to the earth as a tree,” Tung says. He wades in and moves the sticks.

The boat floats downstream, away from us, around the bend and out of sight.

Minnows swim together in the same direction. Maybe they’re following Mom’s spirit. What might her life have been like if I was born dead like some of the other babies? Would her family have taken her back if I had run away when I was a little boy?

“Do you want to go back?” Tung asks.

“I can’t.”

“What will you do? Where will you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t want to end up like me.” Tung sits beside me and takes off his sandals.

I put my feet in the water and dig my heels into the sand where it is cooler, and I imagine Mom’s spirit floating from the creek to the river and into Cam Ranh Bay where

sparkles of sunlight spread across the water and hit so hot that the boat goes up in flames and the smoke carries all of her words back to me.

“How old are you?” Tung asks.

“Ten.”

The shadows of water bugs shoot across the creek bottom.

“You’re grown up,” Tung says.

“Not really.”

“You see this?” Tung pulls one leg out of the water and holds his foot close to my face. “You think this is what makes me different?”

I hesitate. “I guess.”

“What if I told you you’re wrong? What if I told you that it isn’t what’s on the outside that makes us different? What if I told you it’s how we feel about the outside? Do you understand what I mean.”

I don’t. “Yes,” I say. I stand.

Tung has a bald spot on the back of his head. There are dark circles beneath his shoulders where the bad blood has been sucked away.

“I need to go,” I say.

“Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere.”

The puffy clouds drift and separate, but I can’t make any shapes. I can’t make anything.

“What if I told you it wasn’t me who took the pig?” Tung asks.

“I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Learn this while you’re young,” Tung says. “Everybody thought it was me. So after awhile even I thought it was me. What other people believed made a lie true. Don’t worry what other people believe. You’re a good kid. Don’t worry what people say.”

“Then why does everybody leave me?”

“That’s life,” Tung says, digging dirt from between his toes. He washes his fingers in the water. “You know that?”

“Yeah.”

“You can stay with me.”

“Thank you,” I say, but there is something in the way he looks at me that makes me nervous.

Before we go to sleep I dig up the piece of gold Mom buried and give it to Tung as payment. He seems impressed, and I wonder if I have given him too much. I have no idea what it is worth or what I would ask for it. I fall asleep with a rock in my hand.

I wake up to black sky. A tugging at my pants. Tung stands over me, his dick as hard as a stick. I pretend to sleep. I reach for the rock I put beneath my bag before falling asleep. I grip my backpack with the other hand, and before Tung has time to react, I whip the rock at his head and run.

II.

Chapter 12

Tomorrow I will find a road; I will make my way to Saigon; I will be among people once again, and I don't care if they hate me. I can't take this anymore. I say this every day. I'm a liar. I'm crazy. I'm talking to myself. But I'm tired. Tired of lying silent beneath leaves. Tired of walking through the marsh, crabs nipping at my ankles. Tired of pulling leeches from my legs and watching the blood drip. Tired of never knowing the difference between the constant droning of frogs and the sound of ghosts moving all around me.

The glaring sun filters through the tops of the trees, all the way down to the decaying jungle floor. At every turn I run into spider webs. Fleas bite the flesh beneath my pants, and when I bend to slap them away, mosquitoes buzz in my ear, like they're working together. A scream pierces the branches in front of me. It could be a monkey. It could be a GI or Republican soldier tortured by the Viet Cong.

I want to find a village, somewhere safe where I can sneak up at night and find food. Where am I? I sit on a fallen tree and blink to keep the sweat out of my eyes. Ants bite my toes. I slap them dead. Touching the Viet Cong's knife still gives me shivers—almost every night the horrible dreams come, the memories—but it is the only one I have, and this is necessary.

I pull down the waistband of my pants. The curly hairs teem with bugs. I slice until all of it is gone. This doesn't stop the itching. It feels like the bugs have crawled under my skin, and they cannot be dug out. Small and hard like sesame seeds, my fingernails will not crush them.

Green coconuts grow in clusters, but it's hard to tell how far away these trees are. I search for the one-legged monkey who will bring me good luck, and even though I haven't seen him since the weeks surrounding Mom's death, I have this feeling that he is up there in the sparkling rays, watching over me.

I stand up and run a stick through the hot logs and coals from last night. My leg seizes. I press my knuckles into the calf where the Viet Cong soldier stabbed me. The muscle is hard like rock, but there is something wrong beneath the scar.

A frog hops through a glistening spider web. I wait: slam down my hand. It wiggles beneath my fingers and sticks out its tongue as I flatten it against the mud.

"I'm sorry," I say, pressing the edge of the blade into the speckled flesh. I cut off the head.

I slice through the white belly, scoop out the heart and other organs, stretch the intestines between my fingers and let them dangle. I stab a stick between the back legs and walk over to the coals, spread dry grass and twigs in a triangle and blow. Fire consumes the grass and catches the twigs. I break a branch over my knee and cross the halves atop the fire. Hold the stick steady. The green skin turns dark and crisp.

The frog catches fire. I pull back the stick and blow out the flame. What a stupid boy I was. All the Linh Foos were just a stupid game played by a stupid kid who couldn't even fight back. Let them try me now.

I take a bite of crunchy skin and gnaw the meat from the bone. I feel alive. I wish I had a dozen more. I ball up the intestines and leave them at the base of the tree I've slept beside the last two nights. I take out my slingshot and lie on my belly with a rock cocked.

Uncle told me stories of sidewalks in Saigon where every step was another table and every table was piled high with fresh herbs, pig and cow meat still on the bone, and noodles as long as ten frogs' intestines. I'm going to get there. Where the night air is cool and dry. Where there are lights that shine every color of the rainbow. Where there is ice cream all of the time. Where there is music and laughter and dance. Where the sky lights up with fireworks instead of bombs.

A magpie lands. Pecks at the heart. Drags the intestines.

I fire and miss. The bird flaps, rises. The intestines dangle from its beak. They become a part of the sky, twisting and drifting with clouds behind them. How quickly life changes. Not long ago these were inside a frog, helping it to hop across the earth, and now the frog is inside of me and the intestines are flying.

An ant crawls along my neck and up to my ear. I let it. Maybe it will crawl into my head and change my crazy brain. I can't run from what I am. There is no hat I can pull low enough. I don't even know who I am. What I am. There are two of me: the one who wakes in the morning and takes the mirrored glass from my bag, who makes sure every spot of bare flesh has fresh mud in case I hear somebody coming, the one who stinks like an animal and eats bugs and lizards, the one who climbs like a monkey to see what is around me. Then there is the boy, buried deep inside, the boy who ran from Mom that last day, the boy who saw frogs and butterflies as more than food, the boy who held Burnt Rice in his arms and offered his thumb. The angry me—the one who talks to myself and believes that nobody will ever care about me again—is winning. I can't even sleep. When I close my eyes the night by the creek comes back, the Viet Cong standing over me, and I wake up feeling like I slept on pins.

The fire burns low to the ground. I put the frog's head on a nub of burning branch and spreads twigs around it. Fire takes the eyeballs before the skin. Skin burns around the eye sockets. The head caves in.

I hug the tree and plant my bare feet on the bark. I pull and climb, stopping only to lean back and rest my shoulders before carrying on. Everything is upside down, the ground becomes my sky, and this perspective takes away the fear as I lean back so far it feels like I'm walking on flat ground, all the way to the branches on top. The clouds seem close enough to jump up and touch, but each move bends the branch. Red dirt stretches and curves below. Maybe this is the road that leads to Saigon, and maybe the river stretching in the other direction is the Nine Dragons.

Smoke rises with the smell of meat, seeming to originate from between two houses and a clothesline where shirts and pants sway. Next to one of the houses is a moped. The door of the bigger house opens. A girl carries a broom to the side of the house where she opens a wire cage, and ducks come scrambling down the wooden ladder, pushing past each other. The girl hits the ducks in the butt, and they waddle into each other and toward the pond. If she looks up she might see me, but I don't care. I want her to come up here. I want to ask her questions. I want her to give me answers. Like "Yes, I can help you get to Saigon" and "Yes. Everything will be okay."

Everything will be okay, Mom says.

I crawl out on a limb to test its strength. I pull the knife from my belt and hack at a coconut. It falls. I chop all I can reach. What would this girl think to see two blue eyes coming at her from behind a mask of mud? I climb down.

On the ground, I position a coconut between two rocks and imagine the fibers to be Sook's dirty face. I stab the husk. The coconut rolls. I retrieve it, hold it between my feet, and keep stabbing the same spot until the knife penetrates. The tip grinds in as I spin it around the hole. I drink. The warm water rushes through every cell. I want to jump on that moped and ride as fast as it will go.

I sneak over to the trees just beyond the pond. The girl's hair hangs all the way to her butt. It is light like jasmine tea. She is mixed race. Maybe she would let me dip my head in the pond and wash away the dried mud, but I'm afraid to go any closer, and I don't need her. I need the moped.

Dusk paints the leaves pink. The one-legged monkey is nowhere to be seen. The girl appears to be looking right at me. If I move, she'll know I'm in here. I stand for a long time, watching and waiting. Rays pass through her dress: outline of legs and waist as she bends to shoo the last few ducks into the wire box before going inside.

I wait by the fire. Bugs pop inside the wood. I sneak into the yard and walk to the pond where the water reflects the sky: every star, the black line of the trees, and the moon like the same slice of cantaloupe in the sky.

A key ring shines below the moped ignition. If stupid Tung can ride then so can I. I'll just start it up and go before anybody realizes what is happening. I take the long way around the house, past the wood pile, away from the cages of ducks. I put my hands on the moped bars and sit down. Moonlight shines on the thatched roof of the house the girl came out of. The windows are dark. I roll forward off the stand. The moped squeaks.

Mom, please help me.

Turn the key. Squeeze back the gas.

The trail that runs from the house through the jungle must lead to the road I saw from above. I turn the key. The engine rumbles. I crank back my hand. Nothing. I crank back again. The gas revs, but the moped doesn't move. The door of the house slams open.

“Hey.” An old man comes toward me. He has a gun.

I could run. I could grab the gun from his wrinkled hand. I could make up any number of stories. But I just stand there, still and silent, waiting for my punishment, wanting to be among people again. Maybe he will shoot me, and I will go home, to wherever Mom is. The girl walks beside him, wearing the same dress she had on earlier this afternoon. I get off the moped, raise it up on the stand, and keep my arms at my sides. Moonlight shines on the old man's feet. His toes are rough and faded like giant peanuts. He speaks to the girl, but his words come out so quickly that I don't understand.

“Who are you?” This I understand. “What are you doing here?” This too.

The girl scratches her shin with the toes of her other foot.

“Answer me!”

“I don't know where I am,” I say.

“Who are you?”

“Bò,” I say. “Just Bò.”

The old man presses a thumb into my elbow, and I follow him up to the house. Pain shoots through my forearm. He turns to the girl.

“Bring the moped back,” he says, “and take out the key. I will find out who this boy is.”

He leads me inside the house and up to a bed where an old lady lies. There is a low table made from tree trunks, each leg carved and made to shine, and this is where the three of them must sit on the dusty wood floor and eat. On the opposite wall a counter displays dozens of clay pots, all of them different sizes. There is another room I can't see into. Next to the old lady's bed is a pot used for spitting betel. The saliva in the pot is purple with white foam.

"Who is that?" she asks.

"A thief."

She rises from the bed and lights a candle. She has kind gray eyes like Mrs. Thanh's.

"How old are you?"

I address her in the respectful tone. "I am eleven, Grandmother."

She leans forward. "Show me your face."

A cockroach skitters. Shadows flicker on the floor and the bottom of the wall. The old woman puts her hands under my chin and raises my head. Her fingers are cold and scratchy. Her neck is wrinkled like patches of mud after a stream has dried up. A film covers her black eyes. She may have been beautiful at one time, but now she is old, and the hair that must have shined like a black stone is now gray and scraggly, the same color as the ones growing out of her ears.

"You are blessed from both lands," she says. "Like Loc." She smiles when she speaks. There are leaves of betel stuck between her purple teeth. "Look at his eyes, Grandfather."

"He is a thief. I don't care."

The door opens. The girl shuts it behind her and stands off in a corner.

“What is your name?” the old lady asks.

“Bò.”

“Where do you live?”

“Nowhere.”

“You will stay here tonight.”

“The hell he will,” the old man says.

“He will stay here tonight.” She puts a thumb under my eye and chips away a flake of mud. “You will study. With Loc. Can you read?”

“A little,” I say.

“You will help Loc in the morning,” the old man says. “Then you will go.”

The old lady puts her hand on my head. “Go to the pond and wash,” she says. “Loc, give him a towel.”

The girl hands me a towel. What do I look like? A muddy ghost or a beggar boy too poor to afford soap? Maybe I look like what I am: a boy cut off from people, living on roots and insects and frogs and lizards; a boy who pours marsh water through his shirt to drink it; a boy who would do anything for the fresh water of a green coconut. I glance up just long enough to see the girl’s eyes. They are not black or dark brown like the Vietnamese. They are light like her hair. Like the water after lifting up a net filled with minnows.

I walk to the pond. Just knowing I’ll be clean makes me feel better, makes the night sky brighter from inside this circle of cleared trees. Cui’s figure looms, dark blue on the yellow moon, beneath the blooming tree.

Can I trust them?

I don't know if I'm asking Cuoi or Mom or Uncle, or even Grandfather. I take off my clothes and look to the house. Loc ducks from the window. The water cools my feet. They sink into duck shit the deeper I get. The water covers my balls. My whole body cools. The surface that looked dark from farther back appears gold close up.

I dive under, swim to the bottom, and lie in the duck shit. It's cooler. I blow bubbles and wonder how long I can stay under, my body like a rock until there is no breath left to blow out. I try to push up, but my feet sink. I flap my arms and legs and swim toward the light.

My body has not been this fresh for as long as I can remember, like everything is new, like this is a beginning, like getting rid of this mud has washed off some of the past.

There is an argument between Grandmother and Grandfather. I sit outside beneath the window.

"He's a criminal," Grandfather says.

"Give him a chance," Grandmother says. "Maybe he was just afraid. He stopped, didn't he? He could have run."

"I don't care. I want him gone."

"You're the one who says things happen for a reason."

"So what if I am?"

"So it isn't natural for Loc to be out here with our old bones. She needs someone her own age."

"You've lost your mind, old woman."

In the creek again—snakes swimming against my legs—I hold my breath, only this time when I try to pop up from the water my body will not move. The Viet Cong soldier realizes I am there. He jumps on top of me and squeezes his hands around my neck. I shake and punch with all my force, but my body is frozen.

The Viet Cong's knife gleams. I try to block my face from the blade. The VC slices through my fingers, and before I can feel the pain I wake up. I slap my face. Nothing is familiar: four wooden walls with cracks in the panels where light shines through, cobwebs from wall to ceiling, no window, but I am inside, somewhere.

A swallow puffs out its breast from a nest in the corner. I walk past burlap sacks to a basin. I dip in my head, and the visions go away. I pull open the sack: pellets the size of rabbit droppings.

“Wake up,” the girl calls from outside.

I walk to the barn door and pull it open to a light so bright I can hardly see. “I’m awake,” I say.

She steps past me and heads for the burlap sacks. She turns. “What are you looking at?” “Sorry,” I say. “I’ve never seen a girl.”

“You’ve never seen a girl?”

“I mean I’ve never seen a mixed-race girl.” I pick my shirt off the ground and put it on.

“Why do you talk so funny?”

“What do you mean?”

“You say your words so slow, like you’re trying to think.”

This makes me stop and think. Did she plan this?

“Why?” she asks, pulling a strand from the top of the burlap sack.

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to anyone for a long time.”

Her stare does not feel rude.

“Help me with this,” she says, taking a scoop from the bucket and digging some pellets out of the burlap sack.

“Is there another scoop?”

“Why do you need a scoop? You look strong.” She smiles and nods at the burlap.

I walk over and hoist the bag above my shoulders. Her eyes follow the burlap as I lift up and down. I pour the pellets into the bucket.

“What are these?” I ask.

“Duck food.”

“I know that. What’s in them?”

“Uh...duck food.”

I follow her outside. The ducks quack inside the cages as if they know, and further on beyond the pond and above the trail leading into the jungle, crows sit in wait on the branches at the edge of the property. The bucket strains my muscles, but I will not let her know. I lift with both arms. Loc opens the cages. Loose feathers fly as the ducks scramble past each other. They attack the bucket and bite at my feet and ankles.

“They’re crazy,” I say.

“You’re crazy,” she says. “Pour out the food.”

I do.

“Not all of it!” Loc rips the bucket from my hands and gets in the middle of the ducks. “You have to scatter it. What’s wrong with you?” She bends and waves her arms. The

ducks flap toward the pond. The glare on the water stings my eyes. Loc scoops the food back into the bucket. She then walks among them, dropping handfuls.

“You want my help?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “I’m not used to other kids.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“You know what I mean.” She sets down the bucket. “We have to spread them so they don’t fight.”

I reach in the bucket and drop handfuls of pellets.

“See that one,” she says. “No, the big brown one. Kiki. He is my favorite.”

It waddles up and eats from her hand.

“Where were you born?” she asks.

“Cam Ranh Bay.”

“You are far from home,” she says. “Stop.” She swats at three ducks that are trying to gang up on one.

“It’s not home anymore,” I say.

“Do you miss it?”

“I miss Mom,” I say. “I miss Uncle.”

Loc squats on the straw around the pond. She wipes her hands on her dress. “Many people have died,” she says. “Maybe my mother. Maybe my father. I never met them.”

I want to pick her up and run to the pond and float with her curled up inside of me like the baby kangaroos Mom told him about. Loc digs a rock into the dirt and creates rose petals and then a stem. In the morning light her eyes are the color of honey.

Kiki dips its fat head into the water and dives under. Others fight for the last bits of food.

“We must get them back in,” Loc says. “That is the hard part.”

“Why can’t they stay out?”

“It’s dangerous,” she says. “The sun will hit the water and burn them.”

“Really?”

Loc brushes a duck back toward the cages with her foot. “Where are you from?”

“I told you.”

“Did you ever hear of ducks being burned by water in Cam Ranh Bay?”

“You told me something,” I say, “and I believed you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she says. “Tigers could eat them. Or owls.”

“But don’t they fight in the cages?”

“Sometimes. But they don’t eat each other.”

I follow her lead, brushing the ducks toward the pond and blocking those that try to walk the other way. The sun shines through her dress. There is black between her thighs. Ducks flap all around us. Loc grabs two by their feet.

“They are the worst ones,” she says.

I want to tell her about Mom, about how I had to lie there and listen and watch, and how she did all of this for me, and how she finally jumped up and kicked Sook’s ass. I want to tell Loc how beautiful Mom was. I want to tell her about the frogs she used to save for me, about how we worked side by side in the muddy field, about how she could carry more than anybody else, and cook better, and could even speak American words like she was born there. I want to tell Loc about how Mom overcame everything, about how she promised to

never let anything happen to me, about how she made me who I am, but I can't. I want to tell Loc that I believed Mom when she said that we were going to take care of each other, that we would be okay no matter what, even if it was just the two of us. I want to—everything inside of me tells me that I should—but there is something blocking me. I haven't told anyone anything, not since Tung, and I don't know if I ever will.

Chapter 13

Loc rides side saddle behind me. I pull back the gas and race between the holes beside the pond, the holes I now know like the feel of my own fingers. We veer past the clothesline, under a branch, beyond the tire swing, and onto the trail that leads to the road. A bump sends my butt off the seat. Loc reaches her arms around my stomach.

“Slow down,” she says. “Grandfather is outside.”

“Aren’t you excited?”

“Watch the road.”

Loc doesn’t know I hit the bumps on purpose. If she did, she would probably stop wrapping her arms around my stomach. That’s why I go fast. That’s why I lean on curves, and this time I’m not going to play those stupid games with myself: I’ll kiss her if she swims to me in ten seconds; if I can stay underwater longer; if this rock skips five times; if the one-legged monkey appears.

I cruise onto the trail that winds through the field and up to the cluster of trees. The rushing water coming from the waterfall sounds like a typhoon. I stop the moped, get off, and offer Loc a hand. Near the edge of the pool, the trees have been cut back. Stumps stick up from the ground. I find my name carved on the trunk of the diving tree among all the others, and I say a prayer that every child who carved his name is still alive. Further back, right at the opening to the jungle, a hammock hangs between two trunks up on a hill. Shadows of branches drift on the water’s surface. Three naked boys walk past an old man and his water buffalo up on the road.

Loc pinches my stomach. She runs and jumps, flailing her legs until her feet hit the water. I dive in, come up under her, and pop her body above the surface.

“Stop,” she says, swimming away. She drifts like a leaf.

I swim to the falls and let the water crash off the rocks and onto my shoulders. Loc swims over.

“Count,” she says. “In case I get too dizzy.”

She breathes in and fills her chest before plunging under. She spins faster than the wheel on a moped, flipping, feet over head, and even with her heels dug into her butt it looks like her legs have grown longer. This time when she breaks the surface there will be no words, just the surprise of my lips.

The naked boys walk up the trail. I lean my arms on the edge of the pool. Their skin is like paper on their ribs. They kick each other in the butt every couple of steps. They stop just inside the clearing, cover themselves. Each wears a tight necklace made of blue clay beads. Their bodies are covered in ringworm and scars.

Loc pops up. She coughs out the word “seven” and then spits water in the air. “How many did you get?”

“I lost count.”

“You weren’t even watching.” Loc tries to dunk me, but her arms aren’t strong enough to move my shoulders.

“Get in,” I tell the boys as they approach the water with their heads facing the ground.

The smallest boy pushes the biggest one in, and the other follows. They cup their hands and squirt water at each other. The smallest boy asks me to throw him in. I dunk Loc under and swim to the edge. She rises up and hits the water with her fist. She’s smiling. The boy follows me up and over the edge. Clouds drift just above the line of trees.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Eight.” He has the blackest eyes I’ve ever seen, irises dark as coal.

“You are lucky,” I say.

“Lucky how?”

“You have two good friends to play with.”

“Sometimes they are mean.”

“Are they there?” I ask.

The boy turns. Our wet footprints lead from us to the edge. His friends splash water at each other. Loc floats away from them.

“How do you mean?” the boy asks.

“With you,” I say. “Every day they are with you. Right?”

The boy smiles; this means yes.

“Then you are lucky.” I grip under his arms, lift him above my shoulders, and throw him.

He crashes, back first. Loc shakes her head and swims to the falls. Sparkles bounce off the rushing water. Her face shines beneath the white cascade.

The biggest boy climbs out.

“Older brother,” he says. “Your eyes.”

“Yes?”

“They are blue.”

“Yes, they are.”

“But why?”

“Why not?”

I throw him in. Then I throw the third and keep throwing the three of them. They hit the water hard and come up laughing, come up and say, “Again.”

Loc gets out of the pool and walks past the diving tree to the hammock. I throw the boys until I’m too tired. Loc’s hair hangs over the side of the braided hammock.

“Can we share?” I ask.

She moves over. I lie down. Her body is wet, hot. I try not to look at her clinging clothes. Neither of us says anything. I can feel life passing through her thigh and into mine. Her heartbeat. The sun between our wet shoulders. A crow flies above the tree line. The sun burns my eyes. Maybe Mom’s spirit drifts within the clouds.

“What are you thinking about?” Loc asks.

“Mom.”

I have wanted to tell her for a long time about the way Mom died, but something won’t let me, and when I feel closer to her it makes this even more difficult. What would she think if she knew everything? About lying across the room when Sook came in. About almost punching her dead body. About leaving the last day I saw her alive.

“At least you have memories,” she says. “I could walk down the street and see Mother and a hundred other women, ten other women, one other woman, and I wouldn’t be able to pick her out.”

“But that’s what hurts.”

“What?”

I plant a foot on the dirt and send the hammock rocking. “Everything reminds me of her. When I catch a fish. When I see a frog. Sometimes I think I see her. On the road. In the market in Duc Lap.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

Loc rises. The hammock sways. She digs her chin into my chest. “You have the biggest shoulders I have ever seen on a boy,” she says.

“I’m not a boy.”

“You’re younger than me,” she says. “Twelve is a boy.”

“Almost thirteen.”

She stares into my eyes. I see my face in her pupils and wonder if she sees herself in mine. She reaches out her hands and touches each of my shoulders.

“I think they’re bigger than Grandfather’s,” she says.

“Because I’m a man.”

Loc rests her head against my chest. Heat breaks through the shade. Her hair smells clean. I hope she can’t see my shorts or feel what is happening against her leg. The leaves don’t move. Through this green I imagine that every bit of blue sky is a different shell. A different shape. A carved out piece.

“Older brother.” The smallest boy stands before us holding a crow.

Loc rolls over me and steps down. The hammock rocks.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Stop being stupid,” Loc says. “It’s a bird.”

“I know that,” I say, standing from the hammock and walking over to the boys.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Give it to me,” Loc says.

The boy hands her the bird and covers himself. I lean in closer. The crow moves its head back and forth. There is blood crusted on the feathers.

“Can you fix him?” the youngest boy asks.

“Let’s go to the water,” Loc says.

We follow her to a level edge where the pool meets the earth. Loc dips the bird in. The wings flap. Loc runs a finger along the back of the head.

“It will be okay,” she says.

The tallest boy approaches. “Can I hold it?” he asks.

“We’re going to let it go,” Loc says.

I search the ground for a flat rock and skip it across the water. It pops up four times before hitting the base of the waterfall. I want to ask her if we can keep the crow and bring it back to Grandparents and mash down peanuts and coconut meat, but I keep my mouth shut because she will think I’m a baby.

“You can touch the head,” Loc says. “Gently.”

The boys walk down the trail and squat before us. Loc lets them touch the head, one at a time, and they do so with respect for the bird, for her.

“She needs to go back to her family,” Loc says. “What if you boys didn’t have a family?”

“What?” the smallest boy asks.

“Nothing,” Loc says. “Back off now.”

She sets the crow on the dirt. It runs down the trail, wings flapping, water dripping, jumping like it wants to fly, but something is wrong with its right wing. The bird turns in circles.

“Go,” Loc says.

The crow flaps until it rises and turns in the sky, heading straight toward the trees in the distance where we will never see it again. Like the one-legged monkey. Some things don't feel real even though they really happened, like Loc somehow talked to that bird and gave it the courage to fly.

The boys jump back in the water and race each other to the falls.

“Do you want to swim?” Loc asks

“No,” I say.

“What's wrong?” she asks.

I scratch my chest. The sun burns my back. I think about Mom. “Nothing,” I say.

“Everything is good.”

“Did you want to touch the bird?”

“Don't be silly.” I follow her to the edge of the falls. We sit and dip in our feet. The rushing water kills my thoughts.

“Tell me about the GIs again,” she says.

“There's nothing to tell.”

The boys swim. It must be fun for the youngest to go on these journeys with his friends. “Tell me what they say,” she says.

“They're bad words.”

She squeezes my thigh. “Please.” Her eyes turn almost gold with the sun shining behind her. “Please, please, please.”

I mutter. “Sucky two dollar.”

She says, “What?”

“Sucky two dollar.”

She falls back and pulls me with her. “Sucky two dollar. Sucky. Sucky.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m serious. Stop.”

“I’m serious. Stop.” She grips hair on each side of my head, forcing me to look into her eyes.

I want to move because she will feel what is happening, but she has me trapped.

“What was that?” she asks.

“You started it.”

“*You* started it.”

Grandmother sets a bowl of hot water in front of Loc and another before me. We sit at the table dipping the dead ducks in and plucking out feathers. I pull on a short one, but it won’t come out. Grandfather takes a naked duck from Loc and puts in the burlap sack.

“Where did you go today?” he asks. He lifts his rice wine from the table. One of his eyes is closed more than the other.

Loc sets a feather atop her pile and looks over to Grandmother who lifts her eyes and tilts her neck. “The waterfall,” Loc says.

“You told me that,” Grandfather says.

Moonlight shines through the window and onto the dusty floor.

Grandmother says, “What he means is ‘Why were you gone so long?’”

Loc turns to me. I concentrate on the short feathers.

“We were worried,” Grandmother says. “The communists are close by. You cannot leave us for that long.” It is the first time I have heard anger in her voice.

“It was my fault,” I say. “I got lost.”

Grandfather picks up the piles of feathers, wraps string around a handful, and heads to the door. It slams behind him. We all look at each other, but none of us says anything.

“We’re all going to die,” Grandfather shouts into the night.

Grandmother opens the door. “Please,” she says.

“We’re going to be shrimp food.” His face and body look dark, and beyond him the pond and trees are black. Frogs croak their drawn-out song.

I feel sorry for the headless ducks and their bare bodies but know their deaths are necessary for us to live. The end of them is not what makes Grandfather like this. It is a combination of the day turning into night and the amount of rice wine he has drunk. I want to walk out to the storage barn and be alone. Grandfather is different than when I arrived. Nothing is right. He is all complaints: The ducks aren’t being cared for. The storage is dirty. The trail needs to be cleared.

“What’s wrong with him?” Loc whispers.

I say, “I don’t know.”

Grandmother closes the door. She loads the bowls into the basin and scrubs them with sand.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “One second he says one thing, and another second he says the other. It was his idea.”

“What?” Loc asks.

“To sell the ducks,” Grandmother says. “To get a boat and get out of here. To give you two a better life.”

The door slams open. "What are you talking about?" Grandfather demands.

"The ducks," Grandmother says.

Chapter 14

I hold tight to Loc's body inside this hole that smells like a potato left in the box too long. I can't see my arms. Every step on the wood above makes me shake. I blink. Bugs crawl all over me. Loc shakes. I feel like she's going to scream. They're going to find us. What if these soldiers have dogs? What if they bring them inside, and they sit and bark on top of the trap door, and an ax comes slamming through?

A body crashes into the wall.

A soldier yells, "Where are they?"

I grip Loc with one arm and put my hand over her mouth. Her breath is just as hot as the damp air.

"Please," Grandmother says. "Nobody is here."

Bangs and shatters. Sounds of slapping. Bowls and cups hitting the floor and chairs and tables kicked over. I want to tell Loc that everything is going to be okay, that we only have to wait, the same as I did when I hid in the jungle and let the soldiers pass.

"Do you think we're fools?" one of the soldiers says. "They told us you are hiding half-breeds. Where are they?"

"Who told you?" Grandfather asks.

A loud slap. "You question me?"

"Get up," a soldier demands. "What is in the barn?"

The door opens and slams shut behind the footsteps.

"Stay calm," I whisper.

"I'm trying," Loc says.

"You're doing good."

We breathe in and out at the same time like our bodies are connected, and I'm not sure how long we wait. Bugs crawling all over me, spiders the size watermelon seeds, and when I try to brush them away webs stick onto my arm.

"Try to sleep," I whisper, reaching out and covering her forehead.

I remember the day the GI's came and how there was nothing I could do to stop them. I remember hiding in the tunnel and being stuck and thinking I was going to die. What if the soldiers find us and rape Loc?

"What if you were blind?" Loc asks.

In this damp hole I feel closer to Loc than I have to anybody since Mom died, but I'm not ready for all of this to be over. We have more living left to do. I want to tell her this, to tell her everything, to whisper all my pain into her ear.

"I would miss everything," I say.

"Like what?"

"First I would have missed seeing you when I came through the jungle."

"And what else?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

Footsteps. I cover her mouth. The secret knock, but this does not mean that Grandparents are not being forced.

"They're gone," Grandmother says with a sense of relief.

I reach up and run my hand along the wood to find the hook. I unclasp it and push up the trap door.

Everything is blurry, dark, then back in focus. My arms are covered in spider webs. The neck of Grandmother's shirt is torn, and her skin is red. Loc crawls out. Grandmother hugs her. Grandfather stands in front of the window. He turns. Blank eyes. His nose is crooked, there is blood above his lips, and the skin on his face seems to hang.

"I'm sorry," Loc says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Grandfather rubs his hands together and goes back to looking out the window.

Grandmother steps toward him. She turns back to us. "We're going to get you out of here."

Loc brushes dust from her dress and leans against the wall.

"The boat will leave in a couple days," Grandmother says.

These boats go all the way across the sea to a place called the Philippines, but most of the people who get on never make it. They drown and come back as water ghosts or pirates rob them or sometimes there is never a boat going in the first place. That's what I think is happening here, and I don't trust Vinh or Mai. I haven't trusted them since the first time Grandfather took me to their village outside of Duc Lap to sell eggs. They don't care about us. They don't care about anyone but themselves, and they don't care about anything except for money.

Loc takes Kiki from the cage and holds the webbed feet and wings. She nuzzles the beak against her neck and whispers something. I peel off a strip of tape. I have been counting, and after this many times the action is automatic, but Kiki is different. Loc hands over her favorite, and I want to ask again, but I already know what Grandfather will say: There is no room for ducks or anything else on the boat.

I squeeze Kiki's beak shut, wrap the tape tight, and move on to his legs. Grandfather pulls the duck from my arms like it is just one of many. He secures the wings and ties it beside the others on the lattice strapped to the back of the moped. Some of the ducks wrench their necks and try to kick their legs, and this only hurts me more. I tell them I am sorry, that this is necessary, that at least they didn't lose their heads like the ones we plucked. Grandfather walks around the moped with twine, making sure each duck is secured. Grandmother stands in the doorway with a basket in her hands. She calls Loc over.

Everything is ready. We all get on the moped. Grandfather drives. Grandmother sits behind him, Loc behind her. I ride on the back with my hands on both sides to protect the walls of ducks and our basket of food. Feathers blow onto the trail as we ride beneath full green branches and up the hump that leads to the road. The old moped coughs and struggles, but we make it over. We pass a boy leading a water buffalo along with a rope secured to a ring in its nose. The boy stops and waves. Grandfather honks the horn. An old man walks along, strapped to a wagon like a mule, pulling a load of wood. As we pass families and farmers I feel important—rich with all these ducks. Every bump rubs me against Loc. She reaches her hand between my knees.

“Stop,” I say.

“What?” Grandmother asks.

Loc says, “Look.”

The three boys from the waterfall walk between the road and rice field. They see us, yell hello, and sprint behind the moped, running and huffing until it is too much, and they stop and bend, put their hands on their knees and hang their heads. Two men ride bicycles with baskets beside the back wheels and giant stalks of green bamboo pointing up to the sky.

The world looks so much bigger on this dirt road to Duc Lap where the whole blue sky can be seen and fields of rice stretch out on each side. We pass other mopeds. Up ahead is a section of tall trees clustered together across the entire right side of the rice field, the village outside of Duc Lap, where Vinh and Mai live.

A truck barrels down the road on the other side.

“Hold on,” Grandfather says.

When we finally pull through the trees and up to the market, my stomach rumbles.

Women lift lids from tin pots and stir soup once the steam has settled.

“Eat,” they say. “You are hungry. Eat.”

“Not now,” Grandfather says, rolling the moped past overflowing baskets of fresh bread.

I want to stop at every stand.

“Look at that half-breed bastard,” a young man says to his wife.

“Ignore them,” Grandmother says.

We pass more food stands. They are nothing more than four bamboo poles with cloth roofs tied atop, but it is like we have entered another world. We follow Grandparents, walking the moped between all the people, but I absorb everything as if I’m eating. Sweet red bean cakes wrapped in plastic. Sticky rice balls. Hard-boiled eggs on a stick. Boiling blood sausage. Coconut and sesame candies. Roasted watermelon seeds. Dried water buffalo. All the fresh fruit I could ever eat.

Vinh leans against the fence in front of his house and blows smoke into the air. His fat wife, Mai, waddles up to us like *she’s* a duck. She whispers as if people are trying to listen in, even though we are beyond the market, beside their house made of brick.

“You are so beautiful,” she tells Loc, looking her up and down like something she wants to buy.

“You have grown so much,” Vinh says. He puts his hand on Loc’s shoulder and removes it only when Grandfather steps in closer.

Loc stares at the worn path. I know from what she has told me that Mai is supposed to sew the gold leaf into her new ao dai. This is how we will survive after the boat drops us off.

Vinh paces around the moped. “How many are there?” he asks. His eyes are red like a drinker’s, his teeth missing.

“Twenty-six,” Grandfather says.

Vinh turns to me. “Who is this?” he asks, though we have met before. “You found another bastard?”

“Watch your tone,” Grandmother says.

Mai waddles between her and Loc. “Let’s let these men take care of business. I will show you what we have done so far.”

“Loc,” Grandmother says, “there is a hat in the basket for you. You too, Bò.”

Loc gives me one before pulling her hair up and lowering the hat so the brim covers her eyes. Grandfather unties the biggest duck and holds it out before Vinh. “Have you no heart?” he asks. “All these years I was good to you. Despite what people said. I told them, ‘Vinh is fair.’ Now you try to rape me.”

“I respect you,” Vinh says. “This is business.”

A man pulls up on a bicycle. He waves his loaf of French bread at Grandfather. “Do not sell with him,” he says. “Go down the road.”

“You go,” Vinh says, kicking dust. “Get out of here.”

I walk over to a wide palm and sit in the shade with my hat pulled low. The ladies come out from behind the curtain.

“You two go,” Grandfather says. “Let the adults talk.”

Loc and I walk into the market, looking down the entire way so that nobody turns us in. There are so many smells: fresh bread, boiling broth, meat grilling, gutted fish covered in flies.

There are legs and feet everywhere. Vendors yelling, “Buy! Best price! Buy!”

Loc stops in front of a dozen bird cages. Beyond them people walk in every direction beneath the tarps and out to the road that leads even further past Duc Lap, probably all the way to the mountain range in the distance. Loc bends before one of the cages. I squat next to her.

“What if the boat sinks?” she asks.

“It will be fine,” I say, but I don’t believe this.

“What if they rob us? What if they feed our bodies to the shrimp? What if the boat crashes and Grandparents have to swim?”

Beyond the cages, a butcher stands at a table slicing meat from the hanging leg of a pig.

“You worry too much,” I say. “We don’t even know where the boat is going.”

“Maybe America. Maybe Australia.”

I wonder if they ride on the backs of kangaroos like some people ride water buffaloes, but I don’t tell Loc this because I’d have to explain everything: how Mom and I jumped together, and then how I hid and pretended I lived in her belly.

“Maybe we could find your father,” Loc says. “Or mine. Not that he wants to see me.”

“What if I don’t want to go?”

Loc stops whistling at the birds. “Don’t say that.”

I want to tell her that I can’t abandon Mom’s spirit, that if I leave the country there will be nobody to pray for her and she will become an aimless ghost. Loc rises. I follow her under a canvas tarp, past shadows of tables and chairs. A mother and father eat noodles from the same bowl as their children. They look happy together. I want to ask them about boats, about whether they know anybody who has ever gotten out, but it’s like asking somebody what happens when you die. Nobody comes back to answer. Nobody comes back at all: only horror stories of families being robbed by pirates and drowned, of killers taking gold from the teeth of the dead to melt down and make rings, of bodies chopped up and fed to pigs.

A legless boy rolls between the people, his hands like stumps pushing the cart along as he calls out: “Sweet bean cakes.”

Loc gives him a coin. He reaches into the box beside his head, hands her two cakes, and then moves on through the maze of legs.

“What if you didn’t have legs?” I ask.

The shadow of the cloth roof splits a line through Loc’s hat and face. She takes a bite of the cake. “Then you might win a race,” she says. “What do you think it will be like?”

“Me beating you? Like every other day.”

“You know what I mean,” she says. “If we get to America.”

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

I push the beans against the roof of my mouth and suck the juice. I wonder what stops me from telling her everything about Mom and Uncle and the Viet Cong soldier. Losing her? Leaving the country was always a dream we both knew would never be realized, something we talked about because it gave hope, it gave something to look forward to, but deep down we both knew, and now, with the possibility this close, it is like all that hope has exploded, like there is only sadness and fear, because every good possibility I have ever imagined turned out bad.

“It will be beautiful,” I say.

“We won’t need hats,” Loc says, turning to walk in the direction where we left Grandparents.

When we return to Vinh’s, nothing is said about the ducks or the money or the future, or anything. The moped is back to what it was: rusty, dented, and bare. Grandfather stands next to Vinh. Both of them smoke cigarettes and drink from bamboo cups. Grandfather’s face is redder than it was before we left, and he appears to be looking beyond the fields, to the line of mountains.

“Go with Mai,” he barks at Loc. “See what she has done on her machine.”

Grandmother takes Loc’s hand. The three women walk into the brick house.

I return to the market. A woman with long hair parted down the middle stands beneath a cloth roof. She arranges satchels on a line of string, and I’m drawn to her. She is Mom’s age and looks similar. Her smile is comforting.

“All of it is the best quality,” she tells me.

“What about this one?” I ask.

The purse is red like Loc's ao dai is supposed to be, and in the center is a brown duck that looks like Kiki.

"Five hundred dong," she says.

She gives this price to enter into a bargain. I know how to do this. Mom taught me when we used to sell flutes. I take all the coins Grandfather gave me for plucking the ducks and put them on the table beside her cash box.

"This is not enough," she says.

"Please," I say. "I must get something for my friend. This will be the last thing I can get from Vietnam."

The woman closes her eyes and nods. She unties the satchel from the line and hands it to me. Then she picks up my coins and gives them back.

"My sister has a mixed race child," she says.

I smile to thank her and walk away before she changes her mind. I take Mom's jade from my pocket. Sunlight spins from the stone onto my arm.

She is the only one like you, I say, looking to the blue sky.

Lucky Boy.

She is with me as I slip the jade fishhook into the purse.

Take care of her.

When I approach, Grandfather spits betel juice and curses about Chinese gangsters. Loc comes out from the brick house with her arms crossed over the bright red ao dai. She looks like a woman, her head tilted to the side, eyes down. She glances up at me and then looks back at the ground.

"It is beautiful," Grandfather says.

Grandmother and Mai have moved beside their husbands, leaving Loc standing before the brick house with only stretching fields, mountains, and sky behind her, like this is her house, and I imagine this to be our house.

“For a beautiful girl,” I say, stepping toward her.

Loc presses her knees together and looks at the ground.

Grandfather glares at us.

Beside Vinh and Mai’s house, ducks snap inside the rusty cages. Their feathers blow through the links and stick to the brick. Dried green and brown shit covers the ground all around that side of the house, and the way the ducks are all stuffed in there, I wonder if they’ll ever get out, if the ones we just brought will ever see a pond again.

“Come with us,” Grandmother tells me.

I follow her inside the house.

“This camera was a gift from the Americans,” Mai says.

“I have a gift too.” I reach behind my back and into the waistband of my pants.

“It’s Kiki,” Loc says. She lowers her head and puts the satchel over one shoulder. The strap rests against her neck and drapes down the middle of her ao dai. She runs her pointer finger around the edges of the duck. “What’s inside?”

Mai smiles at Grandmother and raises her eyebrows. Grandmother’s lips curl up like she’s trying to stop from laughing.

“Look,” I say.

Loc reaches in and lifts out the jade. “I can’t take this,” she says. “It belongs to her.”

“Please,” I say. “I want you to have it.”

Loc walks forward like she’s going to hug me but stops short. “Thank you,” she says.

“Come,” Mai says. She takes our photograph.

We walk back outside. The air smells like rain. Miles away half the sky is like dark ash. Grandfather takes money from Vinh and puts it in his pocket. Loc’s ao dai blows back and forth. I will go anywhere she wants me to go, and Mom will understand this.

This place that has been home is different without the ducks. The days seem so quiet after getting used to the quacking being silence. I stand at the window peeling garlic. Grandfather walks halfway around the pond, turns back and walks the other way. It looks like he’s talking to himself or yelling something into the dark trees. Grandmother and Loc sit at the dinner table. Grandmother tears apart strips of salted duck meat. Loc chops bamboo shoots.

“What will we do when we get there?” she asks.

I watch Grandfather and listen, but Grandmother doesn’t say anything. She stands and lifts the lid from the pot atop the stove. Steam escapes.

“You will be accepted,” Grandmother says.

“I mean during the day,” Loc says. “Will we have ducks?”

I sit down next to Loc and give her the garlic to chop. I peel an onion. Tears burn my eyes.

“You two will go to school,” she says. She wraps her thumb and fingers around Loc’s ponytail and pulls down. “You will take care of us.”

“But what if there is trouble?” I ask.

“Do not bring bad omens,” Grandmother says.

I want to tell her about the stories I have heard, about the dangers of getting on a boat and going out into the middle of the sea. I keep chopping.

Through dinner I am silent, and afterwards, when Grandfather drinks his rice liquor and we drink tea, I say nothing. They don't even seem to notice when I walk out the door.

Wind blows the moon back and forth on the ripples of the pond. I open the barn door. It creaks. The swallow perches in the corner. Rays bleed through the holes in the roof, and I wonder what death is really like.

I lie on my straw mattress, eyes closed, begging for sleep, but I cannot stop thinking about being stuck in the middle of the water. I cannot stop thinking about screaming out for the others. About swimming in the darkness. About floating on my back and looking up at the moon and knowing I'm going to die. It is this sense I have. Maybe this is Mom or Uncle or Grandfather. Something tells me not to go. I lift the VC's knife off the floor and run the tip into the skin atop my hand: a hairline of blood. The door opens.

"What are you doing?" Loc asks.

"Nothing."

"Where did you get that knife?" Loc sits down on the bed. She leans forward, takes the Zippo from my table, and lights the candle I use for reading in bed.

It is a story I must tell her. It is a rotting poison I need to be rid of so that I don't have to go to the spirit world with this guilt. Her shadow bounces on the wall. She leans back on her palms.

"It is a Viet Cong's knife," I say.

"How did you get it?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Tell me."

“I don’t know where I was,” I say. “There were nights when I heard footsteps and voices and the sounds of guns thumping like flat tires spinning round and round, and all of it was in my mind, but this night was clear. The sounds were clear. The man’s voice was so close. He was drunk, and he was singing ‘Chairman Ho is a good man’. He was singing it in a joking tone, but I knew by his voice that he was communist. That he was angry.

“It was so dark. I knew he was drunk and that if he found me he would kill me. I could hear him coming closer. I could hear the other VC yelling for him to shut up, but they were far away. I was sleeping next to a creek. I had been sleeping there for many days because sometimes I could catch fish and I needed water. It was the best water I ever drank.

“The man is coming closer. So close I can hear his feet crunching sticks. I hide my pack and get into the creek. It was so dark that night. So dark. Under the water it is even darker, and I can still hear him. Getting closer. I hold my breath. He’s splashing. His foot hits my leg. It was his fault. He was walking all around me. He keeps coming, and I try not to move, and I can’t hold my breath any longer, and that’s when it happens.

“He falls on me, and we both jump at the same time, and I don’t know who is more scared, but he pulls out his knife. And I try to choke him. I remember pulling at his eyes. Then I remember a burn in my shin. I reach back, and his arm is coming forward with the knife.

“I’m sorry, Loc. I don’t mean to scare you. I don’t know what happened.”
“No,” she says, putting her head on my chest. “Tell me. It’s okay to cry. You can tell me anything.”

“There’s nothing left to tell. Just white light. Just the knife from his hand into mine. Then I’m kneeling with the bloody knife, and his body is floating. It’s floating in the water.

His head is down. The water washes away the blood around his neck, but it keeps coming. I'm holding the knife. I turn him over. His whole neck is blood. His shirt: blood. I'm holding the knife. I can see the blood on the shining steel. And his eyes. I'll never forget his eyes. They look back at me like he hasn't given up. They look back at me like he's saying, 'I'm not done with you, half-breed.' They look back at me."

"What did it feel like?" Loc asks.

"What?"

"When he died."

"It didn't feel like anything. I was afraid."

Loc reaches in her pocket and takes out a brown piece of paper that she carefully unwraps. It is the photograph Mai made of us, and in it my eyes are serious and my mouth is closed, but I'm smiling. Loc is looking toward my chin. Her lips are bigger than mine, and I never realized this until right now. My skin is darker, hers the color of newspaper behind the print. Both of us stand with our toes pointed inward, my shoulder behind hers.

"We look good together," Loc says.

She rolls onto me and presses my arms behind my head. I don't struggle. She kisses both of my eyes. Kisses my forehead. My cheeks. Her lips touch mine, and this contact sends a vibration through my entire body. I hold my hands in the space between her ribs and hips. Our tongues touch. I breathe her breath, and why didn't I know before: how this would make the whole world safe and warm, how the caress of her fingernails would make my head tingle, and now that I know, I don't want to stop. I want to do this forever.

Chapter 15

“I will die here!” Grandfather yells. He throws a mug at the wall.

“Stop,” Grandmother says, reaching beneath the table and gathering shards.

I stand in the corner where it is dark, as if moving from this position will cause Grandfather to explode. I don’t want to be here, don’t want to see the veins on Grandmother’s forearm as she reaches, don’t want to see the saliva collecting in the corners of Grandfather’s lips as his face continues to get redder, but I have to be here, for Loc, for Grandmother. The same as I was for Van Le.

“We will find another way,” Grandmother says. “Mai said she will take care of it.”

“Fuck Mai,” Grandfather says. “She is a dirty, greedy whore. She probably never even knew a boat man. It’s all probably a lie.”

“Stop,” Grandmother says. She looks right at me, then at Loc, then back at Grandfather. “Don’t make it any harder.”

I inch out of the corner and walk outside. The air smells like rain. Stars drift with the shifting wind on the surface of the pond. I get on the tire swing, brace my feet on the ground, and twist until the rope won’t turn any further. Then I lean my head back, lift my feet. Turn slowly. Faster. Increasing. Nothing is in focus—the whole world a blur of dark and light.

Is this you? I ask Mom. Not wanting me to go. If we stay here the communists will come, and eventually they will find us, and who knows what they will do. They may hang both of us by our feet or cut off one of my hands and make me beg for them in Duc Lap or Saigon. Something has to happen soon or they will take us away from Grandparents and probably from each other.

My stomach feels like I ate bad berries. The tire has stopped, and everything is in focus, but my head still spins. Mom says nothing. The only sounds are the cicadas and an occasional drunken shout from the house.

The key is in the moped which is beside the storage barn, and Grandfather is so drunk that by the time he got his gun I could be halfway to Saigon, but I understand now. I understand why Mom stayed in that village and let Sook do what he did. I understand how she still believed even when I knew. I understand how she was trapped by love, how it's not a choice, how it's not the mind that is in control. Maybe she tried to get it out of her head, but it is like those lice that never leave.

The door opens, and Loc walks toward me. Her eyes are red.

“What is it?” I ask.

Loc puts her arms around me. My cheeks warm against her hair, and as our chests touch my dick starts to grow. It isn't right for this to happen when she's sad, but I can feel her through her T shirt, and everything is warm, like we're floating together in the dark.

“The man with the boat drowned,” she says, letting go of me. “Everybody died.”

I don't know what to say because I don't know what I feel. Her words make me want to get on the boat even more. Like we've been robbed. Like something has been stripped away. Like we were cheated.

“There were little children,” she says. “Babies.”

I think of Burnt Rice running between all the villagers. What would it be like for children to be floating in the middle of the sea? For babies with no idea how to swim?

“It will be okay here,” I say.

Maybe we will be safe and escape the communists, but I want more. I can tell myself that I hate people for what they have done, that nobody cares, but there has always been a feeling that someday things will be different, that I will find a place where everybody accepts me, and behind a door inside my mind has always been the idea that this place might be America, that there the people might embrace the half that everybody else hated.

“I’m afraid,” Loc says. She pulls petals from a white flower and drops them to the ground. “There is a man coming tomorrow.”

Loc tells me that Mai knows a woman connected with American relief workers. She will give us a paper to get on a plane with other orphans and mixed race, but we have to hurry.

“What if Mai is lying?” I ask.

A cloud floats in front of the moon and splits off in different directions. Loc’s eyes blink. The sky and trees are dark behind her, the only light coming from the candle in the kitchen window. She folds her hands together.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“What about Grandparents?” I ask.

“They will stay.”

I turn away from her and ask Cuoi for strength. “I can’t take you away from them.”

“You are not taking me,” she says. “You are not doing anything. Grandfather said that if I don’t go I will be alone.”

It is the first time I have ever seen her cry.

“You will have me,” I say.

“You know what I mean,” she says, lowering her head. There is a dirty feather stuck in the ground. “Why does he do this?”

“He’s drunk,” I say. “Maybe he’s afraid.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I reach for her hand and hold it inside of mine. “Maybe his mind will change in the morning.”

She drops the flower, puts her other hand on mine. “He won’t,” she says. “Promise me you’ll go with me.”

“I promise.”

I lie inside the storage barn. The swallow sits upright in the nest. Light shines on her neck, on the wing I can see.

I’m afraid, I say.

Of what?

Leaving.

Then stay.

I’m afraid of that, too.

I watch the bird and wonder if Mom’s spirit lives within her. If I stare until my focus goes, will I be able to see her figure? I wish Loc would come and hold me until morning.

What about you?

I can go anywhere. Wherever you go I will be with you.

I wish you were here.

I am.

No, here. Here here.

I light the candle and stare into the flame.

Your fear comes from the unknown.

I think about life since she died, about waking each morning and brushing off leaves and applying mud, about wanting to go to Saigon but being afraid about what will happen.

But that's everything, I say. If I leave, you'll be all alone.

Bò, I am never alone. The sun. The moon. Think of me. I am inside of you.

I run a finger along the bridge of my nose—I'm not crying. I dip my pointer into the liquid wax. It burns. It forms a white helmet on my fingertip.

Sleep.

But I'm confused.

About the airplane?

About everything.

Chapter 16

If this truck actually makes it all the way to Saigon then I'll know that somebody from the spirit world is watching over us. The dirt road stretches ahead of us, all the way up to the highway where buses and trucks loaded with people make their way to Tan Son Nhut airport. At the fork, gray clouds hang over the tree tops. Behind us the sky is blue above our house, the clouds like white ladders climbing against the sky. The heat beats down, but the wind is cool up here on the top rack with the burlap sacks of frogs and bags of clothes and rice, chickens tied beside bicycles, and just the two of us. The driver fishtails around curves and speeds over bumps. Any second a swerve could knock us off and slam Grandparents into the dozens of people riding below.

Loc rests her arms atop bags on each side of her body. The wind blows her hair. "What if they hate us even more?" she asks, her voice vibrating.

"Who?"

"The Americans."

"Why would they hate us?"

"Because we are Vietnamese."

I tuck my feet beneath the rack. Dust rises up behind the truck. Nobody has ever called me Vietnamese, but she is right. Just like these people hate my blue eyes, the Americans might hate my black hair.

"Americans aren't like that," I say.

"You don't know," she says. "Maybe everybody hates us."

The people below chatter with worry about who the Republican soldiers will let on the plane. We have our papers, but I can't let myself think about what life will be like without Grandparents. I want to tell Loc that not everybody hates us and that the Americans will be different, but I don't know this. They killed Uncle like he was nothing more than a jungle rat. They raped Swan and Van Le. The Viet Cong never did this. Never to us. They only put up flags and passed out printed pages of propaganda and made the other kids memorize songs. They sometimes forced us to give them rice and hide their guns, but a Viet Cong never killed a single one of us.

It feels like the sky is moving as the driver speeds up and blows past a man hauling rice away from the field. He could be twenty. He could be eighty. His skin is darker than Burnt Rice's, and his calves fill like duck eggs with each pedal of the bicycle.

"Do you see that sword?" Loc asks.

"Where?"

She takes my hand. "Right there," she says, pulling me onto her.

The truck bounces us, but we hold each other tight, in the middle, protected by the walls of bags. Our lips touch, and the kissing is exciting with all of the people riding below.

Gunshots ring out. I smother Loc. There is nobody in the fields save for two old ladies in hats, no signs of movement in the trees, nobody on the bus far behind us brandishing a weapon. Gunshots hit the truck.

"I don't want to die," Loc says.

"I won't let you die."

I lean over the side but can only see the tops of heads. I don't know who is alive and who has been hit. Peasants huddle into each other on the floor. I should have known not to hope, to have realized that change is never going to work out for me. The truck swerves even more, and it feels like we're going to roll. Maybe we should have stayed. Maybe this chase to leave is only a way of running from destiny. If I'm hit or she's hit, then what have we accomplished? Loc pulls a bag over her head.

"Where are they?" she asks.

"I don't know."

"Check on Grandparents."

A girl lies between the people. The side of her shirt looks like it is decorated with a rose, but this is blood. Grandmother tells the girl's mom she's going to be okay, but the lady won't stop screaming. There are children crying and not enough room for everybody on the floor. The truck jerks as the driver switches gears. People crash into each other. Grandfather pushes a teenage boy. I grip the railing.

The driver shouts, "Stay calm."

People shout at him to go, to go faster, and to watch the road. The bleeding girl clenches her teeth as her mother holds her down.

"They're okay!" I yell to Loc. "Stay there!"

A peasant woman in a faded straw hat lifts the girl's shirt. Blood seeps into her waistband.

"The bullet did not enter," the peasant woman says, wiping away the blood with a sweat towel.

The little girl screams. The woman presses the towel against her side and holds her tight. Everybody is quiet. The rapid gunshots stop. The riders whisper. Behind us the bus is getting closer, but these are just families, people like us. A single shot rings out from somewhere amongst the trees. Another follows. And another. Quick rounds of fire: enough gunshots to kill a small village.

The truck jumps from dirt to highway. People with mud-stained shins rush up from the rice field. A man stands in the truck's path. The driver keeps going full speed ahead—the man's face filled with surprise and shock as the truck barrels through him—weaving between buses and the crowd of people begging for rides.

Republican soldiers run to jeeps and other long vehicles with their guns against their shoulders, knocking people to the ground on their way.

More buses overloaded with people and pigs and chickens and clothes and bicycles are lined up beside the entrance to Tan Son Nhut airport. There are GIs and Republican soldiers everywhere, in front of and behind the fence, milling around American planes and bombs stacked up next to buildings. Everything smells like gasoline, sweat, and exhaust. Jets rise into the sky one after the other. Helicopters swirl like swarms of dragonflies.

The people on the ground run to the buses. They stand below the windows, reaching up as if they want inside the bus, as if they have been turned away. There are too many people inside already, scrunched next to each other, pushing forward to the front of the bus, stepping down: one, two, and three at a time, breathing in this air that smells like gasoline.

The driver of our truck helps the people down. I lower the bags. As quickly as one lady and her boy receive them, they are off, running with the masses, trying to push closer to the fence where armed soldiers stand guard.

A round of machine gun fire.

The crowd runs from the fence. Tanks roll across the tarmac as children are rushed onto the back of the largest plane I have ever seen. Ten trucks would fit side by side in the back. This must be the one we are supposed to get on. The one that Grandmother said is called Operation Babylift. The one sent by the president of the United States: Ford. He must be a rich and powerful man because his family's name is on many of the American cars.

Grandparents stand at the bed of the truck as people rush the driver and demand that he takes them to a boat.

"Please," a father begs. "The communists are here. The airport is not letting anybody else in."

The man and his family climb onto the back of the truck, and I wonder what is going to happen to the little boys. Another lady tries to pass her baby through the window of the truck, but the driver notices and pulls her back. He reaches in and grabs a bamboo pole, walks to the back of the truck and beats the people trying to cling onto the racks. One of the men runs around to the front, jumps in the driver's side door and takes off.

Loc and I get our bags and leap from the top. I roll on the ground, out of control, knocking people over.

I yell, "Loc!"

She comes to me, and we run over to Grandparents. They are surrounded. The truck speeds through a crowd like the people are no more than branches flinging off to the side. Nobody stops to offer aid. Everybody seems to be running to or away from the fence. The driver runs after his truck, but he is not fast enough. This machine might have been his whole

life, the only way he had to survive, and now it is gone, and he sits on the ground with his hands over his eyes.

“We must hurry,” Grandfather says. “We must stay together.”

We all clasp hands.

It smells like rain. The wind shifts. The sky cracks open with explosions from the other end of the airport. A helicopter turns into a ball of fire and crashes down. Everybody runs. Thousands of people: running to get away, running toward each other, into each other, just running without an end in sight.

Grandmother squeezes my hand. Snot runs out of Grandfather’s nose, and saliva collects in the corners of his mouth, and all this quick walking makes him look really, really old.

There is a gate in front of the plane where dozens of angry soldiers stand with guns on their shoulders facing the crowd of people. A burnt rice boy looks all around like he has lost somebody, and in this stampede nobody cares who he is. He could even be Swan’s child.

A soldier slams his gun into a woman’s chest—we’re too far away, moving toward all this—and she falls to the ground in front of the fence. Other women try to push their children up to the entrance, but the soldiers knock them back. If this swarm of people overwhelms them, they might start shooting. Yet others try to pass their babies up to those close to the fence. They scream and beg. In front of us, a young boy falls. His mother ducks down to get him, and the crowd tramples over both of them.

“We must get you in,” Grandmother says.

Everybody pushes forward. The crowd pushes us, and we have to keep moving or be trampled. An explosion hits. The fire cannot be seen, but the smoke rises into the sky like burning tires, turning and twisting into the dark clouds.

A drop of rain hits my forehead like a grape smashing open. I squeeze Loc's hand. She squeezes back twice, like a heartbeat. Thunder rumbles. Bombs explode.

A woman walks with her infant above her shoulders and manages to get up against the fence, yards away from the entrance. I want to scream *No!* I tug at Grandmother and Loc, but they must think I'm just trying to keep up.

"The baby," I shout.

"What?" Loc yells, "What!?" but we all keep moving, Grandfather forcing his way through the people.

If I let go of their hands and run for the baby I will get separated, and there will be no way to find each other, but somebody needs to stop this. It's like nobody but me sees what is about to happen, or they don't care.

The mother crouches down, pops up, and launches her baby into the air. The infant hits the barbed coils atop the chain links and hangs by a leg on the airport side. The mother fights to climb. She slips down, and another man tries. Blood runs from the baby's knee. The upside down girl looks right at me. I turn away. The baby stares. Like I did this. Like she knows who I am. Like she knows what I am, and her face is like the face of an adult screaming for help.

A soldier rushes over from one of the jets, but he's not going to make it. A barb rips the infant's flesh from knee to ankle. The last thing I see are the little hands reaching up. Too many people to see her land.

There is no choice in where we go, pushed along by the masses, moving. Moving with no control, and this image, these last seconds of the baby's life keep playing over and over. The image drowns out the screams and explosions and gunshots. It is just the smell of gasoline and that baby looking up at me, that baby looking right into my eyes, and maybe the baby's soul died and entered my own. How would I know? Maybe death means no more pain. Maybe Mom no longer hurts. Maybe it is okay to die.

The crowd behind us has doubled. Buses filled with people continue to pull up. Grandfather pulls us along like a warrior who won't give up. A Red Cross truck drives between the entrance and the back door of the giant silver bird, picking up and unloading children. Rain pours down. The red bow in Loc's hair blows free behind her. Her ao dai sticks to her body, and I wonder whether or not the gold leaf can be damaged by water. The rain hits the mud and shit and piss, and the whole world smells like a hole beneath an outhouse.

Grandfather stops. We are only yards away from the fence, but nobody is moving. Grandfather's lips look blue. "You two must go on now," he says. He pushes a man who runs into him but is so weak the man doesn't even notice.

"I'm not leaving you." Loc wraps her arms around Grandfather's waist.

Rain drips down both their faces like waterfalls of tears.

"We have lived our lives," Grandfather says. "Let go. There is no life for you here." He takes Loc's chin in his hands. They are spotted with purple bruises. He takes his hands from Loc's face and pinches my elbow just hard enough to strike the nerve. "Take care of her." Grandfather bows his head at Loc. "Go," he says.

I take Loc's hand, and we step away from Grandparents. Before Loc and I get five steps, the crowd pushes through the space left between us and Grandparents.

Loc shouts back, "Grandmother!"

Grandmother bumps against another old woman and struggles to stay up. She and Grandfather fall at the same time. The crowd tramples over them. We splash through the mud toward Grandparents, but it is no use. Moving against the people is impossible.

At the entrance, soldiers use their guns like Bat GI. They don't care. They knock down the elderly and the children and throw them away from the gate.

We reach the front of the line where a soldier stands in front of the entrance, flanked by others with guns on their chests, ready to fire. The soldier demands to see our papers. Loc folds the top of her red purse over the brown duck and reaches inside. The soldier looks into her eyes.

"Another half-breed," he shouts to the soldiers behind him, "but this one's got a set of tits on her. Go ahead." The soldier slaps her butt as she passes through the gate.

The white fire of violence burns inside me.

"Papers," the soldier demands.

I reach into my pocket. The paper is wet and soggy. I unfold the top, but each crease is torn. The folds are stuck together. All of the ink has been washed away.

"What is this?" the soldier asks. "Get out of here."

"But I am with her."

"She has her paper," the soldier says. "I don't care who you're with, bastard." He rams the gun into my chest.

I push forward and try to run past, but another soldier hits me with his gun. The two of them stand over my spinning world, the barrels of their guns aimed at my head.

“Go or die,” the first soldier says.

“Die.”

The soldier kicks me. Then two others roll me away from the line. Rain washes the blood down my face. It tastes like metal. I crawl through the mud and pull myself up the fence.

Loc rushes toward me but is grabbed by three soldiers. She kicks and screams. I can hear her yelling “please” between the echoes of bombs going off at the other end of the airport. The soldiers let her down, and one drags her by the arm toward me.

I beg Mom: Please. I will never ask for anything again.

She yells out my name. “Bò!” She yells out my name.

I try to reach my hand between the links. She opens the red purse. Rain runs down her face. I want to lift the wet hairs from her cheeks. Loc holds the photo Mai had made for us. We stand with our bodies pressed into each other, only this fence between us. Rain pours down. I try to reach my hands through the links. I manage only my fingers. Loc holds them. The soldier pulls her back. Loc rips the photo and gives me half. The soldier pulls harder. Loc grips the chain link. I grasp at her fingertips. My chest shakes. Her eyes are like golden brown fire.

The soldier wraps an arm around her waist. Loc refuses to let go. The soldier pulls her body horizontal. She’s crying and screaming and trying to hold on. Her face begs me to break through, but I can’t. The soldier rips her hands from the fence. She kicks and screams as he drags her back toward the plane. I scream her name. I beg the soldiers.

I jump onto the fence and climb halfway up before the butt of a gun crushes my ribs. I fall into the mud. I slap a puddle and scream. Feet hit my side. People walk on top of me. Go ahead. Crush my ribs. Break my skull. I don't care anymore.

I lie in the rain for a long time, listening to screams and explosions, wishing that all of this would end. Wishing I had never been born. They were right. I am a curse, a good-for-nothing-half-breed bastard.

The crowd stops pushing forward. Chills run up my legs. I take off my shirt and wring out the rain. The airplane Loc got on rolls between yellow lines and heads for a man waving two orange flashlights. The roar of the engine hurts my eardrums. There is no point reaching through the fence. No point in running or climbing. Soon she will be in the air, and I will be stuck on the ground. The plane turns a corner and continues on before stopping.

The flashlight man runs off to the side. The plane races forward, gaining speed, straight down the tarmac, and just when it looks like it will drive into the rice field, the wheels fold up, and the belly lifts, like a fat bird rising.

The plane climbs toward the clouds. Thousands of people watch the same plane, but I feel alone. The nose lowers and the back rises. The plane flies straight like Loc's body was only moments ago. I wonder if she can see me.

At the road, people cram onto buses and fill trucks. The airplane has risen above the clouds, out of sight.

"Help us," a young mother says, cradling her baby against her side as a boy no more than three walks with them.

"How?" I ask.

“We need to get out of here. The buses will not let us on.”

The young boy turns. His face is deformed, like wax that has sat in the sun for too long. He has no arm. His hand is attached to his shoulder. Why she chose me to ask for help I'm not sure, but I pick up the boy and walk to the front of the bus.

“There is no room,” the driver says.

I take three American dollars out of my matchbox. “Please.”

The driver takes my money, money I was going to keep forever. He lets on the mother and her children. For a second I feel better. Then it's gone.

The plane flies through the clouds, the nose pointing down. It turns and comes back toward us. A dark cloud follows the back end. It looks like smoke. Others have stopped running. Everybody is looking up. Something is wrong. The plane descends like the ones I saw land at the base in Cam Ranh Bay, but this plane is still above the rice field.

“It's going to crash!” a woman yells.

The plane glides like a heron approaching water. The nose hits. Smoke rises. Everybody gathers around an old man who has binoculars.

“It split in three,” he says. “There is fire everywhere.”

People push and jump and grab at the old man, knocking him to the ground. I dive into the mud and tear the binoculars from his hands. People pounce on me. I throw elbows and fists and knock them all off. I run through the crowd, knocking people over, but I don't stop.

I find a spot by the fence where there are no soldiers. They have turned their attention to the crash. I hold up the binoculars.

Specks become people running out from clouds of smoke and falling down in the rice fields, rolling in the water and rubbing mud on their faces and arms. Helicopters swarm through the air. People lie dead in the water. Others run past them. A girl dives into the mud to douse her burning head and chest. A mother holds the hands of two children as they run. Red Cross trucks and jeeps race down the dirt road to the edge of the rice field. Soldiers and nurses rush out. Helicopters land.

Republican soldiers jump out and run through the smoke. They pick up children without limbs, children so bloody they must be dead, and run with them in their arms. Nurses walk among the wounded, their white dresses soaked in muddy water and blood. A soldier rifles through the pockets of a dead nun. He rips a chain from her neck and puts it into his pocket. Then he moves on to a white man. He slips the watch from the man's wrist and pockets this.

Loc is nowhere.

The field still smells like smoke, but everything has stopped burning. There are three distinct lines in the mud—they look like creeks—leading to the stripped down parts of the plane. Everything is so much bigger than what I saw from the fence, bigger than what I saw from the binoculars, and this makes me feel like I have never seen this plane before. I have never seen *this*. The water buffalo walking in front of a cluster of trees look like an ant compared to these destroyed parts. There are no more helicopters or soldiers or nurses. No dead or injured. Only people peeling away sheets of metal and carrying them up to the road as old men wait by bicycles and wagons while others work in the rice field on the other side as if nothing has happened.

A shirtless man with acupuncture circles on his back pries metal from the nose. He pulls the flap back and forth, then slips a machete into the crease and pounds it with a hammer. Two boys carry away a chair padded with cloth.

None of these people could have been on the plane when it crashed. They have no injuries. So where did those jeeps and trucks take the survivors? I want to walk into the back of the plane to know what Loc last saw, but the thought of finding her stops me. I circle around the front. A mound covers the nose. My feet sink into the mud. I search the scavengers for a smiling face, but nobody is smiling.

A teenager steps out of the nose and falls beside me. A black box slips from his hands and into the mud. He jumps up and bends his knees, tries to heft the box up to his chest, but falls backward.

“Let me help,” I say, crouching down, careful to keep my head facing the ground.

“You want to steal this,” the kid says. He slurs his words like he is drunk. Maybe he’s slow or simple.

“I just want to help you,” I say.

“You are him.”

One of his eyes looks off to the side, and I don’t know which one to concentrate on.

I reach down, and we lift together. “My name is Bò,” I say.

“I am Luong.”

I almost drop the box. This is not good luck. I need to get away from this kid as soon as possible, but something tells me that everything is all right, that I need this Luong as much as he needs me. We carry the heavy box toward the cluster of trees. I ask where they took the survivors.

“I must bring you to my mother,” Luong says. “There are many bad people here,” he whispers.

We walk under the trees where the shade makes life bearable again. Luong approaches a lady in a hat and a scarf, his mother, and says something I cannot hear. As she bends to sort through the metal and cloths they have collected in their wagon, I see the knots in her hands and knuckles, her skin that of a peasant burnt by the sun for many years, but she appears strong, confident, as if this work has not beaten her, will never beat her.

She lifts a blanket from the pile, folds it in front of her chest, then turns to me. “I saw her,” she says. “She showed me a picture of you.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know. Everybody is gone.”

I tell her about Loc, about how we met, about the ducks, about swimming at the waterfall and sinking to the bottom of the pond together, and as I talk I cannot stop; it is better than any crying I have ever done. I keep talking, all the way back to the dead GI I found and forward to the other Loung and Dung and having to run and hide as a child, to Bat GI, to Sook, to Tung, to the burial of Mom. The lady never diverts her eyes. She leans into me and nods the entire time.

When I finally stop speaking, I feel lighter. Others mill about beneath the trees guarding what friends and family bring from the airplane. The woman’s eyes are dark. The way she focuses makes me think that she’s going to say something about my own, but she doesn’t.

“The war took my husband,” she says. Her eyes do not change, but her lip trembles. “Come with me.”

I follow her past the three-wheeled bicycle to the cart attached to the back. Metal juts out in every direction. There are bags and clothes beneath this. Luong chews on a strip of young bamboo. His mother zips open a bag.

“This,” she says, pulling out a strip of red silk. “I found this after she left.”

I hold the silk up to my nose. It smells like Loc.

It will be okay.

The gold leaf is visible through the tear between front and back. Blood stains the white inside.

“Keep this,” the mother says.

I want to take out my Zippo and burn the cloth, to send prayers to Mom and Uncle. I want to keep the ash and throw it into the wind so she will know I’m thinking about her.

“Is there a hospital nearby?” I ask.

“In the next village,” she says. She takes a shirt from the bag. “Do you need clothes?”

“Where is she?” I realize I have raised my voice at an elder. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” the woman says.

Chapter 17

The air smells of gasoline, and I miss the fresh breeze coming off the sea. I take the knife from my belt and look down both sides of Phu Tuyet alley to make sure no one has followed. Saigon is filled with crazies I can't trust. I pry the rusty grate away from the brick wall and crawl through the open space. The abandoned building is dark, the sounds of footsteps and traffic faint. I have gotten used to the overpowering odor of cockroaches and rat shit. I tap the crumbling stucco like a blind man. I find the door handle and walk down to the basement, past the first room and through another door.

Safe now, I unravel the red silk and pop open the Zippo, light the candle just inside the opening. Shadows flash on the wall. Miko sleeps on the sheets with his paws tucked against his thin ribs. His name doesn't mean anything. It came to me in the seconds it took to push away those kids and ask how they would feel if I hit them with sticks.

Light passes through the pile of green and brown bottles I've collected in the street. More stucco and chunks of cement have fallen from the iron rafters, and if this ceiling caves in, it will be the end. Some nights I wish for it.

There are no sounds down here. The world is gone. It is only me and the spirits who have left this earth.

I kneel before the table of boxes and burlap sacks and light incense to mask the stink. I pray to the photos: Loc and Daddy. This is my altar even though both are still alive. Streaks of gold spread out from the edges of the photos. Loc watches my shoulder, and when I look closer it feels like she's trying to tell me something. The gray paper doesn't show the color of her eyes, but I remember her splashing beneath the waterfall, the sun shining on her face; I

remember turning to look at her riding behind me; I remember the night in the barn when we kissed, and I remember lying in the hammock beside the waterfall.

Shadows of light hit the wall where I've drawn trees and houses with charcoal. The tears will not come even though there is a well of them somewhere. Miko runs in his sleep but doesn't open his eye. Where is he going? Is he chasing or being chased? Is he imagining being younger? Maybe he wants to be somewhere else.

I run a finger above my lip and wonder if the thin hairs will turn into a moustache as thick as Daddy's. I hold Miko tight to my chest and wish he would open his good eye. Fleas crawl around his ear. I get that feeling again: Loc is inside a tight space, calling out my name, waiting for me.

I take a pinch of tobacco from the coffee can beside my bed and roll a cigarette with newspaper. This is my meditation, slowly pulling in smoke, holding, and then breathing out. In this moment I think only of smoking.

Time does not exist after I blow out the candle. I cannot see my hands or feet, cannot see anything, but the darkness will not let me sleep. There is no quiet in the silence, and I have no idea how long I have been lying here, feeling Miko's heavy breathing and trying to stop my mind.

I walk along the lamp-lit Saigon sidewalk with my hat pulled down to the top of my sunglasses and my shirt hanging over the knife inside my belt. Shadows of tree branches dance on the sidewalks and up the brick buildings. Steam rises from boiling cauldrons and circles above drunken men sitting beneath hanging light bulbs as pigeons peck rice from a puddle of puke and hop from sidewalk to street. The drunken men talk nonsense—three or

four different dialects at the same time. They slurp broth and suck up noodles and smoke and drink liquor simultaneously, and I never want to be like this. I never want to be like the orphans who suck glue from paper bags.

A thin man bangs his fists on the plastic table. Glasses fall. Two men slap the thin man in the ribs at the same time. He yells made up words. Then he stops, salutes, and his tone changes as he relates a story with the seriousness of a medium predicting the future. During the war he went six days without sleeping, he killed Americans in walking dreams—people told him what he did—and when they got to the place where they slept each night he remembered none of it.

“You can ask any of them,” he says.

“Shut up and eat,” an old woman tells him.

He’s just another drunk, but as I walk from the sidewalk down into the street I understand what this man feels, and I wonder if he too sees floating strings of light when he tries to concentrate.

A lone moped turns a corner. A girl rides side saddle behind the driver. The drunks stand up one at a time and wobble down the street beneath the pink lights where prostitutes pull them through the door. Dogs eat scraps from beneath the tables. I could beg for a bowl; I could rob one of these drunken men—I’m twice their size—but I don’t like the way that makes me feel.

I walk away from these men toward the alley where there is a woman who sometimes gives me a sweet potato for sweeping and hosing down the sidewalk in front of her shop. She is not there.

“You want a good time, big man?” a woman asks from the steps below a pink light.

I keep walking, and I wonder what I would do if I had money. A scream rings out from somewhere in the alley, and I run over to find a man pressed between the legs of a dark mixed race girl with his pants around his ankles. As she beats his back the memory of Sook on top of Mom comes back. I dive into the man and knock him off the girl. My elbow slams into the concrete, but I feel no pain. I slam my forehead into the man's nose. The cartilage crushes. Something hits me in the back of the head. I spin and ram an elbow into the side of somebody else's head. A foot kicks my ribs.

One tries to hold me down while the other cocks back with a bottle, but they don't know I'm crazy. I shake. I flail my arms. The bottle smashes against my head. I get my hands around the rapist's neck and choke until he lets go.

"What do you care about black whores?" the rapist whimpers.

"She's just a girl!"

I catch the foot of the rapist and twist. He screams. The other man turns to run. I let go of the rapist, give chase, and tackle the other man.

"You broke my leg," the rapist says. "She's just a fucking half-breed. A nigger half-breed."

I punch the other man's head with both fists. The rapist moans and tries to drag himself out of the alley.

"Go," I tell the other man. "Get out of here."

He scrunches up his forehead and turns to the girl. "I'm sorry," he says, and then runs out of the alley.

I kneel on the rapist's chest, press his arms against the ground, and spit into his bloody face. He begs me to stop. I pound a fist into his broken nose.

“Please,” he says.

I keep swinging. Everything turns the white of lightning. I’m crying and punching and the man’s head is bouncing against the concrete, and I’m thinking of Sook and thinking of Loung and thinking of Mom and Uncle and thinking of running and thinking of the plane taking off and thinking of catching it with one hand and gently setting it on the ground. I reach for the knife. A hand touches my elbow from behind. I think it’s the mixed race girl.

“Please,” a burnt rice boy says. “Don’t kill him. They will find us.”

Lamplight shines on the whites of the boy’s eyes. His skin is the color of the muddiest parts of the Cuu Long. He has the same dark freckles around the sides of his big nose that Burnt Rice had, and both him and the girl have nostrils so big they could put a peanut shell in them.

My brain shakes inside my head. The rapist doesn’t move. He may be playing dead. He may be dead.

“Kill him,” the girl says.

“Rose.” The boy rubs his hand against her side. “They will kill us.”

Everything hits me at once: the brick wall; the dim yellow light; the wisp of clouds in the gray sky—no stars in Saigon; far off voices of drunken men; the clap of bicycle tires; engines humming; the quick breaths in the girl’s nose.

I put the knife back in the holder. The girl comes to my side.

“Are you okay?”

“Hit him,” I tell her.

She kicks the rapist’s head.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

The boy and girl follow me to the lake in the middle of Dam Sen Park. We sit on the bank. The lamps along the sidewalk reflect in the water.

“Your arm is bleeding,” Rose says. “Let me help you.”

I run a hand over my head. A knot has risen, and the lump is tender. I cup my hands and lift water to my face. It stings. A paddle boat shaped like a flamingo rocks back and forth against a dock. I lean back on the grass and look up for stars, but there are none.

The girl looks into my eyes. “Please,” she says, reaching for my wrist and scooping water with the other hand. “This is going to hurt.” She runs her palm against my elbow.

I close my eyes and breathe deep as she digs in with her fingernails and scrapes away the shards.

“I am not a prostitute,” she says. “I sell roses. They call me Rose.”

“I am Pok,” the boy offers. His top lip is deformed so that it looks like it folds in on itself. “We have seen you sing before.”

“Bò,” I say.

Rose lifts my arm closer to her eyes. “I think that’s all the pebbles,” she says.

I thank her. Pok digs his heels into the bank above the water’s edge.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” he asks.

“In fights.”

My head throbs. I put on my sunglasses and hat, pick up my walking stick, and climb the stairs to the first floor. Sun shines through the diamond spaces of the grate. I poke my head out and scan the brick walls for shadows. Miko sniffs the light and drags his tired body

outside. The dog lies by the dumpster where he will spend the entire day licking up garbage juice. I secure the grate and walk out to the road.

Everybody seems to have a purpose: the scent of agarwood drifting out of the old woodcarver's shop; students in blue and white uniforms passing with books under their arms; rickshaw drivers smoking and waiting for fares, but there is a certain control that a blind man has when tapping his cane, and I feel this as people step out of my way.

Kid's Alley smells like piss. Pok and Rose cuddle beside a dumpster. Rose takes a paper sack from a boy I don't know, inhales, exhales, inhales, and passes it to Pok. The bag inflates and deflates before his arm drops to his side. There are sores around his cleft lip. His head falls forward like his neck muscles are made of rubber.

"Vu wants to feel your muscles," Pok says.

I hit Pok's foot with my cane. He looks around like he doesn't know where he is or how he got here. I wonder if Swan's baby ended up like this.

"That stuff is ruining your brain," I say.

Rose says, "We are hungry."

A boy crawls into Pok's lap, reaches out his hand and holds it in front of my knee. This must be Vu. "Hungry," he says. "Please. Hungry."

Every day I tell myself I'm not going to give them money because I need to save to hire a truck. Giving is one of the only things that makes me feel like a good person, but if I don't save money I'll never get back to Grandparents. I'll never know if they are still alive, if Loc made it back there after the crash. The bus would be the cheapest way, but the stations are filled with Northerners trained to turn me in.

As the little boy reaches out and tugs at the hem of my pants, I can't help myself. I know that fear. That pain. That confusion. I put fifty dong in the small hand.

The boy closes his fist and smiles.

"You need to work," I say.

Pok pulls dried grass from his hair. "I am working."

I walk out of the alley. A pink glow reflects off the windows on the Hotel Continental. I wonder if William ever stayed here. I bend to pick up a half-smoked cigarette, and as I straighten, the student I have seen every day this week passes. I feel bad when I see her, like I'm being unfaithful or giving up on Loc, but I can't stop looking. Around her I forget that I am supposed to be blind. I get embarrassed about the way I look, the way I smell, the way I get my cigarettes by scavenging butts from the ground. The student looks right at me without disgust or fear; her look is one of sympathy, and maybe this is why I'm drawn to her.

I pass beggar children who recognize me even though none have seen my eyes. They call me "Old Boy" because of the cane. A boy and a girl walk yards in front of me, imitating a hunchback. They are friends of Pok and Rose and the others, and they sleep behind the dumpster in Tan Dinh Alley, curled up beneath a screen of flies, but at least they have each other.

I arrive at my spot in the middle of the Dam Sen Park where three paths converge. I stand in the shade of bannock trees and set my hat on the grass. The air smells of hibiscus. Men in fancy shirts and ties that must have been tailored in Bò An walk past with cases in their hands. Their hair is clean, cut, combed. I hate them but need their change; I'm hungry, and Miko is too.

Mothers push babies in strollers. A couple sits two trees away, alternating bites of what looks like a pork liver sandwich wrapped in brown paper. A woman stands beneath an umbrella selling ice cream out of her cart.

The children will come up to me once there are some coins in my hat, and they will say, "Just enough for a fried donut. Please." I will reach in and give each child twenty dong, and as they walk away I will hear them talking amongst themselves and asking each other how the blind man always gives the same coin.

I close my eyes because it's easier when I can't see. The first song I always sing is for Mom. It's for the two boys eating ice cream on the grass, wealthy kids in white shorts and socks pulled to their knees. If I can get them, I'll get the mother, and she's the one with the purse. She wears a bonnet and holds a fancy Japanese umbrella over her sons; she must be the wife of an officer.

I twirl the cane, lean forward, and let it hold my weight. I sing.

"The monkey climbs. The tiger runs. The bird flies. All for fun. None are dumb."

The kids laugh as I sing faster, imitating each animal. This seems to please their mother. To make sure, I sing a communist song as fervently as though my life depends on it, which it does.

The full moon shines on our land
So that we can sing and dance
And make wishes for Uncle Ho.
Uncle Ho—we wish you a long life!
We wish you a long beard that we can stroke
While you hold us in your arms
And tell us how much you love us and our country!

Whether this lady supports the communists or not, she lifts her chin straight and holds her boys by her side because she doesn't know who might be watching. Even the communists

support a blind man trying to survive by singing for the cause, but it's all so backwards. The communists came and demanded that nobody have property or possessions, that all was to be shared. There was to be no wealth. Everything was to be divided among the people. Then they took palaces and land and businesses. They took over people's homes because they were extravagant. They took cars. Then weeks later the same generals came out of these same houses, now their homes, driving Citroens and wearing tailored suits.

After a few more songs, I take the coins from the hat and put them in my pocket. Soon I will have enough. Cloud shadows drift across the lawn. I approach two ladies and their children.

"Have you seen this girl?" I ask, holding out the photo of Loc.

"No." The lady turns to her friend, and they rush past me.

I want to yell at her for not even looking, but there is no reason to cause a scene, especially when I'm supposed to be blind. I ask another lady. She doesn't know. Neither do the orphans. Two uniformed officers walk down the dirt path. I head out of the park, and when I get to the alley, I run all the way to the cave.

Three boys lean against the dumpster. As I approach, they jump up. I catch a boy whose leg is deformed. Heat steams above the dumpster lid. Miko sleeps underneath by the back wheels.

"I am not police," I say, showing him Loc's picture. "Have you seen this girl?"

"No," the boy says.

I squeeze his arm. "Are you sure?"

He gives the photo a closer look. "I don't know anything."

“Then go, get out of here. You’re all worthless.” I tap Miko’s butt with my foot. “At least I have you.”

He stands and rubs his head against my leg.

Chapter 18

Grandparents' house has been overtaken by vines like an abandoned Viet Cong hideout. From a distance it looks no different from the rest of the jungle: green everywhere. I trudge through the weeds and elephant grass. The tire we used to swing on rots on the overgrown path. The matted ground around the pond cannot be seen. Grandfather's shirt and Grandmother's skirt hang on the clothesline. Moths have eaten through the soiled cloth. Spider webs stretch around the roof of the house.

I walk toward the front door. It's open, but there is so much green that I can't see inside. It smells like dead animals. I trudge through the weeds to the kitchen window. Behind the brush there is a half-burned candle as gray as the window it sits behind.

I squeeze tobacco inside newspaper and roll it up to mask the stench. I slap mosquitoes and tear spider webs from my face and neck. I want to rip away all these vines, tear them off the house and barn, and make this place what it was. I hate myself for waiting so long. I hate those beggar kids who care nothing about anybody but themselves. The blue sky stretches forever. Maybe the three of them are nearby, looking at the same thing. I scream into my hands. I am going to be alone for the rest of my life. There is no way that I will ever find them now.

I tear away vines and pull open the door. The smell is even worse inside: rat shit and dead cockroaches. A leg as gray as an elephant beneath the kitchen table. Toes like dried up hunks of ginger. I turn away.

Mom, please. Please tell me these bodies aren't theirs. I kick the kitchen table, but it doesn't fall. It's all tangled. Grandparents lie beside each other, but they are just bones and dried flesh. There is a bullet hole in the center of Grandfather's skull. Between weeds and

Grandmother's hand I see the satchel I bought for Loc. It is pink, the duck gray. I reach inside for the jade. Nothing is in there but a soiled notebook. I turn to the first page. I can't look at Grandparents. I'm afraid to dig around the rest of the house. The notebook shakes in my hands. The ink has run, but the words are still clear:

The nuns gave us these. They said to write what we are feeling because this is a special day. I'm feeling angry. Afraid. Lost. Alone. Very alone. I hate those soldiers. Why wouldn't they let him in? The nuns said we will want to read this later. I hate them. I hate everything. I can't believe you aren't with me....The plane is really loud now. Everybody is crying and screaming. I don't want to go without you.

I can't read anymore. I kick the kitchen chairs until the vines snap. I slam the wood into the wall, pick up pots from the shelves and smash them on the ground. There is no control—only white: me spinning and ripping up everything until I can't breathe, smashing every single pot, every glass and plate, searching for her, but she's gone. Whoever did this to Grandparents must have taken her. The tears come, and they won't stop, and I don't care who knows I'm crying. I can't take it anymore. I might as well be dead.

I fall to the ground, and who knows how long I sit there, letting the bugs crawl on my legs, breathing in the stink as some kind of punishment, daring whoever did this to come for me so I can tear them apart limb by limb. I reach over and touch Grandmother's hand. It feels like thin strips of bamboo attached to a dried pig's ear. I hold both their hands and breathe as if my life might bring back their own.

It's okay. They are with me.

“It's not fucking okay!” I scream.

I stand and kick the door until it falls off the hinges. I run to the barn. If Grandparents have already entered the spirit world they would have warned me not to go because if Loc is in there she's dead, and I don't want to see her. I peek through a slat left by a fallen board.

The sheets where I used to sleep are covered in grime. I open the door. Rats skitter into dark corners. Loc is not in here, and this gives me hope.

As I unravel the silk from my Zippo, walk outside and over to the clothesline, I pray to this family of mine, this family I cannot see, this family that continues to grow, and I wonder whether or not William is up there with them. I yank the skirt and shirt down from the line and carry them inside the house, put them in opposite corners.

I place a coin inside Grandmother's mouth. I place a coin inside Grandfather's mouth. I wish my last memory was something other than seeing their bodies trampled, and if I just would have come sooner, if I would have kept my money instead of giving it to those bastard kids, if I would have eaten less and not worried about feeding Miko, they might still be alive; I might have been able to save them from whoever did this.

I light the shirt, walk to the other corner, and light the skirt. They catch the bottom of the walls, and the flames spread to the broken chairs.

Chapter 19

He's here again—the man with the beard longer than Ho Chi Min's and thick gray hair that stands up like a monkey's and dark glasses and a cane that only real blind people need. He sits on a park bench in the shade of a willow. Dozens of silhouettes scattered on the fold up table in front of him. He cuts another from black cardboard. People pass him by on the sidewalk without even stopping to look.

I take a break to light a filtered cigarette that somebody dropped into my hat. The blind man sat down right about the time I went from my kid's songs into the laments, honoring the great communist leaders we have lost. He claps even though my last song finished over a minute ago, and he has clapped like this after every song. For a week he has done this.

Others clap sometimes and tell me that my voice has gotten better. But never like this. Maybe the blind man is crazy. Or Chinese. So many of them have come into the country recently and taken over businesses or started their own. Some of the orphans from Kids' Alley think that maybe the Chinese mafia killed Grandparents in order to kidnap Loc and force her to work in an exclusive mixed race brothel down by the river that caters to foreigners.

I stamp out my cigarette and approach the blind man. The lenses on his sunglasses are black as crickets.

“Do you like them?” the man asks in a strong Northern accent while waving his hand over the individual silhouettes. “I can make one for you.”

“I am poor, and I can't see,” I say, watching the rich walk along the sidewalk with plastic bags of soy milk and orange juice.

“You are a singer,” the man says.

Birds fight over berries in the trees behind him. Two boys run through the grass.

“I am only trying to honor the cause,” I say.

“I know you,” the man says.

A shiver runs from my chest up my neck and into my head. The man takes off his sunglasses. His eyeballs are black circles covered with a gray film. Both of them turn outward when he looks up and back in when he picks up one of the black cards.

“This one is Cuoi,” he says.

“It must be very nice,” I say. It is very nice: a figure in the middle of a circle, holding onto tree roots.

“But you haven’t even touched it,” the man says.

I reach out my hands. The man puts the silhouette into my palms.

“It feels like a boy in a circle,” I say, running my fingers along the distinct cuts.

“Do you know the story of Cuoi?”

“No,” I say. I only know what Mom has told me: that Cuoi lives on the moon and drinks from an immortal well.

“Walk with me, Child,” the man says, putting his sunglasses back on.

I help him to gather the silhouettes into his bag. I carry the table. The people we pass seem curious. The man who sells Polaroid pictures to the rich Chinese tourists takes our photo, assumingly because neither of us can see him. Even the woman who sells paddle boat rides on the lake turns from her chair and watches. Two lovers interrupt their picnic to stare and whisper. The blind man taps his cane, and I do the same. We pass the children who

always beg for fried donuts. The blind man bends and drops a coin in the can of a beggar who has no legs.

“A long time ago,” the man says, slowing down the pace, as we walk past trees, and I breathe in the eucalyptus, “there was a clever boy named Cuoi. He was always playing tricks on people, mostly his aunt and uncle because he lived with them. One day Cuoi came to the field and ran up to his Uncle. ‘Your wife has fallen down the ladder,’ he told him. ‘She is bleeding.’ Uncle ran back towards home. Cuoi took a short cut. He met his Aunt by the fence. ‘Uncle has been trampled by a water buffalo,’ he told her. ‘He is going to die.’ She was so scared that she ran out to the field.”

“To the field where Uncle was?” I ask, knocking a plastic cup off the sidewalk.

“Yes,” the man says. “On her way she ran into a man. It was her husband, sweating and breathing heavy. Like her. The couple locked Cuoi in a bamboo cage and pushed it into the river. The current brought him crashing into a bank, but he was still trapped. His uncle and aunt spotted him. He asked that they please return home and bring him this book that was hidden behind a basket of rice. It taught that lying was wrong. They left. A blind man passed by. Cuoi told him that his eyes would be cured if he untied the cage.”

This beginning of the story I have never heard before, and I believe the blind man is telling me this because he knows I’m a fraud. For a second I think that maybe he’s not blind either; maybe none of the blind beggars are really blind; maybe he’s inviting me to join a secret society.

“When Cuoi was freed, he hid himself in a bamboo grove,” the man says as we walk from sidewalk to street and wait for a clear path between traffic. “He found a jar of gold. He returned to his aunt and uncle and gave this to them to atone for his lies while the poor blind

man waited in a nearby village for his eyes to be treated. This blind man never regained his sight, and Cuoi continued to lie.”

My stomach aches. The pain is something different than hunger. All of these people passing by and turning around, talking about the two of us, makes me feel like I just stopped spinning on the tire swing.

“Cuoi got married,” the man says, ducking beneath a sign and leading me through the crowd to an alley. “He kept lying. One morning he came into the forest and saw a tiger mother picking leaves from a tree to cure her cub’s wound. The wound recovered right in front of Cuoi’s eyes. The cub followed behind with even more energy than his mother. Cuoi uprooted this magic tree. He planted it in the garden behind his house.” The man coughs and spits phlegm on the grass beside the sidewalk. “He called the tree ‘banyan’ and took very special care of it. He would scold his wife whenever she poured dirty water or dumped garbage anywhere near the tree. She got so jealous that one day she dumped garbage all around the base of the tree.

“When Cuoi returned home the tree was shaking. It began to fly into the sky. Cuoi dove for the roots, but the tree was moving too fast. He refused to let go. The tree kept flying higher and higher until it reached the moon. If you look up at night you can still see him up there.”

The blind man stops and uses the top of his cane to scratch his shoulder. “You couldn’t see him, of course.”

“Maybe I will dream of him,” I say.

“You do not have to see him,” the man says. “Though you may, if you look hard enough. Cuoi sits at the foot of the banyan, looking down upon the world. Before you lie,

look up to Cuoi and think. Think about what you're doing. Your lies don't affect only you. They may be taking from someone just like you."

I want to run. Not because the man is threatening, but because what he says is true.

"Cuoi watches because he doesn't want us to make the same mistakes. His lies have trapped him, far away from everybody."

"Maybe he is happier up there."

"All alone?"

"Maybe not. I don't know," I say. "I am thirsty."

"We will go to my house."

The hallway inside the crumbling brick building smells like fish sauce.

"Please hold this," the man says, handing over his cotton bag before feeling around for the key hole. The door creaks as he pulls it open. I set the bag on the table against the wall. A bamboo screen shields one corner, probably the toilet from the way the bottom is soiled. The man gives me a glass and points to his sink. There is a bed in the corner and an empty bowl on a table. Other than these few things, the place is barren. I walk to the sink and drink glass after glass until my stomach feels like it's going to burst.

"May I feel your face?" the man asks.

I think about waking up with Tung standing over me; I think about ducking out the door unnoticed.

"I would like to make your face," the man says.

"But I have no money."

"My bag, please," he says. "This is my gift to you."

I take off my sunglasses. It is the first time I have bared my eyes in front of anyone since I arrived in Saigon. I expect the blind man to say something. Something about blue eyes and lies and ghosts that live around Cuoi. Maybe he made up that part of the story to see if I would give myself up.

“Bring your face to my hands,” he says. Then he holds them together like a bowl used to scoop water.

There is a closeness that makes me want to back away: his fingers on my nose; a thumb brushing my lip.

“You have an American jaw,” he says.

I don’t realize I’ve been holding my breath until all of it pops out. “I’m sorry,” I say. For blowing on him. For being part American.

“Many people hate them,” the man says. His eyebrows stick up like his hair. Grey broom bristle tips. “I do not hate them. When we hate *we* are in danger. Not the hated.”

I close my eyes again. When the man removes his hands and sits down on the bed, I get another glass of water.

“Sit,” the man says, and I do, right beside him.

The tips of the scissors stab into the black board, and there seems no way that what he is doing will ever end up looking like me, but as he cuts away the black, and dim light shines through the board, I begin to see the right eye connect with the top of what I recognize as my own nose, and as the negative space turns into me, I want to ask the man whether or not he lost his sight in the war.

“All that is left are the ears,” the man says, setting down the scissors. He puts a palm on each of my ears and holds them there, like a child who refuses to listen. “They are long like the Buddha,” he says. “You will be lucky.”

“My mom used to call me Lucky Boy,” I say, putting my sunglasses back on. “I don’t know what luck I’ve had.”

“You’re alive. You have a gift. You have a voice.”

The ceiling shakes. Dust crumbles from the brick walls. Furniture slides across the floor in the apartment above. My stomach hurts from all the water. I want to go back to the cave and sit on my coffee can and be alone because this man knows that I am a fraud, and maybe everybody knows that I am a fraud, and even when I’m around people I still feel alone.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“It’s amazing,” I say. “How long have you been making art?”

A smile spreads. “Longer than you have been able to see,” he says, handing me the image.

I put it in my pack, and as I pull open the creaky door it feels like he is staring at my back.

“You don’t believe in those songs,” he says.

“No.”

“But you believe in something. I can hear it in your voice.”

I run a finger along the brick and collect a smudge of pink dust. I say, “Thank you.”

“No, thank you.” The man stands from the bed and moves toward the door. He gets so close his breath feels warm on my face. “Stick with what you believe in,” he says.

“I will.”

Chapter 20

I look old enough to go in, and the prostitutes and gangsters sitting out front don't say anything when I walk through the door. The long hallway smells like vomit and bleach. At the top of a set of stairs a bulb hangs from a rafter. The door at the top of the stairs opens. A mama san with a wart on her nose opens the door and waves me up. I climb the steps. She takes my hand and leads me past tea girls and horny rich men, into a room pulsing with red. The floor, walls, even the ceiling, covered with red carpet. Two women with sores around their mouths sit next to each other on a red couch, looking like they want to die. Wart Nose sits in a chair behind a desk and motions for me to take a seat in front of her.

“What do you have for me?” she asks.

I don't know what she means. “I am looking for a woman,” I say.

“Of course you are.” Her accent is Chinese, her skin yellow, her face round.

“No,” I say, reaching into my pocket, “I am looking for my friend.”

“Of course you are,” she says. “Listen. I don't need any trouble.”

The red seems to close in. I put the photo of Loc on the table. “Have you seen her?”

Wart Nose doesn't even look. She takes a knife from a cup and slices open the end of an envelope. American bills fall from the letter to her desk.

Wart Nose puts the money into a box and slices open another envelope.

“Please,” I say. “Look. She would be eighteen now.”

She shouts something in Chinese. Then she places her hand flat on the desk, fingers spread. She stabs the letter opener between finger and thumb, between pointer and middle finger, and keeps going like Luong used to do to show off for the other boys. The movements get faster. She looks up at me and keeps stabbing.

Two men walk in the door behind her desk. The shorter one has a shaved head, like a gangster. The other wears American businessman clothes: a crisp white shirt with a tie and black pants.

“Take this troublemaker,” Wart Nose says.

I hold Loc in my hand. All that is left of me is the torn shoulder and arm pressed against her side. Maybe she holds the other half. Maybe she stays awake at night and talks to the paper like it is alive, like it can hear her words, and maybe these are the dreams that come between the nightmares of the soldier by the creek, the dreams of her being in the distance and then gone when I try to reach for the knife, but my hands and arms won't work, and I can't see her but can hear her yelling, “No!” Maybe the kids in Tan Dinh Alley are right. Maybe the Chinese did take her because the mixed race will soon become a free passport out of the country for anybody claiming to be a relative, if the rumors about the Americans taking them in are true.

“Give me that,” Baldy says, ripping the photo out of my hand. He licks his lips. “I know this slut,” he says. “Her pussy is sweet like sugar cane.”

“She's not a slut.”

“You want to find her?” Businessman asks. He knocks off my sunglasses. “I knew it. A bastard half-breed.”

I wait to see what they are going to do, lean back and feel the handle of the knife against my stomach, think about what Pok and Rose told me about mixed race street kids disappearing. This isn't going to happen to me.

Baldy smiles. “They’re all whores. But her,” he says, shaking the picture between his thumb and index finger, “she’s worth some money. It’s not going to be so easy to get her out.”

A part of me thinks that maybe they know something, and this stops me from pulling out the knife.

“Please give me the picture,” I say.

Baldy slaps my jaw.

“Fools,” says Businessman. “All of them.” He tears up the photo and throws the pieces at my feet.

“You help us, and we will bring you to her,” Baldy says. “You don’t, and we will bring you to an early grave.”

I lean forward on my knees and gather up the torn pieces. By the time I see Baldy’s foot it’s too late.

“Did you hear that?” Businessman asks.

My head rings. Silver strings fall before my line of sight and become nothing. I want to kill these gangsters and run out of the room, but what if they really do know where she is?

The torn pieces of Loc’s photo are glued to cardboard and tucked between folded sheets of newspaper and plastic inside my backpack. I stand beside the jeep where Baldy and Businessman lean back and smoke cigarettes. Breathing is more difficult up here, and the air is cooler on this road that winds along the Sapa Mountains. Mist stretches between the trees. The sky is darker behind the range even though it is the middle of the day.

I pray to Mom and Uncle to help me this one last time and I will never ask either of them for anything again. I pray for what Wart Nose said to be true, that she really does know where Loc is and has the power to get her back for me if I find the wind tree and fill these bags with frankincense.

“Say hi to the tigers,” Baldy says from the passengers’ seat of the jeep.

“You run, she dies,” Businessman says. “You tell anyone, she dies.”

They’re using me, and though every thought tells me to run, to get away from them and find Loc on my own, there is hope. The only problem with hope is the way it obscures reality.

“What are you waiting for?” Baldy asks.

He passes an opium pipe to Businessman, leans back, and puts his feet on the dashboard. They laugh and mutter insincere words like “good luck” and “you can do it.”

I have seen pictures of these mountains taken from above, but here in front of them I can’t even see the ridges, only jungle that appears to stretch forever. I enter between two trunks and duck under the low lying branches. Fleas rise from the wet stalks. With every step, spider webs stick to my face. I hate this. Hate them. Hate what I have become. The ground turns soft at different spots. Hard again. Every step the ground moves in front of me. I keep my eye out for snakes. I can hardly see the sky, dark gray through the dense branches. A long whistle. I turn in every direction.

My shoulders burn. I pull the pack of axes and rice higher up. I tramp through the mud, no cares about getting stuck, lifting my legs high up because I’m strong. Because I’ve always been strong. Fuck them.

Every direction looks the same. Every vine and weed looks like a snake. I raise a finger to determine where the air is cooler. They said this would be a sign the wind tree is close. I head the other direction, looking for the light bark, the eye-shaped leaves, and trying not to let my imagination get the best of me when I hear these sounds: the rattles of snakes; roar of tigers; the whooping of owls that could swoop down and eat my eyes.

I stop. Mist everywhere. I forgot the paper tie that Rose made. It is supposed to keep away ghosts and kidnappers and devils, but what about tigers? I get it from my pack, tie the string behind my neck, and listen for the sounds of wild animals, but there is no way to tell the difference between a roar and the wind. What if this is all a cruel joke? What if the tree doesn't even exist?

You know it exists.

I blow my nose onto the decaying vegetation on the jungle floor and turn around to make sure I am alone. There are others in this jungle, tribes of wild men who know no language.

For hours I search for the white bark. The air gets even colder as the sky grows darker. I find a dry spot beneath three banyans. I chop young branches and cross them over each other for my bedding. The jungle doesn't sleep. Monkeys come out to scream. Bats fly from branch to branch. I lie still. Sneak a strip of dried fish from my pack as if the jungle is watching.

I tuck my hands inside my sleeves and pull my shirt over my head. Mosquitoes bite through the cloth and buzz in my ear. Sounds like screams. Clicking. Howling. The moon tries to peek through the dark clouds. Frogs croak so loud it drowns all sound. Images keep coming: the plane turning around, Mom inside the hole, Uncle's face.

For days I wake and walk and wake and don't think I will be able to rise up. I keep seeing the same terrain, the same rocks and creeks, and maybe I'm walking in circles, but then, finally, tall pale trees far off in the distance. I run past branches and over fallen logs and almost fall in front of the cluster of wind trees.

There are at least twenty of them, their white trunks standing out against the rest of the jungle. I take the ax from my pack. It is like she is standing right here, waiting, cheering me on as I slam the ax into a trunk. The head sticks. On the iron, words are written in Chinese, words I cannot read, but I want to pretend they mean this is the end. They mean victory. They mean that it is all over.

This could really be true. I help them, and they help me. They bring me to her, and we sit in dry clothes, loose on our bodies, with piles of rice and fish between us. I will ask her to keep her eyes up so that I can see my reflection in them. My teeth will be clean, my mouth fresh. Her cheek will press against mine and our lips will come together.

I will tell her, I never stopped. I never gave up.

She will say, I have missed you.

I kick at the ax handle. My foot slips and scrapes against the iron. Blood runs from my ankle. The flesh turns purple, and it hurts to stand.

I loosen the handle and pry out the head. I chip away the base of the tree. I hammer until I can't breathe. My shoulders and arms shake. They told me to start from the base and chip away the bark until I see black. There it is. The sap looks like coal, but for some reason it is worth more than gold. I take out the soldier's knife and carve away the bark. I chip out all of the frankincense, carefully gathering the pieces that splinter and fly.

I move on to the next tree, cock back the ax and swing at the base as if this is the only thing standing between us. I swing again and chop into the trunk at an angle until the base splits. I jump off my good foot and hang like a monkey, leaning back, facing the grey sky until the tree slowly bends and I fall against the earth. This one has even more sap, and I wonder if the bag they gave me will be big enough.

I move on to the next tree, chop it down, collect the frankincense, and move on to the next one, and as I chop I wonder why some things are worth money and others aren't, why some people are taken care of and others thrown to the side in the alleys of Saigon and not just mixed race and orphans—the two old men who sit together and let the weather wash their clothes, and they have nobody but each other: no family, no friends, just the two of them, and nobody else cares. People walk by them every day like these two human beings are no different from plastic spoons or wadded-up paper.

I chop down another tree.

Maybe there is one person, a sort of head guy where ideas start, and this guy is the one who determines the value of things and lives, and if there is, is this guy Ho Chi Min? Is he the American president? Or is he the king of some dynasty who set these rules in place long before anybody was born?

Every step from tree to tree burns my ankle. Only two more left. The bag is almost full. How much is this worth?

I carve out the last chunks and load the bag over my shoulder. I trudge back toward the place where they dropped me off but everything looks the same, and I don't know where I am. I'm going to die out here. I have to keep walking no matter how much it hurts. I imagine sitting across from Loc. What is she like now? What if she really has been working

in a whorehouse? Maybe she is just a tea girl. That's not so bad. But what if she tells me we were just kids? What if she asks me to leave her alone? What if she has somebody else who is better than me and loves her more, who would never have let her get on a plane all by herself, no matter what?

I look up for the one-legged monkey. The sky turns the color of ash. A raindrop hits my arm. Another hits my face. I raise my palms to the sky, scream and laugh, and I don't know if these tears are coming from joy or sadness or both. I let the pouring rain wash dirt from my skin. The sky cracks and thunders like the heavens are talking.

I scream. "You can't hurt me!" I scream.

Fuck the pain. I run, and somehow I make it back to the place where they dropped me off. Trucks pass on the road above.

I sit just inside the jungle, chewing banyan leaves into thick green spit and wiping this on my swollen ankle. Everything is too wet to make a fire; even the kindling inside my backpack is drenched. I can't stop shivering. The rain will not stop until the season is over. Nothing left to do but lie back, open my mouth, and drink what the sky brings.

The rumbling of a motor breaks through the splashing drops. I peer past tree trunks to the road above. The jeep comes to a stop. Baldy steps down and calls out my name. I rock forward and use my good leg and arms to rise up. Lying in the rain took away the pain, but trying to move makes it worse.

Businessman steps in front of Baldy and spits on the ground. Both of them are wearing hats. Water drips from the brims.

"In here," I say.

They come through the clearing and into the spot where I have tried not to die for the last two days. Both of them push past me. Baldy snatches the bag of frankincense. The gangsters argue in Chinese. Baldy puts the bag beneath the tarp I rode under on the way here and tries to tie it down, but Businessman keeps pulling it back and nodding toward me. Baldy grabs my arm and leads me to the back of the jeep.

“What happened to you?” he asks.

I clench my teeth and keep my hand at my side, my arm covering the knife. Snot runs onto my lip. “Where is Loc?”

“Who?” Baldy asks.

“His little girlfriend,” Businessman says. “Get under the tarp. Or we’ll leave you.”

Baldy laughs.

My brain shakes inside my skull as I get into the jeep and onto the back bench. I lie down. The pain almost knocks me out. The metal is cold. No effort is taken to be gentle, and crying out would only make it worse, so I squeeze my fists and bear it as the gangsters tie down the tarp.

Every bump on the road pushes out tears and makes me pray for death, but I keep picturing Loc in that same room where the men first came in and knocked me down. I imagine Wart Nose letting her go and Loc standing before me. She asks me if everything is okay, and I say, it is now.

It is now.

Wart Nose sits at her desk counting money. Nobody sits on the red sofa. Baldy unzips the bag and dumps the frankincense onto the desk.

“You did good,” she says, picking through the chunks and holding some of the larger ones up to the light.

“He’s asking about his little girlfriend,” Baldy says, cleaning his fingernails with a toothpick. Wart Nose runs a comb through her hair and rubs dandruff from the ivory. “That girl is worth gold,” she says, “but maybe we can work something out.” She licks her fingers and wets the teeth before combing her long gray hair. “You want to see her?”

“That was our agreement.”

The Chinese men stand behind her like iron posts beside a gate. She spits into the bowl next to her desk. “Our agreement just changed.”

Pink neon shines on the window frame. Stucco has crumbled from the building opposite exposing bricks and mortar. Baldy and Businessman fold their arms across their chests. They’re laughing, silently, mocking me.

“You promised,” I say, putting my hands on her desk.

The ceiling light flickers.

Wart Nose leans forward. There are hairs coming out from her nostrils. “You work for me,” she says. She pulls aside the neck of her dress to show Chinese letters branded on her shoulder. “You know what this means?”

I want to say that I don’t care, to demand she tell me where Loc is, but I know for sure now. She doesn’t know. She never did.

“Loyalty,” she says. “That means you do what I say you do.”

I rip the knife from my belt and jam it into her neck before she realizes what is happening. Then I pull out the blade and duck away from Baldy’s blow while pushing him into the wall with his own momentum. Businessman tears off his shirt and wraps it around

Wart Nose's neck. Baldy tries to rise, but before he can move I tear into his neck with the blade. Businessman grabs me. I can't breathe. I try to shake free. I ram the back of my head into his face until he lets go. Businessman grabs the knife from the desk and comes at me. I duck off to the side and punch him in the neck, then the stomach. He doubles over. I grab the back of his head and slam his face into the desk. Businessman falls onto the red carpet. I kick him in the head until he stops moving.

I kneel over him. "You like sweet pussy?" I ask.

Businessman blinks. He tries to crawl toward the door. I unzip my pants and piss on his face. The urine washes the blood down the sides of his skin and onto the carpet.

"Please," he says.

"Fuck you."

"You can't get away with this," he says. "They will come for you. We aren't punk street kids."

I jab the knife into his eye and twist until it pops.

Baldy and Wart Nose are dead. All of them are dead. My hands are covered in blood. Red pulses all around me. It's like I lost time, like I found out Wart Nose was lying and something else took over. There is something inside of me that I have no control over, and it is bad, as bad as the men on the streets who drink and talk to the air and believe there is somebody there responding to what they say. Maybe this is the ghost that has always lived inside me.

There are footsteps in the hall. I need to get out of here. I hobble toward the window. My ankle burns so much I hop to the desk. She would not want this. Not Mom or Loc. Or maybe Mom would. Maybe this is the courage she always wished she had.

Any second a whore might come knocking, and then what am I going to do? My hands shake as I rifle through the drawers and put all the bills and coins into my pack. I wipe the blood onto the carpeted walls and ask Mom for forgiveness.

These were not good people.

I stuff the frankincense and all the cash into the bag. My ankle is the size of a baseball. I lift the window and push down the metal stairs, tell myself it's almost over, force my leg to work. Pink flashes on the windows across the alley. Behind one, a family sits before the dinner table, smiling and laughing and sharing ladles of soup from a big bowl. With two arms and one leg, I descend the ladder.

An ice cream vendor leans back in her chair beneath an umbrella, and she doesn't know anything. The postcard kids can't even see me. Two men in a corner smoke cigarettes next to the dumpster, and they know nothing. A back door opens. A man pours a bucket of mop water into the alley. I head toward the group of moped and xichlo drivers.

They rush forward and offer rides.

"You, sir, please," I say, walking past all the youngsters to the oldest man. I put my bags on the moped seat and get on behind him. "Please hurry."

"You haven't told me where we are going."

"Phu Tuyet Alley," I say. "Quickly."

Chapter 21

I gather water from the rain buckets beneath the gutter and lug the pots over to my herb garden. Even all the way out here in the middle of the jungle, I sometimes catch myself looking over my shoulder. I sometimes think the man who sold me this place is just waiting for the right price before he turns me in to the Chinese mafia. It is not as bad as it was. I've come to realize that most of these thoughts are my own paranoia, and that the man who sold me this land has no idea who I am or what I've done. He just wanted to live the rest of his life in Saigon, but these realities don't stop me from keeping a gun under my bed and boarding up the windows each night.

The sky is so much closer out here: the stars a blanket of light all night long. Breeze blows the smell of roses onto the porch, and as I sway in my hammock, it still doesn't feel real. To not be running and hiding. To have this house.

The saplings I planted have turned into banana trees that stretch around the entire property. Miko sleeps beneath the hammock. His belly has gotten so fat that he waddles like a duck. I lie for a long time watching clouds drift past Cuoi, and it isn't until Miko barks that I realize I've been dreaming, the same dream about Pok and Rose running toward me.

I wrap a sheet around my shoulders and walk to the well, crank the bucket up and bring the cold water to my lips. Mom says these dreams mean something, and in those waking moments between the dream world and real life, I think see her. She is smiling. Her words are not spoken; they are in the space between my head and heart.

You must go.

And I know this. This place has brought a comfort and security I haven't had since leaving the home of Grandparents, but something is missing. In the morning I will get on my

moped and head to Saigon, to the place those Northern bastards now call Ho Chi Min City. I will not let the fear of running into Chinese gangsters stop me. Maybe Pok and Rose know something about Loc. Maybe they are sending signals through dreams because we are connected, because we share American and Vietnamese seeds.

As I ride from the highway to the roundabout, I shake the cramps from my hands and join the hundreds of mopeds and trucks that flow around and down side streets like water. Two Chinese men weave past. I lower my head. Two gangsters on mopeds pop up onto the sidewalk. An orange juice vendor jumps out of the way. His stand falls. He gathers up the green oranges and curses the gangsters. Pig intestines and legs and a head hang beside the body as a butcher pounds his fist in the air and curses. Mothers hold babies tight to their hips.

I ride slowly between the thousands of people, weighed down with the feeling of being alone. A work truck chugs past. I turn down a side street and honk my horn to warn a woman who carries a basket of French bread. I coast into Phu Tuyet alley and feel a ghost jump onto the back of the moped, feel the seat weighted down, as if the old me died in this basement cave where I used to sleep with Miko.

I turn to see if anyone is following.

Two steamed dumpling carts sit at opposite ends of the alley, a woman in bright clothes standing behind each, both desperately pleading for business. The grate I used to crawl through has been covered with concrete, and I wonder if anyone ever went in and got my bottles or the coffee can I used for tobacco or the one I shat in. The last night I sneaked inside feels like yesterday. There is still the fear of being caught. The fear of being tortured. The fear of dying because that is the truly unknown. The fear that I will live the rest of my life as a wandering ghost because of all the things I've done.

A Chinese gangster with gold chains and an American suit walks along the sidewalk and stops at the edge of the alley. I breathe deeply and hold the breath in my chest. I think of the blind man who knew I could see. What else do people know?

I cruise down the street and into the end of Kids' Alley where Pok and Rose usually sleep. Three kids I have never seen sit beside the dumpster, their pants held up by rubber straps cut from tires. Two boys and a girl, full-blooded Vietnamese, but these kids are so dirty and ratty haired they could be mistaken for burnt rice. One of the boy's legs is too small for his body. The girl has ringworm scars on her arms and legs. Her watery eyes and scratched face remind me of a young Rose. I step off the moped and take twenty dong from my pocket. The girl leans forward.

"You want sex?" There are bruises on her knees and around her elbows.

The boys lean in front of her as if to signal that I need to pay them.

"Have you seen Pok?" I ask.

The lame-legged boy lifts his head from his chest. "Who?"

The girl whispers in the other boy's ear. Then both of them are silent. They look from side to side without moving their heads.

"Or Rose," I say, pinching my nostrils. "They call her Rose. She always wears a green shirt."

"I know them," the girl says. "but they don't sleep here anymore."

I catch the bigger boy staring at the keys in the ignition of my moped, and I know what is going through his mind. I've seen this same look in the market stalls when a rich woman turns from her bowl of noodles for just a second, when a blind man drops a coin from his cup and it rolls off, when the kids used to ask me to buy them fried donuts.

“All of the half-breeds are gone,” the girl says. She looks between her legs like she has done something wrong.

“Gone where?” I ask. “Chi Hoa prison?”

“Kidnapped,” the girl says. “People force them. Or pay them. Rich people who want to go to America.”

I heard these rumors in the village near my house, but I didn’t believe them, couldn’t believe the government would let anyone go to America, and I still don’t. It’s a lie to trap them. When they show up for the free ticket the communist cops kill them or force them to work in the labor camps along the Cambodian border without food. These half-truths are no different than the kids whose mothers told them their fathers would be back. I look at these three orphans and wonder how much longer they’ll live.

As the sun shifts, I remember how the afternoons turn gray in the alley and the whole world becomes shadows and bricks. The bigger boy scratches his head. Dry skin flakes onto his shirt. Pebbles stick to his forearms.

“I can show you,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

“Where all of them are going,” the boy says. He stands and lifts the deformed boy.

I let the orphans get on the moped behind me. We chug through the alley into the sea of traffic. I weave past rich families huddled chest to back. The orphan’s every word releases the stink of rotting teeth and gums. I feel guilty about what I’ve gotten, about the lives I’ve taken, about living on blood money.

The boy directs me through the streets to the southern edge of Dam Sen Park. We get off the moped.

“They go into there,” the boy says, pointing to a government building of crumbling stucco. “It is where they get papers to go to America. Should we wait for you?”

“No.” I take the key from the ignition.

The kids don’t move. They stare at the ground. Thin as fence posts. Smelly. Missing teeth. Eyes like stray dogs. I know how they eat because it is the same thing I did before singing: digging through trash cans or waiting and begging at tables in front of people’s houses. The orphans stare up like the ducks used to do. I take a step, and they take a step. I stop, and they stop.

“Older brother,” The girl scratches at a welt on her neck. “Why are you looking for them?”

“Because they are like me.”

This thought has not come until this moment. I take all the coins out of my pocket and hand them to the girl.

“You eat,” I say. “Share these.”

The girl takes the coins from my hand and runs. Ringworm chases after her, leaving the deformed boy on the ground by himself. I give him a shirt I have in my moped basket and walk away.

Dam Sen Park looks like a city without houses. On the spot where I used to sing, all the grass is gone, the bushes skeletons of their former selves. Mixed race sleep beneath tarps tied to tamarind trees. For pillows they use bags filled with their entire lives. A girl combs lice out of another girl’s hair as they wait beside a trash can for somebody to throw away food. There must be a hundred teenagers gathered, and the communist cops who patrol the sidewalks aren’t doing anything.

A white man sits on a bench next to a Vietnamese woman. A group of mixed race gathers around them. This is the first white man I have ever seen not wearing green. Maybe this man knows something about William. Maybe he can help Loc and me if I ever find her.

A dark mixed race walks with his head down. His hair is a mess of ratted curls and dried grass. With every step, his right foot drags. This can't be Pok, but I'm sure it is. What could have happened to make him like this? Was it the glue the kids sniffed behind that dumpster? Was he attacked? Tricked into working for gangsters and then maimed when he tried to leave?

The sun is so bright I can't make out his face, but I'm sure it's him. I force my way through the people on the sidewalk and slip past a sesame ball vendor.

"Pok," I say.

He pauses then turns and rushes toward me with his leg dragging. The same self-inflicted scars that run across my knuckles stick up on Pok's.

"Older brother," he says, looking at the ground. His breath reeks of alcohol. "Please help me." His cleft lip rises in a smile of shame. Streaks of tears run in clean lines over the freckles beside his nose. "You must help me. Please. Rose is gone. Every day I come looking for her."

A girl screams. I see her: a teenaged mixed race falling to her knees. She has a black eye, and her clothes are covered with dust. A woman pulls at the girl's ear and lifts her from the ground.

"Get up," the woman says. Her face is red. "You will not do this to me."

A man in a business suit sets a plate of rice on the ground. Two dark teenagers creep toward the bench where he sits. The man picks the plate back up and spits into the food; he

stirs the saliva in with chopsticks. After he gets up and walks away the kids run over, dig their fingers in and eat the leftovers in seconds. The rich woman hits the back of the mixed race girl's head.

"She bought her," Pok whispers. "I think somebody has bought Rose."

"When?" I ask. "What do you mean? Kidnapped?"

Pok picks at his calloused palms. They are so light compared to the rest of him. A black squirrel runs across the ground and up a tree. A wife and husband walk down the sidewalk. The man spits inches from Pok's feet.

"Who took Rose?" I ask.

Pok wipes his eyes. "Two men in a car," he says. "You see that boy walking with that family?"

"Yes," I say, watching a teenager cross the street, his movement controlled by a man gripping his shoulder.

"That is not his family," Pok says. "They bought him. Like the girl we saw. Like that boy over there."

"Why don't you find a family?" I ask.

Pok doesn't say anything. A magpie lands on the matted grass and looks up at us as if waiting for crumbs.

You know why.

Maybe this bird is Mom's spirit.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Did you ever find that girl?"

"Loc?"

“Yes. I think I might have seen her.” Pok looks down at the ants passing along a crack in the sidewalk.

“Where?”

“Near the river boats.”

I know this is where Chinese gangsters prostitute women to the foreigners who come to Saigon for business.

“Come on,” I say.

Pok struggles to keep up. “Where are we going?”

I put the key in the ignition, start up the moped, and hop on. Pok gets on behind me.

The wind blows my hair back as I speed between trucks and mopeds, leaning to avoid the bicycles coming at us, the air getting cooler as we get closer to the river. I park far enough away the boat so that nobody will recognize me. Strands of white lights hang from the entrance to the boat. A woman in a blue ao dai stands at the top in front of a glass door. She is the color of sweet milk coffee, and her legs stretch up as high as the stool beside her. An umbrella shades her from the sun.

Chinese men stumble out the door and into her. They grab at her waist and ass. She smiles and laughs, but neither are real. The men descend the dock and get into a black car that speeds through the traffic, scattering mopeds and bicycles.

Pok looks like he’s about to fall asleep.

“You must help me,” I tell him. “She might listen to you because you are both burnt rice.”

Pok scrapes a fingernail against his teeth and rubs the plaque onto his pants. Another black car pulls up, and three Chinese men emerge with a white man who is double their size.

The Chinese men speak loudly. It sounds like English. Their faces are red. They lead the white man past the door girl and inside. I reach into my pocket and take out the photo of Loc.

“This is my life,” I say, handing it to Pok. “Ask if she is there and get out immediately.”

“What if they try to capture me?”

A crane shakes out its wings on the branches of a fallen tree in the middle of the river. This photo and the thinning piece of silk are all I have left.

“Give me that,” I say.

Pok hands back the photo without looking up. If I die trying to get her back then this is meant to be.

Go, Mom says.

I get close enough to smell the door girl’s perfume. She turns her head to the side like she is better than me. Inside the windows, women walk up to the tables and sit on the laps of fat men who eat crabs and lobsters.

“Please,” I say. “You are mixed race. Like me.”

The woman turns. Her lips are big and shiny like morning slugs. She bats her eyelashes and hides behind the umbrella.

“You should not be here,” she says.

I take out the photo. “Just tell me if you have seen a woman who looks like this girl.”

Her eyes open wide. “Loc,” she says.

“Tell me.”

“They took her away. You have to go.”

“Where did they take her?”

“I don’t know. Go!”

The door slams open, and a group of men come tumbling out.

“What are you doing, half-breed?” says a red-faced Chinese man in a suit. He turns to his friends. “Have you ever eaten bastard?”

I run to the moped and yell at Pok to get on. My brain shakes inside my skull, like that big bone is rattling around and about to crack through. Pok says something, but I cannot hear him.

“Shut up,” I say. “Just shut up.” I can’t think. I’m driving through the mopeds and bicycles and cars and people, but it’s like a flashing blur of lights and heads and shoulders and bricks and trees all running into each other.

I pull back up to Dam Sen Park and get off the moped across from the white man.

“Where are you going, older brother?” Pok asks.

“To ask that man for help,” I say, gripping my key so tightly it digs into my hand.

Pok touches my arm. “Do not trust him,” he says. “There is a woman who might help you.”

“Who?”

“We must go inside to where they give papers for America.”

It looks as if the Vietnamese woman is interpreting for the foreigner as he writes things down and talks into a tape recorder. She is pretty and clean, dressed in a black suit.

“That man is no good,” Pok says. “He promised to help Rose. Now she is gone.”

“We will find her,” I say. I say, “You can never give up.”

“She’s pregnant,” Pok says.

“We will find her.”

Pok leads me from the park into the street, past a communist cop who stares straight ahead and doesn't acknowledge either of us.

"I saw the men drag her away," Pok says. "Lalou is looking. Please trust me. Follow me."

My throat shakes as we walk closer to the old French building and up the steps toward the sitting gold lions that guard these stucco walls. I want to tell Pok that worrying doesn't help anything. I want to tell him that he doesn't have to destroy himself just because he can't find her. I want to tell him that hope is everything and nothing, that together we will find Rose no matter what it takes. As these thoughts circle I realize I'm talking to myself. What if I never find her? Or worse, find her dead. It's the hope that has helped me survive. If the hope goes, then what?

We stop at the top of the steps.

"Have you been in here?" I ask.

"Yes," Pok says. "I come every day. Lalou knew my real mother. She was the only one who was ever nice to me."

"Who is she?"

"She works inside," he says. "She tries to help the mixed race."

Across the street a scuffle breaks out. Three burnt rice teenagers kick two orphans and pull them up from the ground. They must be twice the age of the orphans. These full Vietnamese kids grab their bags and run, but the burnt rice kids chase them into the street and knock them down. Mopeds swerve to avoid the ruckus.

“Stay out of our park!” the biggest mixed race yells. He pulls a chain from his back pocket and brings it down on the legs of the smaller orphan. “Stay out or you’ll never walk again. This is mixed race park.”

“We need to help those orphans,” I say.

“Come on,” Pok says. “Those burnt rice work for gangsters.”

The burnt rice boys run down the street and around a corner. Pok tells me that the leader of this group dances at one of the clubs and is also a male prostitute. They work for a man who wears gold chains and rides in the back of a silver Citroen. Many of the kids work for him. I want to ask Pok about his leg and if he ever worked for gangsters.

There are so many orphans whose names I never got to know, who would sleep around Kid’s Alley for weeks and even months at a time, and then they were gone, forever. Maybe that was why I stayed alone. Maybe it was more than just word getting out to the police and losing my place in the cave. There was no point getting to know those kids because they would leave or die. Maybe it was the fear that losing anybody else might finally destroy my mind, turn me into one of those guys who sits talking to himself all day, but with Rose and Pok there was something different—maybe a result of the way we met—an ability to sit with them and listen to the stories of how their own mothers would beat them and call them “ugly black kid”, and it was in this listening that I came to realize that there were others with even harder lives than my own. At least I got to have the love of Mom for as long as I did.

“Let’s go in,” Pok says.

“I’m afraid.”

“You? Afraid?” Pok looks at me like I’ve just asked him how war could be stopped forever. “What are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know. Finding her?”

I open the heavy door. A fat man in a tie sits behind a desk. He sucks on a cigarette. “She is not here,” he tells Pok. “Get out.”

Gifts pile up on the man’s desk: cartons of cigarettes and foreign liquor, giant durian fruits and boxes filled with rambutan and lychees, cakes colored with gold frosting. Fat man taps a Salem cigarette from his pack and offers me one. When I reach forward to accept, he snaps back his hand and laughs.

“How much money do you have?” He blows smoke into my face.

“Money?”

“You think you can just leave?” Fat Man asks. “You’re going to fly to America on your ghost eyes?”

“I don’t want to leave,” I say. “I want to find somebody.”

“Listen. Do what I told your friend. Give up. Now get out of here.”

Behind each desk the evil men smoke cigarettes. Fake families crowd against the walls and on the floor. In the corner one lady—the only lady working here—sits behind a desk. This must be Lalou. She looks me in the eyes, and it feels like we have meshed together without touching.

Maybe she will understand that I don’t want to go to America, that I only want to find Loc, that I have nothing to give, and even if I did the man who wanted money cannot be trusted. What has happened to those responsible for all the bribes on his desk? What happens to one of these mixed race kids who is forced to take people he doesn’t know with him to the

United States? Surely the families abandon him as soon as they land, but maybe it is easier to go about unnoticed in the United States.

Pok leans against me. "Talk to her," he says. "Lalou is a good woman. A kind woman."

She puts papers into piles and offers me a seat. I tell her most of my story and give her Loc's picture because she asks for it. She walks over to a machine, lifts a lid, and slides Loc's photo underneath. A long green light spreads from one side of the machine to the other. A piece of paper spits out the side. The woman gives Loc's photo back and places the paper on the desk between us.

I imagine her taller now with longer hair and a flower behind her ear. I imagine her arms wrapping around me, lying down together, her legs pressed against mine, her head on my shoulder, our lips touching. I want to buy one of these machines and paper my walls with her image so that no matter where I look she will be there watching over me.

"Give me time," Lalou says. "Do not go back to the riverboat. He is dangerous. Give us one or two weeks, and I will let you know."

Pok and I walk out the heavy doors. The air smells like soiled babies. Kids with snot on their noses and kids dressed in their best clothes sit around the steps outside. It is obvious what is happening here. These kids are coming because they have heard they might be able to get to the United States. They are denied because they have no money for bribes. Then rich families buy them whether they like it or not. They pay the bribes, and everybody is allowed to leave.

What if somebody has already gotten Loc and forced her onto a plane?

Again.

My knees have not stopped shaking since Lalou told me that an amnesty group rescued mixed-race prostitutes from a whorehouse in Cholon and would be bringing them to the American Transit Center within a week. Every day I have shown up early only to have her say maybe tomorrow, but today she says not to worry. Today they will be here.

I have to listen to my own words, the advice I gave to Pok over the last two weeks as he helped me gather ducks and vegetables to sell at the market; I have to believe in the idea that all I can do is be a good person, do my best to love and serve others, and the rest is up to some force I have no control over. Those nights I could hear Pok talking to himself inside the other room as I fashioned flutes with bamboo and tried to coax myself into sleep, I prayed not that he would find Rose and that life would be everything they wanted from that point on, but that each would be given the strength to carry on no matter what, to make good in whatever circle they ended up being around.

Maybe I am closer to that place of acceptance after seeing the fruit it bore Pok. Not that he was happy to be alone, to be without her, to know that somewhere in this world there was the seed of his baby growing inside of her, but he had accepted that there was nothing he could do, and it wasn't more than three days after he said this that we found Rose, bruised and beaten, half-crazy, talking to herself down by the river where the three of us sat the first night we met. But she was alive, and the baby was alive, and after we calmed her down she told us what had happened, that the men who had taken her wanted a joyride, that they had a Chinese man who liked pregnant women, that they used her like an old, worn-out mattress and then threw her to the curb. That night I watched the way the space between two people can make the whole world change. I felt the air between them, the energy all around us, the

night sky, the silence, the way everything changed as the two embraced, and I knew once again that love is real, that love knows no time or distance.

Pok and Rose sit beside me, waiting for Lalou. I put my head against Rose's belly. The baby moves inside her, and I pray that this world changes, for him or her, for Pok and Rose.

Lalou calls me over to her desk. Pok and Rose follow. Pok offers Lalou a bag of sticky rice and vegetables he made last night after picking onions and squash from the garden at the house. I told Lalou last week that if she really does find Loc that I will bring her a piglet instead of selling it at the market.

Lalou's desk is covered in papers and pictures clipped to folders and letters in English and Vietnamese. Her only gift is the food Pok just gave her.

"Let's see," Lalou says, standing from her desk.

The three of us follow Lalou past the desks of the men who sit like greedy pigs, smoking cigarettes and sipping slow drip coffee. We walk down a long hallway to a back door. Roses stretch around the building. A sidewalk leads to another back entrance.

Lalou looks out at the passing traffic. "For so long the police didn't care," she says. "They couldn't be reasoned with. Now not doing something will make the government look bad."

"I wish we could be sure she is with them," I say.

Lalou weaves her fingers between each other and cracks her knuckles. "Nothing is sure," she says.

Rose twists a clump of short hair into a horn. She has grown up, is no longer the girl I first met. The cuts on her face have begun to heal, the black eye is gone, her belly is like a

healthy pumpkin, her skin glows from all the fresh vegetables and country air, and if I have nothing else, at least I helped to save her. To give them a safe place to love and raise a baby. A blue covered truck weaves away from the mopeds and bicycles and into the parking lot. Dust blows off the tires and into the rose bushes. The truck backs up to the steps that lead to the back entrance.

“Stay here,” Lalou says. She puts her hands together, steps past Rose, and bows as if to say that everything is going to be all right.

Exhaust rises from the muffler and floats away in thin rainbows. I run a finger across the scars atop my hand. Pok and Rose look at me like I’m supposed to say something, but what can I say? What if Loc doesn’t recognize me? Or worse. What if she isn’t even on the truck?

Two police officers step out from the cab in their olive uniforms, their faces dark like peasants, guns hanging across their chests from a shoulder strap. The barrels point to the sun.

Lalou bows and says something, but I cannot hear her or them. We are the only people back here though two hundred yards away traffic whirrs and thousands of people walk along the sidewalks and across the street. The driver of the truck runs a thumb across his badge, walks around to the back of the truck, and puts a key in the lock that holds shut the sliding door. He pulls it up. There must be twenty women crammed against each other. Some have a Chinese letter branded on their shoulders like cattle. Like Wart Nose. They blink their eyes and adjust to the light, pushing into each other like eels in a bucket. Some are dressed in the fancy ao dai. Others wear cotton pants or jeans and T shirts. The cops stand between them and the truck, and I wonder whether they are here to protect them or control where they go. I watch the white ones closely. All of them are beautiful. One woman walks with her

head down. This might be Loc. Her arms are scarred with track marks. She looks up. Her eyes are dark black. Another woman has the circles of cigarette burns on her neck. I can't tell if she is wearing make-up or if her brown eyes are naturally surrounded with black.

Please.

You must look.

Rose steps up to my side. "Do you see her?" she asks.

Three of the women have hair the same color as Loc's, but they are not her. Maybe she has lost weight, and her face is thinner. Maybe she dyed her hair black to blend in. Still, I would feel her; I would know right away no matter how she looked. I would know the eyes. The face. The cheeks. The way she smiles, but none of these women is smiling.

Pok steps behind Rose. I can tell that he wants to wrap his arms around her and put his hands on her belly and make that voice of his where he pretends the baby is talking, but the cops are watching.

I walk past the ladies and the cops to Lalou. "She is not here," I say.

Lalou says, "Maybe she has already gone." She says, "Maybe she is somewhere safe."

She hasn't gone. I know she is still in Vietnam. Somewhere. Nights when I can't sleep I imagine her curled up in the corner of a room, all alone before a candle, sweating out the drugs the gangsters force her to take and running a pencil across paper—a piece of white paper spotted with dots of tears and words, one after the other, that add up to everything she needs to say to me, everything I need to hear.

The officer pulls down the back of the truck and locks it back up. Two of the men who work in the American Transit Center walk out the back door: Fat Man and the one who

enjoys saying every case is fraud until proven otherwise. Lalou follows the officers and prostitutes inside. The men approach.

“Your little girlfriend didn’t make it?” Fat Man asks.

I walk toward the driveway. The stench of gasoline hits as soon as I get to the sidewalk.

“Hey,” Fat Man says, “maybe she’ll come with the next batch of dirty whores.”

Pok and Rose tell me to slow down. Mopeds whizz past. I carry on toward my own without looking where I’m going.

Chapter 22

Pok runs a hoe into the earth and creates straight lines that run along the trees on the east side of the house. Rose holds their son against her chest. She drops three watermelon seeds every two feet. This is the second season they have insisted on doing this work by themselves. They say it is their way of giving back, but what they don't understand is that they have given me more than I could ever return. They look so happy and alive out there in the sunshine, but this joy in watching sometimes gives way to jealousy.

Rose's braids hang, one on each side of her hat. Pok's hair is big like a helmet, his headband dark with sweat. His barrel chest glistens. Baby Bò bends each time Rose drops down seeds, and he reaches for them even though his arm is too far away. He pinches her nose and giggles. She pops up and pulls him higher against her side.

Birds fly in an angle toward the drifting clouds: an elephant, a turnip. I rise and walk past the well. Miko waddles up and licks my hand. He barks until I take the stick from his mouth and throw it as far as I can.

"You're doing a good job," I tell Rose.

She sets the baby on the ground, and he runs over and tries to climb my leg.

"Take a break," I tell her, picking up baby Bò.

He reaches for my nose and won't turn away, his gaze fixated on my eyes, like he can see the difference.

"Just this last row," Rose says.

They finish working and join me beneath the tin roof Pok and I built before the rainy season last year. Baby Bò runs up to his mom, slaps her knee, and then walks away. Miko crawls onto Pok's lap.

“Sit,” I say.

Miko’s tongue drips.

“You see that?” I ask.

Pok and Rose turn their heads and look at the budding banana trees. They look to the sky.

“What?” Rose asks.

“The way Miko sits when I tell him to.”

Baby Bò squirms in Rose’s arms. He reaches for Miko and starts to cry. Pok pats the baby’s belly until his cries turn into laughter.

“I feel bad sometimes,” I say. “Like I tricked him.”

Pok squints his eyes.

“When he was a puppy I watched him,” I say. “When he came up to me and sat quietly I said stay. When he was running I’d yell come, just once, and if he ran to me I fed him. I anticipated what he would do and pushed him toward this.”

“You trained him,” Pok says, tickling Baby Bò’s feet.

“He still has his ideas,” Rose says. “He wouldn’t wear the eye patch.”

I pick up a stick and throw it as far as I can. Miko runs in slow motion and pounces on it. His tail wags on his way back.

“This is what he wants to do,” I say. “Maybe I should let him do what he wants to, be what he wants to be.”

Miko picks up the stick and drops it in my lap. He picks it back up and drops it in Pok’s lap.

“You can’t just let him do anything,” Pok says. He throws the stick. “What if he runs away?”

“Or bites baby Bò?” Rose says.

“Then we eat him,” I say.

“Stop joking,” Rose says.

“Come here.”

They stand and follow me through the trees into the jungle. I turn over a rotten log. Ants and beetles dart out. Worms burrow into the earth.

“This is how to watch the living,” I say, “but we want to make things to be the way we think they should be. It isn’t natural.”

Baby Bò reaches for the ground.

“He wants to touch them,” Pok says.

“Maybe he just wants to watch,” I say. “What if we just let nature do what nature does?”

“But we don’t,” Pok says.

“I think we can’t,” Rose says, pulling her son to her chest.

“We can,” I say. “That doesn’t mean I do. Or you do. Or anybody does. But we can. Imagine just watching.”

Rose and Little Bò sleep inside. I sit by the fire with Pok and watch sparks rise and burn out.

“I have not told you everything,” I say.

Pok pulls a stick from the fire and spins the end in a circle so that red light appears to float in the sky. The blue outline of Cuoi looks especially dark, or maybe it is because the moon is so bright.

“I am not the person you think I am,” I say. Smoke blows right at me. “I have done bad things.”

Pok leans forward and stirs the logs with his stick. Bats screech. The fire is hot on my legs, the smoke heavy.

“We have all done bad things,” Pok says without looking up.

A red log bends beneath the weight of the others, and I wonder how much longer it will stay intact. It feels as if Pok is reading my thoughts.

“I have killed people,” I say.

Pok doesn't look up, but his stick stops stirring embers. Only Loc knows this, and only part of what I just said. What would she think if she knew I was tricked into risking my life to save hers and that this ended in murder? Would this make her love or hate me?

Pok leans back and pulls his stick from the fire. His hands support his weight.

“You saved our lives,” he says.

I want to cry. I want to fly into the night and bring Loc to a cocoon where the two of us curl up until we turn into something new.

The fire pops and shoots sparks that spin above the black outline of tree tops.

“Nobody ever cared before,” Pok says. “It does not matter to me what you have done, only who you are now.”

I feel Mom in the air between us. “I want it to go away,” I say.

“What?”

“The pain. The nightmares. Waking up and feeling like I am a terrible person. Like the spirit world has punished me. Like this is why I will never see Loc again.”

“You are the best man I know,” Pok says. “My mother used to call me Ugly Black Kid and beat me with bamboo. That’s why I ran. That’s why Rose ran. She had enough. Her stepfather raped her and told her she deserved it, and her mother knew. That’s wrong. I don’t know why you killed people, but I know this. There is no bad inside of you. I trust you, and I have never trusted anyone except Rose.”

I know that I got something many mixed race didn’t. I got ten years with a mother who loved me. I want to tell Pok about the mornings I woke up beside her during those last weeks, the mornings where she no longer trembled from what Sook had done the night before, but I keep these stories inside myself, somewhere between mind and heart, because to tell Pok would only hurt him, and I fear that in letting them out they might be lost.

You don’t need to say thank you. I should thank you.

We sit in silence. The fire crackles and burns down to a circle of embers. Flames spread flat across the surface.

“I am glad you are here,” I say.

“You saved me, older brother.”

“No,” I say. “You saved me.”

Chapter 23

Gray hairs sprout from the mole above the old lady's lip. She tells me to sit in a reclining vinyl chair and brings over a tray with finger bananas and a pot of tea.

"How much money do you want to spend?" she asks, placing a cold, bony hand on top of mine.

"I want to see the girls first," I say.

This is the fifth place I have been tonight, and it is even darker and mustier than the last, adorned with dying bamboo in gold pots, bare walls, and a calendar above a counter: a Chinese woman smoking; below her, February of last year. This place, run by this old lady, is where a prostitute told me Loc is after I showed her picture. If it is goodbye that Loc wants then this will be enough, but I feel I can't go on any longer without knowing.

"Come with me," the old lady says.

I follow her into a room so bright I have to blink to adjust my eyes. Women and girls who are not even teenagers stand behind glass with numbers pinned to their dresses. Chills run through my body in this hot hallway. Each woman faces sideways with her dress pulled up to her thigh. All of them have painted red toenails, and I wonder if the mama san made them do this.

"You must choose," she says.

I study the lines on her face, study the gray moustache and mole hair, study the purple teeth, and, beneath this life that has made her into what she is, I see a younger version of her, one as beautiful as any of these standing with a number.

"Maybe a drink will help," she says. She yells in Chinese.

A teenage girl comes out of a door at the opposite end of the hallway with a glass in hand. Mama san takes this and gives it to me.

“Sip,” she says. “It is very strong.”

The liquor burns my throat. My eyes water. A drip hits the wood floor, and this is the only sound, over and over. The prostitutes look like bats frozen in tree branches by a flashlight. Some are children. What kind of sick man would pay for them? Did William ever come to one of these places? What if I have a brother somewhere here in Saigon?

I sip the liquor and try to get a view of the girls standing in the back. My head becomes lighter, and I fear that maybe I’m being drugged. I drink no more. I must be seeing things through the glass. Between the heads of two girls in the front row is the jade fishhook resting against a light chest. I stare at this, listen to the drip, watch the water run from this rusty spot to the corner, look back at the jade. It is her.

The old lady turns to me. The whisker in her mole. Lines on her face. I hold in everything: tears for the black circles beneath Loc’s eyes; tears for her sunken cheeks; tears for this moment that stands between me picking her number and seeing her. I want to tap on the glass and make her notice me. Her gaze appears aimed somewhere far beyond the glass, beyond the wall behind me, lost, looking at nothing, but she is beautiful, tall, and looks almost innocent as she crosses one leg over the other and looks to the ground. She bats her eyelashes. Her dress glistens like fresh pineapple, and it is as if every other girl has disappeared, as if the mama san does not even exist beside me, as if this building is nothing, was never built.

Look at me, I say inside my head.

Maybe she is too far gone to recognize me. Maybe she doesn't care. What do you say to someone you have been searching for? What do you say to move forward? What do I do now?

The mama san lights a cigarette. "If you don't choose I am going to have to charge you for looking."

"Seventeen," I say, and it is my voice that causes Loc to turn her head. Her eyes open wide. She knows it is me, but it's like she cannot reveal this for fear of what the mama san might do. If it all ended right now, this moment would be enough. To look into her eyes again. All the years are erased, and there she is: the first girl I ever loved, the only woman I want. Inside my head I tell her: I'm here. I'll never let you go.

Loc cups one hand with the other. Her expression doesn't change, but I can see, or maybe I can feel the smile behind her eyes.

"I should have guessed," the mama san says. "What else would a half-breed want?" She opens a side door and walks behind the glass.

Loc stands as if frozen, her hands at her sides. The mama san grabs her arm and leads her past the rest of the prostitutes and out the door to the hallway where I try not to shake.

"Pay now," she tells me.

I give her the money and follow them down the hallway to a door. We enter. The door closes behind us and sucks out the light. I follow the sound of their footsteps, inhaling dust and bleach along the way. A door handle turns, and the door pushes open, and again I can see Loc from behind, her long neck scarred with burns from cigarette butts, and I wonder if she did this herself.

The room the mama sans pulls me into smells like sweat and mildew. Pink neon flashes on the walls and bed. Dusty perfume bottles and framed pictures sit on top of a vanity in front of a dirty mirror. It is hard to see through the window, but outside is a fire escape made of iron.

“One hour,” the mama san says. “Don’t make any babies. We don’t need any more of you.” She slams the door behind her.

Loc sits down on the bed and puts her face in her hands.

“It’s me,” I say.

I want her to reach her arms around me and cry out all the years we have missed. I want to tell her that all we have is the future, but there are black circles of pain and abuse beneath her eyes that I can’t wash away, that nobody can clean. I want to say the words that will make everything all right, but I don’t know what they are, and if I did, I don’t know that she would be able to hear them.

“How did you find me?” she asks. Expressionless.

“I never stopped looking.”

I sit on the bed. Loc covers her face. I put a hand on her knee. She moves away.

“I don’t want you to see this me,” she says.

“I only want to see you. You are you. Always.”

Her dress smells like sex. There is no fat on her shoulder, and I can feel her bones against my arm.

She lifts her head. In the pink light her eyes look darker. “I’m not me,” she says.

“You are all I ever think about.”

Loc runs her fingers through the back of my hair. My scalp tingles. She pulls my head to hers and bites my lip, pushes her tongue deep into my mouth and then pulls back like there are two of her, like one just realized what the other was doing. Her eyes glaze over.

“We need to get you out of here,” I say.

“I can’t,” she says, standing from the bed. She walks to the vanity and sits. I follow, stand behind her, and watch her face in the dusty mirror. Her lips twitch. She picks up a piece of charred foil and a straw.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Stop, please,” she says, putting the straw in her mouth. She lights the foil and sucks in the smoke. Her eyes close. She blows out smoke and falls back in the chair with her arms behind her head. “You want to fuck me?” she says.

“I want to help you,” I say. “I love you.”

She doesn’t move. “You don’t even know me. You can’t know me.”

“Remember the waterfall,” I say.

“That was long ago. I am a stupid woman now.”

“I have done many stupid things,” I say, picking up an empty perfume bottle. The top smells like roses.

Two frames covered in so much dust it’s hard to see they are photos lie flat on the desk. In one, Grandparents look back at me. It is their wedding picture. Neither is smiling. The picture of me is tucked into the bottom of the mirror between the wood and glass so that my face is visible from the nose up. I pull it off. So young and innocent, but my smile looks so old. On the back of the photo Loc has written:

Bò. 1975. Everything changed the day he came.

I take the other half of the photo out of my pocket and line up the two. The curled edges make it look like we are closer than when the photo was taken.

Loc lights the foil. Her eyes open and close like she doesn't where she is, like she has forgotten I am here.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks.

"Look at us," I say, holding the two halves together.

"I can't."

"Please," I say, "just come with me."

Loc takes the picture. It falls from her hands to the ground. She bends over. A cockroach skitters across the floor. Loc rests the picture on her thigh. The flashing pink neon shows a single streak beside her nose.

"Put it back," she says.

I slide the photo between the wood and glass. I never should have let her go that day at the airport. I should have gone first. I should have made sure. I pull at the window, but it is stuck.

"We need to get this open," I say.

"They will catch us." The foil falls from her fingers. The straw shakes in her hand.

"You don't understand. They will kill you."

The pink neon flashes on and off her face. She rubs her forehead and temples with her fingertips.

"You left me all alone," she says.

“They wouldn’t let me in,” I say. “I tried. They beat me.” How can I explain to her that the day she flew away in that plane has haunted me more than any other in my life? I kneel before her and reach for her shoulders.

“Don’t,” she says. “Don’t do this to me. I thought about you every day.”

“I’m here, Loc.”

She bends forward and picks up the foil. The black ash transfers to her fingertips as she looks to see if anything is left. “I stopped thinking,” she says, “about what could have been.”

“It still can.”

“It can’t.”

Squeaks of bedsprings ring through the wall. The pounding of a headboard. Moans and grunts.

Loc takes a folded up piece of paper from a drawer. Inside is brown powder she scoops up with a fingernail and drops onto the foil.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask.

“It’s what I have to do.”

I look out the window. Mopeds pass below the fire escape. There are so many people down below, and none of them knows what is going on.

“Did you know I was alive?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Somehow. I knew.”

Loc pulls her dress to her knees. There are cigarette burns on her calves.

“Sometimes I wish I would’ve flown out of that plane,” she says. “The faces never go away.”

She drops the foil.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say.

“There is a monster,” she says, “a ghost. It follows me everywhere I go.”

I breathe deeply and try to send energy through the silence between us.

“The plane was so big,” she says. “Everybody was crammed together. Kids were strapped to hooks in the floor so they didn’t move, but some just sat there next to their mothers. If only we would’ve known. She reached out for me. The little girl reached out her little hands. It was like I knew what was going to happen. Like I knew and didn’t do anything. Even before the wind.”

The neon flashes on, off her face, but she is no longer here. Her body rocks, but her soul is somewhere else. A cockroach flies into the mirror.

“I should have done something,” she says. “I felt it. The wind sucking at my clothes. Blankets flew through the air. There was a big bang like a bomb. Then the metal split, and kids were sucked from their moms. Little kids. Everybody was screaming. The nurses and nuns screamed, ‘Grab onto each other.’ I tried to grab her foot, but the wind took her.”

Her head and chest and stomach shake. She lets out one long sob and presses her chest against the table. I have to strain to hear her.

“She reached out for me. Stuck in that hole. She tried to push her hands forward, but the wind was too strong. It sucked her out. Her eyes looked right into mine. I should have let go. I should have undone my straps. I watched her die. The plane was going down. The door blew off, and you could see the sky, and kids were flying everywhere, grabbing onto people’s

feet, and those nuns, they didn't move, and I didn't move. *I didn't move*. All those kids died, and *I didn't even fucking move*. It should have been me. Look at me. Why didn't I die?"

"You're supposed to be here," I say.

"For this?"

I put a hand on the back of her shoulder. She lifts it off.

"You don't know what it feels like to know you're going to die and then not die. In those moments I kept thinking of you. I prayed to you. I begged for you to remember me."

I pull at her arm. "Get up. Please. I'm taking you out of here."

"They'll kill you."

I reach under her armpits. "Come on."

"Wait," she says. "I want you to wear this." She unties the leather from her neck.

"I gave this to you," I say. "It is yours."

"No," she says, folding my hand over the green stone. "It is a disgrace to her name."

I tie the leather behind my neck; anything to get her out of here.

"I can walk," she says, following me to the window.

The door bangs open, and three men even bigger than me walk in with the mama san.

"Your time is up, half-breed."

"I will pay more."

Loc walks over to the corner and squats. She fans her face like flies are trying to attack.

"You need to leave," the biggest man says.

"How much?" I bow deeply. "Please."

"Your time is up," the mama san says. "Now get out. I see what's going on here."

I smash my head into the biggest man's nose, but he doesn't go down. He punches my ear, and at the same time I see an iron bat coming. A ringing pain. My neck. Everything turns blurry. No control over this fall. A foot crushes my ribs. I can't move. I can't see her. The entire room turns black, and there is only ringing, like a siren inside my brain.

Chapter 24

I drive Little Bò into Saigon to help him pick out a gift for Rose. I want to tell him about my first memory, about that day when I saw William, about how happy Mom was, about how lucky he is to have both parents in his life, but it's not fair to tell a story and end it in the middle. We stand at the side of the road waiting for a seam in the stream of traffic.

“Give me your hand,” I say.

He looks up at me with his arms folded over his chest. “Why?”

I press down his hair. It is almost as big as Pok's and feels just like the dead GI I found. “I don't want you to get lost,” I say.

“Why?”

“You know why. Now be careful where you step.”

“Why?”

“Look,” I say, crouching before the crack in the sidewalk and pulling him against me.

“Ants. How would you feel if a giant foot stepped on you?”

“That's impossible.”

“Maybe that's what an ant thinks before...boom,” I say, popping back up and bringing a

hand down on Little Bò's head. “It's all over.”

We wait for a gap and then dart past weaving bicycles and mopeds. On the other side I can feel his heartbeat in his hand.

“That was fun,” he says. “I could do that all by myself.”

I lead him past the fish mongers and the lady selling chicks and up to a stall of dresses and shawls. Little Bò lets go of my hand and runs over to shelves of carved wooden turtles.

An old lady at this stand grips his arm and tells him to watch. She takes what looks like half a rubber ball and presses it to the ground. She steps back. The rubber shoots up between her and Little Bò. “I want that,” he says.

A lady with long black hair and a dress that fits tight against her body walks past. Little Bò catches me looking but keeps quiet.

I say, “For you or your mother?”

“For Mom,” he says.

The old lady offers a handful of these half rubber balls. “This is a good gift for your mother,” she says.

“I think you want this for you,” I say. “You’re trying to trick me.”

“No. For Mom.”

People stop and look at us. They stare and whisper. It happens every time we come into the city together. It’s funny to imagine what they must be thinking. How did this white mixed race end up with a black son?

“How much for all of them?” I ask.

The lady’s eyes open wide. “All? You tell me.”

“5000 dong?”

“No. 5000? I cannot. There are ten of them here. 1000 dong each.”

A man bought one for his child for two hundred dong only moments ago, but she’s smart. She’ll get what she can because she probably saw us pull up across the street on the moped. I unfold money and count out ten thousand dong notes.

“These are for the kids in Dam Sen Park,” I tell Little Bò.

“But you bought them for me.”

“For you to share. Let’s go to the clothes market.”

I leave the moped locked to the pole where we parked. We walk through a lone alley. There is a pink light over one door, but no prostitutes around. There is nobody around save for

an old man with a bent back who sweeps myrtle leaves from a walkway and scoops them into a beer case. His pointy hat is pulled low over his face even though the sky is gray.

“You have a cigarette?” the old man asks.

There is something about this voice. I light my own cigarette first, then the old man’s.

“Thank you,” he says, tilting his head and inhaling deeply. His cheeks suck in like a ghost. Black circles coat the space below his eyes. I know who it is.

It seems as if the old man reads my mind. His hands shake as he reaches for the handle of a door, but before he can open it, I get in front of him and block his entry.

“Turn around,” I say. “Look at me.”

Sook obeys. He takes a pull on the cigarette. I yank his hat from his head.

“Look at my eyes.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asks. “You must have me confused with somebody else.”

“You know what you did.”

“Please, Child.”

“Don’t ‘child’ me.” I slap him with the back of my hand.

The stench of piss rises through the sewer grate. I spit into Sook's face. It stays on his chin, phlegm, and when he reaches up to wipe it away, I ram my knee into his stomach. Sook doubles over and tries to breathe.

"Please," he says. "Stop."

I grab him by the hair and pull so hard that when I let go there is a clump of gray in my hand. In Sook's eyes I see Luong holding me down while Dung pissed on my face. I see Tram standing over Van Le for the final time. I see a fatter Sook, a thick neck with tendons and a face covered in pockmarks, the naked legs pumping up and down, the fat belly and ass pushing between Mom's legs. I see the back of the hand that used to slap me, but when I look away from Sook's eyes, down the length of his reedy arms and to his hands, I see the bony fingers of a frail old man: a shaky, bleeding, frail old man, but in the eyes I see the same drunken face that told me to leave the last day I saw Mom alive. The fist which made that demand. The feet that kicked me. The mouth that spit on me. I hear the words: Bastard. Half-breed. Lower than a dog. The slut killed herself.

Pigeons coo on the rooftop. I knock Sook to the ground with one punch. I unscrew the broom handle and press the metal into his neck.

Sook begs. Pleads. "I am an old man."

"You hurt everyone."

Sook folds his body into the fetal position. He guards his face with his hands, the tip of the broom still pressed into his neck. "I never hurt anyone," he says.

"Liar!" I push the handle in deeper. "Prove it."

"How?"

For a moment, I'm unsure. My mind cannot be making this up, but what if this man cowering on the ground is just a victim of my own delusion, of my own desire to right something that can never be righted.

I pull at the old man's pants, struggling against his resistance.

"I have money at home. Please, Bò. I'll give you anything."

His penis looks like a shriveled bird. The raised scar where I bit away his skin is purple. I take the knife from my belt and kneel atop his arms.

"Who's the bastard now?" I scream.

Horns honk. Dogs bark. But from where we are, nobody can see us. We are alone on this dim cobbled road between brick walls. I press the knife against Sook's temple and slice a line. Blood trickles into his ear.

"Listen," Sook says. "I lied. I'm sorry."

"Tell it to the ghosts," I say.

"Please." Sook squeezes his own hands together. "I am just an old man now. I am just trying to make right. To clean. To get my little food. I was wrong." He bends down and kneels at my feet. "The communists took Tram. They took my money. Luong disowned me. I have nothing but an old chicken." Sook looks up like he's praying to the sky: tears in his eyes.

I raise the knife.

"Wait." Sook unties a pouch. He opens a leather wallet and unfolds a photo. "I loved her. Take it."

I hold the knife in one hand. It is a photo I have never seen. Mom wears a flower in her hair. She is surrounded by sand and sea. Young and smiling. She stands next to a girl. Both of them hold handfuls of seashells. Both of them smile.

“Before William,” Sook says. “Before the war. Before you. Before my wife. I loved her. We loved each other. I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry. It was all so crazy. I was always afraid. I don’t know why.”

The knife falls. The back of the photo is stained the color of spilled coffee. The ink is faded. Sook is crying, and I don’t think this is because he is worried that I am going to kill him. For some reason I believe his eyes more than his words. He looks like a raisin compared to the man I knew.

Little Bò.

I grab my knife, put the picture in my pocket, and rush out of the alley. Hundreds of people pass. Children follow their mothers. I yell out Little Bò’s name, searching for a black face in the crowd.

“Hey, look where you’re going,” an old woman says.

I bend to help her pick up the tray of wooden flutes I knocked over. “I’m looking for a dark boy,” I say.

The woman shrugs and sits on the stool behind her stand. A bread vendor leans over her basket.

“Have you seen a mixed race child?” I ask.

“You are a mixed race,” she says. “Go. You’re ruining my business.”

I get on the moped and cruise down alleys and past orphans, asking everybody I can find. In Dam Sen Park I see three burnt rice children, but all of them are teenagers. I walk

between the vendors and past groups of gangsters. I lift blankets from the heads of sleeping kids. Wind blows through the tamarind trees. Leaves fall. It's getting dark, and nobody knows anything.

I race back to the spot where we bought the flying half balls. There he is, sitting in a corner with his arms folded. He doesn't even see me get off the moped and approach him.

"Hey," I say.

He looks up at me with an expression I have never seen on his face, like he is afraid.

"Don't you ever walk away again," I say.

"Okay, Uncle," he says, reaching for my hand.

III.

Chapter 25

I chop through the elephant grass and low lying branches with the overwhelming feeling we are going to find a lot of crystal. My American English teacher knows a man in California who will pay big, but these treks to the ledge are more than just making money. Little Bò tramps past us. He turns, his feet stuck in the marshy ground up to his ankles.

Rose swats mosquitoes. "I don't think we're going the right way," she says.

"He knows where he's going," Pok says.

I keep quiet because it's hard to see the sun through the full branches, and every direction looks the same. We pass roots sticking up so high out of the ground they could be hollowed out and lived in, and I remember how these used to remind me of the skin above Mr. Thanh's heels. I wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Thanh can see me from the spirit world or if by some miracle they are still alive. I wonder why I suddenly miss them. I wonder what they thought when I had to go away, and as we pass under palm leaves the size of elephant ears, I can see their faces as clearly as if they are right in front of us. They look lost.

On the walks I take in the mornings before everybody wakes, I try to feel every bit of wind, to hear the sounds of each animal in the jungle, to smell the decomposition of each branch that has fallen. This is the experience I want to give them.

A monkey howls.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

Pok says, "What?"

"Listen," I say.

Little Bò plucks a foot up from the mud. “I want to go to the waterfall,” he says.

“You said we could swim.”

“We will,” I say. “Listen.”

“I hear a bird,” Little Bò says.

I lead us toward dry ground. “What does it sound like?”

“A bird,” Little Bò says.

“I know,” I say. “What sound does a bird make?”

“I’m not a baby,” Little Bò says, and he’s right, he’s not even little anymore, almost eight years old, but we still call him *Little Bò*.

“What sound does it make?” I ask.

“Tweet tweet tweet,” Little Bò says in a voice lower than his own.

I say, “Exactly.”

Pok wipes his forehead with the neck of his shirt.

“What are we doing?” Rose asks.

I scrape dirt from the machete and wipe the blade against a tree trunk. “I have been thinking,” I say. “In all this talk about your parents, and my parents, and what could have been, we trap ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” Rose asks.

“It comes in the mornings,” I say. “I miss moments because I’m thinking: *What if this? What if that?* Are you happy where we are?”

“Yes,” Pok says.

“I want to stop thinking about the past,” I say. “That’s what I try to do in my morning walks.”

“How?” Pok asks.

“I try to pay attention to my breath.”

A bird swoops from a branch and flies so low we have to duck. Little Bò splits a strip of elephant grass with his thumbnail. He blows the slit until it whistles.

“Listen to that,” Pok says.

“That’s now,” I say. “Do you want to try what I do?”

Pok and Rose both say yes.

Little Bò says, “I want to go to the waterfall.” He digs a stick into the earth and pulls up a worm.

“Look,” he says.

I say, “Remember what I told you.”

Little Bò drops the worm.

“Let’s try to be right here, right now,” I say. “Breathe in for eight steps, hold your breath for four steps, and then breathe out for eight steps.” I put a hand on Little Bò’s shoulder. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s try.”

The four of us walk. The air is wet like the jungle is sweating. Birds chirp. Mosquitoes buzz. Sticks crunch beneath our feet. In these moments of presence, ducking under branches and traversing past roots and hills, the past and future cease to exist. The spirit world walks with us as I practice the half-smile Uncle told me would take away sadness, even when the worst of things were happening. I feel the energy of my new family

pass through me. We are a snap of the finger inside this timeless jungle—Pok and Rose and Little Bò, all the animals and plants, a part of each other, a part of everything.

The jungle opens up to the spot beside the ledge where we have spent nights beside the fire after swimming below the waterfall. Trees jut out from the highest parts of the wall and hang down sideways like a canopy. How many years did it take for the water to cut grooves into the dirt and turn it into rock? How many years will it take before my soul becomes as old as Uncle's?

“What did you think?” I ask.

“It was hard to stop thinking,” Pok says. “About stupid stuff I have to do, like feed the chickens and cut down bananas, things that don't matter right now.”

“It is the monkey mind,” I say, a term I learned from one of the Vietnamese English teachers. “It can't be present. It wants to jump back and flip forward.”

“We have to think about something,” Rose says.

“Then why not right now?” I ask Little Bò what he felt.

“Mosquitoes,” he says. “Can we go to the waterfall now?”

“We have to work first,” Rose says, stretching her arms over her head. She takes a deep breath. “I feel better.”

“It's like there are two of us in our body,” I say, taking off my backpack. I open it and take out the spades. “I have to be direct with my monkey mind. I have to tell it that these thoughts aren't real. What is real is what is happening right now in front of my eyes.”

“Is that what you do when you sit at night?” Little Bò asks.

“Yes,” I say.

Pok runs his spade along the line where fresh water drips. Dirt crumbles and falls to the jungle floor.

“I don’t like to sit still,” Little Bò says.

“That’s the truth,” Pok says.

Rose stands beneath a collection of jutting trees, away from us. “Come here,” she says. Look at this.”

Ants stretch around the base of a tree and up the side of the ledge.

“They’re everywhere,” Little Bò says. “How many do you think are there?”

“Count them,” Pok says.

There must be millions. Is this what the world looks like from above? Is this what Loc saw from the plane? Maybe the chaos of Saigon looks like perfect order from a different vantage point.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” I say.

“What?” Rose asks.

“They don’t think. They just go.”

I examine the wall for crystal.

Little Bò crouches down with his spade. He runs his hand along the base of the ledge.

“I see something,” he says.

We all stand behind him, but none of us can see what he sees.

“Right there,” he says, “beside that root. Uncle, help me.”

I take the knife from my belt. “Show me where.”

“Here.” He licks his finger and presses it into the wall.

Pok says, “It’s all rock, Child.”

“It is under there,” Little Bò says. “I’m sure.”

Light shines through the trees and shifts from branch to branch. Puffs of cotton clouds drift above the trees. I remember the hammock. I remember Loc, turning the shapes into shells and swords and ladders and animals. I get the chisel and hammer from my bag and show Little Bò how to knock out the rock around the spot where he thinks there is crystal. He chips away, wipes the spot with saliva. I see a gleam of light. Little Bò blows away the dust and keeps chipping.

“See,” he says.

“There is crystal,” Rose says. “How did you know?”

“Uncle taught me.”

“What?”

“To look for sparkles in the dirt,” he says.

Little Bò keeps moving steps in front of me because he’s excited to get to the market in Saigon where he will waste all the money he made feeding the pigs and scooping up shit.

“That man keeps looking at you,” he says.

One of the American teachers whose class nobody wants to be assigned to, whose room smells like beer and sweat, whose students call him *Mr. I’m Not Sure*, stands. He runs between mopeds and cars to the sidewalk. Even the white tourists move up against the building and walk faster as Roger approaches.

A banh mi vendor says, “Crazy foreigner.”

“My friend,” Roger says, dodging a moped. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and then coughs into the wet armpit of his T shirt. “You didn’t see me?”

“No,” I say.

“Come for a beer.”

Little Bò stares at Roger.

“No time,” I say.

“Ah, come on.” Roger wraps an arm around my neck and leads me to the plastic table where he was sitting.

Two glasses sweat next to a pitcher of beer. It is cooler beneath the umbrella.

“One more glass,” Roger says. “And a Coca-Cola for the boy.”

Little Bò’s eyes open wide at the mention of Coca-Cola, and he looks at Roger as if to examine who this man might be and how he knows me.

An old woman pokes her head out from behind a rack of glasses. “He has been here all day,” she says.

“Drinking away my sadness,” Roger says.

A peasant boy stands before us, holes in the knees of his pants, in his hands a fan of postcards like he’s a magician preparing for a trick. “Ten for a dollar,” he says.

I say, “No, thank you” because he won’t get the money anyway; it goes straight to the gangsters.

Roger digs into his pockets and pulls out crumpled bunches of dong. His upper body sways forward and back as he hands over the wad. “Just take it,” he says. “I don’t need any postcards.”

A lady sits behind a metal bucket. Meat sizzles on the braided strands of wire fastened across the top. Smoke rises. The poor peasant boy walks up to a group of tourists whose legs are sunburned pink beneath their shorts. Mopeds whirr past them.

“Did you sell your crystal?” Roger asks.

“You remembered,” I say.

“Of course. I remember everything.” He pours another glass and tops off his own.

“To your health.”

I pick up the beer, clink my glass against Roger’s, and take a sip. Roger lights a cigarette and slides the pack of Alain Delons across the table.

“Take one,” he says.

“Smoking is bad for you,” Little Bò says.

I take some dong from my pocket and hand the bills to Little Bò. “Why don’t you go get something to eat and be back in a half hour,” I say.

He picks up his Coca-Cola and walks toward the market. A peasant woman squats over a basket of silver-skinned fish and brushes away flies. Little Bò puts his hand to his nose and walks through the arched entrance.

“He doesn’t know you smoke?” Roger asks.

“I don’t smoke.”

“You did.”

“Good looking boy,” Roger says. “I like the way black Vietnamese look.”

I wish more people could think the way Roger does. “You said you were going to the beaches in Hoi An,” I say.

“Yeah, well.”

I take a sip of the beer and wonder if I would look or act more like Roger if I had grown up in the United States. This tourism is still strange: people coming to crawl through the tunnels of Cu Chi and see the punji pits and other traps the Viet Cong made to capture Americans. When I see an old tourist crossing the street with a young Vietnamese girl, I have to wonder if this is opportunity or destruction, if she was like this before all of them came with their dollars and pounds.

Roger leans his elbows on the table. The stool legs buckle, and he tumbles to the ground. "I'm good," he says. No attempt to get up. He stretches his legs under the table and reaches up for his beer. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"That my dad will never be happy."

"Why?" I ask, watching a group of moped drivers pass a water pipe back and forth and blow out tufts of black tobacco smoke. A young white couple walks hand in hand into the market. They wear pointy hats that have never seen a day of work.

Roger calls out to the beer vendor, "Give us three more."

"But there are only two of us," I say.

"One for my friend," he says, tapping the plastic where he was sitting. "Empty chair."

I take one of the cigarettes from the pack and light it. The tobacco is harsh, and I wonder why I ever enjoyed it. "Why do you think he'll never be happy?"

"My mom said it's like he left a part of himself here." Roger thanks the old lady and tells the woman grilling meat that she is more beautiful than any woman in Vietnam. "You probably don't want to talk about it. Nobody does. But I trust you."

I want to tell him that we don't even know each other, that talking on the streets in the middle of one of his drunks is not what I would consider a building of trust. Roger isn't like one of these backpackers walking by or even like the old men who come for sex. He's on a search. He wants to see what his father saw, but that Vietnam no longer exists.

"I don't know what your dad saw," I say.

Roger looks confused, his face red with the combination of beer and sun. Sweat beads across his forehead and on his arms. Mom used to say that it's better to talk to a wall than a drunken man, and now I know why.

The memory of William spinning around while the elephants and monkeys danced above comes back often, but for the first time I recall what else happened that day: the bleeding woman reaching for someone who wasn't there, the little girl without arms, the woman and her child thrown to the ground when a mortar hit right in front of them. I have been thinking about William a lot lately, ever since I started the English classes two years ago. I wonder what he looks like now and if he has a family in the United States. I never thought that American kids would be affected by their fathers being over here. What if William has an American son who is somewhere in this country, trying to figure out why his dad is the way he is?

"Imagine being afraid all the time," I say. "Imagine seeing the people you love die right in front of you."

Roger buys a baguette filled with meat from the old lady. He eats and drinks at the same time.

"I saw him cry once," Roger says. "We were at the Vietnam Wall. It's the only time he ever talked about it. He's a butcher. A tough guy. But I think he's afraid." Roger's lips

twitch, and he looks like a boy sitting down there on the ground, like a pouting boy stuck inside while all the other kids go out to play. “He rubbed one of the names. He rubbed the stone and said, ‘In this space is a mother’s heart, a father’s pride, and thousands of memories. Then there is absence, like the dead soldier never existed, like this space between the marble was cut out from everyone who loved him. They cut a lot out of me, son.’”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t know what to say. Maybe that was my only chance.”

“You will have other chances.” I finish the beer and start on the next one. My legs feel loose.

Tourists walk down the street taking snapshots of the old French hotels, and this I understand, but why do they stop postcard boys and rose girls and ask for pictures with them? Maybe they see the Vietnamese as different.

“It’s like a scar,” I say.

“Lies!” Roger pounds a fist on the table. Glasses fall, and he can only catch one as the other hits the ground and shatters.

“What is his problem?” the beer vendor asks.

“I will take care of him.”

Roger puts his head down on the edge of the table. He mumbles. It’s hard to hear him. “I used to find him in the yard,” he says. “Late at night. I didn’t know when I was a kid. I just thought he was crazy. Sitting in his underwear. Eating rice. Speaking gibberish. What am I supposed to do? He just says, ‘You never saw the shit I saw.’”

“He’s right.”

He lifts his head off the table. "I just want a dad." His eyes are wet with drink and sadness.

"I understand."

"Sorry." Roger bites into his second baguette. He puts his head back down, holds his sandwich in his lap.

He might be passed out, but I tell him about Pok and Rose, how we met, what I've done for them, the way our lives are now out in the country.

"You know the most important thing I did," I say.

Roger lifts his head. "What?"

"I listened."

"What?"

"I listened."

"I'm joking," Roger says. "I try." His voice rises. "I try."

"Maybe your father can't be who you want him to be."

Roger lights another cigarette. He holds the pack out to offer me one. "Three more," he calls out. "You don't understand."

"How long have you felt this way?"

"Forever."

Pigeons swoop down from the wires and bob under our table to eat fallen crumbs.

"The last time I went home, he picked me up at the airport," Roger says. "It looked like he wanted to hug me. And I wanted to hug him. I would've hugged him, but the moment passed. He said, 'Good to have you back,' and that was it."

"Maybe that's the best he can do," and maybe the best William could do was to leave.

Maybe William was different before he came to Vietnam, just like Loc would never again be the girl who got on the plane. Maybe these parts have something to do with the monkey mind taking over the heart and never allowing a person to leave a place or a memory behind, to live in that forever and miss every moment of life. Maybe this is me.

Roger leans forward. His right eye is almost closed. "You know what I recognized?"

"What?"

"The Pall Mall."

"The what?"

"The cigarette. There had always been this idea that next month or next year he would be happier. I knew it was a lie, but that Pall Mall, there's a truth in it. It was comforting because...I don't know. I guess because it's safe. It's a memory."

A postcard boy kicks a rock across the street, and I remember Uncle telling me about the wisdom of rocks, how they have been around longer than any of us, how they have seen everything and know more than any human being. I keep this for me. Roger is too drunk to understand.

Chapter 26

Little Bò bounces down the rock road on the moped. Rose takes clothes down from the line and loads them into a jute basket. Maybe I should help her or go out and give Pok a hand chopping wood, but I have already fed the chickens and collected the eggs, weeded around the vegetable garden, and brought a full sack of bran for the pigs. Now is my time to rock back and forth in the hammock and play my flute. I push off the floor to get some momentum going.

Little Bò lifts the moped onto the stand, takes an envelope off the seat and walks toward me. “Uncle,” he says, sitting down in a chair beside the hammock.

“What is it?”

Hair springs out from his cap as he leans forward and offers the envelope. “I saw Lalou when I brought in the crystal,” he says. “She said to give this to you.”

I turn over the envelope. Nothing is written on either side. I tear it open and read.

“What is it?” Little Bò asks. He leans forward and casts a shadow across the letter.

“Uncle, you’re crying.”

“I’m okay,” I say.

Ducks land on the pond that Pok and I dug. The pigs scarf up bran. Chickens chase each other around the matted earth circling the fire pit.

I put the photo and letter back in the envelope.

“Where are you going?” Little Bò asks.

I walk inside and kneel before the shrine I built for Mom. She looks so happy, standing there beside her sister like this is the woman she always wanted to be, like this is

who she was before the war came, like she, too, was no different from William, no different from Loc, no different from Roger's father.

I light a stick of frankincense and close my eyes, let the smoke circle through the room and out to my world, and I ask no questions. I just want Mom to be near me while I think and get up the courage to read the letter from the beginning. To get past the first line: *I have started this letter a hundred times.*

I walk back outside and sit on the hammock. In the photo, Loc leans against a palm tree jutting out of concrete. She looks so small, but her shoulders are thicker than the last time I touched them, and her face fuller. She smiles for the person behind the camera. Who is it?

“What is it?” Little Bò asks.

“My best friend,” I say, unfolding the paper. The letters are big like a child's writing.

Bò,

I have started this letter a hundred times. This new place does not feel like home. It is called Orange County, but I never see any oranges. Not on trees. I only see them in the market where there are so many things I can't decide. It's like I can't decide anything. I was so sick those days after I stopped. They had to put me into a hospital. I was sweating and shaking and thought I was going to die. Some nights I wake up and can't go back to sleep. I think I am a bad girl. My body is weak because I cannot eat, but sometimes I still want it. I wonder if you still think about me. I did not mean to do all those stupid things. You are the only one who ever treated me right. I am trying to do good things. I try to make ladies look pretty. I paint their nails, and sometimes this makes me feel good when I make them happy.

The letter ends at the bottom of the page without a signature or even a name. Nothing is written on the other side.

“When did this come?” I ask.

“I don't know,” Little Bò says. “She only said to give it to you.”

“Where are the keys?”

“Sorry, Uncle,” Little Bò says, handing them over, all the while his eyes facing the ground.

“You didn’t do anything,” I say. I rub his shoulder to stop him from cowering. “I must go,” I say, heading toward the moped.

The key seems too tight for the hole until I realize I’m putting it in upside down.

“Uncle, where are you going?”

I crank back the gas and take off.

Lalou stands from her desk and walks to the front door as soon as I come in.

“Number one half-breed,” Fat Man says in English.

Lalou leads me to a corner away from the men. “Let’s go outside,” she says.

I follow her across the street to a bench in the middle of Dam Sen Park. The beggars are gone. No more mixed race. A boy and his father fly a kite above the bonsai trees that look like manicured pencils pointing at the sky. Roses grow around lamp poles. Vines twist and weave through trellises along a fence. Families sit beneath umbrellas, sharing sticky rice balls and fruit from baskets. Two old men gather across a picnic table with a chess board between them. They argue about whose turn it is. Lovers roll across the pond in paddle boats shaped like swans. Even the old bum, sitting alone with a blanket and a bottle of wine, looks happy.

“What do you want to do?” Lalou asks.

I pick black paint off the iron bench. “They will never let me leave,” I say.

“Who?” Lalou asks.

“Fat Man. Asshole. All of them. They get pleasure from denying applications. They would probably dance after rejecting mine.”

Lalou opens her purse and takes out an orange. She peels off the skin and hands me half. The juice tastes sour. The air smells like honeysuckle, but I can't see any flowers.

“We eat one slice at a time,” she says, separating her orange. “The first slice is whether or not you want to go.”

“You don't know,” I say. “You can't know.”

I should be celebrating. This should be the happiest day of my life, but leaving will be a tearing away of everything I've built—I would be abandoning Mom, Uncle, and Grandfather along with Rose and Pok and Little Bò and Miko.

“I will find out what I can do,” Lalou says. “I must get back.”

I walk her through the river of mopeds to the door and wonder if it is even busier than this in Orange County.

“It will work out,” she says, and then closes the door and walks down the hall.

I sit beside my moped and scrape sand from the ground with the side of my finger until I get a stack the size of a pack of cigarettes which I scoop into my palm. I let the grains slide between my fingers. There are people everywhere: riding, walking, sitting, talking, waiting, loving, laughing, eating, drinking. I stand up, get onto the moped seat, and sit without putting in the key, watching and thinking that not a single person has noticed me, not even the bum with his bottle, no one.

I move from knee to knee, clipping dead heads from the rose bushes and dropping them into a bucket. Water comes to a boil atop the fire. They all say I must go, but when I come out

beneath the moon on these nights I can't sleep, fear tells me different, but even Cuoi says this is a lie, says that home is inside of you, that home exists in the space between people, that home floats between the letters Loc and I send to each other.

I take the pot from the fire, lift off the top, and drop in the petals. Then I wait. This may be the last batch of rose tea I drink. Sparks pop. Only the stray howl of a monkey. Not a cloud in the sky. I rub my thumb against the jade. The moon is full, and this will always be something both of us can see no matter where we are.

The fire light burns gold circles into the darkness. Maybe the sky will fade, and I will see her, sitting alone wherever she lives, listening to the sounds of English coming from the television, or eating hamburgers with friends like the backpackers on Tan Dho Street, or sitting in a bathtub like the ones in the hotels, trying to tell herself that everything is going to be okay now, that everything will work out.

The fire dies down to a circular sheet swaying above the ash. I add two logs and watch them catch. I lift the lid from the pot and inhale the steam. Footsteps come from the main house.

"Again," Rose says. "It is not good not to sleep." She sits down beside me, pulls her feet onto her thighs.

"I made this for you," I say. "Rose tea for Rose."

"And where is my cup?"

"You were supposed to bring it."

Rose looks up at the moon. "Cuoi is watching you," she says.

“I will get you a cup.” I walk toward the house. Steam rises from an arc of pee in front of Little Bò. He finishes and turns to go back inside without even looking up. I get the cup and return to Rose.

“I think your boy is sleep walking again,” I say.

“I think you’re sleepwalking.”

I swat Rose’s knee.

“Hey,” she says.

“I thought there was a mosquito,” I say, pouring her a cup.

“You’re bad.”

“I’m not sleepwalking,” I say. “What would you do?”

“What you and Pok did for me.” Rose puts her lips to the cup and tilts her head. She waves her hand in front of her mouth. “You never gave up.”

“I will help you,” I say, “if you want to come.”

“Just worry about yourself. For once.”

The tea is too strong, but it makes breathing easier. Sometimes I look at Rose and listen and feel like she is older than me. This is one of those times. I set the cup beside my leg and remember Mom swimming in the bay when I was little, how she could float without sinking, how she could lie with her arms behind her head and let the waves carry her body to the shore. Maybe she can do the same thing in the spirit world.

“I am the only one Mom has left here,” I say.

“That is an excuse,” Rose says.

Crickets rub their legs together in song. The tops of the trees shine silver.

“What do you mean ‘an excuse’?”

“It is because you are afraid,” she says. “What have you always taught us?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“That you must give to get.” Rose takes a sip. “Your mom has always been there. In Cam Ranh Bay. In Saigon. In Dalat. In the North. Why do you think she can’t be in America?”

“People say you must be around the graves of your ancestors.”

“The spirit world is not like ours,” Rose says. “Have you asked what she thinks?”

“I’ve asked her if I should go.”

“And what does she say?”

“That I should, but sometimes it just feels like I’m talking to myself.”

“That’s because she is inside you, no matter where you are.”

“I never knew what I wanted until the letter came.”

“What’s that?”

“All of you,” I say. “A home.”

After Rose goes in, I take out the coins I have painted white on one side. I ask Mom if she thinks I should go, one last time, and flip them. One side comes up white, the other silver, and I know what I have to do.

Chapter 27

I lean back in the cushioned seat, feeling everything but comfortable, worried that Loc has given up on me because I never showed up when the first plane was supposed to land, because all the plans changed at the last minute, and I'm sure this was done by Fat Man. I keep telling myself that it is all going to work out, to trust the force that I have no control over, that the bus will take me to where Loc works once I get off the plane, but these thoughts, me trying to control my mind, doesn't take away the fear.

A voice from above speaks in Vietnamese, then English, an official tone to let us know the temperature and what time we should arrive in Los Angeles. The seats are too big for the Vietnamese, and yet they sit with elbows tucked in like they are crammed together. A mixed race even whiter than me sits in the middle row. He has no arms, and I can't help but to picture him holding a cup or begging for change in the streets.

The plane rolls forward like a truck. I tighten the seatbelt and wonder if the others are afraid. There are so many people in this narrow space. Women in blue ao dais stand in the front of the plane holding masks over their faces. This isn't the answer I want to hear for crashing in the ocean.

The plane picks up speed and then thrusts forward. The momentum fills my chest. I press the back of my head against the seat and hold on to the armrests. Through the window, Tan Son Nhut airport gets smaller and smaller. Rusted rooftops and plotted squares of rice field turn into dots. Mopeds cruise through the streets like ants attacking cake. The Cuu Long River becomes a long brown worm twisting through green. Home is a dot I'm not even sure is mine, and then the clouds swallow everything.

The plane shakes. This must have been what it was like before Loc crashed. The boy beside me will not stop crying. His mother blows into his ear. Sun sparkles on her purple earrings. I sit on my hands and pray. Pressure fills my head.

Everything is okay.

“Don’t panic,” the lady next to me says. “This is part of it.”

I don’t believe her. I lower the window shade and squeeze the sweaty jade. The woman beside me pinches her nose with her fingers and blows with her mouth closed.

“It will help your ears,” she says.

I blow into clenched nostrils. My head pops, and air shoots out of my ears with a whistle. Nobody talks. I pull up the window shade. The clouds look like the spun sugar that Grandmother sometimes brought home from the market in Duc Lap, and I wonder just how high up we could go, if we would run into more clouds, if there are other planes nearby.

The plane shakes again before leveling out. The voice tells us it’s safe to take off our seatbelts. If I make it through this ride, I will never get on a plane again.

Two sisters stand from the middle rows. Their hair is tied back with the same white ribbon. The older asks to look out my window. Their mother smiles as if to say she is sorry as I move my legs to the side so their little knees can get past mine.

“What if the window broke?” the older sister asks.

“Then we could fly,” the younger says.

How nice to see life through their eyes. I once did: the day paper tigers and elephants marched in the sky, the frogs who were my friends, the way Loc and I made clouds into whatever we wanted them to be. Maybe I could have a boy with his own eyes to remind me how to see. How to see these clouds as a pillow I could step out and lie upon and the sky a

place to float all day. The sisters giggle and point and talk about flying through the air with their arms. The older one presses past the other and puts her face against the glass. The girls' mother orders them back, and they obey.

The smooth movement of the plane produces a weightless sensation. A man behind us says his American father will buy him a motorcycle when he finds him. Another man talks about an uncle who has been in America for a year and already has his own car. Everybody speaks with excitement about their new lives—"There is no poverty. No gangs. No crime. Everything you want is there"—and it seems no one else is alone.

The women in the blue ao dais stop at the seats up front and pass out food. Their lips are bright red like fresh blood, and this close the white make up is visible. The short-haired one whispers to the other.

"Did you see the eyes on that mixed race?"

These women have been places, seen a variety of people, and I hope she let the other woman know because she likes what she sees. She sets a tray on my table and smiles. Her white makeup gives her the face of a porcelain doll. On the tray everything is ordered into different compartments inside the plastic. I pick at the spring rolls and green salad, but the food hurts my stomach.

A kung fu movie plays on a screen in front of all the seats, and I remember practicing in the candlelight of the cave, watching my shadow on the cinder block wall. The movie ends with the list of actors' names rolling up past the pile of bodies Bruce Lee has taken out. The image of a grey plane appears on a map, still close to Saigon and far from Los Angeles. I try to keep my eyes open through a love story. The clouds turn from pink to purple. The oval

windows become black, and all that can be seen outside is the flashing red lights at the end of the wing.

What will Pok and Rose and Little Bò do without me? I rest my head against the folded down tray. Maybe I could bring Loc back to the house. Maybe all of us could live together.

I breathe and think of the nights beneath the stars. I think about sitting with Pok beside the fire. I think back to when Little Bò was just a baby, laughing in my arms, and I think about what I will miss. I think of Mom, so close I could reach up and touch her, and in this moment I know she is with me.

Everything is so bright. Flashing. Loud. I feel naked without my sunglasses, weighed down by the bag in my hand. People race past in a blur, dragging suitcases and children. I should move, but I don't know where to go and can't stop looking around. Everybody looks mixed race—black and white and every color in between—like everybody in America has sex with each other. Their heads are so big, and I have never seen this many fat bellies. Some of the men have long hair. Chinese and Vietnamese bounce between the Americans like ducks among dogs, and I am no longer the biggest one.

A long truck without a top rolls across the marble floors with a constant beep of the driver parting the people. The elderly ride in rows behind him. Voices engage in conversation like they're yelling across the room. I can't understand what anybody is saying. It's all too much at once. The ones working must be the poor: brown ladies pushing carts of cleaning supplies; big black men in blue suits, guns attached to their belts. They talk into box radios like the one Sook had in the tunnel. I can't move.

“What are you doing?” “Get out of the way?” “Watch where you’re going.” “Make up your mind.”

Some of the women look like prostitutes who walk the streets of Saigon at night in pairs, but I have never seen these shades of lipstick: purple plum, and pink bubble gum, and even black lips on angry looking women. Skirts above knees. Copper colored legs. Clothes glitter like specks of gold and shine like new coins.

A teenager sits cross-legged on the floor. A strip of purple hair runs down the middle of his bald head. He has a ring in his nose and more in his ears and lips. I keep expecting to see old women selling soup and grilling meat. To see big pots overflowing with white steaming rice and knives chopping through vegetables. To smell fish sauce and bubbling broth. There are people sitting at tables inside restaurants, but where does their food come from? Who is cooking it?

I stop at a coffee stand.

“How you doing?” the man at the back of the line says.

“Bad,” I say. “I don’t know where I’m going. My English is no good.”

“What you looking for?”

“The buses,” I say.

“Right there.”

The man points to a hanging sign. Not only is the word bus written in English and Spanish and Chinese, there is also a big picture of a bus right at the bottom.

“Sir,” the young girl behind the counter says. A silver loop circles through her nostril.
“What can I do for you?”

There are many things she might do—like assure me that everything is going to be all right, or make sure that I get on the right bus, or tell me where I should stop and eat, if any of these places have rice—but this isn't what she means.

I say, "Coffee, please."

The girl speaks English words, a lot of them. Some might even be Italian or French. It feels like everybody is watching me and laughing inside even though I wore my most American clothes: my maroon Members Only jacket and Lee jeans.

"Give him a regular coffee," the man behind me says.

The girl rolls her eyes and hands me a foam cup. The coffee tastes weaker than tea, like it has been diluted with water. Maybe this is how it is supposed to be in America.

A father lifts a child above a silver box. The boy's hair is orange like a tiger's fur. Water shoots out of the top, and the boy laps it up like a dog. People eat and walk at the same time, holding bags of chips and round sandwiches wrapped in paper. Men and women sit in padded chairs watching televisions that hang from the ceiling. Every twenty feet there is another section of seats set up in the same manner, with the same television, and with all of these same people. Nobody talks to each other. In one section a brown child plays with a white child. A black woman offers her pointer finger to a Chinese baby. I wonder if Loc likes children. She might be too old. The years of abuse may have ruined her. She was right when she said I didn't know her the night we met in the whorehouse.

I pass a row of telephones hooked to boxes where people stand next to each other talking too loudly. I recognize words—good to be back; I missed you; I'm tired—try to live in the moment, take out Lalou's directions for the bus that goes to Lotus Nails.

The voice from above says: Do not carry bags for others.

I think that maybe America is a selfish place, especially when people push past me like I don't even exist.

“Do you need help?” a woman asks in Vietnamese.

I turn to say thank you. The woman pulls her veil across her face. Her wrinkled skin bunches up.

“Go back to Vietnam and do your stupid things,” she says. “We don't need more of you making us look bad.”

“Please.” I follow after her. “I don't know where I'm going.”

“America is not Vietnam,” she says. “See that policeman? I only have to tell him you threatened me, and he will take you away. So go. Get lost, half-breed.”

I walk through the crowd to a bathroom. It smells like piss and shit and pine trees. A line of twenty men stand side to side with a wall between them. I open one of a dozen silver doors. The toilet is raised up like the bowls in the English school. I sit. Something won't let me just go outside and find the bus. It is the same fear that I had when I went to the hospital to get a shot: the waiting; the anticipation; the possibility of something going wrong. I pray to Mom and ask her what's wrong, ask her what I should do. I rub the jade. Nothing comes back. Maybe Rose was wrong. Maybe Mom's spirit is stuck in Vietnam. What I have waited for all my life is so close, but I can't get up. The toilets flushing sound like typhoon winds. I pull down my pants and try to shit, but nothing will come out.

Outside the bathroom, people get on stairs that that move them up and down. Doors open without being touched. Maybe this is why people are so fat. I walk on to the exit for the buses.

Across from the airport there is a blue and silver building that looks like a spaceship. Palm trees grow out of circles in the concrete, but it doesn't smell like the jungle. It smells like the exhaust blowing up from trucks and buses larger than any I've ever seen, and when they pull up to the curb, people rush in and out just like in Vietnam.

Buses pass: 126, 34, 58, 72. I use my best English to ask a black man where the 91 bus is. What if he is Pok's father? Any one of these men his age could still have a son or daughter in Vietnam. The black man tells me to wait here, that it should be coming soon. I feel like everybody is watching me. They walk in T shirts and skirts and shorts, and I wonder if Loc goes around showing her legs all the way up to her thighs.

The 91 bus pulls up. The steps are higher than those in Vietnam, and the air inside blows like the cold during rainy season.

"A dollar ten," the driver says.

"What?"

"One dollar and ten cents," he says, stretching each word for a second.

I hand over two dollars.

"You have to put it in here," the driver says, taking the money and sliding it into a metal slot.

"I need to go here." I show him the paper Lalou gave me.

"Sit down," the driver says. "I'll yell it out."

Everyone on the bus looks like they know who I am and what I've done. The only seat left is next to a man with ratty gray hair and a beard. I sit. The man smells like he has never bathed. He might be drunk and passed out. He might be dead.

The bus rumbles down the airport road and out to the highway. Cars speed past faster than airplanes. There are no mopeds, no bicycles, and no motorcycles. Chain fences run through the field for miles, but there are no houses behind them. A line of mountains stretches out beyond the right window. On the left side, beyond a brown-skinned family, tops of tall buildings with glass windows dot the sky.

We pass a field of crushed cars. I think of the American bombers that rusted away at Tan Son Nhut. I think of the scavenged plane, the C-5 Galaxy, and I think when it comes to waste and using everything that I am more Vietnamese than American. I have seen Coca-Cola billboards before, but these white faces surprise me even though I have always known that Coca-Cola is American. On another billboard there is an orange with a straw piercing the skin. A white woman sucks out the juice. How do the Americans grow these special oranges?

The driver slows down and pulls into the city where traffic is front to back, a row of white lights on the other side, and red lights stretching forever in front of us: the same order from the airplane; the same organization as the ants in the jungle, but down here it is the chaos of honking and switching lanes and yelling out windows.

The bus stops every ten minutes, and people get on and off. I hold tight to my bag and watch the heads of the men and women inside cars. All of their windows are rolled up as if they are afraid of wind. They look straight ahead as if they are afraid of people.

I take out the directions. Maybe the driver lied. Maybe he has no idea where I am going. Maybe he just wanted to get rid of me like the coffee girl. I don't know how to pronounce either of these words: Alameda or Boulevard. I want to ask somebody, but the brown people around me aren't speaking English. We pass houses on hills with yards that slope down like slides. Dogs jump against fences and run in circles.

A Vietnamese man pushes a shopping cart, and as we ride past shops with signs written in English and another language there seem to be more Vietnamese scattered among the people. We stop at a red light. Cars rest between yellow lines. Behind these are businesses with signs written in Vietnamese: hairdressers, lawyers, bank loans, and restaurants. Vietnamese people walk in and out of the doors. Vietnamese kids ride on skateboards and jump up onto a concrete circle that wraps around a palm tree. The kids wear American clothes: blue jeans and T shirts, but their jeans are lighter blue and baggy.

“Next stop,” the driver says.

“My?” I ask.

“Yes, for you, your highness,” the driver says.

I wait for the bus to pull up to a bench where dozens of Vietnamese gather. They mutter under their breath as I step down.

“Great,” a man in an American cotton shirt says. “Another one.”

I walk past this man to the skateboarders. “Do you know where Lotus Nails is?” I ask. A boy whose hair is spiked up with grease leans his skateboard against his leg. “English,” he says. “We only speak English.”

I ask him again in English, and the kid points to a sign across the street. The other kids speak so quickly I can’t understand. There are bonsai trees on each side of the glass doors in front of Lotus Nails.

“Thank you,” I tell him, turning to walk to the shop.

Tires screech, and a car comes to a halt. My bag falls. I can’t move. The white driver pokes his head out the window. “Take the dental floss off your eyes!” he screams. He holds up his middle finger and shouts. Then he yells “fucking gook” and speeds off.

I pick up my bag and step onto the sidewalk where teenagers smoke cigarettes and play cards in front of a restaurant called Nha Trang. This place is anything but—the only sand on this concrete beach has blown up and collected against the curb between the sidewalk and the street. The only fish: cigarette butts. I try to be in this moment, but my monkey mind wants to jump ahead to what she might say, to what she might look like, to how she might react. The air smells like fried donuts, and I remember giving coins to the orphans in Dam Sen Park. I remember how the napkins soaked up the grease, how the crunchy coating led to sweet gooey insides.

I feel his stare before I see him. A dirty, sad man in a muddy shirt and piss-stained pants sits behind a cardboard sign that says: Homeless Vietnam Vet. Please help. I reach into my pocket, and drop coins into his hat. “You were in Vietnam?” I ask.

The man doesn’t look up. He takes the coins from his hat, lines them up together, and puts them in a front shirt pocket with a crushed pack of cigarettes.

“I was in dick duck boo,” he says. “Got my arm blown clean off.”

I want to tell him that he has both arms and that there is no place I have ever heard of named dick duck boo, but I walk on.

Two old ladies with painted-on purple eyebrows walk out of Lotus Nails. One says something I can’t hear. I should go inside and get it over with—that’s what Pok and Rose would tell me— but I’m stuck watching the skateboarders jump onto the concrete circle. The street lights change from green to yellow to red to green to yellow to red. Spray paint covers a cinderblock wall in the alley: Fuck Life; Youth Lacks Love; Money Desire Drugs Sin Jail; I Don’t Give a Damn.

I pull open the salon door. At different tables, Vietnamese women paint the finger and toe nails of American women. There must be fifteen workers inside the room. A white woman with cotton between her toes stares at me. I smell my own body odor. A young woman approaches the half-circle up front and rests her arms beside the cash register. Her black suit jacket, white shirt, black tie, and short hair cause me to glance again to make sure she is not a thin man. She taps her nails: ten black skies dotted with stars.

“It’s you,” she says. The plastic rectangle pinned to her shirt says Minny.

The other women in the shop turn from what they are doing. I put my hands in my pockets to wipe away the sweat. Minny has on too much makeup, but the powder doesn’t conceal the dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Mai,” she calls out.

This old woman named Mai lets go of the hands of a white lady and sets down her clippers. I shiver as she walks up to the front desk. I get a bad feeling. Her eyes frown beneath painted purple brows as she nibbles a toothpick, takes it out of her mouth and holds it like a cigarette with her nicotine-stained fingers.

“You are looking for Loc,” she says.

“Yes.”

“You killed her spirit,” she says. “She was a good worker.”

A ring sounds from somewhere in the front of the shop. A young mixed race boy walks through the front door.

The kid stares into my eyes. “Who are you?”

“He is nobody,” Mai says. “I told you, ‘Stay outside.’ Come here,” she tells me.

I follow her to table. There is a framed photo on the desk, the word SHAMU carved into the wood. Loc and Minny stand in front of a pool with a giant whale in midair above them.

“This is where she worked,” Mai says. Then she walks away, and Minny approaches.

“She told us you would come for her,” Minny says.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“She has been missing work. It is not like her.”

I sit down in a chair that spins and look at my face in the mirror. My hair is pressed down one side and sticking up on the other. There are black circles beneath my eyes.

“I tried to call her, but she didn’t answer,” Minny says. “I left a message.”

“Somebody has to know where she is. Doesn’t she have any friends?”

“I am her friend. I have been worried about her.”

“Why?”

“You were all she ever talked about. I didn’t want her to waste her time and then be let down. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“It was like she had a boyfriend who wasn’t here.”

It feels good to know that Loc and I both felt the same way. Minny keeps talking, but I can’t hear anything. The earth or the sun or something has stopped, like this moment is frozen, like those dreams where my body won’t move. It is like I’m standing across the room, watching her lips and seeing my own face in the mirror and it’s dirty and unshaven.

The hallway and stairs are falling apart even more than some of the old apartments in Saigon, and the entire third floor smells like fried sesame oil and garlic. I scrunch up the paper the coffee girl gave me and drop it through the space between the winding staircase to see it fall all the way to the basement floor. Minny knocks on the door of what must be Loc's apartment.

"She's not going to hear that." I pound on the door.

A Vietnamese boy pokes his head out of an apartment across the hall. Behind him, an old lady in a blue scarf looks out.

She beats her cane against the cracked tile floor. "Shut up," she says in a strong Northern accent.

"Have you seen Loc?" I ask.

"She's crazy. I hit the wall, but she wouldn't turn off the radio. All night."

I bang on the door. "Loc! Open up."

A man sings in English. For seconds, I think this might be her boyfriend, and he's keeping her hidden, but it is the radio. Other doors open. The heads of Vietnamese peer through the cracks, and I wonder how Loc moved to America and ended up in Vietnam.

"Wait," Minny says, lifting the mat in front of the door. She picks up a key and opens the door.

The room smells of burnt food. There is no light, only one window the size of a newspaper, and all the walls are stained the color of a cigarette filter. There are plastic wrapped packages of noodles beside an electric heating coil.

She must have fallen asleep while cooking because inside the pot there are only black chunks. Her place reminds me of the basement where I lived in Saigon. Blankets clumped

together and pants and T shirts spread around this mess, a stuffed whale in the middle, looking at me with one eye, a small table against one wall, and this is all she has.

Mিনny breaks the silence. “Let’s bring your things in here,” she says. “I think I know where she is.”

On the way down the steps, I ask Minny how long she has known her.

“Since she got here,” she says. “We met at St. Anselm’s.”

She tells me not to go there, that everybody who goes there loses his mind or kills herself. But she says not all of the social workers are bad. They helped both of them to get the jobs at Lotus Nail Salon, and there was a man they called Buzz who helped people to find their fathers. So many kids had so many ideas that didn’t come true, they couldn’t go on. They had all these expectations. Many ended up homeless or dead. A lot of them went to jail. The place was filled with mixed race, and most of them were miserable, angry people.

“I knew one boy who met his father,” Minny says, “and you know what his father said? ‘Don’t ever talk to me again. If you contact me again I will call the police’.”

I tell her about the first time I went back to Dam Sen Park and how there were hundreds of mixed race camped out beneath the trees, how they ate from trash cans like rats and slept curled up next to each other for safety and warmth.

“How did you meet Loc?” Minny asks.

“I was interested in her grandfather’s moped,” I say.

I follow Minny down the concrete path that runs along the beach. A girl and guy look like they’re sliding along faster than a bicycle when I realize they have wheels on their shoes.

People whose clothes cover only their private parts hit a ball back and forth over a net.

Minnie walks a few steps behind me as if I'm leading her.

“There,” she says. “That is her spot.”

A bridge stretches into the ocean for a mile like the builders stopped building or realized it would be impossible to get all the way across. Beyond the end of this bridge only sky and water exist. You could swim out and fall off the side of the earth.

I want to run all the way down, sneak up behind her, blindfold her with my hands and say, “Guess who?” I want her to be the girl I used to spin on the tire swing and watch as afterwards she tried to walk in a straight line. I want her to know that from this point forward I will never leave her again. It is her—the dot all the way at the end. I can feel this, but with each step and each plank of wood I pass, the journey feels less and less real, as if the wind and the seagulls and the setting sun right in front of her have all been made up in my mind, as if this dot is not her. Maybe all of this is a vision that has already happened in a dream, like I have been here before, and maybe my spirit was sitting right here with her those nights I looked up at the moon and wondered what she was doing. Maybe this is how the spirit world works: wind taps you on the shoulder to let you know you've been here before.

A man sculpts castles on the sand below. “Throw your coins!” he yells.

I take a coin from my pocket and try to drop it into the plastic cup filled with water, resting in the middle of the castle. The coin plops in, and the man waves. With each step I tap the railing and wait for her to turn around. It feels like those times I told myself I would kiss her if this, if that. Loc's arms rise up from her sides. Seagulls circle, catching what she throws and flying off to the middle of the ocean where they stand still on bobbing poles.

I pull my jacket closed and wonder what I'm going to say to her, if I should kiss her or talk about how much I think about her, if I should squeeze her body tight and not let go until she moves away, if I should let her reach for me. Soon she will turn around because I am the only one walking behind her, and she will be able to feel me. I will run ahead, pick her up, and carry her all the way back to Minny's car.

Bodies in black suits ride the waves almost all the way to the beach, and they are crazy to be out there, and I am crazy to have come all this way, and she is crazy for sitting by herself, throwing things up to the birds and telling them all of her problems. The pink ball of sun gets lower and lower until it is only an upside down smile. I look back at the city, at the restaurants, at Minny. She bats her hands forward. When I get less than ten feet away, I say, "Loc."

She throws crumbs of bread into the air and wipes her hands on her pants.

"Loc."

She turns. Her skin is clear. Her eyes look like honey, and there is black beneath them. Hair blows into her face. Everything smells like salt. Seagulls circle above her.

"Don't cry," I say.

She clasps her hands together and rests them against her chest. "Tell me you're not a ghost," she says.

"I'm not a ghost."

Loc looks down through the planks. Waves crash against the poles.

"Let me look at you," she says. "I didn't think you would come."

I walk right up to her, so close that I can feel her heartbeat as she looks at me. I want her to say more, to get out what has been inside her all of these years.

“I told you I would come.” I slide my shaking hand to the curve above her waist.

The sky seems to lift and push the sun over the edge of the horizon, and as I run a hand down the back of her neck, she looks up at me and smiles—the first smile I have seen from her since the day she got on the plane. Her eyes blink. She puts her lips on my neck. She says, “Thank you.”

Everything feels warm.

“All my life, I’ve told everyone about you,” I say.

She steps back. The sky is a curtain of dark purple behind her. Lights the size of baseballs bob far out above the black ocean.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve come here,” she says.

I want to reach out and pull her into me, to never let go, to tell her about everything, but just being this close is enough for now.

“How did you know I would be here?”

“Minny brought me.”

“I should have known. You know I waited at the airport. I thought you might be dead. Everybody got off the plane, and I still waited. I asked everyone.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “The flight kept changing. It was all so crazy.”

Loc reaches into a paper sack and breaks up a slice of dry bread. She’s smiling the same way she used to after coming up from the water, right before trying to dunk me under in front of the falls.

“Throw it,” she says.

I take the bread from her hands and throw it into the air. Seagulls swoop.

“What should we do?” I ask.

“Let me cook for you,” she says.

“I saw what you cooked.”

“Minny took you to my house? You can’t judge me by that. I was sad.”

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She empties the bag onto the beach and crumples it between her hands. Then she puts an arm behind my back. “Let’s go.”

The lights of the city invite us in as traffic passes in the streets beyond the restaurants. Loc stops and takes my hand. Her eyes shine, a golden brown, specks of pepper in the irises. Our lips touch. Tangled up against the railing, we kiss until my legs feel like they’re asleep.

She looks at me and then at the ground and then back at me. “I still get angry sometimes,” she says. “I can’t control it, but I’m getting better.”

“Everything is getting better,” I say, and this brings a smile.

Chapter 28

I find her where I always find her when I get home from work, sitting on the sofa we got at St. Anselm's. I set a bag of hamburgers on the kitchen table and sit down next to her. The cushions smell like a dog. Through the palm fronds outside the only window, the evening sun casts neon pink through the leaves, a color that only the smog of Los Angeles can make. The neighbor's wife screams for her husband to stop beating her. Loc sinks deeper into the cushions and doesn't even look up. Doesn't say hello. Doesn't stop staring at the window. I inch closer.

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The refrigerator hums like it is alive, like it is trying to tell me something, something more than once again Loc has not made dinner. Kitty bats at the radio cord. The brown Tabby has put on weight since we started feeding her, but it's like Loc doesn't even care about her anymore. How long has Loc been sitting here? I miss the light and life of Little Bò. I miss Pok and Rose. I will not tell her this. I refuse to tell her this because she will tell me to go home if this place is so terrible. She has said it before.

In his last letter, Pok asked if we could sponsor them. What they don't understand is that when I said I had a job I left out the part about the people who make fun of my accent when they come into the Jack in the Box. I left out the way my boss calls me a gook behind my back and says that I'm lucky she lets me work there. A real lucky boy. I don't tell them that Loc hardly ever speaks or that she has what the social workers call depression. I don't tell them she has asked who would really care if she died or that she sleeps all day and never leaves the house. I tell them I love America so they don't worry. I have never written that

there is only one reason I love America or how she sits across from me like this every night with her knees pulled up to her chest and asks why we can't have a television like Minny.

"Tell me what's going on with you," I say. "Please. Talk to me."

"You want to know something," Loc says. "You want me to talk? About what? About the three men who fucked me in the Philippines? About how they held me down every night and I wanted to cut my wrists wide open but couldn't knowing you were alive, knowing I was so close? Is that what you want to hear?"

"I'm sorry," I say. "I want you to know you can tell me anything."

She pulls her knees to her chest and cries into her arms. I put my hand on hers.

"Don't."

"I'm sorry. You're having a bad day."

"Nobody cares," she says. "People ask, 'How are you doing?' They don't want the truth. They want to hear 'Good' or 'Fine'. I'm not good. I'm not fine. How are you doing means 'I said hello, now don't bother me.'"

The space between the leaves is the color of eggplant. I take out my lighter, spin the wheel, and light the candle.

"Don't," she says, leaning back so that her arm presses into my chest. "Please go see Buzz."

"So he can tell me William wants nothing to do with me?"

"Please," she says. "For me."

For months I have promised to go down to St. Anselm's and talk to the man who tracks down fathers even when they don't want to be found, who defies the United States laws about disclosure. They say a GI has the right to his privacy. Right? Maybe he should

have thought of this before fathering a child. No good has ever come from these meetings, no stories of a father accepting responsibility. Most refuse to see them. So what would it hurt? To humor her, to go down there in the morning on my day off and see if we might go to Omaha.

“I’ll go for you,” I say. “Maybe in Omaha there are no Vietnamese. Maybe we could just be American.”

“The Vietnamese are worse here,” she says. “Why would I go anywhere? They call me prostitute baby.”

I get up and turn the radio to the Vietnamese station. I want to buy her a television. I want her to be able to sit with something that stops the voices in her head.

Randy Tuan Tran sings his most famous song “No.”

“They like him,” I say.

“Because he has money,” Loc says, standing up.

I spread out on the couch. I can smell the grease that saturates my clothes.

“Listen,” she says.

*This skinny, lonely one will always miss you—
And miss your lullaby, ever since I lay in my crib!
Life without a parent is the most sorrowful thing in the world.*

“At least *you* have a chance,” she says. “You know his name.”

“I told you I would go.”

Kitty jumps onto my chest. The cat’s vibrations roll through me. I scratch the top of her head and consider telling Loc my plan about getting out without William’s help, about closing down Jack in the Box one last time, about getting on a bus and going wherever it takes us, as far away from this apartment as we can get.

Chapter 29

Snow circles around the bus stop in this gray morning light. My feet are like rocks inside my shoes. I can't wiggle my toes. Cars speed down the road, kicking slush onto the curb. I tuck my hands inside my jacket sleeves and wait for the 76 bus to Henry Doorly Zoo.

As we pass the Woodmen Tower, I wonder what it would be like to spend all day working in an office on the thirtieth floor and watching the life of the city from above. I get off at the Deer Park stop.

Tiny is the only one in the employee locker room.

"At least it's good and warm out there," he says.

"I'm sweating," I say.

This is sarcasm. Tiny taught me the word when I got the courage to ask him why everybody called him by that name even though he weighs over three hundred pounds. "Been calling me that since I was a bitty baby," Tiny said. "Not that I ever been bitty."

He pops the top on the radio and puts in a CD.

"Who is this?" I ask.

"Jimmy Buffet," Tiny says. "People think a black man don't like Jimmy, but me, shit. I listen to what makes me feel good."

The English is slow and easy to understand even though I usually have a harder time with songs. You can't ask a song to slow down, but this Jimmy, he sings slow enough.

"It's my job to be cleaning up this mess
And that's enough reason to go for me.
It's my job to be better than the rest
And that makes a day for me."

“Makes me feel good,” Tiny says, shaking his fat butt. “Think I’m doing right. Maybe a rich man looks at me and thinks I’m poor, but I ain’t poor. The bible says ‘rich in heart’.”

“Thanks, Tiny.”

“You gonna be okay no matter what,” Tiny says. He zips up his jacket and stands.

“She keeps asking to go,” I say.

“Then go. What’s the worst he can say?”

I follow Tiny out to the cage where Moo Maw stays. A steaming pile of dung rests against the bars of the fence, but Moo Maw is inside where it is warm. Tiny opens the door. Moo Maw circles in the corner and picks up hay with his trunk. In this weather he comes out only to shit. I pat his back legs, and Moo Maw raises his trunk and bends for more hay.

“Back out to the cold,” Tiny says. “Another day, another dollar.”

Here is a man with two kids and a wife who makes the same money, maybe a little more than me, and he’s right. He’s right when he says, “Ain’t no reason not to be happy.” If only I could help Loc to realize this.

The cold rushes through my gloves. I grip the shovel and scoop up hardened clumps of elephant dung which we throw into bins. In Vietnam these would be used to heat, to warm people. I imagine sitting with Pok and Rose and Little Bò, right here, rubbing our hands above burning dung.

As the sunlight eases out from behind clouds, snowflakes sparkle in the rays. We scoop up shit. I follow Tiny to the food shed. He loads a wheelbarrow with pumpkins. Moo Maw curls his trunk around one and eats half of it in one bite. It looks like he is smiling.

Tiny and I move on to the cage where Moo Maw's sister stays. Tissy is even bigger than him, but she doesn't like pumpkins, so after we get done scooping up the dung and laying out more hay, I bring out a five-gallon bucket of apples and dump them on the ground. They are dented and brown, and I wouldn't eat them, but Tissy plucks them up, one after the other.

On the way to the monkey cages, Tiny puts a hand on my shoulder. "What you got to lose?"

"My face," I say.

"Your face, shit," Tiny says. "You a funny little guy, Bò."

For almost a year I have been telling Loc that I will go see William. I tell her we will move to a warmer place, and she tells me not to forget why we came here.

Theodore is my favorite. A crazy monkey. He howls like a siren and swings across the chain link netting. The handlers corral him and the others into the warmth of the enclosed glass room. Tiny and I scoop up monkey shit. I wish that I could walk up to Theodore and shake his hand and thank him for the memories he brings.

"Did I ever tell you how some people catch monkeys?" I ask Tiny.

"No."

"They cut a hole in a coconut, just big enough for the monkey's hand to slip through. Like this. Then they put a sweet inside, pineapple or something, and then hang the coconut in a tree. The monkey reaches to the sweet and won't let go. Then his fist gets stuck."

"Why you telling me this?" Tiny asks, taking the box of liners from our cart.

“I think that’s what this depression is like. I think that’s Loc’s problem. She’s like those monkeys.”

“But they want sweets.”

“So does she,” I say, “but neither will let go.”

We gather paper cups and Styrofoam boxes that have spilled out over the trash cans and throw them into the rolling bin along with the bag. Tiny replaces the liner. We move down the sidewalk to the next one, and I can hear Theodore screaming out over the whole zoo, and I wonder if the monkey is trying to speak to us, if his howls are a plea for us to believe that everything is working out exactly as it should be.

Loc dips a spoon into the jar of peanut butter and yanks out a glob. She licks this like it helps her to think: her head tilts; her eyes rise to the right.

“I heard a joke today,” I say. “Want to hear it?”

“No.” She keeps licking the peanut butter. “Stop looking at me.”

“I wasn’t looking at you.”

“Of course you weren’t. I wouldn’t want to look at me either.”

I take the spoon out of her hand and dip it into the peanut butter. I hold it up to her lips and tell her I’m sorry. I tell her she’s the most beautiful woman in the world—I tell her this every day—but she doesn’t believe me. She says that I only say this to make her feel better. She says she knows she’s stupid. She says she should have taken the pills.

“It’s never going to be better,” she says.

She blames this cold and this stupid city, and she tells me if I was a real man I wouldn’t let one phone call stop me. I would go to William’s house.

“You’re wasting your time,” she says. “Our time. Scooping shit at that damn zoo, showing up early and staying late, and you think they care? They probably call you a half-breed when you’re not there. Americans are no better. They just talk behind your back.”

“He will think I’m a failure,” I say. “In America you’re not successful if you don’t have a car.”

“Stop making excuses,” Loc says. “You’re just afraid.” She picks up the snow globe I bought her, the one that throws flakes all over the monkeys when you shake it, and she looks deep into my eyes and then smashes it onto the ground. Shards of plastic bounce up. The flakes that once spun collect in clumps against the broken pieces.

I clench my jaw to keep from yelling and ask Mom what I should do.

Hold her.

Loc slumps into one of the lawn chairs we bought for the living room because they were on sale. I slide the electric heater in front of her feet. She brings a hand up to her face and sobs beneath it. I know that I should take her into my arms, but something won’t let me. Snow circles around the light poles. The plows have pushed piles so high onto the curbs they cover mailboxes.

“First you needed a job,” she says. “Then you needed better clothes. Then you needed a bicycle. You got all of those, and now you need a car?”

“I don’t want him to think I’m a loser.”

“Maybe that will teach him,” she says. “Maybe then he will help us.”

I sit down in my own lawn chair. The armrests are cold. Loc will not look at me. Blurs of white and red speed down Dodge Street. For some reason I imagine Theodore

running across the tops of all of these cars, jumping from roof to roof in a manic chase to get away.

I ride against the wind and snow looking for the mailbox that says Jackson. My face is hot behind the wool scarf and strands get into my mouth, but I pedal on. A honk almost knocks me off the bike. An SUV roars past. Mom would have come here long ago if she had the chance, and this time I'm not going away until I see him.

The gate at the end of the winding driveway wasn't there before. Maybe he saw me riding through the neighborhood last time and put this up to keep me out.

A tire swing hangs from the branch of a giant oak, the inside filled with snow, and I wonder what it would have been like to be swinging next to the pond in all of this cold. I set my bike in the ditch and walk up to the gate. There are telephone numbers on a box and a button with the word "call" beneath.

Through the glistening bars the yard stretches as far as the rice field we used to work. This must be where William raised his other kids, where he taught them to catch baseballs and swing bats, where he watched them climb the oak and pushed them on the tire swing. This must be the yard where he forgot everything. Or maybe he didn't. Maybe there is a part of him still trapped back in Vietnam, like Roger's father.

This is all wrong. Maybe I should wait until a car pulls up. Maybe I could come later in the day and give him a chance to eat dinner. No, I have to do this, for her. Hopefully she is doing the relaxation exercises the social worker taught her. I know she is waiting for this part of my life to have some kind of closure, waiting for the time when I no longer have to guess about what might happen, and as I think this I realize it's something I never speak, but

something that lives within me as well. Still, she wants it more than me. She is the one so sad and broken that she cannot bring herself to go out of the house. Every day she waits. Every shovelful of shit I throw into the garbage is for her. If it weren't for Loc I might have given up long ago, but it's like Tiny's song. Loc is my family. This is something that needs to be done. Something that needs to be done now.

I pull the scarf down and blow like I'm smoking. A snowman stares with black eyes. Wind burns my cheeks. I steady the toe of my boot atop an iron leaf and climb to the horizontal bar running across the middle. The lights are on behind the living room curtains. An icicle falls from the gutter and crashes onto the deck in front of the door.

No regrets.

I flip over the gate and hit the snow with a crunch. Every footstep breaks through the layer of ice as I walk toward the house. The front door opens. I run to the oak tree and hide behind the trunk. A dog the size of a small horse runs straight for me. I turn for the gate. Climb. My foot slips on the icy iron. I jump back up and feel a tearing at my leg. I kick the dog in the head, but his grip is tight.

“Stop.”

I try to climb, but the dog has a grip on my jeans. I crash into snow. I try to play dead, but the dog keeps growling and pulling.

“Heel!” This must be William.

The dog backs off and sits in the snow. Steam rises from its dripping tongue. There is no doubt this man is William, fatter and older, but William. He wears only a T shirt and shorts, but doesn't even shiver. His chest juts out in front of him like a Sergeant. Sergeant William Brent Jackson. He's getting closer, his hands balled into fists.

“What the hell are you doing!?” he yells, bending down.

William rips at my jacket. His eyes open wide. He lets go of the jacket, and I fall back. William leans down. The wrinkles on his face recede, and his eyes squint.

“I know who you are,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” I say, backing away. “I didn’t want to cause trouble.” I want to say ‘fuck you’ or ‘I hate you’ or ‘how dare you?’ or ‘you piece of shit’, but again I say, “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” William says. “I told the man from St. Anselm’s I couldn’t.”

The front door opens to a woman with long blonde hair. “Is everything all right, honey?” She holds a fluffy grey cat that has probably never set foot outside. Jewelry shines on her wrists and fingers, and her skin looks orange. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” William says. “Go inside.”

She closes the door behind her. I stare into William’s eyes. They are mine. I want to reach up and bang his head into the snow and make her watch. Was that the woman Mom worried about when I was a kid, the one she said stole my daddy, the one she cursed late at night after kneeling before William’s photo and begging?

“It was so long ago,” William says. His neck sucks in like he’s swallowing. “There was nothing I could do.”

“That’s bullshit,” I say. “We can do anything we want to.”

“*Bo.*” He reaches forward like he wants to hug me and then puts his hands back at his side. “We were kids.”

“At least you got to be kids.”

Just as the words “I’m sorry” came from a place I didn’t know—maybe Mom—so too were these words flowing out of me like I needed to say what will hurt the worst.

Wind blows against raw skin and burns my ankle. Snowflakes hit my face and melt. I lick my lips.

“This is my life,” William says. “You don’t understand.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’re going to need a doctor.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“You aren’t.” William takes a set of keys from his pocket. “I’m going to take you to my doctor. You need stitches,” he says, and for some reason I follow him to the garage. His butt is flat and long like deflated watermelons.

The white SUV is bigger than our apartment. We get in and pull down the long driveway. The seat warms beneath me. The windshield wipers dart back and forth.

“You have to understand,” William says. “I loved her, but we were just kids.”

I don’t say anything. If you really love someone, it does not matter when it started. Either William is lying, or he has a different idea of love.

Snow hits the windshield and melts before the wipers knock it down. I loosen my scarf, set it in my lap, and unzip my jacket.

“Did you ever think about us?”

“I thought about you all the time,” William says.

Liar.

Drips slide across my window like each one is in a race. Cars kick up slush as they pass in front of us. William pulls into a hospital lot. He turns off the car but keeps the inside lights on.

“I want to do something for you,” he says.

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

Families and couples walk past the SUV and into the hospital.

“I know I can never make it right,” he says, “but I want to do something. What do you need?”

“A father.” I say this to hurt him.

William takes a breath so deep I can hear it. “Are you married?” He takes the keys out of the ignition and puts his pointer finger through the key ring.

“No.”

“Do you have a job?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you work?”

“I shovel shit at the zoo,” I say. “I clean up after the animals and make sure they have food.” I don’t mention anything about the possibility of being promoted to security guard. It’s not like he will be around if it happens.

“How do you get there?”

“I ride my bike to the bus stop.”

“I know a friend who could get you a car.”

“I can’t afford a car.”

The windshield fogs up with our breath. The glass is cold and wet on my finger. I write TRONG SEE LONG.

“Why are you doing this? Haven’t you ever made a mistake? Haven’t you ever done something wrong?”

Our breath fills in the letters, but her name is still there.

Chapter 30

I come in from the cold and take off my shoes. Candles burn in the living room. They were not lit when I left for work that evening, and Loc isn't usually up in this early morning darkness. I'm proud of her. Two times a week she talks to a lady she can tell everything, who can understand as I can't because she has had the same experience, and in turn Loc helps women who have been where she was. They come to the house, and I have seen them change. I have seen the way this, even more than her job at Bruegger's Bagels, makes Loc feel useful.

She sits with her back against the wall, legs crossed, practicing her relaxation exercises. I know that she heard me come in, that she knows I am here, but I also know that she wants me to know how hard she has been trying.

Loc unfolds her legs and smiles. Kitty runs up to her foot.

"Close your eyes," Loc says. "Stay there."

I close my eyes and feel her hands wrap around my face. She leads me from the hallway into the living room. I can see a gold glow through my closed eyes. She pulls her hands back.

"Look," she says.

In the corner a tree stretches up to the ceiling. There are white lights strung around the pine needles. They flash on and off. Boxes wrapped in shiny red and green paper circle the trunks.

"How did you do this?" I ask.

"Some men delivered it," she says. "They said it was a gift."

"From who?"

“They said anonymous.”

“Maybe Tiny sent it.”

I pick up a wrapped cylinder. My name is written on a card.

“I know what this is,” I say.

“What?”

“It’s that Jon Bon Jovi poster I’ve been wanting.”

“Stop,” she says. “I know sarcasm.”

“Can I open it?”

“Not until Christmas. We are Americans now.” She likes to say this lately, when we stop in at the McDonald’s drive-through; when she scoops up peanut butter with a spoon; when the pizza man rings our door bell; when we go to church and pray for the poor who still suffer.

Loc rises up on her toes and kisses my jawbone before ducking onto the couch.

“Watch,” she says. She sits in her relaxation position and breathes in through her nose and out of her mouth for minutes. No one in the world more beautiful. “They said I’m the best patient,” she says.

“I have something for you.” I reach into the Albertson’s bag, take out the box of ice cream sandwiches, and open one. Her cheeks roll up in a smile, and her eyes open wide like Kitty’s.

“I don’t know how you can eat those,” I say, handing her one. “It’s freezing outside.”

“Yes,” she says, pulling open the curtains, “but it’s nice and warm in here.” She takes a bite, stands up, and walks to the window.

I stand behind her. Snow flurries circle beneath the light pole. Cars drive by slowly, stopping to look at the paper bags of sand and candles that line every driveway in our neighborhood.

“People at work keep talking about the New Year,” I say.

“It’s the same at Bruegger’s. They think all the computers are going to turn off and planes will fall from the sky.”

“It will be the end,” I say.

“Silly Americans.”

When I get home from work I take my boots off at the door, walk lightly to the kitchen and fill a glass with water because that’s what Loc likes as soon as she wakes up. I set it on the lamp table beside the bed and slip in under the covers. She keeps her eyes closed but moves her legs and takes the blankets between her knees.

Loc runs her fingernails along the bottom of my forearm. “Good morning,” she says. “Now go to sleep.”

The sky turns the snow a bright orange on the roof outside the window. Grandparents look back from the ancestral altar. Mom stands next to her sister, and this young woman I never met, the girl she was before the war, is the one I choose to remember. A new picture, in color, of Pok and Rose and Little Bò and the new daughter they named See Long in honor of Mom. Rose wrote that it was an honor to hear stories about a Vietnamese mother who loved and raised a mixed race as her own.

The sun burns my eyes. It takes every inch of reach to grasp and lift the picture of us from the bedside table. The center of the photo is glued together, attached to cardboard. The

wrinkled paper smoothed flat beneath the glass. There are jagged lines where the gangster tore her picture, but every piece is there. Brown spots, the shade of the Cuu Long River water, spread across the black and white. We were so young.

Loc's lashes flutter with every breath. I curl up behind her. Kitty's tail bobs in her sleep. Loc reaches back for my hand, pulls my arm over her waist. It is warm beneath the covers.

"Good night, morning," I say.

Loc stirs. Her hand squeezes mine.

You love her.

Chapter 31

Loc turns down the volume on the TV. She jumps up from the sofa and blocks my path to the door. “I don’t want you to go,” she says. “What if something happens?”

At first, I think she is joking. She’s the one who has been mocking everyone, talking about spaceships falling, and aliens landing at dinner tables, and people coming down from the future, and all the trains flying into the sky, and every other crazy idea she can come up with.

“What could happen?” I ask, pulling on a boot.

“What if a plane lands on our house?”

“Stop.”

Loc puts her hand over her mouth to hide her grin. She masks her laughter with a whimper. “Don’t leave,” she says.

“I’m going to start the car,” I say. “I’ll be back.”

Wind bites my cheeks. I race to the car, start the ignition, and run back inside. Loc stands at the door in her puffy pink robe, and I want to lie next to her in front of the heater all night long.

“I want to celebrate the millennium with you,” she says.

“Since when have you cared about the American New Year?”

“Since they said you have to work,” she says. “Can’t you call someone?”

“I’ll get off next year.”

“There might not be a next year,” she says. “Get out of here. You’re wasting gas.”

“Let’s look at it again,” I say. “It’s no Jon Bon Jovi, but it’s still the best gift I ever got.”

“Bò.”

We walk over to the map of Vietnam she bought for Christmas. Her hand is warm on my chest. I trace my finger from Cam Ranh Bay, past Duc Trong, Dran and Dalat.

“There it is,” she says.

Duc Lap. Neither of us speaks. I hold her hands in front of me, and I know that she must be feeling the same thing: a desire to be back in the market with Grandparents, to make new memories, and a joy that rises through the pain like laughter behind tears.

I turn and kiss her forehead.

The Cosby Show comes back from a commercial.

“This is the one where Theo’s sister sews him a sweater,” she says. “It’s funny. One sleeve goes two feet past his hand. Let’s watch it.”

“I’ll be back before you wake up. It’ll be like I never left.”

“I love you,” she says.

I lift her up and set her down in the Lazyboy recliner.

“Go,” she says.

I take the steps two at a time and rush to the warmth inside the old Chevy. I turn on the wipers and let the blades brush away the freshly fallen snow. Loc stands behind the kitchen window with her hands at her sides. I wonder if she remembers that first night I bathed in the pond and caught her watching.

I turn on the radio, expecting to hear the same song I have heard a thousand times in the last week, but Jumping Jack and Late Night Stacy are talking to each other about what’s going to happen at midnight. People are invited to call in.

“Maybe R.E.M. is right,” Stacy says.

A song I like comes on the radio as I drive through the traffic, past the bus stop where I used to wait, and out of the city toward the zoo. I turn up the volume and sing along.

“TV hours, three towers, powdered cowards, crash burn return...it’s the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine.”

I slam my hands on the steering wheel and laugh out loud. I laugh about Loc falling down after I spun her around in the tire swing dozens of times. I laugh about her naming the pigeons outside the Los Angeles apartment. I laugh about the kids who used to dance when I sang in my sunglasses. I laugh about the shadow puppets I made on the walls of the cave. I laugh about the times I walked through the market with Little Bò and watched the reactions of the people. I laugh about Uncle sitting on his porch and blowing his flute no matter what people thought. I laugh about Mom standing over Sook with the spear, and how I knew it was all over. I laugh about putting twenty twigs into Pok’s afro. I laugh about Roger falling out of his chair. I laugh about Mom. I remember sitting with her—I laugh; I cry—and we laughed together because she tried to tell me that coconuts needed hair to run. For a second I laugh with my eyes closed. I scream out the song, and so what if it is the end of the world. I feel fine! I feel better than fine. How are you? I’m fucking finetastic. And you?

The lights in the employee parking lot look dim with all the snow blowing past. Maybe this Y2K is slowly draining them in preparation for the end. I feel jittery and excited like what happens when I drink too much coffee. The crew of Mexicans, my former co-workers, head out to their cars and trucks, exhausted after a long day of hauling trash and scooping shit. I get out of the Chevy and tell them hola, but they ignore me. It’s not my fault they didn’t get promoted to security. I’m the one who showed up early and stayed late. I’m

the one who did anything they asked, even when I didn't want to, who worked without complaint.

Tiny comes bouncing out of the employee locker room and into the parking lot. "It's swinging beef out here," he says.

I don't know what this means, but he is moving fast, probably ready to celebrate with his family. I shake his hand. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, little buddy," Tiny says.

I walk into the security office and sit down in the squeaky swivel chair in front of the monitors. I take off my jacket and roll up my sleeves. My first round doesn't need to be done until one in the morning, but I may walk out anyway just to see the animals close up, to see if they act any different when the year gains three zeros.

The phone rings. I lift the receiver.

"Are you there yet?" Loc asks.

"No," I say. "I'm still driving."

"Ha ha. I love you too."

"I love you."

"No," she says. "I really really really really really love you."

"I'll call you if the world doesn't end."

I hang up the phone and wait for the night to become another century. I reach below the desk and turn down the heater. This office is my place to get quiet. It is my morning walk through the jungle. It is where I breathe all alone, and I know that all I have done needed to be done, that all is complete, that if the world does end in one hour and thirty-seven minutes I will have lived a life Mom can be proud of.

The windows are covered with frost. On the green screen Theodore swings past all the others. He hops up and down with his arms between his knees and claps his hands. The other monkeys ignore him. They sit on the fake tree limbs or sleep inside the carpeted tents close to the heaters. The tigers sleep inside their cages. Thin, green whiskers move up and down with each breath. Moo Maw sleeps on his side. Tissy picks through the last few apples scattered on the ground. I am supposed to make sure no criminals sneak into the zoo, but what I like is watching the animals without them knowing, like I'm going to catch them at something. Maybe catch a flock of birds playing dominoes or all of the fish playing chess.

These are the stories I sometimes tell Loc when I get home, and she is still half-asleep, when she asks me how his night was. Then I crawl in bed beside her, and she rubs my head and tells me thank you for everything, and I say it's nothing.

And she says, "Everything."

And I say, "Nothing."

Then we both say, "Everything."

I push the light on the side of my Indiglow watch. 11:55. Five minutes until the world changes. What is everybody doing out there? I open the door and walk out into the blowing snow. Air hits my arms like a thousand pins. I keep walking, past the drinking fountains and restaurants, beyond the bathrooms to the monkey cages where Theodore sits atop the tallest wooden branch with a fist in the air, howling at the sky, and under this night sky it looks like he has only one leg.

The drinking fountains are filled with ice, all of the snack stands boarded up and padlocked, the ticket-taking window CLOSED FOR WINTER. A tingle runs through my arms, and all of the cold goes away. Is Loc watching the sky and waiting? Did she walk

outside? Is she really nervous? What if Cuoi comes down from the moon and looms over the entire zoo? Only seconds left. A thousand years will be gone. Forgotten.

The sky explodes. Dots of purple fall through gold, red through green, pink through blue. Smoke hangs in the black like torn spider webs.

We are still alive.

END

Vita

Zachary J. George was born in Waterloo, Iowa, and has travelled throughout the world.