

PROLOGUE

Saigon, South Vietnam

January 12, 1975

Major Nguyen Van Chinh ignored the bold, red-lettered signs above the shops: “Nguyen Van Dac,” “Perlon Dental Cream,” “Photo.” He strode quickly past bright-green umbrellas blossoming over café tables and produce stands glowing with mango yellow and rich reds.

Slim young women, sheathed in traditional, white *áo dài*, floated around traffic on bikes, their faces protected from the hot sun by broad, conical straw hats. Busy mothers shopped for dinner or gossiped with friends while their children ran laughing around their feet. Toothless old men, shopkeepers, soldiers, and traffic clogged the street.

In three short months, this scene would not exist, but for now, the army was holding and everyone was looking forward to the upcoming New Year celebrations, which began in a few short weeks.

You would not be so calm if you knew.

Knowing would not save them, anyway, Major Chinh thought grimly. Not now.

And where would they go, anyway . . . into the ocean? There is nowhere to run.

The term “boat people” had not yet been coined.

Chinh navigated deftly through the crowd, focused only on arriving on time. Even in this time of stress, and maybe because of it, the brim of his cap sat square above his brow, and he had taken particular care trimming his thin mustache this morning. His uniform was crisp. A solid, brace of medals filled the area above his left pocket. No one paid the thirty-six-year-old military officer any particular attention. Saigon was filled with military men, from both the ARVN and the US.

His purposeful stride and manner gave him a confident air, but today there was an additional undercurrent of urgency. Not panic, for Major Chinh knew outright panic to be a useless emotion. He elected instead to use the strong danger signals his brain was producing to keep his body sharply focused. Every step he took in the next few days and weeks had to be placed perfectly.

So much to do; no time to waste. Even though the Americans thought they could hold Saigon through the dry season, and even until the beginning of the next year, Chinh knew better. From the latest reports, they had very little time. He needed to arrange for the safe passage of Mai and Dinh before it was too late. Hence the appointment he was walking to now.

Rounding onto Vung Tau, his path was blocked by a large white Mercedes pulled half up on the sidewalk. Some American officer, no doubt, or someone they'd bribed. Irritated, he walked around the behemoth and continued on. Everything American was too large. Until recently, he thought that included their commitment. They hadn't had enough supplies or equipment for months. Empty promises. How did the American government expect them to win? His men had recently had to cannibalize some of the older planes they could have used, just for parts. His friends in the American Air Force felt the same way. It was always the governments far away that made a mess of things.

Crossing the street, dodging traffic, he arrived at his destination, La Vie Café, and went inside. An elegant crystal vase filled with Bach Ma orchids curved over a gleaming mahogany table. Ceiling fans spun lazily overhead. Thankfully, it felt at least twenty degrees cooler, even just inside the door. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark. When they did, he found his friend had arrived first and was waiting for him at a table in the back of the restaurant, sipping a coffee.

Chinh smiled. Cong looked much the same, only fatter. As a child, his friend had been frail and small. Born with a pronounced spinal curvature, the other boys in the village teased him mercilessly when Chinh was not around. Cong came from a household of women. He had no brothers, and his father died two months before he was born. If Chinh had not fought Cong's battles for him, Cong would in all likelihood not have survived his childhood. No one knew why the tall boy had taken the damaged one under his wing, but from the boys' earliest years, they were inseparable. Chinh always felt a bit guilty for the praise showered on him for this. Chinh's father had died when he was only four, and Cong was the brother he would never have. The war separated them, but more than the war kept them apart now.

Cong, unable to join the military due to his birth defect, made his way south to Saigon with nothing more than the rice in his stomach. Once Chinh left to join the South Vietnamese Air Force, there was nothing to stay in the village for. The exhilarating chaos of wartime Saigon suited Cong well. He soon built a profitable black market business, which had obviously continued to flourish, if his weight and choice of restaurant were any indication.

Their paths rarely crossed anymore, and when they met occasionally over the past couple of years, they spoke only briefly, and never about business. The less he knew about Cong's black market dealings, the better, Chinh felt.

He knew if you needed something, you went to Cong. And Chinh needed something now. But so did Cong. Money couldn't buy everything. Once again, Chinh would save Cong, but this time, his friend could help him, too.

Chinh's heels clicked softly on the hardwood floor as he walked to the back of the restaurant, past a series of French doors that opened onto a lush garden with a fountain, to join his old friend.

Cong placed his coffee down and watched his friend approach.

Straight and tall as ever.

He did note a few more gray hairs when Chinh took off his hat and placed it neatly on the white tablecloth to his right. The war was aging them all.

"How are you, my friend?" Cong began. "I have already ordered for us. I hope you don't mind. I included some banh mi. I know," he replied to the surprised look on his friend's face. Banh mi was a popular street vendor sandwich, not something you would normally get in a restaurant. "Banh mi are my weakness. They make them for me here. And some wine. Here, they have the best. I would have ordered more, but you said this meeting must be short."

Cong nodded to the waiter across the room to let him know his guest had arrived. Chinh would have been happy with just a quick, simple bowl of noodles from one of the vendors outside but was glad to indulge his friend. And given the importance of their meeting, a more formal setting seemed appropriate.

"I am well," Chinh answered, "and you seem to be quite well."

Both smiled at the reference to his increased girth, of which Cong was proud. The surgeon said it was too late to do anything about his curved spine, so he pragmatically put up

with the pain and decided to enjoy what was, indulging his many passions, which included good food, sex, math puzzles, and calculating his next business move.

“I enjoy my life here in Saigon,” Cong said, waving his hand across the view. “It is my city. The French, at least, left us with some things of value. The Americans are just leaving, or so I’ve heard.”

The sandwiches arrived first, and further conversation was put off while they ate.

Cong took a large bite of his banh mi, savoring the crackly crust of the airy baguette spread with pork pâté, layered with cool, spicy chilies, cilantro, and thinly sliced vegetables. It did not do to rush these things. His friend had arranged this meeting. Let him speak first. Besides, the sandwich was true perfection.

“It is our rice flour that improves on their bread,” he said. Seeing his old friend made him want to be proud of being Vietnamese. “But their music,” he added, closing his eyes as a middle-aged female violinist began to play a sonata in G minor near the piano. “The French also left us with their music. I do like Senallie. Do you know him?”

“No, I’m afraid I do not,” replied Chinh. Deciding not to play the waiting game any longer with Cong, who could always beat him at it when they were boys, anyway, he spoke directly, but at a much lower volume, the one thing Cong wanted to hear, “I can get you out.”

Neither spoke while the waiter cleared their plates and another waiter set large steaming bowls of pho in front of them, with fresh bean sprouts, cilantro, peppers, and quarters of fresh lime in small dishes between them.

Cong’s body language remained the same, a short man with a full face, enjoying a leisurely lunch, but his eyes flicked instantly to his friend’s. He would have tested anyone else, but he knew Chinh didn’t lie, so he didn’t waste time.

“When?”

He had heard the rumors the army could not hold much longer. He knew his money could bribe his way out, but to where? Smugglers and pirates couldn't be trusted. He did not want to wind up in Thailand in some refugee camp, living on a concrete, twelve-by-twelve rectangle, waiting for some country to take him. He wanted a straight flight to America in a US military plane. And only Chinh's American Air Force friends could supply that.

“Soon. I have to make final arrangements.” Chinh paused. “And you can't bring anyone—just you.”

“Who would I bring?” Cong said, shrugging his shoulders, lifting a thin piece of spiced beef to his lips. He had long ago accepted that no woman he valued would want him. But other women were always available. They would have those women in America also, he knew.

“Good.”

“How much?”

He did not think Chinh would accept a bribe, but maybe some American doors higher up needed to be opened.

“No money will be necessary. People are expecting you.”

Cong raised his eyebrows, but said nothing, waiting for his friend to elaborate.

Chinh set his jaw, unwilling to ask the favor, but knowing for his family's sake he must. He leaned in. “There will be three seats. My wife and my son. He is eight. They must get to America safely.”

If this was all Chinh wanted for the price of his ticket out, for him to babysit the wife and son on a flight to America, while Chinh and his men were flown out with the regular military, Cong was delighted.

“Of course! . . . I would be happy to . . .”

“That’s not all. I have responsibilities here. You must promise that if I cannot meet you right away . . .” Here he hesitated, then went on. “They do not speak English. They will need help in that way.”

Cong’s English was very good. Americans were some of his best customers.

“I am not without resources,” Chinh added. “I have prepared. They will have enough.”

Cong looked at his childhood friend. They were so different. What would this man sitting across from him be doing if their country were not at war? Probably teaching at a university. A vision of the thick stand of bamboo surrounding and protecting their childhood village came to his mind. Chinh was like that, strong and straight. Always protecting. Always doing the right thing, while he, Tran Van Cong, was more like the river, running ceaselessly away.

He understood what his friend was asking, and how unlikely it was for Chinh to make it out of Saigon if he waited too long. He, too, had heard the rumors.

With a nod to his friend, he accepted both the gift of his own life and the responsibility of theirs.

Chinh needed one more thing. Somewhere to change his cash into something more transportable. Something for Mai and the boy in case he didn’t make it. Or something for them to build with if he did.

Chinh was not familiar with such things, so Cong told him what narrow street to go down and which old shopkeeper to find.

When he got to the shop, Chinh didn’t ask what a poor man on a back street was doing with diamonds at all, let alone such a stone as the largest one in the bunch. Diamonds, gold, and

other currency changed hands frequently in Saigon at that time. Everyone wanted whatever was worth the most, weighed the least, and could be smuggled through whatever customs inspections they may need to pass. Thieves worked overtime, too, and instead of risking a formal appraisal, sold their gleanings to anyone with a chunk of cash. Most people over or underpaid. Few knew what they were getting. Major Nguyen got lucky. Cong saw to that.

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Friday, February 7, 2014

Valentine's Day loomed.

It's not that she wasn't a romantic, but Logan hoped Ben hadn't planned anything. He'd been hinting, but she wasn't there yet. *They* weren't there yet. Were they? It had only been a few months. A great few months, but . . . she counted backward on her fingers . . . six months. Was that a long time? She had no idea what was considered long these days. Widowed for almost three years, with a twenty-three-year old daughter, she'd been out of the dating pool a long time.

Apparently, six months was a deadline of sorts.

"It's time to seal the deal, girl," Bonnie said.

Ben was great, a solid guy. And she really liked him. They'd spent a lot of time together over the summer, and so far he passed all the tests: played well with others, a hard worker, and he cooked, a definite plus. In addition to all those virtues, he'd been patient in the sex department, a rare attribute among Orange County males.

How well *should* she know him before she sealed the deal, as Bonnie so bluntly put it?

Things were so different now. With Jack, she'd waited for the ring. That's what you did. She didn't need a ring. She could take care of herself. It wasn't that.

She didn't want to sleep with Ben until she was sure what was developing between them was real. At times, Ben seemed too good to be true. He'd given her no reason to doubt him, but subconsciously she kept looking for flaws.

After all, she thought Jack was great when they married, and he turned out to be not only unfaithful, but adept at lying about it. Sure, she was older and wiser, but what if Ben showed his true colors one day . . . she did not want to go through that pain again.

How had six months gone by so fast?

She'd been busy, that's how. In the first half of the summer, a young glassblower had been murdered at the Otter Festival, where she was helping her friends Thomas and Lisa at their Native American arts booth. For reasons that turned out later to be false, Thomas was the primary suspect. Logan's incorrigible digging had helped flush out the real murderer and clear Thomas's name. It all still felt unreal, like it had happened to someone else.

After coming a little too close to death herself when the murderer attempted to silence her, Logan felt grateful to be alive. Pushing back from her desk, she looked up from the calendar on her computer and took in the full expanse of the view out her new office windows.

The Pacific Ocean was showing off again. Shameless, really. Even in winter, the Southern California sun revealed more blues and greens than Logan could name.

"Ms. McKenna? Are you still here?" Brandon, one of her project leaders from the high school, shouted up the narrow stairs connecting the studio to her office on the second floor. "We just finished. Do you want us to lock up?"

She was a woman in between—not a Mrs., not a Miss. She just let people call her whatever they wanted. Most went with a slurred "Mizz" in order to avoid offending.

“Thanks, Brandon. Just the studio door—I’ll lock up when I leave,” Logan called back down the stairs. “See you Monday—you guys have a good weekend.”

The boys made scuffling noises and shut the door behind them. She saw the top of their heads as they bounced down the street to the bus stop, guitars strapped to their backs. Brandon and Jeff were recording a couple of songs to include on a CD they were turning over to the publications and marketing team to raise money to replace instruments once their grant funding phased out. It was pretty good. She’d promised to lay down a track for them with Bella, her violin, after spring break.

Spying the unfinished snack she’d forgotten, Logan reached for the chipped blue cereal bowl on the desk next to her computer and spooned the last peach slice into her mouth. Lifting the bowl to her lips, she then slurped every bit of the remaining juice. Nothing was as good as home-canned peaches in February. *Bless you, Bonnie and Mike.*

Setting the bowl and spoon back down, she again rested her eyes on the ocean, allowing herself a few more minutes to take in the view. So many blessings.

Ben, of course. Without him she wouldn’t be sitting here. First, he and Purgatory rescued her from crazy Leah, then stuck around and helped her make this project happen. They’d worked side by side all summer, shared life stories over long beach walks and stargazing sessions on the deck upstairs. What they’d both avoided, she realized, was any talk of the future.

Her daughter, Amy, was another blessing in her life—one she never took for granted. Amy loved her work in Africa, and her new botanist fiancé, Liam. He seemed like a good man. Of course, you never knew. She’d only met him once over Thanksgiving. She’d learned things about Jack after he died she’d never have thought possible.

Trust. A wonderful and dangerous thing.

Her first real home. That was a biggie. She bought it with the proceeds from the sale of the business and loved every inch of its 982 efficient square feet, particularly the French doors in back and the rooftop deck she and Ben often enjoyed.

Her newly constructed office, where she was working, sat on top of what used to be Lola's garage, now a small sound studio for the students in her program, and whoever rented it. Lola, her '58 Corvette, had yet to forgive Logan for making her sleep outside.

Bonnie, whose optimism and willingness to stick her neck out for a friend helped Logan out of a jam, finagled this opportunity-of-a-lifetime job she would not have discovered on her own. Left to her own devices, Logan would probably still be slogging away in a classroom, straining at the bit for more of something she couldn't define, dealing with petty school politics.

Ned and Sally—they'd helped get the studio and the new program up and running by September, when school started. And Mike, Bonnie's husband, whose home-canned peaches she was just savoring the last of, had kept them all fueled with fresh vegetables and several dozen jars of produce he and their kids had put up from their garden. Between Logan and Ben, the canned peaches hadn't lasted long. Ben loved to cook and Logan loved to eat.

Luckily, she also loved the beach. Those long morning walks and swims kept Logan's waistline down and her spirits up. They healed more than her body, which was still recovering from the car wreck that had taken her husband's life two and a half years ago. Ben, whom she didn't have to slouch around because he was six foot one to her five foot eight, and Purgatory, his Greater Swiss Mountain dog, often joined her when they weren't away on a job.

Most mornings ended at Tava'e's for coffee, and if there was time, a chess lesson with the great Samoan queen herself. Just being around the massive woman gave everyone, including Logan, a sense of calm and security. It was as if her physical and psychic mass kept everyone

safely in her orbit. In addition to being a fan, Logan was addicted to the cinnamon rolls Tava'e's husband made, but limited those to a Sunday treat.

Logan's new job, which she loved, was integrating a music program into the new Common Core curriculum the Tilcott City School District was scrambling to design. Most states had adopted Common Core, and yet few seemed to have any idea how to implement it. It was the Wild West out there.

The Rigorous Curriculum Design (or RCD) units they'd developed so far were very rough, and in some places full of holes, but that was OK with her. Better than the prepackaged, scripted texts she was given to work from her first and only year in the regular classroom. She liked a good project, even if it was like building an airplane while flying it.

During most of July, drawing on skills she'd developed in the computer training company she and her husband, Jack, built, she went into curriculum design mode, working at her dining room table until the garage remodel was done and she could move into her office above the studio.

With the enthusiastic support of Charles Greuger, the school board member who'd recruited her, she consulted with neurology researchers at her alma mater, UC Irvine, who specialized in how the brain created, stored, and retrieved memories—how the human brain learned. She mapped out how the program would be implemented at the two schools that volunteered to pilot it. They'd started with three, but quickly scaled back to two when they saw how much work needed to be done.

The major donor, Mrs. Houser, provided enough funding to get the new program off the ground. From there it was up to her. They had to be fully functioning in two years, and show promise in one. Logan chose to man the program with student leaders, two paid teachers, and

herself wearing all the support hats. Student leaders were pulled from the community service classes all middle and high school students were required to take. Logan had Bonnie help her trim down the teacher applicant pile. They finally settled on Jeremy Allen, an almost albino, irrepressible, thirty-four-year-old music teacher with wild curls, and Tilly (short for Mathilda) Jones, a fifty-four-year-old African American math teacher who played jazz piano. Jeremy would take Franklin Elementary School, and Tilly would run the middle school program out of Davis. Logan tried to get Glenda, a former school nurse and an old friend of Logan's father, to come on board, but she had already taken a job at a private school up in Oregon. Which reminded her, she owed Glenda a call. She hadn't talked with her since before Thanksgiving when Amy brought Liam home to meet the family.

Liam didn't say much at first, but after Ben got him to talking plants, his eyes lit up and Logan could see what her daughter saw in him. He was passionate and had an endearing sense of goodness about him. She hoped he was as good as he seemed. If not, she would seriously have to get on a plane for Africa and hurt him.

Lucky for Logan, the district offices were bursting at the seams that summer and had no room for her. She wasn't complaining. The fact that there was no room at the inn suited her just fine. She preferred working away from the district beehive, even though she was going to have to foot the bill. Whether or not she stayed with the school district, now that music was back in her life, having her own sound studio and office just felt right.

After buying her 1940s fixer-upper the year before, Logan knew how much contractors charged and remodels cost. It did not look promising. Not only was it turning out to cost a fortune, but they'd never get all the approvals and permits in time to get the job done before school started in September.

Ben came to the rescue (again) donating leftover materials from landscaping jobs, and his own tools and muscle whenever he could, which was often. That helped, but the real lifesaver was Solange Sauvage, the owner of the Otter Festival, whose fountain Ben had just redesigned. As a favor to Ben, Solange, a still-famous sculptor internationally, used her influence to smooth the way. Permits appeared and stamps of approval got stamped. She always wondered if Ben hadn't had a fling somewhere along the line with the artist, but he insisted they were just friends. With that he'd tapped on the plans spread out on the table and told her to get her mind back on the work at hand.

Since she didn't want to lose her rooftop deck on the house, they decided to turn Lola's garage into a small sound studio and add office space upstairs. Due to Killer Hill's infamous steep grade, she got to keep her view. In fact, she now had two ocean views: one from the rooftop deck on her house and one out of the broad windows of her new office. From either vantage point, she could enjoy the sounds of seals and waves crashing on the rocks below.

By the end of August, with only a two-minute commute on the days she wasn't on the school sites, she was happily ensconced in her new digs.

She decided to see if she could catch Glenda on the phone. Putting her Bluetooth headset in her ear, she looked up the number Glenda had given her and hit dial. She made sure the phone was secure on the desk, then got up to stretch her legs and start closing up shop. While she waited for Glenda to answer, she lifted the metal pole off its hook in the corner and used it to close the upper half of the long rectangular window above and behind her desk.

Hanging the pole back up, she straightened and sorted papers into baskets and files, clearing the surface of her desk. She ran her fingers across the smooth wood. The Indian rosewood table was a lucky find. One of Ben's customers was going to throw it out when they

redecorated. It would have cost a fortune, had it not been split and damaged on one side. Taylor, a musician friend and sometime day laborer, helped Ben lug it up the stairs, where he they repaired and refinished it. Logan tried to keep the surface free of paperwork, just so she could enjoy the gleaming golden color and contrasting grain.

Glenda had taken a job at an experimental, project-based school in Oregon. A skilled herbalist as well as a retired school nurse, Glenda wore several hats at the New School and seemed to be loving her new job.

“Hello.” Glenda’s brisk greeting was always cheerful, but to the point.

“Glenda—it’s Logan. Sorry it’s taken me so long to call you back. How is everything? Are you still enjoying Portland?”

“McMinnville.”

“Right, McMinnville. How’s the school?”

“Good! Very good! You would love it here,” she said bluntly. “You must come.” Then she added out of politeness, “How’s your program coming?”

“Good—the kids love it. The teachers who understand what we’re trying to do, really like it. They’re not sure how to do it themselves, though, and it’s not something you can hand someone—it’s not turnkey. Not sure how we’re going to replicate it, or if it can be.”

For the next forty-five minutes, the two women talked shop. An afternoon onshore breeze rattled the window before Logan realized what time it was. She looked at her watch and realized how long she’d been on the phone. Dimebox needed to be fed.

By the time they’d said their good-byes, she’d made an executive decision. Because of Tilcott’s alternate calendar, and due to Mrs. Houser, she had as much as three weeks off. Two weeks for spring break—February 17–28—and up to another week for her to meet with some

Portland University professors doing promising new research about how music influences memory. Glenda wanted her to visit, and the New School had programs similar to hers, but their principal, Rita Wolfe, had expanded on that idea and taken things to a higher level. Ever since Glenda took the job, moved up to Oregon, and sent back such glowing reports, Logan had wanted to check it out.

If she left a few days early, she could even avoid having to decide what to do about Valentine's Day. She'd break it to Ben tonight.