

A BEND IN THE RIVER
by
Libby Fischer Hellmann

DEDICATION

To Angela. Our finest adventures are yet to come.

VIETNAM CIRCA 1968



MAIN CHARACTERS

Name	Pronunciation	Definition
Tâm	“dtum”	
Mai	My	
Quang	kwah-ng	Fisherman’s father
Phong	fow-ng	Fisherman
Cô Cúc	koh cook (upward pitch)	Owner of the Saigon Café
Dr. Đường Châu Hằng	zuh-ng; chow; hah-ng	Doctor who enlists Tâm
Hạnh	hang (downward pitch)	Mai’s roommate & coworker at the Stardust Lounge
Thạc	dack (downward pitch)	Owners of the Stardust Lounge
Biên	be-yen	Tâm’s first Party name
Hiền	hee-yen (downward pitch)	One of Tâm's fellow trainees
Đắc	dah-ck (upward pitch)	Tâm's fellow truck driver
Diệp Hồng Bảo	dee-yep (downward pitch); how-ng (downward pitch); bow (mid-low pitch)	Tâm's lover
Đêm Nguyệt	day-em; witt (downward pitch)	Mai’s son
Phan Trúc Vinh	fahn; chuck (upward pitch); ving	Mai’s lover
Linh	Ling	Tâm’s Party name when she goes to the Cao Đài
Yến	een (upward pitch)	Cao Đài temple desk girl
Đức	duuk (upward pitch)	Yến’s cousin
Bà Thảo	bah (downward pitch); tow (mid-low pitch)	Tâm’s landlady when she is with the Cao Đài
Dũng	Zuung (upward pitch)	Da Lat farm owner

Part 1
Vietnam --1968
Tâm and Mai

Chapter One Tâm

Is there a warning the moment before life shatters into pieces? A minute shift in the light? The chirr of a monkey. Perhaps a heaviness in the air that tastes like disaster. For Trang Tâm and her sister, Linh Mai, washing their family's clothes in the river, the warning might have been a barely perceptible scent wafting toward them. Perfumed soap mixed with sweat. Unfamiliar. Foreign.

Or perhaps there was no warning at all. Absorbed in their task, the sisters squatted on a narrow strip of shore, scrubbing shirts with their brushes. They slapped heavier items against the rocks, then rinsed everything in the waters of the Mekong. The clothes would dry quickly. The hottest part of the year was approaching, and the combination of summer heat and the monsoons would produce an indolent lethargy that made even washing clothes a burden. Though it was only March, the sisters lifted their hair off their necks to catch the breeze.

Tâm, at seventeen, used her *nón lá* as a hamper for the clean clothes. At the moment it held only two pairs of tiny pants belonging to her little brother. Hùng Sáng, an unplanned surprise five years earlier, was now the prince of the family. According to their parents, no boy was as handsome, as talented, as lucky. With his arrival the girls' status declined. They had become afterthoughts, to be married off quickly. Sáng should not be burdened with his sisters' care. When he grew up, he would have enough to do for his own family and his parents.

Tâm wiped sweat from her brow. Mai, three years younger, nattered on, but Tâm only half listened. She was about to graduate from the Catholic school two villages away, and she was wondering how she would continue her studies. Where would she find the money to pay for university? What would her parents say when she confessed that was her goal?

“I’m sure you know him. Lanh Phúc. He’s handsome. His is the wealthiest family in their village,” Mai said. “Their home has a real roof. And windows. His father makes sampans...” Mai giggled. “I think he likes me, Chị Tâm. I hope Mama and Papa will agree to a match. I can already picture our wedding. Of course, we will honor the Rose Silk Thread God, but it will be modern too. We will have music to dance, and—”

Tâm cut in. “Mai, you can be a silly girl. Dreaming about weddings and dancing? This is a man you may live with the rest of your life. Have you ever shared a conversation? Talked to him about his future, *his* dreams?” She twisted water out her father’s shirt and dropped it into the conical hat. “All I hear is that he is the son of a wealthy man, and he is handsome.”

Mai was the beauty of the family, delicate and tiny, with large black eyes, silky black hair, and soft skin that glowed white, even in shadow. Tâm had seen the longing on village boys’ faces when she passed. Her parents would have no problem arranging a match for her. Tâm was taller, leaner, and while her face had the same classic features as Mai’s, they were arranged differently. Her eyes did not appear to be as large; her nose more pronounced, her skin darker. She was attractive in her own way, but she wasn’t a beauty. Although older, she wasn’t waiting for an arranged marriage. She wasn’t interested. She wanted to study plants: their growth, foliage, colors, blossoms, how they added to their environment or not. Her Catholic science teacher explained to her that what she wanted to study was “botany.”

Mai, who usually deferred to her older sister, drew in a breath. “You’re a fine one to talk. Do you have a suitor? You reject all the men our parents suggest.”

Tâm sat back on her haunches. When had Mai developed such a sharp tongue? This churlish behavior was new. As Mai’s *chi*, the older sister, Tâm should be treated with respect. She was about to say so when a wisp of smoke passed over them.

Tâm sniffed. The scent of the smoke was farm-like. Clean. The end of the dry season was approaching. A farmer was probably burning leftover corn husks or rotted fruit from his fields. Except that most farmers usually fed leftovers to their cattle or pigs. She frowned. Perhaps the smoke came from the dying embers of a campfire around the bend of the river. A fisherman or two cooking breakfast before a long day on the Mekong.

A second puff of smoke wafted over them. Stronger. This time it carried with it an acidic scent. Gasoline. Tâm’s jaw tightened. She looked over at Mai, whose eyes grew round.

“Do you smell that?” Mai asked.

When the third gust of smoke reached them, even more intense, Tâm scrambled to her feet and beckoned to Mai. “Leave everything. We need to go home.”

Chapter Two Tâm

When the Japanese occupied Vietnam during World War Two, a platoon of soldiers seized the village. Those who stayed wanted easier access from the river. So they supervised the construction of a dock and steps leading from the river's edge up a hill. The steps ended at the dusty road leading into the village. Tâm and Mai's father had been conscripted to build the dock and steps in his teens, and his back bore the scars of beatings, an indispensable tool of Japanese brutality. Despite their harsh treatment, though, most of the villagers were pleased when the steps were finished. Outsiders could now be spotted as they approached, and villagers could determine whether they were friend or foe.

Yet it was still possible to climb the hill a dozen yards north of the dock. Under cover of cashew bushes, papaya, and jackfruit trees, one could secretly enter the village at its mid-point. Tâm and Mai took that route. As they hiked up the hill, a cacophony of sounds washed over them. Somewhere far above was a distant *thwup* of helicopter blades. On the ground screams of terror. The occasional crack-spit of gunshots. The yelp of a dog that suddenly stopped. The squeal of a pig. Mechanical voices, as if someone was talking on a radio. And above it all, the thick flat voices of men bellowing in what Tâm knew was English.

She froze. Americans. How had they found their tiny village? Not by water; Tâm and Mai would have seen them. But the land route was overgrown with dense forest and bush, impenetrable in some spots. They must have come that way.

She worried about the helicopters. She'd heard how the U.S. dropped powerful bombs that erupted into fire, scorching everything on the ground. When the last flame was extinguished, the Vietnamese were left with barren fields and poisoned land unable to grow anything. The

government said this was the only way to force the North and Viet Cong into the open, to halt their guerilla war. She'd heard, too, that Americans liked to execute the VC they found, set fire to their villages, then force the inhabitants to relocate into squalid camps near Saigon. Tâm blinked fast, trying to suppress her rising fear.

Slowly, silently she led Mai through the papaya trees. She stopped before they emerged from the bush and carefully pulled aside the fronds of a jackfruit tree. In front of her was the village square, an expanse of dirt studded with rocks where events, including weddings, births and funerals, were celebrated.

Now though, Tâm stared at chaos. There had to be over twenty GIs in camouflage uniforms and helmets, rifles slung across their shoulders or in their hands. Some hoisted long thick weapons much larger than rifles, but she didn't know what they were. Half a dozen soldiers moved from house to house, dragging villagers, their hands high in the air.

“Any VC in here? You VC?” they shouted in primitive Vietnamese. When the villagers frantically shook their heads, the GIs prodded them with their rifles toward the village square. “We heard there's a nest of enemy gooks in this hamlet,” they replied in English. “Gotta make sure.”

Other soldiers poured gasoline on the thatched roofs of the now empty huts. Still others flicked their lighters and laughed when homes went up in flames.

Most of the villagers appeared to be terrified. The wife of a rice farmer planted herself at the entrance to her hut, shrieking and gesturing at the soldiers. She tried to explain that they had the wrong village. That they were simple farmers and fisherman with no interest in war. Of course, the Americans didn't understand, and barked orders in reply. When she refused to move, two soldiers dragged her to the square and shoved her to the ground.

About a dozen villagers, choking on the smoke, huddled in the square, heads between their knees, as if averting their faces would somehow mitigate the disaster. A soldier went back to the woman's hut, flipped his lighter, and touched the flame to her thatched roof. When it caught, he gestured to the villagers on the square, shouting "Lookie here. Roasted gook for lunch!" The flames devoured her home as if they were indeed starving.

From their perch behind the trees, Tãm looked both ways. Smoke curled up in rolls. Soot darkened the sky. The air tasted acrid and sour, and the heat from the fires intensified. She counted five homes on fire, but their own home, thirty meters away, wasn't visible, and she couldn't tell if it was on fire.

The villagers on the square wailed as another house went up. Some choked on the smoke and the overpowering smell of gasoline. Others covered their faces with their hands. Tãm searched for their family. Mai was doing the same because she whispered, "I don't see Mama and Papa. Or Sãng. Where are they?"

"Maybe they escaped," Tãm whispered back.

Suddenly Mai grabbed Tãm's arm. "Look!" She said in a panicky whisper. She pointed past the square. Tãm followed her gaze.

Not far away was a mound of dead dogs, pigs, and even the calf born just two weeks ago. Their corpses, fresh and still bloody, dispensed a coppersy, rancid smell that mixed with the gasoline. That was the source of the gunshots. The Americans were killing their animals. Flies were already swarming and settled on their hides. Tãm gagged, nausea rising in her throat. She swallowed to push it down.

Mai started to tremble. Tãm put an arm around her sister and let her lean against her for a moment, then straightened up. "We must be strong. We need to find Mama and Papa."

“How? We can’t go home. They’ll see us.”

“Let me think.”

Mai shook her head and pointed. “We can go around the path.” A dirt path a few meters away ran along the back of a dozen huts, including theirs. But Mai wasn’t as careful as Tâm. She would make noise or stumble, alerting the soldiers to her presence.

Tâm shook her head. “No. You stay here. I’ll go.”

Mai clutched her sister. “Don’t leave me alone. Please, Chị Tâm!”

Tâm bit her lip. “Go back into the bush. You’ll be safe there. Stay there until I come back.”

“But I—I’m frightened. Stay with me, Chị Tâm.”

“Be brave. I will be back. I swear it.”

Tears filled Mai’s eyes. “I don’t... I can’t.”

Tâm raised a finger to her lips. She pointed to a cashew bush. “Hide behind that. But don’t cry. They may hear you.”

Chapter Three Mai

Tâm slipped into the bush and was quickly out of sight. Mai retreated to the cashew bush and squatted behind it. She wrapped her arms around her knees. She could no longer see the square, but she didn't want to. The sounds and smells, plus what she had already seen, were enough.

Rocking back and forth, she tried to think about something other than the unfolding nightmare. The family had bought a transistor radio, and they quarreled over it, each wanting to listen to something different. Finally, their father had parceled out times. News for him, classical music for Mama. Mai liked the station from the Army base, even though it was broadcast in English. American pop was unfamiliar at first, but the songs were simple, and the throbbing beat was sensual. In fact, the radio, regardless of what was broadcast, had opened up a new world for the entire family. No longer were they isolated farmers and fisherman on the Mekong River, doing what their ancestors had done for centuries. Now, even if they couldn't join it—there was a different world out there. A world full of cities, different cultures, people, and, of course, war.

At fourteen, in fact, Mai thought differently about boys. No longer were they bothersome. They had become mysterious creatures, whose attention she wanted. She cared for her hair, making sure it was always oiled and scented with jasmine. She wore her uniform to school and her *áo bà ba*, black pantaloons and shirt, in the fields, but at the end of the day she would change into one of the two skirts she and Mama had sewn. She begged Mama to let her borrow her lipstick and mascara, particularly when she thought she might run into the sampan-maker's son. Was this how girls became women?

She wasn't sure, mostly because Tâm wasn't like that. Her sister's nose was always buried in a science book she'd borrowed from the school library. When Tâm wasn't reading, she talked with Papa about history, politics, and the war. Mai and Mama weren't interested, but Papa was angry about the American war and their so-called "pacification," which, he said, was just another phrase for death and destruction. He wanted the infidels gone. Vietnam could solve its problems by itself.

"But, Papa, we did not reach an agreement with the Communists," Tâm said, clearly trying to maintain a respectful tone.

Papa shot her a stern look. "If the French and then the Americans had not invaded us, we could have worked it out," he said. "Bác Hồ is a reasonable man. More than Diệm. Communists love their children, too."

Then, less than two months ago during Tet, North Vietnam launched a surprise attack on dozens of South Vietnamese cities and American forces. The campaign was long and aggressive, but the North ultimately failed, and they were forced to retreat.

Tet had triggered harsh retaliation from the Americans. Mama worried that war would come to their village. Tâm and Papa assured her it wouldn't. Their village was small. There was nothing worth fighting over.

They had been wrong.

Now, Mai rose and went back to the spot where they had pushed aside the jackfruit fronds. More people now occupied the square, many crying or silent with shock. The heat from the fires baked their faces, and several of the women had fans. Mai spotted her friend, Dung, among them. They'd listened to the radio together when it was Mai's turn, and spent long hours spinning dreams of the rich young men who would court them.

Dung wanted to move to Saigon. Everyone was rich there, she declared. “Servants do the chores. The women shop, and their husbands buy them sweets every day.”

Mai’s dreams were more modest. A big house in the village would do. She didn’t mind housework. And she wanted children of her own. Lots of them.

All at once, Mai sucked in a breath. Her mother had just appeared in the square. She was carrying her brother Sang. He was sobbing. He had to be confused and frightened by the fires, the noise, the invasion of strange white men. Her mother’s lips were stretched tight, the way they did when she was angry and about to mete out a punishment for misbehaving. Behind her was a soldier, his rifle poking her in the back.

Mai hugged her arms across her chest. Craning her neck, she tried to spot Papa, but there was no sign of him. Maybe Tam was right. Maybe he was hiding in the bush, waiting for the Americans to leave.

Mama sat down with Sang in her lap and rocked him. That did nothing to soothe him, so she gathered him to her chest and rested his head against her shoulder. Mai could see her mother’s lips move. She was probably crooning a lullaby. Mai’s throat closed up, and a deep longing came over her. She wanted to be with them, wanted Mama to sing *her* a lullaby. She belonged with her mother. But who knew what the Americans were going to do? Tam said they were better off in the bush.

When it happened, Mai didn’t believe it. Three soldiers guarding the villagers in the square whipped around and trotted in the direction from which Mama had come. Someone yelled out in Vietnamese, and once she heard the voice, she knew whose it was.

Papa was shouting in English. “Yankees go home! Uncle Ho warn us. You evil!” The people in the square stirred, murmuring among themselves, some with fearful expressions, others

in horror. Two women shook their heads. Where had Papa learned English? The radio? Meanwhile three GI's ran towards him. A spray of gunshots crackled and spit. Her father's rant suddenly stopped.

A chorus of wails went up from the villagers. More soldiers rushed over, aiming their rifles at the crowd and screaming. "Hands up, you bastard gooks!" one soldier yelled. "Get your fucking hands up! Any more VC here? Better tell us now!"

The soldiers who had left the square returned, dragging a body between them. Papa! His face was bent at an odd angle to his body. Which didn't matter much, because most of it was blown away. His gut oozed blood, and his lower parts... Mai watched in a daze, as though she was in the middle of a horrendous but riveting play and couldn't look away.

When Mama saw Papa, a cry of revulsion ripped from her throat. Her mother placed Sng on a neighbor's lap, jumped up, and hurried toward her father. One of the soldiers aimed his rifle at her and told her to go back. But she either didn't understand or didn't care. The soldier yelled out one more warning. She was heading towards the soldiers, one arm waving, the other tucked in the folds of her pajamas. Mai saw her withdraw a knife. The GIs saw it too. There was another rat-tat-tat of bullets. Mama fell to the ground, blood flowing from her head and ears. Horrified, Mai clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Where's the kid?" A soldier yelled. The woman cuddling Sng kept her mouth shut. Mai didn't know what to do. She should try to rescue her brother. But she was frozen, paralyzed by fear. Where was Ch Tm? The soldier shouted again, more urgent this time. "Where's the little VC bastard?"

One of the women in the square pointed Sang out. Chi, the village gossip. No one liked her. The Americans grabbed Sang whose terror temporarily silenced him. The soldier took him away from the crowd out of sight. Another shot rang out. Mai’s heart cracked.

But the shooting wasn’t over. Papa’s outburst had released something in the crowd. They must have been fueled with sudden courage because they got to their feet, raised their fists high, and shouted at the GIs. Some repeated what Papa had said. Others protested their treatment of Mama, Papa, Sang, their presence in the village, the invasion of their country, their very existence. Joined together in one angry mass, the crowd swarmed toward the Americans. The soldiers were taken aback, and, for a moment, there was no reaction. But then one of them—their leader? Mai wondered —barked out something even she could understand.

“Fire!”

The soldiers raised their rifles, aimed at the villagers, and shot them all. Bodies fell where they were, fists half raised, expressions of anguish. A minute later it was silent.

The horror. The flies. The heat. Mai vomited on the floor of the jungle.

Chapter Four Tâm

Tâm watched the massacre from the path behind her family's hut. When they shot her parents and Sàng, a violent rage swept through her. She understood what her mother had done and why. She would have done it too. Now she wanted to attack, maim, and kill every American soldier in the village. Slowly and painfully. Like a photograph from her father's camera, the deaths and destruction of her village would be imprinted in her memory forever. They would pay.

But Mai was still in the bush. She couldn't abandon her sister. The only family Tâm had left. But Tâm couldn't take the chance that a clumsy step or the snap of a twig might reveal herself to the Americans. So she squatted on the path. She couldn't see, but she could hear. The soldiers' leader was talking; his tone harsh and defensive. Long silences followed his words. He must be on a two-way radio. Was he receiving orders?

At last he signed off and yelled to his men. More heat spilled over Tâm. She peeked out. The Americans were burning the bodies. The fires were so intense she had to retreat into the bush. Then she moved, knowing her movements would be muffled by the crackle and hiss of flames. She hid behind a grove of coconut palms until two helicopters approached and hovered overhead, their blades roaring and whipping the air into eddies and currents of wind. The men aboard the chopper must have given the all-clear because after they thundered off, the GIs packed up their gear and headed out on foot.

She returned to the path and looked out. There was nothing left of the village except the foundations of straw huts, still-burning bushes and trees, charred lumps that were once humans,

and blackened earth. The odor of burned flesh, thickly sweet and nauseating, permeated the air. A crow cawed. The vultures would swoop down soon.

Tâm cautiously made her way back to the jackfruit trees, a grief as deep as the Mekong River mingling with, then surpassing her rage. She debated whether to find her family's bodies and cremate them. That was the Buddhist way. Then again, the Americans had already done that. She gazed at the scene in the clearing. *Find Mai*, she heard her father's voice say. *There will be time to mourn. Protect your sister.*

It was the hottest part of the day and the heat was oppressive. But she didn't allow herself to think about that. She tried to imagine what she could possibly say to her sister—she didn't know how much of the massacre Mai had seen. But when she reached the spot at which she'd left her, her sister was gone.

Had she run deeper into the forest? Had the soldiers found her and—Tâm swallowed—killed her too? She didn't know what to do. She couldn't stay here. She and Papa had shared many conversations, but how to survive in the bush wasn't one.

The Americans seemed to be gone, but she didn't think it was safe to call out, so she trudged in ever widening circles around their original hiding spot. She crept slowly, making as little sound as possible, on the alert for human footsteps, their scents, the swish of brush moved aside.

Nothing.

Tâm ran her hands up and down her arms, feeling desperate. The nearest village was several miles away. Easy to reach in a cart with oxen, but there were no oxen. Had Mai ducked deeper into the bush? No. Mai was afraid of forest critters, especially ones that foraged at night. And night would fall in a few hours.

Tâm retraced the path to the river. To be safe, she climbed down the hill, rather than the steps. She didn't want to risk being seen by a passerby in a sampan or boat. As she neared the shore, she heard tuneless humming. Discordant notes. Tâm shaded her eyes from the sun and looked up and down the shore. There! Protected from the sun, a slight figure squatted at the edge of the river, rinsing shirts in the water. Mai. Tâm broke into a jog and hurried toward her sister.

“Mai,” she cried joyfully. “I’ve been searching for you! I’m so glad you’re here. But we are too exposed. We must move back from the beach and hide.”

When Tâm started talking, Mai made no sign of recognition. In fact, she scrambled to her feet and ran in the opposite direction.

“Dirty Rabbit!” Tâm chased after her sister, using the nickname their parents had given Mai. Many Vietnamese parents bestowed unflattering, practically insulting nicknames on their children. An ancient tradition, it was done to keep evil spirits away. When the spirits heard what parents called their children, they would not be tempted to injure or allow bad karma to fester on them. Mai was “Dirty Rabbit.” Tâm was “Stinky Monkey.”

But hearing her family nickname only made Mai run faster. They used to race when they were younger. Mai was small and nimble and often beat Tâm. Now though, a haze of leftover soot and smoke lingered at the river's edge, making it hard to breathe. Why was Mai running? Where to?

Mai peered over her shoulder as she ran. Tâm waved. “It’s me, Mai. Please. Stop!”

But Mai showed no sign she knew who Tâm was. Tâm started to close the distance between them. When Mai glanced over her shoulder again, Tâm saw panic on her face and began to understand. Mai was fragile, her emotions close to the surface. Right now, Mai's mind was not

her own. The trauma of the day's events had been too much for her. In her mind, Tâm was the enemy, intent on capturing and killing her.

Tâm slowed down and coughed up phlegm. She squatted on the narrow strip of beach and worried her hands through her hair. Her mother, when she felt helpless or afraid, would go to the temple to give an offering to the monks. After the nightmare of today, Tâm's faith was stretched thin. But if a prayer would bring Mai to her senses, she would give him ten.

She must have waited over an hour. The sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon. The haze in the air created a perversely beautiful sunset. How could the Buddha or whatever deity controlled the sun have the nerve to paint such a brilliant combination of reds, oranges, and gold? In this light the Mekong looked clear and clean. Tâm bowed her head and rocked. She tried to recall what prayer she was supposed to say.

In a corner of their hut on a shelf above their heads, her mother had created a small shrine to Buddha. She bought a small statuette of the god and placed a gold bowl and wood bell next to it. Easily the most valuable objects they owned, it was there that her mother placed fresh-cut flowers, lit candles, and burned incense a few times a week. As Tâm prayed, watching the sun slowly sink, she felt her spirit loosen. The day was ending much like it had begun. Calm. At peace.

Tâm wasn't sure how long she prayed. Dusk settled, lengthening shadows and darkening the water of the Mekong. Eventually she felt a light tap on her shoulder. She turned around.

"Mai!" Her cheeks were dirty and tear-streaked. Tâm got to her feet and they embraced.

Chapter Five
Tâm

“I’m hungry,” Mai croaked through her tears. Tâm knew the hunger was for more than food. It was a hunger that would never be completely sated.

“Let’s find some fruit,” Tâm said.

“No!” Mai cried. “I—I can’t go back—there.”

Tâm intended to explain that they’d have to. That she didn’t want to leave Mai by herself, and that they’d have to forage in the bush if they wanted to eat. Then she thought better of it and simply held out her hand. “We can do it together.”

Mai squeezed her eyes shut and let out a sob. Reluctantly she put her hand in Tâm’s, and they trudged up the steps back to the bush, looking in all directions to make sure they weren’t followed. Thirty minutes later, their arms laden with ripe jackfruit, mangos, papaya, and lotus fruit, they returned to the beach and wolfed down their food.

By the time they finished eating it was dark, but the heat still hadn’t lifted. They were hot and exhausted and smelled of gasoline, char, and fear. The only light came from a waxing moon that spilled across the water. It was enough.

“We’re sleeping here?” Mai said.

Tâm nodded. “You finish the washing and spread our clothes out to dry. I’ll gather some palm fronds to cover us.”

Mai glanced around fearfully. “But—but, what if they come back?” She whispered. “Or what if someone saw the smoke across the river? They could be waiting for dark to loot whatever is left.”

Tâm tried to sound confident. “We’ll be hidden under the fronds. But that’s not going to happen.” At least tonight, she hoped. They had already lived through one hell. They wouldn’t survive another. “I’m going to take a bath in the river. You should too. Then we’ll wash the rest of our clothes.”

Tâm woke before sunrise. She hadn’t slept well; during the dark hours a horde of mosquitos had feasted on her skin. Mai snuggled against her back, snoring softly. Tâm blinked her eyes open. Memories of the massacre flooded through her. The life that she’d known was over. The certainty that the sun would rise, that she would read and study, work in the rice fields, and help her parents, was gone.

Why did the Americans choose their village? Was it just a random attack? They’d claimed to be looking for VCs, Viet Cong fighters and their enablers, to retaliate against Tet. The truth was they could have found them in any village. During the day the South Vietnamese were hard-working farmers or craftsmen, doing their best to feed their families and survive. After nightfall, however, people would flip their pictures of President Thiệu. On the other side was a photo of Hồ Chí Minh with a benevolent smile. They would don black and white checkered scarves, and prepare food and drink for the guerillas who crept out of the bush. Although they weren’t fighters themselves, these collaborators, including Tâm’s father, put their lives at risk. And the Americans knew it. Unable to battle their enemy directly, the soldiers used villagers for target practice instead.

Mai must have sensed Tâm was awake, because she rolled over and opened her eyes. Her sleepy expression gave way to fear when she realized where they were and why. Tâm attempted a reassuring smile, but they both knew it was just for show.

They dressed quickly and ate the mangos they'd saved, after which Tâm took a sheet and folded some of their now dry clothes in it, tied it up, and hoisted it on her shoulder. Tâm pointed. "Start walking."

"Where?" Mai asked.

"Toward Saigon. Stay back from the water, closer to the brush."

"Is it safe there?" The capital city of South Vietnam had been a key objective for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces during Tet. They'd even held the American embassy for a few hours and fought hand-to-hand with South Vietnamese forces in Cholon, the old Chinese section of Saigon. After the invasion failed, though, it provoked a massive retaliation from the Americans and the ARVN, the South Vietnamese army. Fighting still continued on the city's outskirts, and some sections of Cholon were damaged by mortar attacks.

"The U.S. soldiers who attacked us are headed inland. Toward Cambodia, not Saigon," Tâm said. "So we'll go the other way. To Saigon." She hoped Mai wouldn't realize she didn't answer the question. Tâm didn't know if Saigon was safe.

The shadow of a smile flitted across Mai's face. "Dung would have liked that."

"Why?"

Mai told her. Had it been any other time Tâm would have belittled Mai's friend, Dung, and Mai too, for such superficial dreams. Mai didn't know it, but she couldn't afford those dreams anymore. But she kept her mouth shut and pointed.

"Don't forget our *nón lá*." Mai ran back to pick them up.

They'd walked about half a kilometer when Tâm squinted at something in the distance. As they grew closer, she jogged toward it. Beached on the sand ahead was a sampan. She approached it cautiously, but no one was nearby. She peeked into the sampan. Its oars were

stowed on gunnels on each side. And a fishing pole lay in the bottom of the boat. Tâm smiled for the first time in twenty-four hours. Buddha had blessed her with his compassion.

Chapter Six Mai

By sunrise, Mai and Tãm were on the river paddling the sampan, Tãm in the stern, Mai the bow. Tãm told her to row quickly at first in case anyone saw them steal the boat.

“What happens when the man who owns the boat finds it gone?” Mai said. “Isn’t stealing wrong?”

Tãm didn’t answer for a minute. Then, “Yes. It is wrong. But so was the massacre that destroyed our home and killed our family. Which is the greater evil?”

Mai pondered it. Could a sin be forgiven if it was committed in response to a bigger one? Yesterday she wouldn’t have thought so. But today? Perhaps.

Twenty minutes later, Mai’s hands and shoulders ached. She wasn’t used to rigorous physical activity. “My hands are blistering,” she said.

“We can slow down for now,” Tãm said.

Grateful, Mai rolled her shoulders and wiggled her fingers. Had the massacre not occurred, it might have been a pleasant journey. But she was beginning to see the world through a new lens of caution and fear. Occasionally they passed other boats and people on the shore. Yesterday she would have offered a friendly wave, but now she kept her head down. Chi Tãm said it was too risky to acknowledge them.

A few minutes later, several large black helicopters materialized overhead, hovering low. Mai’s heart thumped in her chest. She twisted around to Chi Tãm.

“Are they coming for us?” Her voice spiked in fear.

Tãm studied them. “No. Look.”

Mai looked up. The helicopters spewed trails of what looked like orange smoke from their bellies. As the smoke drifted toward the ground, it dissipated into mist. “What is that?” Panic tightened Mai’s stomach.

Tâm’s eyes flashed with anger, not fear. “It’s poison. They call it Agent Orange. It destroys everything that grows on the land and contaminates it for years.”

“Why?”

“Without the cover of brush, the enemy can find villages like ours more easily.”

“But why do they want to find us?”

“Mai, do—did you never listen to Papa’s radio when the news came on?”

Mai shook her head.

Tâm sighed. “There are many villagers in the South who hate this war and what the Americans are doing. So they secretly help the guerillas fighting for the North by feeding them at night when they come out of the brush. And giving them weapons.”

“You mean the Viet Cong?”

“So you do know.”

“Dung told me her parents helped. She made me swear not to tell.”

“Ahh. I am sorry your friend was killed.”

Mai tightened her lips.

Tâm went on. “I think that is why the Americans attacked. They were looking for Viet Cong and assumed we were.”

“Are—were we?”

“Papa perhaps.” She paused. “Yes, I would say so. Mama, no. She was not political. And yet she would prepare food for Papa to give them once you were asleep.”

Mai looked up at the helicopters again. “What if they spot us? Will they poison us too?”

“We are just two peasant girls looking for a place to fish, right?” Tâm dug her oar into the water. “I see a cove over there. Let’s head over.”

As they beached the sampan, the hull crunched on the sand. Mai looked up. The helicopters had moved on. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Tâm pulled out the fishing rod. “Have you fished before?”

Mai shook her head. She didn’t know a fishing line from a laundry line.

“Then today you’re going to learn. Take this.” She held out the rod. “Get us some catfish.”

Mai peered at the rod as if it was a snake that would curl up at any second and bite her.

“Take it. It won’t hurt you.”

Mai stood still. “What should I do with it?”

“What do you think?” The exasperation that ignited whenever Tâm was displeased with Mai appeared. Tâm bent over the sampan. “Hold on.”

She explored the bottom of the boat. A moment later she let out a grunt of satisfaction. “Here.” She straightened up. In her hand was a fish hook. Mai had never seen one at close range before. It looked like part of a thin curved earring, with a tiny eye on top and a sharp point on the curved end. She took it from Tâm warily. Tâm found a hand-held net in the boat which she also handed to Mai.

“You need to loop the line through the eye at the top of the fish hook, then drop it into the water and wait.” She pointed to a large flat rock that jutted out over the river. “Over there is a perfect spot. I’ll find bugs you can use for bait.”

Mai gazed at the rock, then back at Tâm. When she didn't move Tâm repeated, "Go." Mai opened her mouth, about to say something, but stopped. Tâm wasn't going to change her mind. She trudged over to the rock with the pole. Tâm waited until Mai had climbed onto the rock, then disappeared into the brush.

Tâm returned a few minutes later with a couple of grasshoppers in her hand. The bugs lay on their backs, their revolting tiny tentacles waving in all directions. Mai jerked back.

Tâm ignored her distress. "I will show you how to bait the hook this time. Next time you do it." Tâm threaded the hook through on the line, took one of the insects, and stabbed it with the fish hook. The grasshopper was dead, but its legs still squirmed.

"Now, drop the line into the water. When you feel a tug, pull it out and drop the fish into the net. Be patient and don't give up."

"Why?" Mai's gut twisted. "Where are you going?"

"To get more fruit." Tâm climbed off the rock and disappeared into the bush.

Mai cautiously dropped her fishing line into the water. Yesterday her world had been normal. It was a world she could understand. She had her place in it. Today, she had no idea where they were or where they were going, and she was stuck with a fishing rod in her hands. Her parents and Sánh were dead, they had stolen a sampan, and all she had in the world was Tâm. While they were sisters, they were so different. She tried to imagine sharing a funny incident with Chị Tâm, as she did with Dung. Or her mother. She couldn't.

Mai wore her *nón lá*, but the sun, lazy and languid at dawn, was now fiery hot. The rock sizzled like a simmering cauldron, and Mai couldn't move without burning her skin. She had to stay where she was. She felt as if she was in a prison without walls. All because of a damn fish.

She wanted shade, and she didn't want to keep going in the sampan. But Chi Tâm would say they had to eat, and they had to get to Saigon. She teared up in frustration and blinked quickly. Maybe this was all a bad dream. When she woke up, everything would be the way it was.

She wasn't sure how long she sat, steeped in misery, when she felt a tiny tug on the line. She straightened. "Chi Tâm, Chi Tâm, I think I have a fish. What do I do?"

There was no answer. What had Tâm told her to do? Pull it up. Catch it in the net. She pulled up the line. Amazingly, a fish dangled, flopping on the hook. She had caught a fish! She knew she had to get the fish into the net, but the line was too long to do it deftly. Was she supposed to grab the fish with her hands? She looked for the spool on the rod that fishermen used to reel in their catch, but there was nothing. She was going to have to pull the line in another way. Fumbling with the rod, she managed to pull it in until the line was in front of her. The fish still struggled. She was afraid it would plop back into the river. Despite the heat on the rock, she got to her knees, leaned forward, and grabbed the line with one hand. With the other she grasped the line higher up. She repeated what she had done. It was working! The line and the fish were coming closer. She grabbed the line twice more.

The fish was now within reach. Mai picked up the net with one hand and grabbed the fish with the other. A sharp pain shot through her wrist, and she cried out. She had stabbed herself with the fish hook. She tried to pull it out, but it was embedded in her skin and wouldn't budge. Panicking, she pulled harder. The pain was excruciating. She let out a piercing scream. Finally, she was able to pull out the hook. Blood gushed down her forearm. Her skin was torn. She burst into tears.

