

## CHAPTER ONE

# BẢO

Hoisin sauce is not paint.

We need a sign that says that, because our customers don't get it. Today's latest work is a misshapen star on the wall. A five out of ten, if you ask me. The kid's parent probably did a double take, snatched the bottle away, then paid the check and left before Mẹ could notice. To be honest, it's not like the sauce makes our wall look worse; it's just hard to wipe off when it dries. But I try, I really do—sometimes. Maybe.

Various relatives from both sides of my family judge me from their water-stained portraits that hang around the restaurant.

I sit down and look ahead at the five booths I still need to wipe

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clean, but this heat's unbearable and the main fan, the good fan, died last week. Break time. I brush off grains of rice that cling to my apron. Later, I'm sure I'll find a few that somehow end up under my socks at the end of each shift. On the opposite side, my best friend, Việt, goes at the same pace as me. His ears are plugged up, probably to block out the *Paris by Night*-like soundtrack blasting from the back room, songs on repeat about the Vietnam War, love, war, poverty, war.

Việt is the most chaotic neutral person I know. On any other day he wastes time by raving about the latest criminal-investigation show he's gotten hooked on. I consider that a trade-off; he's the one who suffers through my fascination with strange words. Once I was wiping down a front window from the inside, unknowingly overriding his work and adding more streaks than there were to begin with. I'd been mentioning the word "defenestrate," which made him calmly threaten me with that very word.

Ba stands behind the counter, punching in numbers at the cash register, then piercing receipts onto a spindle. I think he finds the routine satisfying.

The front door opens, the bell shattering the slowness in the restaurant, ushering in more sticky hot air. My mom's voice whips two other lingering, taskless waiters to attention, and I snatch up the towel and wipe off bean sprouts, leafless stems of herbs, and straw wrappers shaped as tiny accordions. Mẹ charges across the room. She drops her plastic shopping bags in the path toward the kitchen, a storm on her face. Everyone clears the way for her; they know Mẹ's mood. But Ba's expression is as indifferent as his look

in their wedding pictures from the 2000s: Stone. Cold.

My mom slaps down a crumpled piece of paper before him. “Anh, do you know what they’re doing across the street?”

Without looking up, speaking to his calculator, he asks, “Did you get more sriracha sauce?”

“On my way back, I saw these ugly posters all over the place.”

“There was a sale. Did you get them on sale?”

It’s always like this, their conversation misaligned, a *not much* to a *how are you* question.

“Lampposts, windows all over Bolsa Avenue!”

Glass shatters in the back kitchen. The line cooks start blaming each other, Spanish and Vietnamese mingling together. My guess: Bình did it. That guy sucks at his job more than me.

Mẹ ignores the noise. “Two-for-one. Two-for-one bowl of phở. *Trời ơi.*” Only one family can get her riled up like this. She pauses. “They’re trying to steal all our customers. Why isn’t Anh worried?”

Ba snorts. “Their phở is not good. They never have enough salt.” Now *that* I can’t verify. I’ve never stepped foot into the Mais’ restaurant. Because what happens? Apparently my mom will cut my legs off.

Maybe they had one of the waiters pose as a customer. . . .

Mẹ nods, dialing back her worry. After a moment, she says, “Two-for-one phở. Who wants to have phở *lat*?” She laughs at her own joke about their phở’s blandness. Ba joins, too.

Lately their preoccupation with the Mais has ratcheted, probably because they keep hearing about the changes the other family’s been making, changes that seem to be in direct response to

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our adjustments. We'd recently added new wood grain blinds that block out the sun—just because it looks like they replaced their blinds, too.

My mom zeroes in on me. "*Con đang làm gì đó?*" She side-eyes my tables. "Why are the tables still dirty?"

"I'm not finished yet."

"Why not? He's done." Mẹ points to the opposite side.

I look across the room at Việt—

And blink. The tables are shining, and the mirrors are fingerprint-less and—yes—hoisin-less. Kid's like an Asian Flash. "Oh, c'mon," I mutter.

"*Giỏi quá!*" she says to the traitor.

"*Cảm ơn,*" Việt answers without a trace of an accent even though he was born here.

My mom turns back to me. "Hurry up!" She jabs a finger at me. "And fix your hair! It's so messy." I can't help it; my hair has a mind of its own.

The poster that Mẹ showed my dad floats to the ground in her wake. Curious, I pick it up, passing by Việt. Making sure my mom's a good distance away, I elbow him. "Suck-up."

Việt lands a punch to my stomach. "Lazy."

I pretend not to die; he's always been stronger than me.

Việt goes into the back room. I look down at the flyer. I'm not sure how anything like this can be considered ugly. It's awesome. There's no other word for it. Just really cool—some kind of collage of old and modern Vietnam: a woman wearing a traditional silk white dress and rice hat winking at a camera. You can see the sun

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and beachline—reminding me of Nha Trang, my parents' hometown—blazing behind her. An airplane flying above the woman spells out in the clouds OH MAI MAI PHỞ: TWO-FOR-ONE DEAL. With this kind of advertising from the Mai family, my parents should be worrying about *our* advertising. We don't have a Linh on our team.

I glance out the window. As if this poster summons her, Linh appears from Larkin Street's direction. She rushes into the restaurant, her flyaway hair alive, her large canvas bag, which she hauls everywhere, hitting her long legs. Over the entrance and below a pagoda-style eave hangs a South Việt flag just like ours—yellow with three red stripes—and it flutters in greeting to Linh. She's always a colorful blur—going to class, dashing down La Quinta's hallways when the bell lets out, running into the restaurant at 3:30 p.m.

I see her, but I know close to nothing about her. Maybe it's a good thing she's constantly moving, because if she ever stopped, we might have to talk to each other. And we haven't done that since we were kids.

Hypothetically, a Buddhist temple is not a place for insults or threats or a potential bloodbath.

I've gone to temple sporadically throughout my life, but the day I met Linh is the most memorable, for many reasons, aside from running into the rest of the Mais and being *thiiiiis* close to seeing bloodshed before Ông Phật.

Before meeting Linh, I'd never seen another seven-year-old kid stab paper with a crayon. Repeatedly. We were in the kids' room

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where the *chùa*'s volunteers babysat kids as the parents went to worship or at least get a moment of silence. Mine were catching up with friends upstairs. There were tables with finger paint, macaroni, glue, and paper, and another table with crayons and markers. I'm not sure why—maybe because it was less work—I went for the crayons.

The other kids sat so far away from Linh because they were afraid she might turn on them. But the look on her face was calm and concentrated—satisfied, even—and when she made sure all of the crayons were completely dull, she raised her white paper in triumph. I was closest to her, so she showed it to me.

The dots formed a complete picture: green grass, a yellow sun, and a red-and-blue swing set.

“Wow,” I said, like any six-to-eight-year-old Asian kid with a bowl cut would say.

“It's the playground at my school,” she answered proudly.

“Can you draw Spider-Man?” Because back then, that was the only thing that mattered to me.

“Maybe. I can't remember what he looks like. I need something to look at.”

“I have one! I can get it!” I'd brought along my Spider-Man backpack, but it was upstairs in a cubby with our shoes. We raced out of the room, escaping the volunteers, who didn't really try to catch us. Up on the main floor, the temple membership was serving bowls of phở *chay* and a white-haired lady waved us over for a bowl of vegetarian soup.

Linh took her bowl with everything that my family always

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taught me to use: hoisin sauce, thai basil, and bean sprouts. That told me she knew phở; she *came* from phở. It was confirmed when we both tried the phở at the same time and said, “BLECH.” Salty as hell. We left our bowls, quick, then moved on to our destination.

Running, that’s what I remember. I was chasing a girl I barely knew, but I really wanted that Spider-Man drawing. Before we could get to my backpack, though, Mẹ’s sharp voice rang out. The one that still summons centuries’ worth of furious Vietnamese mothers. I froze. Our families stood on opposite sides of the room, where Buddha was at the center, accepting gifts and praise from the visitors. Linh and I were caught in between. I waited for Buddha to come alive, chime in, like a referee, and bellow—while the ground vibrates forcibly—“Ready, set, FIGHTTTT!”

But nothing like that happened.

Linh’s mom took one step forward, like she was marking her territory. Her eldest daughter and husband were just behind her.

“*Đến đây,*” my mom said to me. I thought she was angry at me for running in a temple. I couldn’t say no and when I was with her again, she gripped my hand tight. Ba hung back, and I remember being confused by the fury barely contained on his face, so different from his usual passivity.

After that, they all but dragged me and Linh away from each other.

“You still haven’t finished your tables.”

Ba’s voice from the front desk snaps me out of my memories. I’m still standing by the windows, but I notice the sky is a bit darker

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and the lampposts are starting to turn on. The din of inside chatter fills my ears.

“Why do you have that flyer?”

“Sorry,” I say. “I was thinking of how ugly it looked. Mẹ’s right.” I walk to the nearest trash can, hand poised over it.

The story of me and Linh at the temple could have been kept as a carefree memory, lost and dusty like an old book in the basement. And I did actually forget about it; she was just one of many kids I’d run around with and never saw again—best friends for an hour or two, instead of forever.

Then Linh’s family opened their restaurant across from us five years ago, and I knew it was her. I knew she still drew, because she carried her portfolio with her everywhere, the size of it almost as big as her body.

I also knew that I couldn’t go anywhere near her without risking my mom’s wrath. Disdain was clear in my mom’s voice whenever she talked about *that* restaurant, as if it were a person.

*I heard that restaurant underpays its staff.*

*That restaurant is connected to a gang; they just moved from San Jose, after all.*

*That restaurant blackmailed Bác Xuân, pushed him out of his business.*

That last reason might be why the neighbors didn’t accept them so easily at first. Bác Xuân had basically helped the area flourish, connecting fellow business owners with the right people. Beloved, you can say. I don’t think my mom’s circle of friends made it any easier for *that restaurant*—social wolves who ran various businesses in



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the area: like Lien Hoa BBQ Deli, nail and hair salons, and even one travel agency. Back then advertising wasn't really a thing, so the good word of one of these women? Certified. You either get a *dở ẹc* or a *cũng được*, the latter being as close to great as you can get in terms of Vietnamese praise. Their group is led by Nhi Trưng, an older woman who constantly liked to brag that her name bears a similarity to one of the female military leaders to rebel against the Chinese domination centuries ago—as I discovered on Wikipedia. As if that was supposed to impress people these days. I think of her as the General, though the real-life Nhi Trưng was the general's daughter.

She had a special reason for hating the Mais; she'd always liked Bác Xuân's spot and said it'd gotten the most traffic. I bet she was planning to go for it right when the first opportunity came up.

Luckily gossip changes and some attention spans are short. Now the Mais' restaurant has become a fixture just like ours. But that doesn't stop my mom's competitive streak.

My parents—my mom, really—have now perfected the art of non-encounters, knowing their schedule right down to when they close and when they leave. In a way, their schedule has become ours. We're background characters in each other's stories.

As I look at the poster in my hands, though, I wonder if it's possible for us to change up our scripts. What would happen if our families came face-to-face with each other like that time at the temple? What would me and Linh say to each other?

*“Tại sao mà đứng đó vậy?”*

“Sorry!” I shout to my mom. Back to work.

I fold up Linh's poster and pocket it, not knowing why.

## CHAPTER TWO

# LINH

“Maybe I just won’t take the SATs again. Maybe I’ll just drop out right now and become the next best American novelist.”

I give my best friend, Allison, my *You’re annoying me again* look, since this is the third time she’s interrupted me as I worked on my latest sketch. “C’mon.”

“No, really. What’s the point of the SATs? There’s no real-life application that we can get here.” She twirls her curly hazel hair with a finger. Her foot kicks my left ankle. “And your legs are in my space again.”

I fold them just a bit more, but there’s not much I can do in this booth. “You’re going to do fine. They were fine the first

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time around. So what if your math scores aren't perfect? They're still great. And you'll ace the writing part, Ms. Editor in Chief. I know it."

"And you're going to ace all of it. Because you're Linh fucking Mai," Ali says. She pretends to take an angry slurp of her *cà phê sữa đá*, condensation leaving a puddle next to her. Since middle school we've always had iced coffee to get us through the mountain of homework we have. Senior year just started but I already feel as if I'm buried.

Some of my coffee spills onto the table, soaks the edges of my cream-colored sketch pad. I don't clean it up. Ms. Yamamoto is in my head, saying, *If you want to be an artist, you'll need to get messy.* I focus on my sketch.

Downtime at the restaurant is actually a nice time to draw. The empty seat next to me to balances my Prismacolors. My eraser, an ugly blend of all the colors I've been using, sits beside them. The sketch isn't going that bad. The assignment: *Draw your memories.* Instructions: *Why the hell should I tell you what to do?* Or at least that's what Yamamoto always says to our art class.

I'm drawing a beach scene, remembering the time Ba taught me how to float on my back, and where Mẹ taught me how to "cook" with sand—or play make-believe as I dug concave dents in the sand, poured water in them to make *bánh bèo ngọt*, a sweet steamed treat you can hold in the palm of your hand and eat.

My older sister, Evelyn, stayed under the shade of our umbrella, reading—of all things—a book about the human skeleton. Guess who's now majoring in biology at UC Davis?

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The tip of my colored pencil breaks as I shade an area under my beach umbrella.

“What is it?” Ali says, reaches over her SAT book to touch the picture—but I quickly slap her hand away. “*Jesus*, you’re a beast when you’re drawing, you know that?”

I pull back my sketch pad. “It’s not ready yet.” And it won’t be if I keep losing focus, or let Ali distract me with her talking.

And that’s what she does best.

Luckily, I’m used to it. Ali is a fixture in the restaurant after school, and for years, it was me, Evie, and Ali, and nothing really changed, unless you count the fact that now Ali steals the last egg roll, always shooting me an impish grin.

There was a time for a year when her parents were going through a divorce, and as strong as she was, home was more like a battlefield. The divorce eventually happened, and everything’s more stable now. She’s back to being the Ali who likes my artwork so much that she always has to take a peek at it. She says that one day we’re going to dominate the world—her as a writer, me as an artist.

“What’s with your dad today?” Ali tips her chin toward the front of the restaurant, where Ba takes up his own booth. The light from the front windows streams in, turning his normally salt-and-pepper hair a blinding white. He’s writing the checks for the week, but keeps looking up at the Nguyễns’ restaurant. Best guess is that he’s keeping an eye on the Nguyễns. Ba’s weird like that.

“I dunno.”

The Nguyễns can’t *not* see him. My dad isn’t the most discreet person or the stealthiest; every part of him—his walk, his breathing—

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makes noise. My mom, though, is the opposite. She slips in and out of any social gathering, from any room, any conversation, like a ghost. But she's loudest when she's cooking; the spices and flavors in her phở, *bún bò*, and *bún riêu* are her way of announcing, *I'm here*.

Our plan to do a two-for-one deal combines Ba's talent for advertising and Mẹ's cooking, or so Ba claims. But I'm already dreading the flood of people who'll come. We're understaffed as it is; we had to say goodbye to three servers who were seniors off to college. We hired replacements, but only one of them seems like they'll last.

Before I realize it, Ba appears at our table. He sets down a plate of hot, crispy egg rolls that Mẹ sent out from the kitchen. Ali literally *oobs*, like she hasn't eaten a gazillion in the lifetime we've known each other.

“*Cảm ơn, Ba.*”

He reaches for my sketch, appraises it. “*Con vẽ này hả?*” he asks evenly. I nod and he dips his chin in acknowledgment. I know he sees I can draw. He wouldn't have asked me to make the flyers if he didn't at least approve of my work. “Did you do your homework already?”

“*Đạ, Ba.*”

Ba nods, satisfied, and walks back into the kitchen.

There used to be a time where I brought home every single art project in elementary school and middle school, and they would take it, hang it up. A picture of flowers in a vase still hangs in the kitchen by the in-and-out door. I knew they were proud.

But high school is different. In my freshman year, regulars would come in daily, updating my parents on their kid who went

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to Harvard, or won a prestigious award, or graduated with honors, or bought them a house. That was when my parents really started paying attention to my grades—the ones that actually mattered and could get me into a good school.

Toward the end of junior year, I'd brought home a physics exam that I aced and it was only because I studied without sleeping, abandoning an art project I had at the time. The test was worth too much. Mẹ had mentioned it to a regular customer who mentioned a niece who was good at physics and now works as an engineer. Somehow that idea has stuck, and my parents have been pushing engineering as a path for me ever since.

I'd never seen them look so eager.

"Have you told them yet?" Ali pulls me from my thoughts. She is watching me. She's one of the few who can guess my moods, read me instantly.

"About coffee with Quỳn Thành? No, it's pretty much all set. I can't back out now."

My parents don't usually ask for favors from regulars or their friends. Here's how it goes: If something is broken in the restaurant and a friend offers to fix it, they protest. That same friend shows up with a toolbox anyway, and my parents grudgingly let them in. When all things are fixed, my parents offer to pay them, but their friend protests and argues all the way to the door.

In that case, an envelope of money might mysteriously end up under their doormat, or in a pocket of their jacket they might hang up inside the restaurant.

But my parents had pulled in a favor when Evie was deciding

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among schools, and called a few friends of friends to help weigh in. This time they used up another favor, arranging a coffee meeting with that niece who was an engineer. They tell me it's a chance to ask questions and learn more about "my future."

How can I say no?

"Con," Ba calls for me. He's halfway into the kitchen but he gestures to the front where a family of four are waiting to be seated. I slip into my role as waitress, something I've done since freshman year—and even before that. When we'd just opened the restaurant, I remember tagging along with other servers, armed with my own notepad and pen—or was it a crayon?—the customers indulging me with smiles.

"Table for four? No problem. Just follow me." I lead the family to one of the center tables, until Jonathan, the most competent of our new hires, easily swoops in.

I slip back into my booth with Ali. She's chewing on the end of her pencil, stuck with an article she's writing.

It kills my parents, even now, to have Evie a day trip away instead of at home. Evie was the better server out of us, calm and cool under service. Orderly. Mẹ never had to tell Evie to fill up the napkin dispensers or the bottles holding *tương phở*, because they were probably already filled.

And she's definitely more charismatic, like Ali, with the other customers. It's unsaid, but I know, in the way they ask after Evie, that some longtime customers must be disappointed to have me replace her—me who would much rather be in my head or in front of a canvas. They tell my parents how proud they should be of her.

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“She’ll be a doctor in no time,” these customers say fondly. Then they look significantly at me. “And maybe you can be the same.”

Perhaps in other families it would have worked out. I mean, me and Evie are only two years apart, but if anyone didn’t know better, we might as well have been raised under two separate households.

Mentioning that I want to major in anything remotely creative? Impossible. Back in freshman year, when the idea of doing something with art just came into mind, we had a regular who had one daughter who couldn’t be more perfect. Straight As, active in everything in her life, her hair always in a perfect bun. She was also one of the best seniors on the dance team and naturally decided to major in dance at college. Supposedly, the dad was more lenient, hence why she was even allowed to, I don’t know, *live* after announcing her decision. Her mother’s reaction, though, stays with me: “I want to die sometimes! She’ll be poor her entire life. It’ll never work out.”

And my mom just consoled her as if she had lost a child, agreeing with every word. The woman and her daughter used to be close; now the girl’s a choreographer and rarely comes home. Whenever her mom drops by the restaurant, loneliness comes off her in waves.

Now I glance around the restaurant, my eyes landing on the familiar parts that make up a place that’s been like a second home for years: our red shrine greeting customers; our private shrine in the back room, where the ceiling is black with soot after so many years of joss sticks lit for worship; the people who come here for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, people from way back, like Mę and Ba’s refugee camp days, who apparently remember everything about me as a child, even if I don’t remember them. I mix them up half the time.



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Nothing is bad. Nothing is *wrong*, really.

But it doesn't feel enough. There's something urging me to go a bit farther than here. Am I just being selfish?

Ali has gotten up to stretch her legs. She stands by the window with Ba and has started talking to him. Leave it to her to talk to someone who doesn't like to talk unless he has reason to. Off-and-on charisma. Ali laughs at something, but Ba looks serious. I leave my sketch and join them, curious.

"I can always sneak in, you know. Pose as a customer and steal some recipes."

Ba doesn't answer right away. It even looks like he's considering. I roll my eyes. "Ba, no way."

Anything the Nguyễns do, we have to do better. They knock down their *chả giò* price to four dollars for two rolls, we have to do three dollars and fifty cents for the same number of egg rolls. They have five flavors of *sinh tố*; we have six flavors. I'm never sure who's winning.

My parents are still trying to catch up to the others in the area, like the Nguyễns, still cognizant of how hard it was to open a new restaurant in the place of one that had, for all purposes, looked successful.

I remember Bác Xuân, the previous owner, coming over to our old San Jose apartment whenever he had a free weekend—stopping by after seeing his only daughter and his four grandchildren. The oldest, Fay, is getting married later this fall. I remember the slow way he'd shuffled inside and given a satisfied sigh as he sunk into our only comfortable La-Z-Boy chair. He told my parents he wanted to retire and that his daughter, a coworker of my mom's from a nail

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salon where she used to work, would rave about my mom's phở.

*If you make good phở, you can open this restaurant,* he'd said.

Things happened so quickly after that. We moved. I transferred schools. The restaurant opened . . . and suddenly I was only a few feet away from that boy who'd asked me to draw him a Spider-Man. It would have been a good coincidence, and I could have made a friend—if only it wasn't made clear that I should never step near their place.

*"Gia đình đó thì dữ lắm, lại rất là xấu."*

"But how are they mean?"

"They don't pay their staff anything. They owe their suppliers too much money. They—"

"Just don't ever associate with them." My mom had cut my dad off, rarely doing so.

I know Vietnamese people like to judge one person based on the whole family, and to my parents, the Nguyễns are the worst, but Bảo is a mystery to me. There, but not. In four years of high school, with more than 2,500 students, we haven't had one class together. As if our school administrators know of the rivalry and have conspired to keep us apart.

And high school will be over before I know it and we'll lead even more disparate lives.

"Mr. Mai," Ali says in a mockingly grave tone, "I am more than happy to spy on our enemy if it helps the restaurant biz. Just tell me when." She goes back to the booth to pack up. "Think I'm about to head home now. I'm on deadline." She puts on her backpack, groaning at the weight of her books. She stops by the pass-through shelf

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and pops her head in. “Can I take home some broth, Mrs. Phạm?” Pro tip to getting on my mom’s side: Address her by her maiden name, which she kept instead of taking Ba’s. “My mom’s *dying* for her next phở fix.”

Perfect pronunciation, thanks to me.

*It’s like you’re confused and asking, “Hub?” except there’s an f.*

*Oh. Yeah, I get it. In the pitch that kind of loops around, right? But it’s also like if you’re swearing and saying, “Fu—”*

*Okay, yeah, you got it.*

In Vietnamese, my dad mutters in awe and confusion about how he’s never seen a *mỹ trắng*—a white person—eat phở so many times a week.

I hear my mom’s pleased smile in her voice. “Of course!”

Her hair tied in a loose bun—with a pencil, which I can’t ever figure out how to do—Mẹ appears from the back, wipes a hand on her apron. She offers Ali a plastic cylinder filled with our signature homemade chicken and beef bone broth.

Ali beams at her. “Awesome. Thanks so much, Mrs. Phạm!”

We both watch Ali leave the restaurant until Mẹ gushes, “Allison is so *dễ thương*!” She’s proud that I have a friend who likes her cooking.

Ba shakes his head. “*Con đó kìùng.*” I laugh. According to my parents Ali can only be cute or a bit weird. I’ll take my dad’s side this time.

“You’re not eating?” She points to the egg rolls.

If I say I don’t have the stomach for it now, she’ll be worried. “Yeah, working on it.” Remembering Ba’s reaction to my sketch, I

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close my pad and stash it in my backpack, rustling the paper tucked inside.

Ms. Yamamoto gave me that flyer two days ago. It's for an exhibition at the Asian Art Museum that will only be there for one night and morning. Chang Dai-Chien's piece will be displayed, donated by his living family members. He'd been one of the first to elevate ink painting and traveled all around the world before focusing on perfecting the art of Buddhist paintings. Yamamoto thought I'd be interested. She's always telling me how it seems I like capturing memories—rather than something posed—in my artwork.

“Just check it out,” she said, as class was letting out. I was already late for work and ran out the door after grabbing the flyer with a quick thanks. But as I looked at it on the walk from La Quinta, I knew I couldn't miss out on it.

Mẹ disappears, then returns from the kitchen with her own bowl of phở. She likes to eat before the dinner rush. My insides sigh at the smell: star anise, cinnamon, the earthy tones of chicken and beef bones. She dresses it with shredded thai basil and fresh bean sprouts, a spritz of lime here and there, and finishes it with a generous swirl of hoisin sauce, glossy under our lights. A work of art.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” She inhales, a small smile on her face. Mẹ's loud when she's cooking—and she's happiest when she's eating. And I love her for it. I always want her to stay this way.

She gets sad sometimes—mornings when she doesn't let the sun in, leaving the window shades closed so that only slivers of yellow peek through. She buries her head in her pillow, both temples dotted with dabs of *dầu xanh* to soothe her headache. I hate the smell.

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It reminds me of sickness and tummy aches, because that's what they used on me as a kid. Ba cooks on these days. Dinner is always a simple *canh sườn bì*, which always has less salt than it should, and never measures up to Mẹ's cooking.

It's worst whenever it hits the anniversary of her escape in 1983 or when a relative's death anniversary is just around the corner. Mẹ's story about her boat escape to the Philippines is the stuff of nightmares. I grew up listening to these tales. I'm not sure why—a lesson, maybe? Like in a *hey, listen to the hell I went through so you can have a good life* kind of way. But should an eight-year-old have dreams about a pitch-black sea and a boat packed with thirty-nine people, including crying, starving babies?

It's not depression, I don't think. Sometimes, she checks out. That's all. Like she's remembering something and can't get it out of her mind.

It helps when she calls my aunt, her older sister by six years, the one who stayed behind in Vietnam. She'd planned to escape with my mom in tow, along with their older cousins. But the officials had gotten to her, so she pushed my mom ahead, trusting their cousins from there on. They eventually made it to a camp in Palawan, Phillipines. My aunt wasn't held back in Vietnam for long, and might have bribed her way out.

But she understood then that she wouldn't be as lucky the second time.

Mẹ says I remind her of Dì Vàng because we both like to draw and sketch. My aunt had visited us when we lived in San Jose. I was five. I remember thinking she was like a colorful painting come to

## LOAN LE

life, and when I saw a Kandinsky painting in my sophomore-year art theory class—one of his *Compositions*—I thought: *This is her*. Kandinsky had always talked about a connection between himself and the viewer, how the role of the artist was to not only excite the senses but trigger the viewer's soul. Colors and soul—I saw that in my aunt.

When my mom and my aunt get on the phone, I know things will be okay. They took care of each other back in Vietnam—since my grandparents had passed away when my mom was eleven—and they still take care of each other now. The almost nine thousand miles between them is insignificant.

Mẹ smiles as a young couple comes in—Vietnamese, by the way she greets them. Ba shows them to a table. Charisma on. He's already pushing the upcoming phở deal by handing out my flyer along with the menu. Dad's latest marketing scheme might work, but it's going to be hell working during those nights. It will track in a bunch of other Vietnamese people, who were trained by their chopstick-wielding mothers to eat what's in front of them, *then* eat some more even if they're full.

The sight of the flyer tickles something in the back of my mind.

“When is it again?”

“Hmm?”

“Phở Day.” *Or whatever you call it.*

“September thirtieth, remember? We'll need your help that day.”

Until three weeks ago, we were down three waiters and waitresses. Julia, Kingston, and Huy were a grade above me and left for college. But to say that the new workers were making things easier would be

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a complete lie. Jonathan was just okay. Lisa, the hostess, gets flustered too easily. And Tài has slippery fingers.

I lean back in my chair. Some of the air in the padding squeezes out.

Of course it's September thirtieth. The same day as the exhibition.

"Is Evie coming back to help?" My sister texted the other day and sent me a long string of pictures of her dorm room, a selfie with her new roommate, and a sunrise view of the campus after a morning run.

Maybe if she comes back, she can help out like she used to and I can sneak out. . . .

My mom frowns. "Con, you know your sister is busy with school."  
*What about me? I'm busy. I have other things to do. I have a life.*

But I can't say those things. "Yeah, right, I remember now."

Mẹ sighs as she mixes up her phở. "I know this is not the best situation. I know this isn't how you want to spend your time." I try protesting, but she only adds, "You are not so hard to read. Your face always tells me everything. I just know.

"But we want this to go well. We need it to go well. Or else your father will be grumpy for days." She glances over at Ba, who's taking a couple's orders to the kitchen.

There's no way I'll be able to see the exhibition. No way at all.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. I bite into my egg roll. Soggy.