



## Chapter Two

VIVI

Faking a trip is a lot harder than I imagined, especially if it includes lying to your immigrant parents.

“Are you sure I can’t just text my mom now?” I chew on my lower lip as my eyes follow the chaos unfolding on the plane: people shuffling, flight attendants asking us to be patient, and of course, babies crying. The same babies that have been wailing for the entire eighteen-hour flight. I get why my parents are so travel averse.

Cindy rolls her eyes at me. “Singapore is sixteen hours ahead of California. We told your mom that we’d land at six. It’s only five.”

“It’s only an hour ahead—”

My best friend opens the twenty-page outline that we wrote in excruciating detail about our Fake Study Abroad Trip. “We said that we’re on Singapore Airlines flight 2044, which hasn’t even landed yet. Knowing your mom, she’s probably up watching the flight tracker right now.”

I snort. “She was so scared we’d crash into the ocean.”

“Well, that turbulence was no joke.” She shudders. “I really thought she jinxed us.”

“My mom thinks the entire world is out to get us.” After living in Orange County, California, all my life with parents who’d rather spend every day staring at the same palm trees outside our windows, the plane ride was more thrilling than scary. “The jello theory explains that we technically can’t go down during turbulence.”

“*Technically*,” she repeats. “Well, it’s not Singapore . . . but hey, we’re finally in Việt Nam.”

“I know. I can’t believe it. This place is *real* and not just photographs or Google images.” There’s an uneasiness in my stomach, but that’s probably because I’m lying to everyone I know back home.

I look out the plane window, and my heart flutters at the cityscape beyond the tall trees. I’m really here.

Unlike other Vietnamese families, mine doesn’t go on annual vacations to the “homeland.” Weekly gatherings at mom-and-pop phở shops in Little Saigon are the closest I’ve ever gotten to the real deal. Every Sunday, family friends would share stories about Việt Nam, about mouth-watering food and expansive landscapes and bustling streets. I envied them. I asked my parents over and over why we couldn’t visit, but they always said, *You’re too young to understand*. It made no sense.

But now I’m finally here, in the homeland I’ve wanted to visit all my life. I scroll through photos and screenshots in my phone, trying to remember everything I want to experience here. Fresh coffee every morning at a local café, watching the sun peek over the horizon as the city wakes. Meals eaten while squatting on kiddie stools on the side of the road as the smell of street food seeps into my clothes. My thumb pauses on a screenshot of a blog post, “Best Places to Hang Out After School.” Maybe—like once in a lifetime maybe—I’ll meet the person behind the Blog and thank them for bringing me here. Or maybe not, because that’d be a little weird.

Who knows.

Cindy taps on my shoulder impatiently. “Hurry, I need to pee.”

We scramble out of our seats and down the aisle. My carry-on is absurdly heavy, and I groan, thinking about Mom’s antics. “My suitcase is going to explode from all the vitamin supplements my mom *insisted* I take for extra immune system support. She said, and I quote, ‘You won’t know what kinds of sickness you’ll catch abroad.’” Maybe it’s an immigrant-parent thing to always be extra, extra careful.

“On the bright side, you’ve brought the entire CVS store with us!”

“True. Need melatonin or super-fast-acting-flu medicine? It’s on me—”

I’m barely finishing my sentence when someone plows right into me, sending my purse into the air. My eyes widen in shock as we watch it fly up and land with a thud that knocks all its contents onto the floor.

Photographs of strangers stare up at me. Well, not strangers—they’re family. At least, I *think* they’re family. It’s not like I can ask Mom, who I stole these photos from. She’d just reprimand me for going through her things, and still wouldn’t give me any answers.

I pick up each photo, smoothing out their vintage edges before tucking them safely back into my purse. The photo of Mom in a pretty áo dài in front of a cathedral I insert into my wallet instead.

“You okay?” Cindy picks up the last photo from the ground—three women smiling in front of a tall building, maybe a marketplace. One *definitely* is Mom, while the others share the same nose. “Already getting into your first accident abroad. Guess that trip insurance was worth it.”

I place the photograph in the same pocket as Mom’s photo. “I’ve stared at these black-and-white faces so much, spent so much time imagining how they’ll act and what they’ll say to me . . . I can’t believe they’re real people, and I’m potentially meeting them soon.”

“*Potentially meeting?* Vivi, we didn’t just fly across the globe for you

to hallucinate this meeting in your head. We'll find your mom's family *and* find out why your parents never wanted to take you here."

I gulp. "I guess. Where do we even start? I have no address. No names. And my mom would rather put me on the first flight home than ever tell me."

Her gaze softens. "We'll figure it out. This city can't be *that* big. We'll find someone."

But as we both stare at Sài Gòn through the airport windows, we know there's a very slim chance of finding my mom's family. The city *is* that big.

Most Vietnamese kids in the States grow up speaking to their family in Việt Nam through phone or video calls. Not me. Mom and Dad keep that part of our lives separate like a scar they want hidden.

Not that Dad can really do much; his parents died when he was super young. The only things I really know about my grandparents are that my grandma passed sometime during the war while my grandpa and Dad became refugees when Dad was three. Grandpa didn't make it to Dad's wedding. So Dad grew up with all things American: burger joints and Happy Meals, the twenty-six letter alphabet that doesn't contain Vietnamese diacritics, and football (the man really loves football, although I can't understand why).

Mom, on the other hand . . . I know we still have family here. I've seen her taping boxes to be mailed to Việt Nam. Still, she's never shared much, and the place across the Pacific Ocean remained an enigma throughout my childhood.

Mom accidentally reverse psychology'd me, and her refusal to talk about Sài Gòn only made me more curious. When I first googled Việt Nam, textbook images of decapitated bodies scarred me. I grew up thinking Việt Nam looked like rural land where everyone treks ten miles to school. This airport—city—does not look rural. At all.

"What's the first thing we should do in Sài Gòn?" Cindy huffs beside me, walking too fast for both our short legs.

“Nap? Eat? For you, pee.”

She rolls her eyes. “What did that blogger you’ve been following for years say? What’s the name again . . . A *Bánh Mi* something?”

“A *Bánh Mi for Two*,” I say immediately.

“Right.” She nods slowly, raising an eyebrow. “Any tourist recommendations? You’ve read like every single post almost a bazillion times, probably memorized the entire blog by now.”

“They don’t do posts like that. Everything is focused on local life. Hidden gems, that sort of stuff.”

I ran into *A Bánh Mi for Two* while looking up Vietnamese food history for a paper one night. The first post I read described how phở is actually a product of French colonialism in so much detail that I ended up citing the entire blog. I stayed up all night scouring the site. The words made me feel warm, comforted. I hadn’t realized what Việt Nam is actually like.

I scroll through *A Bánh Mi for Two*’s Instagram every day, hope in my chest that the blog’s hiatus will end soon. I miss their writing, and I miss imagining myself in their words even more.

We hurry through the terminal to baggage claim, the coolness of the airport replaced by the city’s thick humidity and sweltering heat. A sign hangs above us: WELCOME TO THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH. So many bodies trickling in and out. A sense of nostalgia washes over me. Home but not home. Scents I’ve always known, and a language spoken throughout Little Saigon, and yet it’s the first time I’m here. Sure, I look Vietnamese and can somewhat speak but am not really fluent in Vietnamese, but I am not Vietnamese enough inside. But I’m not American enough, either. Unlike other students in the program, I can’t just pass as a foreigner, but I can’t blend in with the locals, either. It’s a constant tug-of-war within me: being Vietnamese, but not really . . . and being American, but not really. Will I fit in—ever?

Cindy came up with the plan to study abroad for our first semester of college, and I signed on without a second thought. Why should we

be stuck in smelly dorm rooms and share gross showers with people when we can do the same but *abroad*.

Still, I'm not where I'm supposed to be. Guilt eats at me for lying. Taking advantage of my parents' trust did not feel good. But my parents didn't pry. They never do. They've always silently signed whatever academic forms I needed them to. I picked AP classes and submitted college applications on my own, skills I've learned from being a daughter of immigrants and first of my family to go to college.

I breathe in the smell of motorcycle fumes and diesel from nearby cars. It's evening and the sun is still scorching hot, baking us all in her ruthless heat.

Cindy mirrors my action, wrinkling her nose. "Ew."

"My mom said that when she first landed at LAX after coming from Hong Kong, she breathed in the scents of LA and knew she had found freedom. So, I wanted to try it here," I say sheepishly.

"Freedom must have smelled like piss and pollution, then." She throws her head back laughing.

Now it's my turn to roll my eyes.

My parents talk a lot about America being the land of opportunity, and they're always going on about freedom and liberty. But as I watch them struggle with the language barrier and find menial work that requires them to rise at 5:00 a.m. and toil until after sunset, I wonder if they meant the land of *missed* opportunities.

Mom refuses to speak about her life before the States and why she chose such a life of hardship over Việt Nam. *I did all of this for you, you know*. Việt Nam is always spoken of as a reminder that I shouldn't take things for granted. That I have it better, that I should be grateful. That I shouldn't wonder why or want to look back.

Maybe I wasn't raised right because I've always wanted to look back, to look across the Pacific and imagine our lives within the winding shape of Việt Nam. With another deep inhale of Sài Gòn's fumes, I

ready myself as we step into the cab taking us to the dormitory and to the heart of the city. My parents' home.

The very place I've daydreamed of since stumbling upon *A Bánh Mi for Two*.