

Chapter One

Today's body is skewered through the old church spire, a gray-black whale peeling in fleshy wisps. Dead too long for food.

From between my fingers or with my glasses dangling aside, I am still sometimes too scared to see how life has changed. Trailers refurnished with fish and eels under sunken sofas, cardboard boxes soggy and broken into bite-size pieces, and bodies torn up by the crashing waves. I don't like to look, which means, of course, that I have to.

The bloom has claimed much of our town of Mercy, red algae spilling over the Mississippi and adjacent floods like entrails. Our boat cut through it easily, but the micro-plants are probably sticking to the hull right now. It should've been like any algae bloom—spill toxins into the water, kill a bunch of fish, ruin the local economy, and leave us to pick up boot straps and get back to work—but no, since Hurricane Arlene twenty-one

months ago, these red tides have become the longest-lasting bloom known to humans.

Worse, not all the animals die. Wrecked on the levee, the whale gapes in anguish, as if to scream, *Why me?*

“Cẩn thận nhé con,” Mom says. Her eyes are trained on the riverside, searching for the outsize tree that flanks the fortune teller’s home. Without looking, she reaches over and rubs Vicks under my nose to ward off the rotten egg stench on the breeze. The glob burns my upper lip.

I turn the three-spoke wheel, cautiously guiding our forty-foot trawler on the bloodred river. “It’s ‘be careful,’” I say, because that’s our implicit deal: I learn how to steer a boat and she talks in English. They are the skills we each need to survive without the other. Just in case.

Brows pinching together, she mutters, “Be careful.”

I steer our boat over the tombs lurking below, hoping that none moved again in the last storm. This close to land, anything can rip through the hull. The most dangerous stuff is always unseen. Mom should know; she spends most days staring into watery depths, searching for dark silhouettes. *Monsters*, people like to whisper.

It happens a lot actually—people claiming they discovered a new species or the southern Loch Ness, when really, this dead whale just washed up and became postmortem kebab. Maybe some deep-sea creatures got curious about the sun and swam up. Ninety-five percent of the ocean remains unexplored, so it doesn’t surprise me to see strange animals. A two-headed shark is still a shark. I should know. Before, I wanted to be a marine

biologist, though I probably would've ended up pregnant and stuck here. With most of Mercy abandoned due to off-and-on flooding, I never have to worry about being a late bloomer anymore. I am my best self in this apocalypse.

Mom is not.

“We only have twenty minutes,” I say. “Mình chỉ có hai mươi phút thôi Má. Okay?”

The two moles on her left eyelid disappear in a scowl. Rushing at the fortune teller's is a sure way to annoy her, but right now is prime market hour. Our fuel gauge is way too close to *E* to risk missing the weekly trade, no matter the short distance to the harbor from here.

“It take how long it take,” she says, pointing at the one tree that looms above all others. Beneath it is the tip of an old boardwalk, mostly covered by weeds. The smaller mole re-emerges at her left eye crease as she gets up, sweeping photos of our family from the counter into her bag. The plastic frames clank together. Anchoring as close and safely as possible, I remove the key from the ignition. It hangs from a silver necklace, a pendant to keep close. I turn the familiar weight in my fingers, counting *một, hai, ba*, as Mom taught me. Three times, a magic trick to forget all the bad things. It's more of a ridiculous comforting ritual than anything else. Mom pauses and, with a rare smile, helps put the necklace around my throat. “Đừng có lo.” Both hands rest on my shoulders. *Don't worry.*

Mom never says “I am here for you,” because she's still stuck in those family photos—in the memory of what was. She wants me to be a girl who sits down with her hair neat and smiles,

though I have always been different. I *am* different. Under her hands, my sweater clings to my slick skin, itching me everywhere. I keep still, yet miss her when she lets me go. With a bit more fuel, we'll have an escape, for whenever we need. We can rejoin the parts of the US that forgot us as soon as the news stations left, or just go far from Mercy. But we stay.

On the deck, I open our freezer, where at least eight thousand pounds of large brown shrimp are layered in crushed ice, ready to be processed. I grab an already portioned bag up top, then the smaller sandwich bag beside it, and join Mom on the dinghy. A gentle wave helps us toward the fortune teller's porch. The entire cabin is dipped in the strangler fig tree's shadow.

Mom knocks on the door. "Chị Oanh ơi?" No answer. "Chị Oanh!"

This late in summer, the figs are fat, purple pustules that'll burst at the slightest touch. These trees used to only populate southern Florida, but it's tropical enough now to grow in Louisiana too. Some bats might come eat Bà Oanh's figs yet, then shit seeds elsewhere. Another cypress or palm will die under the strangler fig's embrace. That's romance; I don't touch it.

"Em vô nhé chị," Mom announces. Her knuckles are pale on the doorknob, and quivering. She opens the door. The algae that's laced itself across the cabin rips as daintily as a doily as the door opens. Fine red dust spills into the muggy air. Between the bloom's stench and the overripe fruit, I hadn't noticed her smell. Bà Oanh's body is bloating in the armchair she always sat in during our visits. Gasping, Mom leaves me at the threshold. The algae had found its way inside as well, seeping into damp wood.

It resembles dried blood that can't be scrubbed clean—only blood isn't this orderly when spilled. There is no shape to the algae; it is just everywhere.

Rather than sobbing at Bà Oanh's feet, Mom cries and rifles through the woman's side table and drawers. She grows more frantic when she doesn't find a hidden fortune, a direction to which we can drive our boat next to find what she really cares about.

My dad. My brother.

They are out there somewhere, reincarnated and waiting for us to rescue them, according to her. Every family has their myths, and Sông is ours. It's like the spirit of the water, but its name doesn't mean ocean. We call it Sông for the rivers we've lived by. In Vietnam, we had the Mekong. Here, we have the Mississippi. Sông kept my dad's family safe during the perilous journey to the United States. During good shrimping seasons, my family thanked it for providing. During bad ones, they wondered if they'd mistreated the water, spat one too many times over the railing. To me, it was just metaphor, simile, and superstition. Mom has twisted it with her faith when my dad's and brother's bodies weren't recovered. She truly believes Sông birthed them again as some sea animal. More impossible dreams to catch within our nets.

"Nhung," my mother says, her eyes as brittle as pistachio skin. There is a question there.

Wake up, I can respond. *They are gone*. A fly lands on Bà Oanh's glasses. *She's dead too*.

I cover my nose, brushing a stray tear off my cheek. What's

wrong with being swept in this a little longer, if it makes Mom happy? If it makes her want to live?

“Okay,” I answer. “I’ll help look.” Setting our goods aside, the clock dwindling away light, I go through the fortune teller’s ten-year-old receipts, yellowing magazines, and notebooks. Bà Oanh had been haunted by the memory of her drowned sister. She didn’t believe in reincarnated people or monsters, but she stayed because she’d lived in Mercy since she first came to the US. She never encouraged my mom’s delusions. Lunar calendars and palm reading were her forte.

Her last fortune for Mom had been this: “Not the year for rat signs, Tiên. Bad luck will come and come again for your daughter. It’ll be better if you wait on shore until the shroud passes. She should not operate cars or any other machinery.”

Mom didn’t listen, of course, because we had to be on the boat. She always held onto the hope that, next time, Bà Oanh would divine our family’s location.

Eventually I make it back to the armchair, which Mom hasn’t searched at all. She isn’t good with bodies. People worth saving don’t do things like steal glasses from corpses. I’ve always liked Bà Oanh’s frames since the attached chain makes them harder to misplace. Her glassy eyes don’t need them anymore. The flies I’d disturbed resettle on her forehead. I can see every blemish, every putrefying pore, every small cut likely from seashells on her feet, but no wounds big enough to kill. Maybe a heart attack or aneurysm got her in the end. Better than drowning. Many people drown these days.

I follow her sloping arm, to where it lies between cushion

and armrest, so heavily covered in beetles and other insects that I almost miss the mini notepad. I tug it free. Five words are scrawled out: *KHI NƯỚC CỨ DÂNG CAO*. *When the water keeps rising*. An omen I know well. It's easy to imagine the muck-ridden river or the temperamental ocean waves breaking through the windows and ripping us apart. It always sings in a rush, but it is the day-to-day erosion that will end us. To me, *when the water keeps rising* means now. Like an outdated textbook, the phrase teaches me nothing new.

A laugh wells in my throat. I love the wild, open ocean where it's only us and the horizon, where no one can see me, but I don't want to trace the coastline looking for imaginary monsters again. Mom is overjoyed as she takes the notepad. For Mom, *when the water keeps rising* means every day is an opportunity.

I try to hold on. "We don't know if this is for us."

"Who?" Mom asks. "Who then?" I'm afraid she'll swallow all the carrion beetles with her lips open in argument. I let go. To the fortune teller, Mom utters "cảm ơn chị," as if the woman had written an epiphany destined for us as her final act before unceremoniously croaking. She leaves, slimy notebook hugged against her chest, the only weight keeping her from fluttering away. It won't be long before she takes us into the next storm. Even whales have been known to carry dead calves on their heads for weeks in mourning.

What's an ocean to a Vietnamese mother with a dream?

In those quiet moments between whatever's left of Bà Oanh and me, I open the plastic sandwich bag and put a dome of Vietnamese sponge cake on her lap. She had a sweet tooth, so I'd

saved it just for her. The last of the freezer's frost has melted, making the crumps sloppy. It would've ruined the condensed milk she liked to dunk it in. I mumble a sorry, though I'm not sure for what. The way we barged in here, how I robbed her glasses? For my mom?

Here's the truth: my life went apocalyptic a whole two months before the hurricane swept through, when I lost my virginity in the famed shallows of Mercy Cove. Now more than ever, I can't look in a mirror. I am all the wrong shapes, skin flaking away to shell under prying fingers. My hair's as white as bleached coral, though for a time Mom made me dye it black. Now we just say it's stress-induced. She tells me these changes are from my imagination, but she puts me in thick sweaters and stiff jeans in this awful heat.

The taste of brackish water plagues my tongue as I linger at the door. On the dinghy, Mom hums and waves for me to hurry. My insides boil, which is unproductive because only one of us can be reckless at a time. Crying seagulls dive and snap up small fish breaking through the algae. I go to catch up with Mom.

Time bleeds this time of year, sun late into the day with skies like watered down raspberry tea. This season used to bring back crayon-scented memories full of composition books and leaking glue. It had the slickness of a paper cut: sharp and quick, then pressed with humidity under a cartoon-themed Band-Aid. Outside, everything is beautiful, all at the cusp of rotting. There are no cicadas, only buzzing wasps that squeeze into figs to lay their eggs. September is close, a month of new beginnings.

I glance back at Bà Oanh's cabin, a place I plan to never

return, at the sliver of inside still visible. Light glints off the dead woman's yellowed teeth, made sharper by the blood-tinged foam dribbling from her nose and mouth. As the door closes, she suddenly seems to be wearing a smile.