

CHAPTER 1

Stranded

“Cake comes; cake goes.”

(VIETNAMESE PROVERB)

IF YOU EVER GET THE CHANCE to become stranded in a foreign country with no money to get home, I recommend Vietnam. I say this because while you are boo-hooing and berating your rash decision to sell all your earthly belongings and move to this steamy hot Southeast Asian nation, like I did, you might pause long enough to ponder Vietnam’s own history of hardships: back-to-back wars, colonization, famines, and those seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries who couldn’t make heads or tails of the writing system, so with a haughty, ethnocentric sniff, replaced the ideograms with the Roman alphabet, thus rendering the classics unreadable to future generations. The Vietnamese are philosophical about struggle: Don’t look back; tomorrow will be better.

As I sat at the kitchen table in my sweltering, nine-foot-wide house in Ho Chi Minh City, my young Vietnamese teacher explained hardship this way: “Life *ee* like being on a boat and you have to drive you boat, but a *beeeg* ship go by you and make *beeeg* wave and you get trouble with you boat and you almost fall off boat. Then wave go back down and everything *ee* calm. But then

there *ee* nothing to do.”

I tried to decipher Tin Nguyen’s point. Did he really believe that life is dull without adversity? I knew he was trying to cheer me up. I’d been depressed lately about all that I’d lost in the Great Recession, though I hadn’t told him so specifically. Why say anything? I’d already obliterated all chances for sympathy just by flying to Vietnam. My neighbors needed only to apply a little inductive reasoning: “The Americans purchased airfare to Vietnam. It takes a lot of money to fly to Vietnam. Therefore, they have a lot of money.”

I knew that Tin, who was a born-again-and-again-and-again Buddhist, would be mystified by my Western worldview that the Joneses were viable opponents, that satisfaction with the hand life dealt was a character flaw, and that frequent spending was a lovely way to stave off the unhappiness that always threatened to engulf me if I thought or felt *too* deeply. In fact, the insidious cycle of always wanting more and more (which seems to be part and parcel of the American Dream), and then precariously tying those material possessions to my identity, had worn me down physically and emotionally. I hadn’t realized how exhausted I was until I’d lost it all. By the time I got to Vietnam, I nearly stumbled—wearing, worn, and whimpering—into the arms of my new neighbors, who smiled sweetly and intoned, “*Trời ơi. Thôi đừng có than nữa!*” I didn’t know what it meant, but I thanked them for their kindness. (Loosely translated: “Oh, for the love of God, stop complaining!”)

My attention shifted to a noisy fly that alternately attacked a basket of sweet, oozing mangoes on the table and the drops of moisture on my brow. Annoyed at the *zzzz*-ing around my face, I inadvertently swatted myself. My sweat glands shifted into overdrive and I felt a rivulet of water drip down my back, soaking the waistband of my skirt. It was only 10 a.m. and odor already wafted up from my armpits. *Holy crap, Vietnam is hot.*

Tin (pronounced Din), twenty-five years old and runway-model gorgeous, also focused on the fly. He stood up suddenly

and whapped it senseless in mid-flight. The obnoxious creature fell to the tile floor, its black, thread-thin legs curled up. Dead. *Wahoo!* Tin's quick reflexes astonished me. He normally moved like an astronaut out for a Sunday spacewalk. My gentle tutor, sliver-thin in his neatly pressed slacks and short-sleeved dress shirt, languidly sat back down and wagged one of his long, slender fingers at me. "*Ee* time to pay attention." I looked back at him. He flashed his straight, white teeth, framing them with a gentle smile. "You wasting *ow-ab* lesson time."

I was indeed. And for good reason. These Vietnamese lessons weren't going very well and I felt embarrassed. Unbeknownst to me up till now, I had the language facility of a Cheez Doodle. My husband, our eight-year-old son, and I had been living in Vietnam for more than a month already and I hadn't even mastered the alphabet. It wasn't so much the twenty-nine Roman letters, but the six tonal inflections that changed the sounds of those letters. If you raised your voice, lowered it, wiggled your voice box, or warbled like you were choking on a frog, the meaning of the word changed. Swallow too-hot coffee and you might well be in danger of telling your neighbor that his mother looks like a pork chop.

The language was only a small part of my adjustment to life in Vietnam. We were there to live cheaply, save up a bundle of money, and return home in a year. However, did that mean I was planning to morph into a Buddhist monk and renounce all comfort? Lord no! Such a concept didn't fit my red-blooded American sensibilities. Yet, on this little alley in a threadbare section of the city, we were indeed living that way.

When I grew up, my family stood several notches below the middle class, but at least we enjoyed hot water and 24/7 electricity, both missing from this skinny house. Instead we had legions of ants and cockroaches as big as rats (oh, dear God, those *were* rats). What cheapskate's dumb idea had it been to rent a house in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods? Okay, mine, but what choice had there been?

Now, sitting in our sultry front room (southern Vietnam being a measly ten degrees from the equator), I struggled to count to fifty in Vietnamese while dear, dear Tin, my unwitting mentor, listened with nothing less than the singular patience of a spider on its web waiting for pizza delivery. It was all too apparent that my head-on collision with the Great Recession had damaged the left side of my brain for language, the right side of my brain for attention span, and turned everything in between into marshmallow fluff.

Tin glanced up at me and noticed the constipated look on my face. He closed his notebook, reached over to close mine, and sat back. “Ms. Karin, tell me, why you come to Vietnam?”