

Chapter 1

The moment he saw her at Gail's party, Clarence Bankston experienced a burning sensation in his stomach—a visceral reaction to a past he'd rather forget. Six months removed from Vietnam, the last thing he needed was something or someone to remind him of the dreadfulness of that war. Yet, there she stood, possibly from Vietnam's Central Highlands because of her darker skin. At about 5'4", with shoulder-length black hair, and dressed in a blue silk tunic with white pants, she would have made a perfect model for *Vogue* magazine.

But as pleasing as she appeared, she was like a bad dream—the awful dream of a war that implants and hides in the back of the mind, then arouses at the slightest provocation. She represented the worst of his immediate past as the horror of Viet Cong guerillas relentlessly stalking his lost and emaciated squad in Cambodia reemerged.

As Bankston made the rounds, talking to people he knew, he observed her for almost a half-hour, like a mongoose would scrutinize a king cobra. Who was she? Why was she at this party? Who was she with?

Answers surfaced when she joined a gathering of women in the living room nearest to Bankston. He considered moving away, but Bankston's curiosity outweighed his aversion.

"Gail is my best manicurist. I don't know what I'd do without her," she said in a husky but sing-song voice to the group gathered around her.

She doesn't look to be any older than me, he thought. But she owns a shop? He sniffed. Bankston remained within listening distance, but physically removed, fearing if he got too close, he would go into some postwar-induced meltdown.

To his relief, most of her crowd moved to the family room to watch the Cleveland Browns play the New York Giants. To his chagrin, the rest, including her, drifted closer. As he picked up his drink to go to another area of the house, she turned toward him and smiled.

"Hi," she said, bowing slightly. "I am Ann Minh Bourdain."

"I'm...I'm Clarence, Clarence Bankston," he stuttered as words bumped into the emotions trying to swim upstream in his head. Eventually, he gained some composure and attempted to be the gentleman his parents would have approved of. "So, I understand you own a nail salon. How's business for you?"

She brightened. “It is very good, now. I am truly lucky.”

The other questions he wanted to ask got stuck in the lower part of his throat, so as the rest of the guests drifted into the family room, Bankston took a sip of his drink.

“Gail’s husband said you were in Vietnam?” She said it almost apologetically.

“Yeah.”

She seemed to read his mind, answering a question he hadn’t asked. “I left in 1969.”

Bankston rubbed his brow. “I left in ’69, too.” *But not entirely.*

Keep the conversation short and leave, he instructed himself. But the demure stranger with her hands folded and eyes cast downward, waiting, as if wanting to converse more, caused him to reconsider. *If she’s in the United States, she would not have been the enemy.* He gestured for her to sit.

“I took a boat to Laos, then the United States. I stayed in Manhattan with relatives until I made it to Cleveland.” Ann glanced at Bankston, whose eyes were fixated on the far wall. She looked down again. “I can leave if you are not comfortable talking to me.”

He turned, shaking his head. “It’s not you, the person; it’s what you represent.” He tried to put into words what his senses were screaming. “It’s the whole scene, you know? You go over there at eighteen, nineteen, just out of the house, should be at a party with your girlfriend, hanging out with your buddies, even in college...but instead, you are in hell—people you are trying to help wanting to kill you, guys around you dying, and the stink of death? It stays with you forever.”

Silence sat between them like a third person. “I’m sorry,” she finally said.

Bankston nodded.

They remained on the couch for several more minutes without speaking. “Whoooo! Go Browns!” someone cheered from the family room.

Ann glanced in the direction of the rooters. “You want to watch the game?”

“Naw. Too crowded.”

Ann played with her purse strap as she sat, still looking down. “Nor was it easy for us,” she said, speaking just above a whisper. “Having to fight the Japanese, the Chinese, and the French. They all treated us badly, especially the French—and then the Americans, South Vietnam’s allies...whole generations of families lost, dead. We lived with that same stink of death. We...I’m...I’m sorry.” She forced a smile. “Maybe we should have watched the Browns, too.”

Bankston cleared his throat. “Yeah. Probably.”

