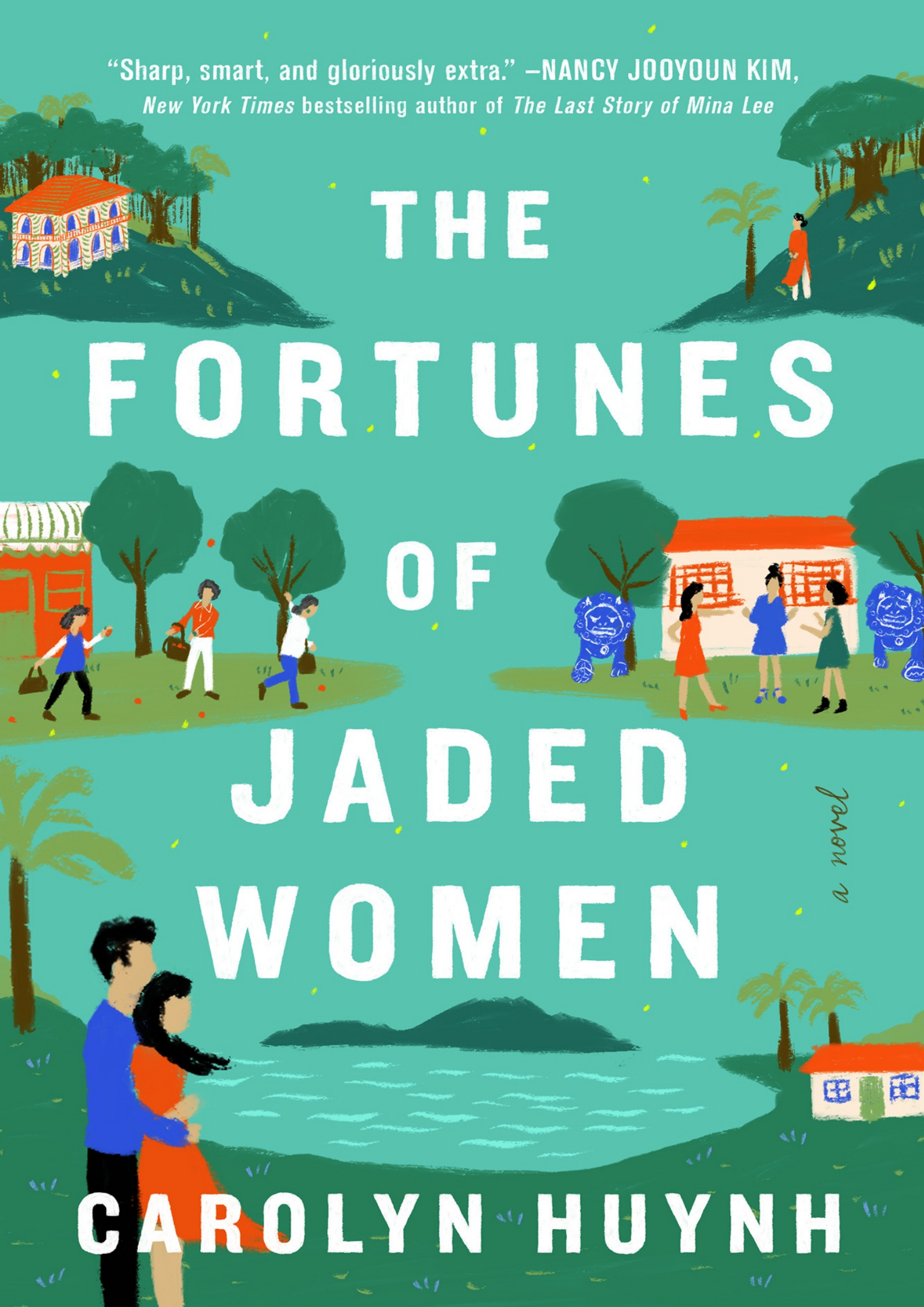


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THE  
FORTUNES  
OF  
JADED  
WOMEN

*a novel*

CAROLYN HUYNH

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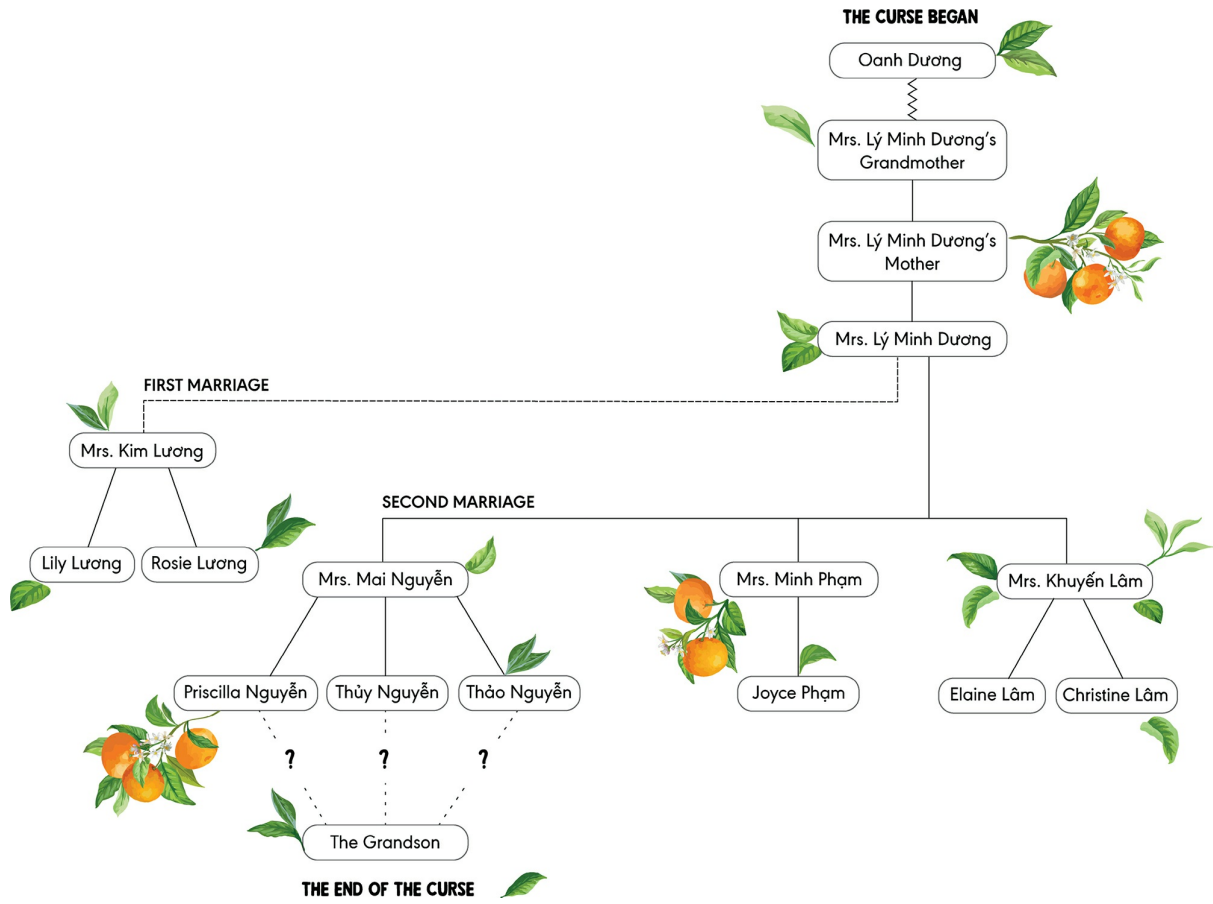
*a novel*

**CAROLYN HUYNH**

**ATRIA BOOKS**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For Me, for teaching me how to tell if it's real jade*



# 1

## Oanh Dương

EVERYONE IN ORANGE COUNTY'S Little Saigon knew the Dương sisters were cursed.

They heard that the curse began in Vietnam when Oanh Dương's ex-mother-in-law, Lan Hoàng, had gone north to visit the reclusive witch who lived in Sa Pa, at the foot of the Hoàng Liên Sơn mountains. The trip across the volatile terrain was treacherous; only truly diabolical souls who wanted to inflict generational curses on others would be able to survive. Like all slighted Vietnamese women, Lan Hoàng wished for the type of scarring that would make her wanton daughter-in-law and all her future kin ostracized forever. She just didn't know what that would look like.

The night Lan arrived at the quiet village, she was exhausted. The fickle weather had brought an onslaught of all four seasons within a few days, and she hadn't been as prepared as she thought. The rustling wind had been her enemy one day, and her friend the next. Thankfully, her hired guide had enough shearling to keep her warm for the final leg of her travels. She begged him to take her to see the witch immediately. The more time wasted, the closer Oanh would be to conceiving a child.

The guide dropped Lan off in front of the tiny, all-white stone home at the foot of the mountains, and wished her luck, though he wasn't sure if he meant it. The old man had taken many desperate women—mothers, daughters, and sisters—across the country to visit the witch, but he'd never once stepped foot inside. He knew better than to interrupt the flow of the universe. Only women were brave enough to tempt fate like that.

Like every other French colonial home that lined the dirt road, the house had stone pillars that held up the front, like Atlas holding up the weight of the world. Wild ivy wrapped all the way around them, mirroring hands that held a tight grip on all lost souls who entered. Though the exterior appeared welcoming, the inside looked as if light had never been able to find its way in, no matter how hard it tried.

Lan shivered, suddenly feeling nervous for the first time in her journey. She'd dreamt about this moment for months, and now that she was finally here, she was afraid. Afraid of what she would become if she went through with it. Would she still have a soul after? As she second-guessed her decision, the dilapidated wooden front door squeaked open, expelling a sinful pheromone, tempting Lan inside. The witch's face peeked out from the shadows, and she pushed the door further ajar and beckoned her. The woman was more petite than imagined, and she had a strangeness about her that Lan couldn't place. Though quite angular with her face structure, uncommon for Vietnamese people, the witch's beauty was enhanced by her dark hair that had grown wild every which way. Lan couldn't discern her age; every time she tried to guess, she felt like her eyes were deceiving her.

"You're late." The witch's voice had traces of irritation, but her impish eyes worried Lan the most. She couldn't read the intent behind them, but she could sense the greed, and it exacerbated her nerves. "Hurry up, you're letting the heat out." Lan didn't ask her how she knew she was coming. She didn't want to know more than she should because she was afraid of ghosts and spirits following her home. She was already testing the universe's patience by being there.

Lan timidly entered the house and followed the woman to the back room. Her nose crinkled at the pungent smell that cloaked the room. She spotted a man in the corner, his face hidden behind shadows and a cap. His age was also amorphous. He was busy pounding a gelatinous substance in his mortar. Behind him, stacked glass jars full of questionable liquids and dry herbs teetered back and forth, desperately trying to stay in rhythm with one another to avoid toppling over. He locked eyes with Lan as she passed him by. The bulbous veins on his hands came dangerously close to revealing his real age. She gulped down the bile in her throat, regret once again bubbling up.

“Snake heart,” the witch said, as if responding to Lan’s thoughts. “Makes men stronger. To produce more sons.”

The witch hurried Lan along, past the man, into the windowless back room, and motioned for her to sit on the floor pillows. She took her own place across the circular wooden table, heated up water, and set out some cups. The flimsy table between them was the only thing keeping the gates of hell from opening on Lan, and she prayed that the table would hold the barrier, just a little while longer.

“Why have you come?” the witch asked as she poured tea leaves into a cup, and gently drizzled hot water onto the leaves, allowing the aromatics to open up first.

“My daughter-in-law,” Lan said. “She has betrayed her duties. She left my oldest son, her husband, for another man. A *Cambodian* man no less. Claims that she’s in *love*. Foolish girl.” Lan uttered tut-tuts of heavy disapproval.

“You seek revenge then?”

“Well, no—” Lan stammered, unsure how to say it out loud. “I don’t want her *dead*—”

“There are plights worse than death.”

“Like what?” she asked nervously.

“Well, malaise can kill you slowly,” the witch said. She closed her eyes and allowed the currents to take over her body, so she could see all that was past, present, and what was to come. “Your daughter-in-law is pregnant.”

“I *knew* it. That whore. No wonder she left so quickly,” Lan seethed through her teeth. Suddenly, her nerves were gone, and she could only see her desire to see Oanh’s blood splattered all over this earth. She looked down at her own hands, saw what she was capable of, and it no longer terrified her. “I want her cursed, Auntie. Her and her bastard child.”

“It’s a boy,” the witch said, her eyes still closed. “She carries a son inside of her.”

“That should have been *my* grandson,” Lan cried out. “That wench doesn’t deserve to have love *and* produce a firstborn son. Vietnamese women aren’t allowed to have both.”

“Then tell me what it is that you want,” the witch said slyly, a hint of wickedness in her tone. “Believe it or not, I can’t read minds.”



“I curse Oanh Dương to wander the afterlife alone. Unable to visit her children when she passes. And I curse all her children’s children, and all those who follow, to never know love and marry poorly. And as a result, their husbands won’t invite Oanh to visit her ancestral altar,” Lan said without hesitation.

“I curse her and all the women in her family to never be able to come home.”

The witch opened her eyes quickly and stared deep into Lan’s as she soaked in her cruel desires. The ivy that wrapped around the outside pillars tightened its grip even further. They both acknowledged the weight of the curse and the significance behind it: Daughters were unable to invite their ancestors into the house without their husbands’ permission. And bad husbands only meant that ancestors would be forever blocked from entering.

“Then I curse Oanh Dương to only have daughters,” the witch said in a controlled voice. “Those daughters will grow into women, and when those women become mothers, they will only bear daughters. May each daughter carry the weight of their mothers’ sins and never escape the cycle.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” Lan whispered, fearful, yet relieved. She felt powerful in the moment, as if she had transcended the Buddha. Her vindictiveness scared her, but there was no going back now. “What will happen to the son growing inside of her now?”

“Like I said, there are things worse than death.”

• • •

A few months later, Oanh Dương suffered a miscarriage. She mourned the loss of what could have been, especially when she realized that she’d been carrying a son. Grief consumed her, but the yearning for motherhood called to her, so the new lovers tried again. This time she was fortunate to carry the baby to term. But when the midwife passed her newborn into Oanh’s arms, she had a look of pity on her face.

“You have a beautiful daughter,” the midwife said. “She has your eyes.”

At first, Oanh tried to mask her disappointment. *Not a son*. But when she looked into the eyes of her daughter, a new emotion surged through her. Her daughter was made entirely in her image. It was the strangest feeling. Staring down at her tiny face, Oanh was reminded of the possibilities and hardships

that came with a face like that. Ten little fingers, ten toes, a mop of black hair. And those eyes! So earnest and adventurous, willing to walk barefoot for miles and miles, all for love. Her husband, however, was vocal in his disappointment. His spine stiffened, and there was a hesitation before he finally agreed to hold his daughter in his arms. Oanh told him not to worry. She promised that they'd try again for a son, and that she'd keep going until she produced him an heir.

As the midwife eavesdropped on their conversation, her back turned to them, she knew that Oanh would never conceive a son. But she didn't have the heart to tell her. The midwife had seen curses like this manifest time and time again. Whenever miscarriages for sons happened, followed by the delivery of a firstborn daughter, a witch's work was at play. No shaman, monk, or traveling priest from the Philippines would be able to undo the spell inflicted on Oanh's lineage. All she could do was prepare herself for the type of generational heartbreak that came with daughters because after she passed on, she may never be able to go home.

Because there was nothing wrong with having Vietnamese daughters. It was how the world treated them that turned it into a curse.

# THE PREDICTIONS



## 2

### Mrs. Mai Nguyễn

THIRTY YEARS AGO, MAI Nguyễn first heard about the strange, petite Vietnamese woman who lived in the blindingly white, marbled mansion off the Kuhio Highway in Kauai. She heard about her through a friend, and this friend, Mrs. Đào, heard about the woman from Vivi Phạm, the gossip queen of Little Saigon, at one of her infamous karaoke parties. Of course, Vivi had heard from Annie Lau, who heard from *her* mother's best friend's auntie.

Kauai had a secret that only the matriarchs of these families knew about. The word-of-mouth tall tales of this woman had spread faster on the mainland than the whiff of a good discount sale or boasts about whose child got early admission into the college of their choice. Within the small village of the West Coast Asian diasporic scene, from Seattle down to Orange County, gossip was the only true currency that had weight—aside from gold bars, jade with 14-karat gold trimming, and other bits of jewelry that could be easily sewn into linings in times of war.

This woman was known as Auntie Hứa. For over fifty years, the locals would whisper about Auntie Hứa behind her back, too afraid of what she could possibly say to their faces. Could she predict death? Misfortune? Financial ruin? Ever since Auntie Hứa immigrated to Kauai in the seventies, the woman had been going around scaring the crap out of everyone, making off-the-cuff remarks that would send them all into a tailspin. Like that one time she walked into Biên's Bistro in Chinatown and told the owner, Biên, that he would have heart surgery soon. And he did. Though to this day, he's not sure if it was her prediction that kickstarted the heart murmurs. He didn't think to question her. Better safe than sorry when it came to dealing with psychics.

However, to the businessmen who paced in the tallest skyscrapers of Hong Kong, waiting to speak to her before making a final decision, or the aging real estate broker who flew in yearly from South Africa, or the young Instagram-famous backpacker on her spiritual journey, Auntie Hứa was known as Linh Hứa.

The famed Vietnamese psychic of Kauai.

Mrs. Nguyễn sat impatient, twirling her dark jade bracelet on her left wrist, calmed by its coolness. Her mother had taught her that you can tell if jade is real by how cool the stone feels against your skin.

The all-white waiting room that matched the exterior of the mansion had an eeriness to it, making it seem like she was in a psych ward. Mrs. Nguyễn distracted herself by observing the young receptionist, who was also wearing all white, filing her acrylics into a coffin shape. She felt a pang of jealousy at how youthful and pretty the receptionist was, and how her own hair used to be jet black and thick as rope, once upon a time. Mrs. Nguyễn reached up to flatten her thinning gray hair that had wisps of silver peeking out. She shifted her weight and crossed her legs, dangling off her worn penny loafers to allow her sticky feet to breathe a little—a brief respite from the hot Hawaiian sun.

As soon as the clock struck 10:00 a.m., everyone in the waiting room looked up, hopeful that the receptionist would call their name. But the receptionist called out for *Mai Nguyễn*. Mrs. Nguyễn got up rather smugly, putting her shoes back on. She clutched her fake Louis Vuitton bag, along with the two color-coded folders that had been sitting on her lap, and made her way toward the windowless back room.

A chorus of disappointed voices, with accents from all over the world, erupted. Their weary, traveler faces were heavy with jet lag and greasy from the Zippy's breakfast platter they got earlier.

“Blimey, how long are we supposed to wait for this godforsaken woman?”

“How is this woman harder to see than the pope?”

“Kondo wa itsu Auntie San ni aemasuka?”

“I just need five minutes with her! I only have one question! I'll pay extra!”

“Llevo aquí desde las cinco de la mañana!”

Mrs. Nguyễn openly smirked as she walked past them all. Amateurs. *Anyone* who is *anybody* knew that the psychic opened her appointment books only once a year, the day after Lunar New Year. Mrs. Nguyễn had kept the same

fixed appointment slot ever since her first visit, those ten some-odd years ago. She had decided to visit the psychic after her sisters and her mother all stopped talking to each other. The silence was bearable at first, but then her three daughters began to leave her, too, scattering to all corners of the world, despite her attempts to keep them close. The more she clawed, the more they pulled away.

Mrs. Nguyễn couldn't help but feel envy, watching her daughters forge their own paths in this world. She had never known what hers was, except what was expected of her: to be a dutiful daughter and mother. But when the ghosts of cackling, gossiping Vietnamese women began haunting her every time she walked past her kitchen, a gnawing pain grew, and she was overcome with a feverish desire to speak with another Vietnamese woman, just to chat about *anything*. That was when she flew in to see Auntie Hứa, a decision fueled by a dangerous mix of loneliness and curiosity to see if the rumors were true about the psychic. Ever since her first visit, she'd never once failed to attend her yearly pilgrimages.

"Chào Cô," Mrs. Nguyễn greeted Auntie Hứa as she entered the white room and quickly closed the door behind her, her smugness evaporating immediately within the woman's presence. Though they'd seen each other once a year for over ten years, they weren't exactly *friends*. Mrs. Nguyễn could never tell if the woman even remembered her. The woman saw so many faces, every day for decades, that it must all seem like a blur to her. Just a sea of heartbroken faces, seeking remedies and answers for things that had no earthly cure.

Auntie Hứa nodded silently in response behind her big, marbled desk, her heavy makeup cracking under the fluorescent bulb. Her face was caked with white powder, as if she were a vintage Hong Kong ad selling face cream. The makeup was done up so badly it seemed intentional, to trick observers, to disguise her real age.

In a show of faith that the woman recognized Mrs. Nguyễn as a repeat client, she took out a box of tissues. She gestured for Mrs. Nguyễn to sit across from her before pulling out a standard fifty-two-card deck of playing cards. Within the spades, hearts, clubs, and diamonds, Auntie Hứa was able to translate the language of the universe out of something so comically ordinary. Her delicate hands swiftly fanned out the cards in a half-moon shape, facing

up. Putting on a show to put guests at ease. As if they expected the woman to have some sort of physical object in front of her, a crystal ball, tarot cards, or I Ching sticks. Without looking down, the woman began speaking in Vietnamese.

“You haven’t been sleeping well these days,” she addressed Mrs. Mai Nguyễn of Garden Grove, Orange County, age sixty-five, the oldest of three sisters, and mother to three daughters. “Your wrinkles are getting worse, and the grays in your hair are multiplying quickly. At your age, you need to sleep more. Enjoy what is left of your life. Maybe try meditating every once in a while.”

“Trời ơi, how can I sleep, Auntie? I have demons knocking at my door every night,” Mrs. Nguyễn responded in Vietnamese. She felt her body preparing to unload everything that worried her. She *was* going to get her paid hour’s worth of information, even if she had to squeeze out every drop from every pore of the woman, shake down the angels, and corner the Devil herself.

“You still haven’t spoken to your sisters or your mother. It’s been over ten years,” the woman said, giving her a raised eyebrow. She seemed exasperated, once again, watching another client of hers not heeding any of her advice. Humans were stubborn, and Vietnamese women were the most stubborn of them all.

Mrs. Nguyễn scoffed. “I’ll speak to them *when* I get my apology.”

“Tsk, tsk.” The woman shook her head. “Careful, Chi, this might be the year you lose everything. Apologies don’t mean anything when it’s too late.”

Mrs. Nguyễn waved off her empty threat. “I’ve been cursed with three daughters. I suffer enough as it is.”

“We are all cursed, Chi, ever since we’ve been forced to leave our homeland.” The woman flipped over a few cards aimlessly. “Why don’t you try opening yourself up to love? There is a man willing to come into the role of your life partner. He’s a good man. Love *can* happen for you if you allow it.”

Mrs. Nguyễn looked confused, not registering what she had just said. *Love?* For *her*? Once Auntie’s words sank in, she howled with genuine laughter, and shook off the prediction like it was an annoying fruit fly. “If he’s kind, that means he’s *poor*. You think I have time for *love*? I’m too old. Besides, I already have an ex-husband who is deep in debt. I don’t need to add on another headache. Life is already full of suffering.”

Auntie Hứa opened her mouth to protest, but slowly closed it. Her face gave nothing away.

Mrs. Nguyễn then took out the two folders she brought in, and slid the bottom file across the desk. The woman opened the folder, and out fell three photos of women. Each one had a stapled photo of a man paired with it. The photos of the women were crystal clear, while the men's looked like Facebook profile photos that appeared on a web browser, were captured as grainy snapshots through an iPad camera, and *then* printed out.

Classic signs of a tech-illiterate Asian mother with a social media stalking mission.

“My love life is over. It never even began. Focus on my daughters' love lives instead of mine.”

Auntie picked up the first photo and focused on the face of a beautiful Vietnamese American woman in her mid-thirties, whose eyes seemed emptier than the usual heartbroken travelers she had been accustomed to seeing stumbling throughout the Hawaiian Islands. It was clear that this woman had been born with sad eyes.

“Your oldest daughter.”

“Yes, Priscilla.”

“She works with computers. She's done well for herself in this life, and will continue to do so into the next life as well,” the woman observed. She felt Priscilla's hands at a keyboard, coding away late at night. She could also feel Priscilla's early-onset arthritis setting in around age fifty, but refrained from saying it. She might be psychic, but she wasn't suicidal.

“Priscilla made her first million at the age of twenty-five,” Mrs. Nguyễn said proudly. She raised her voice louder, just in case the woman didn't hear her properly. “A *million* dollars, Auntie!” She never stopped bragging about her children, despite all the stress they caused her over the years. It was innate in her, like a wild beast in the forest stalking their prey. “Priscilla *just* bought a house next to MacKenzie Scott, Jeff Bezos's ex-wife in Seattle. You know Jeff *BEZOS*? The *BALD* one? I paid for all her school in cash—all *CASH!* UCLA! Wharton! She came out debt free, thanks to *me*, but really—”

As Mrs. Nguyễn kept warbling on and on about her oldest daughter's perfect, shiny résumé, the woman paid no attention to her and continued staring at the photo, feeling very sorry for the woman with the empty eyes.



Priscilla Nguyễn didn't know who she was. Auntie Hứa was used to all the Asian mothers who came before her, boasting about their children, but the mothers never seemed to learn their lessons, no matter what she told them. The woman closed her eyes and gave permission to the spirits to use her body as their vessel. Mrs. Nguyễn's voice was soon nothing more than a distant haze, and the woman was instantly transported into a memory. She saw a young Mai Nguyễn, pregnant with what seemed to be her third child. They were in a house, a bit dilapidated, each room packed to the brim with babies, and several other Vietnamese families, crammed into a tiny shared space. The woman guessed that the other two young mothers were the younger sisters of Mai Nguyễn, who also seemed to have their own baby girls. Outside the window on the second floor, a towering kumquat tree stood next to a bountiful orange tree, both groaning with the weight of all the plump fruit they had produced. Though the outside looked idyllic, the inside of the house was far from the promise of the American dream.

"Never marry a Vietnamese man!" Mai screamed as she threw an empty glass bottle at her husband, and she turned to her two young daughters, who cowered in fear, unsure of which parent to fear more. One of those crying little girls was a young Priscilla. "You should marry French men. Make half-Asian babies who will grow up to be beautiful. Never marry a man like your father!" She grabbed each of her two girls' hands and pulled them closer, her breath searing their skins with her warning. "Never, *ever* get married to a poor man."

The woman was instantly carried back to the present, leaving behind the memory of a young, pregnant Mai and her two daughters. As the clouds in Auntie's eyes disappeared, Mrs. Nguyễn's voice broke through the fog. She had moved on to boasting about her other two children. "—and Thủy, my second oldest, she's John Cho's dermatologist in Beverly Hills! You know *JOHN CHO*, Auntie? I wonder how much he makes a year. Oh, and my youngest daughter, Thảo, graduated with her MBA from Harvard and already has opened up her own clothing line in Vietnam. I'm worried she's partying too much in Sài Gòn—"

The woman lifted her hand to silence Mrs. Nguyễn, as a headache pierced through her suddenly. She always got migraines when she was transported into memories, especially the kind of memories that reminded her of the lasting hardships of the diaspora. Though this wasn't the darkest memory she had seen

in her lifetime, it still made her ill, because in those moments, she was Mai Nguyễn, and Mai Nguyễn was her. Two Vietnamese women who were still enduring, who were battling a different kind of war, despite surviving one. But now she couldn't tell if her headache was caused by Mrs. Nguyễn's shrill voice. She rubbed her left temple gently before beginning.

"The man attached to your oldest daughter"—she flipped to the photo of a redheaded, freckled man stapled to the back of Priscilla's photo and shook her head—"Bad man, bad love. He does not care for what is behind her eyes, only for the way her eyes are shaped. He only desires Asian women. Your daughter lives in sadness; she makes decisions based on her sadness. Like you did, when you were young." Before Mrs. Nguyễn could protest, the woman flipped to the photo of Thủy, the second-oldest daughter, and to the photo of the man next to hers, who was Vietnamese American. "He loves her, maybe too much. I do not know if she loves him back the same. She is the most responsible daughter, out of the three, but the one that lives without joy. This year, she will try to find that joy." Then she flipped to the third photo of the youngest daughter, Thảo, and stapled to the back of her photo was a photo of a young man who was covered in tattoos. They seemed to be partying together on a rooftop in Sài Gòn, and she laughed off this photo. "This man is nothing. He'll always be gone by sunrise. Not serious. She is not serious about life, either, but she wants to be. A man will soon enter her life, and she will want to be serious about life because of him. Be careful, Chi, she is the most selfish daughter, and she keeps to herself. Secrets surround her. But she will grow to be your wealthiest daughter."

Mrs. Nguyễn started tearing up. "Do you think my daughters are all unhappy?" she whispered, scared to hear the answer out loud.

"Yes, Chi," the woman responded firmly. "Your whole family has sad eyes. Your daughters, your sisters, and your mother. Especially your mother. You all have been fighting for too long. Fight over everything. The house, money, who deserves what, who owes what, what to do, what not to do."

"I don't know how to fix them. I've never known."

"That's because you are the unhappiest out of all of them."

Mrs. Nguyễn pushed her feet out of her loafers, digging them into the velvet plush carpet, hoping a black hole would open up so she could disappear into it forever. She suddenly felt very tired. Tired and guilty. Was she a bad mother?

She thought about her own marriage in the moment, and how it had been a marriage of convenience between two immigrants who couldn't speak English.

It had always been about survival for Mai. Love and romance were reserved for the privileged.

"They're not going to marry *these* men, though, right? *Right, Auntie?*" Mrs. Nguyễn asked, her Asian motherly instincts kicking in. Even if the whole world thought she was a bad mother, she had to keep going. She couldn't allow her daughters to end up like her. Bad husbands would eternally trap them behind their sad eyes. She tapped at the photo of her second-oldest daughter and her boyfriend, Andy. "That man makes sixty thousand dollars a year! Sixty thousand dollars! Do you think *John Cho* makes sixty thousand dollars a year? Why on earth would he choose to go to Stanford then if he was just going to end up helping *children* for *free*? How can he possibly afford to pay California property taxes on that salary!"

The woman sighed heavily, watching Mrs. Nguyễn shift back into meltdown mode, for the tenth year in a row. She continued to rant about how these men in her daughters' lives were a threat to her empire—like a single flick to a domino that would lead to an irreversible cascading effect. Mrs. Nguyễn droned on and on about how she was about to reach retirement, had suffered through menopause silently like the typical south Vietnamese woman that she was, and was in no mood to adjust her will one day to include any of her daughters' unfortunate love interests, all of whom she *affectionately* referred to as chó. (Dogs. She was calling them dogs.)

"Chi, I really don't think this man is as bad as you say—" the woman tried to interject.

"And *look* at Priscilla's boyfriend!" Mrs. Nguyễn hissed back at her, continuing on, as she grabbed the tissue box that had been placed out earlier. "A người da trắng! You know how white men are! Do you know how many Asian women there are on this planet? He's just going to go around, sleeping with all of them! And don't *even* get me started on Thảo. She is probably sleeping with every man in Sài Gòn. White, Black, British, Korean, Australian, German, who knows what scene she hangs out with, always talking about expats and business! She's chowing down on the whole United Nations buffet over there!"

The woman waited patiently for Mrs. Nguyễn to run out of breath. When she finally calmed down, the fear and anxiety exposed themselves through her motherly eyes, and Auntie Hứa was finally able to speak. “What is it that you really want to know, Chi?”

Mrs. Nguyễn sniffled through her tears and dabbed her eyes. “I just want to know that if I were to die tomorrow, would my daughters be okay? Will they be loved for who they are? Will they have children one day? Will they be financially okay? Will I be able to rest peacefully in the next life because *they* are at peace? Will I be able to come visit them at my ancestral altar because they married well?”

The woman, in a moment of tenderness, reached over the table and took Mrs. Nguyễn’s fragile hand into hers. “You need to let life unfold as it is meant to.”

“So, what? Just *relax*? Allow them to marry these hideous toads?” Mrs. Nguyễn asked, her pitch rising an octave, like a small child asking their parents if they could have something sweet before dinner.

The psychic closed her eyes again, giving permission to allow the currents to flow through her body. She hummed along as best as she could, waiting to see, to receive, and to be. And she saw it all. She saw the lives of all these women unfold before her, for the next year and more. Every thread that linked together, weaving their stories, their heartbreak, their grief, their future husbands, their future children. She saw it all—including Mrs. Nguyễn’s future. When she opened her eyes, there was the faintest trace of a smirk.

“Like I said earlier, Chi. This is the year where if you are not careful, you could stand to lose it all. There will be one pregnancy, one funeral, and one marriage. A complete turn around the sun by the next Lunar year. But you must fix your relationship with everyone. And I mean *everyone* in your family. Starting with your daughters.”

Mrs. Nguyễn almost fainted out of her chair when she heard this, but the woman quickly jumped up, reached over the table, and steadied her, surprisingly spry despite her untraceable age. “Trời ơi. You’re telling me that one of them will get *married*? And one will get *pregnant*? Will the death be mine because I died from heartbreak witnessing this?” Mrs. Nguyễn whispered, her mind spiraling.