

Chapter 1

The sky was as clear as glass, with not even one puff of cloud daring to stand in the way of the sunlight. Summer arrived early in that year of 1979. It was only the beginning of March, but already the wind blew gusts of oppressive heat that impeded breathing while stripping the old shriveled and abandoned tree of its parched leaves sending them cascading down onto a dry and dusty pasture.

The land was too barren to be anyone's domicile, but thousands of people had lived there and called it home. Deep down they still clung to the hope that the situation would be temporary, but it had been several years after the war now, and they were still living on this very same piece of land while the sense of transitory moment dried up and shriveled like the parched grass on the arid ground around them.

A man with a commanding presence stood in front of a canvas tent encrusted with red dust. Rivulets of perspiration ran from his forehead down his dark, rough face. Wrinkles and crow's feet aplenty attested to the years of a life lived to the full. A gust of wind scooped up a swirl of dust that buffeted his skin before settling back down, its energy spent. A few boys were running around in the scorching sun laughing and shouting in a language which was not Thai. These children were not in school. There were no classrooms for them, no teachers to guide them. They only had their native survival instinct and whatever remnants of boyish spirit they had managed to maintain. He felt deeply saddened but kept his melancholy in check. Decades of taking all kinds of heat from every geographical region had taught the man to let things go. There were just too many evil things in the world for him to be concerned about all of them. Letting go did not actually deaden his sensitivity towards the cruelties this world was capable of dishing out, but it helped to contain the anguish. Justice was not life's natural shadow.

This refugee camp had been in operation since after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. Like ants dispersing from a smashed nest, millions of South Vietnamese attempted to flee for their lives out of their country. And when Laos and Cambodia were painted equally red, refugees in their hundreds of thousands crashed like waves into the nearest country, which was Thailand, known since ancient times to be accommodating to those seeking shelter in troubled times. But not all refugees were met with the blessing of compassion.

It was not Thailand's policy to allow refugees to become permanent residents. Their entry into the country was sanctioned for humanitarian reasons. It was estimated that there were four or five hundred thousand refugees consisting of Khmer, Laotian, and Vietnamese spread out in camps set up along a series of border districts such as Khao Saming, Khao I-Dang, Koh Proed and Chantaburi.

A torn page from a newspaper wafted by the wind came to rest in front of him. On its page was last month's news about General Kriangsak Chamanan, the Prime Minister, known as The Eagle of Bangkhen Meadow, when he announced that general election would take place on April 22, 1979. This would have been the first general election after the bloody incident of October 6, 1976 that had brought on its wake another coup d'état and three rebellions. But political manoeuvrings in Parliament were not the only changes Thailand had to face. Factors from outside the country had exerted their influences as well, not the least of which was the continued presence of communism in Thailand, the very reason why he now found himself here on this patch of land right at the border.

A young man walked up to him and said in a low voice, "Sir, that woman is now in the tent."

He nodded, and murmured, "Thank you, Wichu."

He followed Wichu into the tent. A serious and hard-working young man, Wichu Suwannai, a facilitator attached to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] had been a great help to him.

Waiting to meet him in the tent was a woman who stood there with some composure. She was around thirty-five, quietly pretty. Her face was pale and drawn and she looked rather bedraggled. The old t-shirt she wore had probably not been laundered for months.

She *waied** him humbly and he returned the gesture.

"You are Tran Hui Anh?"

She nodded and coughed softly.

"Yes, I am."

"My name is Tui Pankem. I work for the government of Thailand. Are you the wife of Commander Tran Van Dong?"

"Yes, I am."

"It would seem that I have come to the right place."

He asked her to have a seat on an old plastic chair with UNHCR stenciled on its back. Wichu Suwannai asked him softly, "Will you be needing anything else, sir?"

* *a gesture of respect performed with palms clasped, raised to chest level, head bent towards it*

“Not for now. Please carry on with your work. I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

Wichu Suwannai left the tent while Tran Hui Anh lowered herself with deliberate care onto the chair, as if she was a student appearing before a headmaster. There was no spark of a child’s lively curiosity in her eyes, however. In fact, it looked as if she inhabited a body still capable of functioning albeit without a soul.

But then was there anybody here who still possessed a soul? Maybe it was this introspection that inspired him, normally taciturn, to engage her in a conversation.

“How long have you been here?”

“It’s been one year.”

“What’s it like in this camp?”

“It’s not great.”

“You are not ill, are you?”

“Oh, nothing serious. The officials here look after us as well as they could.”

“Your Thai is very good.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Please. Just call me ‘Khun’.”

“When I was young, my family traded with Thai people. I learned the language then.”

“You must be wondering why I wanted to see you.”

She met his eyes, saying nothing.

“I understand that your husband, Commander Tran Van Dong, used to work for Nguyen Cao Ky, the former President of South Vietnam, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“I am looking for your husband.”

She was silent for just a short while.

“What do you want with him?”

“Nguyen Cao Ky has requested the assistance of the Thai government to locate your husband. He was supposed to leave South Vietnam with his boss, but he failed to show up at their rendezvous.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know why?”

She answered calmly, “Because he is dead.”

He was taken aback.

“Dead? When? How?”

“Four years ago. On April 30.”

“The day Saigon fell?”

“Yes.”

Four years ago. The day Saigon fell. Had it been four years already? Time had flown.

The Vietnam War had erupted on November 1, 1955 and ended on April 30, 1975. It had been in the making long before that, however. Its roots lay deep, beginning with the French occupation of Indochina that encompassed Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Ho Chi Minh led his Viet Minh army against France and succeeded in gaining independence after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Like a sharp blade, the subsequent Geneva Accords cut Vietnam into two halves at the 17th Parallel North. With 99% ‘unanimous’ votes, Ho Chi Minh’s communist regime ruled the northern half, while in the south, Ngo Dinh Diem also claimed a ‘unanimous’ 98.2% of votes in a heavily rigged election that propelled him into the first Presidency of the Republic of Vietnam to be governed by a liberal regime. A new country rife with corruption from day one.

The terms of the Geneva Accords allowed civilians to move about freely between the Northern and the Southern parts of the country for 300 days to decide their eventual permanent domicile. After which an election was to be held in 1956 to establish a unified country.

North Vietnam had no intention of awaiting any divine decree. For Ho Chi Minh, the election was immaterial. He had his own agenda. In 1955, he created the Vietnamese Fatherland Front in order to advance North Vietnam’s own objective of unification with communism.

With both the United States and South Vietnam refusing to sign the Accords, the planned unification election never took place. Instead, armed conflict started right away between the North and the South. Around one hundred thousand South Vietnamese communists migrated to the North. This group was called ‘revolutionary regroupées’. Another ten thousand members of the communist cadres remained in South Vietnam to carry out orders to conduct political activities and agitation. Northern aggression moved relentlessly southward in traditional warfare confrontation, in guerilla tactics, and in seeking destruction by infiltration.

In 1960, Ho Chi Minh organised military-training for the regroupées and had them join up with the Viet Cong to form the National Liberation Front, whose aim was to extricate South Vietnam from liberalism using propaganda techniques that instilled the concept of communism in new devotees and by infiltration into small villages, a strategy used by the

Chinese communists to convert the villages that surrounded urban centres.

North Vietnam's advances into the South became more and more aggressive, swallowing up chunks of South Vietnam, and even attacking US battleships resulting in retaliation that brought US troops into North Vietnam.

After fifteen years of involvement in the Vietnam War, with more and more soldiers being sent to fight in Vietnam, the American public grew tired of the whole thing, seeing no benefit at all in interfering in the politics of Indochina. Images of dead and wounded American soldiers which were the daily fare on television became a game changer. Anti-war protests began to spread. When Gerald Ford replaced Richard Nixon, ousted by the Watergate scandal, the US Congress finally cut the aid budget to South Vietnam and started the gradual withdrawal of troops.

The Vietnam War would have been prolonged for several more years had it not been for a series of attacks by North Vietnam during 1973-74 which succeeded beyond expectation, thus encouraging the North to redouble their efforts. By then resistance had weakened even further. The battle of Phouc Long province which commenced on December 13, 1974 and ended with the capture of Phouc Binh town on January 6, 1975, was a decisive victory for North Vietnam. President Gerald Ford's petition for aid to South Vietnam was turned down by Congress, sapping morale in South Vietnam, and plunging it into deeper gloom.

In actual fact, at that point in time, the South Vietnamese army significantly outstripped the North in almost every aspect: twice the number of tanks, 1,400 fighter planes, for instance. But the fighting spirit was lacking. On top of that, the then escalating oil price had crippled a large number of war vehicles. The most damaging effect though, was the clear signal of American abandonment that sent morale into a nosedive. Soldiers had lost the will to fight, seeing omens of defeat everywhere.

On March 10, 1975 the Northern army moved into the Central Highlands with tanks and heavy artillery zeroing in on Ban Me Thout, Dak Lak province which they captured in just one day. This comparatively easy victory was a great surprise to both the winners and the losers. The South was alarmed at how fast the battle was lost, and the North at how weak the South had become. For the North, the crucial moment had come for the kill.

Ahead of the advancing Northern army was the people in chaos. Military personnel and civilians alike, all were scrambling to flee the invasion. On March 20, President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered a last stand to the death at Hue, the third largest city in South Vietnam, but by March 22, the

whole city had begun to evacuate in order to escape the heavy onslaughts. Airports and harbours were choked with crowds of people fleeing for their lives, some even jumped into the sea to swim out to waiting boats.

Adopting the “Leave the North, save the South” strategy, President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered a retreat which quickly turned into a rout. Soldiers abandoned their posts, leaving the country to face a doomsday scenario.

On March 25, Hue fell, followed by Da Nang on March 30. One hundred thousand soldiers of the South Vietnamese army surrendered.

But this did not stop the North, whose ultimate aim was to capture Saigon, the heart of the South, and the deadline was to be before November 1 to avoid running into the monsoon season, and also to give the South as little time as possible to prepare a defence. Steadily and confidently, the Northern Army moved towards the South Vietnamese capital city, taking smaller towns on the way, one after another. The Southern soldiers now fought with a ferocity grounded in the knowledge that defeat meant the end of everything.

On April 21, President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned, cursing America for its betrayal of South Vietnam, and passed the baton to Vice President Tran Van Huong.

On April 23, President Gerald Ford announced that the Vietnam War had ended. Two days later, the former leader of South Vietnam flew out to Taiwan seeking asylum, leaving only thirty thousand troops to defend the country. Tran Van Huong hung on to his presidency for only one week before resigning once attempts at peace talk with the North had failed. The South Vietnam council next appointed as President Duong Van Minh or Big Minh, the general with known connections to the North. With a younger brother a general in the Northern army, the council believed that Big Minh could bring the North to the negotiating table. But at that very moment, the North was not interested in peace. Their vision was “A beautiful victory”. Tanks on the streets of Saigon made for a much more powerful image than the signing of any peace treaty and would also serve as a slap in the face of America and all other nations that supported the enemies of North Vietnam.

All hell then broke loose. The fear of communist vengeance and a killing spree sent people into a panic to leave the country. The South Vietnamese government put martial law into effect, but it made no impression on anyone at all. Everyone in the south, soldiers included, were hell bent on escape. The soldiers were particularly desperate, as their options were flee, surrender or suicide. Indeed, there were certain units who did

take the latter option.

At the beginning of March, leaving Saigon by air through Tan Son Ngat airport was still possible. But the Northern Air Force put a stop to it with heavy air raids starting on April 28. The fleeing multitudes had to resort to helicopters. Saigon mist shrouded weather made this method unsafe, however, with visibility of only one mile.

The American Embassy became the focal point for evacuations. Beginning on the morning of April 29, tens of thousands of people began to congregate there hoping to catch a ride out. Priority was given to Embassy staff, after which transport was extended to the common people. This operation however lasted only until the next day, April 30, leaving a great number stranded. These abandoned masses decided that they had to help themselves by finding whatever possible way to get out of the country. Rumour was widespread that all Southern men would be killed, and the women raped. Seaward seemed, at that moment, to be the best option. Unending streams of people thronged the seafronts to get on all manner of boat heading into international waters, by sails, or by motors, on small family crafts, tightly packed among hundreds in bigger boats, even on homemade rafts. Some chose to travel by cars to Da Nang, about a thousand kilometres from Saigon, equipped with false documents, hoping to catch a fishing boat out.

The images of people scrambling over each other to get on an American helicopter to flee for their lives shocked the world. Tui Pankem, watching the event closely, prayed that the same thing would never happen in his own birthland. The final scene was on April 30, 1975 when T-54 tanks of the Northern army crashed through the gates of South Vietnam's government house and trundled their way in. Before long, the North Vietnamese flag was seen fluttering over the land of the South. The victors celebrated, the losers scattered to leave the country like ants from a smashed nest.

Tran Hui Anh continued with her account, "We fled from Saigon at the last minute. We knew that we would be among the first targets when the North captured the city. My husband would not escape execution. He was high ranking enough to have troops under his command..."

"How did you escape?"

"We'd planned for all eventual emergencies. My husband said we could follow General Nguyen Cao Ky to take refuge in America. At first, we planned on flying out, but the airport had been under heavy attack from air raids by the North ever since April 28, cutting off that route completely.

Our contingency plan was to get on a boat before the city fell. My husband had foreseen the fall of Saigon months before and had secured a boat to transport military families. The captain of the boat was a soldier, a close friend of my husband's, and the boat was docked at a secret military facility. We were told to bring only the absolute necessities in one suitcase each. The boat was packed with wooden crates containing weapons. Twenty of us boarded the boat, all of us military families..."

She'd never stopped coughing and was looking even paler.

"Are you ill?"

"I'm alright. It's very hot here with constant heavy downpours. A lot of people got ill."

He handed her a glass of water from which she took a sip before continuing.

"Early on the morning of April 30, North Vietnam's 324 unit moved in to capture Saigon and by midday the President and all his advisors were under arrest. In the afternoon, we heard the radio broadcast by President Dzung Van Minh announcing the dissolution of the South Vietnamese government, leaving the people of South Vietnam with not a shred of hope. We knew we had no other choice but to flee..."

"The fact of the matter is, for a long while now, I had been trying to persuade my husband to take our family out of the country. Things had been looking bad. And it was my belief that should the North succeed in conquering the South, among the first to be executed would be soldiers like him. But all along, he had hesitated, reluctant to abandon his country. He said as a soldier his duty was to protect the country, and how would he be able to live with himself if he were to commit this act of treachery. Moreover, he remained convinced that North Vietnam would never defeat a US backed South Vietnam. By the time he realised his mistake, it was almost too late. By then escape from Vietnam had become several times more difficult and cost a lot more money. We were lucky to be able to make use of a military transport boat..."

"I sold everything valuable to get enough money for food and other necessities, with some leftover for an unforeseen future. What was left I converted to gold necklaces hidden in the seams of specially constructed bags..."

"That night we all went to the pier where the boat was to leave from under cover of the dark night. I had my mother with me, carrying a suitcase each. Before we were to go on board, my husband told me that he had something important to do back at headquarters and would join us later. When we arrived, the pier was deserted except for our party, everybody

else had already gone. By nine, when we had all boarded the boat, there was still no sign of my husband.”

“Why did he go back to headquarters?”

“He told me that he still had one duty to perform for the country. I believed that he just couldn’t be reconciled with the fact that his country was being destroyed right in front of his eye. That was why he went...”

Tran Hui Anh took a short pause.

“That was my husband. He was totally devoted to his country. He was shot down once in the North and was imprisoned and tortured horrendously for a year. He managed to escape and reported back to work as if nothing had happened. He found the idea of surrendering very hard to take. That’s why he went back to fight...”

“Everybody on the boat wanted the captain to cast off. The Northern army had already entered the city and they were all deeply stressed. But the captain hesitated because he was a very close friend of my husband’s. His name was Pham Minh Tri. He said to me, ‘Your husband told me that if he failed to show up on time, I should just go.’ Pham Minh Tri told me that there was no use waiting any longer, that he must take off. I said I would never leave without my husband. I said I would go ashore to look for him myself. He saw how determined I was, and finally said, ‘I’ll go after him.’...”

“It was then ten o’clock, and all was dark and quiet around there. Before Pham Minh Tri could climb up to the pier however, I saw someone running towards the boat. It was my husband. We heard two gunshots that hit my husband sending him crashing down onto the ground. I was startled as was everybody on the boat. Pham Minh Tri ordered his crew to fire up the engine right away. I said I must go to my husband, but they wouldn’t let me. They clung on to me while the boat left the pier in a great hurry...”

A big bout of coughing stopped her. She refused a sip of water that he offered.

“I knew that he was dead. I didn’t want to live. I wanted to jump into the sea and end it all, but I had my old and helpless mother to think of.”

“Your children?”

“My husband and I had no children.”

“Is your mother living in this camp with you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“My mother is dead. She died on that trip...”

The atmosphere became tangibly oppressive. Tui Pankem felt like there was a mountain weighing down his shoulders.

"I couldn't believe that my husband would be so easily killed seeing that he was packed full of metal amulets."

"Metal amulets? Do you mean a sort of talisman?"

"Yes, he carried them with him. He had got hold of them after that time when his helicopter was shot down over North Vietnam. He said flying with amulets was a guarantee that the anti-aircraft barrage would miss him. He knew of many helicopters that never sustained even a scratch all through the war. But those amulets did not save his life."

"I know that your husband had worked for General Nguyen Cao Ky for a very long time."

"That's right. He served the General for ten years. The General loved and trusted him completely. Our two families were very close, and we met often."

"In that case, why did your husband not go with General Nguyen Cao Ky in his helicopter?"

"The General was giving passage to so many subordinates, all with families. The helicopter which was to ferry us to the designated US battleship couldn't carry all of us. It would have been more expeditious to go by boat. We were to rendezvous at the command ship USS Blue Ridge out on international waters."

"So why was it that you had never made it to the Blue Ridge after you left Saigon?"

"The captain got us to the rendezvous location, but we were too late. He decided to head for the Thai coast, and before we knew it, we found ourselves in the Gulf of Siam. So we decided to go to Songkhla."

"On the third morning, we saw two boats approaching us. The first one was a very rapid boat which managed to position itself to block us. The people on the boat were carrying Makarov pistols and AK assault rifles. They let off several volleys into the sky, and many of them aimed their guns at us signalling us to stop. They boarded our boat, ordered us to relieve ourselves of our valuable items, to leave them and all our luggage on board. There was no doubt that they were pirates. I heard a couple of them conversing in Thai, so I knew that they were Thai pirates..."

"How many of them were there?"

"Six."

"You said just now that they were using Makarov pistols and AK