

CHAPTER ONE



In the gloom of the dusty temple, Tinh bowed to the Buddha. Three times he knelt, touching his forehead to the grass mat. Then he stood with his palms joined in front of his heart, regarding the statue: reddish copper beneath the layer of grime.

The Buddha's right hand rested in his lap, close to the earth, while the other was raised in the mudra for peace. The Buddha, with his full

cheeks and almond eyes, looked something like Ba, Tinh's father.

Tinh's cousins—Trang Ton, Dong, and Anh—also bowed, not so quickly that the adults would make them prostrate again, but with no time wasted. They longed to get outside before the monk began his long talk.

Several side altars were laden with vases of sweet jasmine and offerings of globular green guavas and waxy star fruit.

One altar, half-hidden by the donation box, displayed photographs of the village ancestors, including Tinh's grandparents—Ong Noi and Banoi. Tinh's gaze lingered on the small faces in the black-and-white photos. Both grandparents had died not long ago, and Tinh missed them.

Tinh looked out at the temple courtyard shining with morning sunlight. His cousins would soon head for the open field beyond.

Trang Ton had just gotten a new soccer ball from his rich uncle in America.

Yet when Tinh's cousins finished bowing, he didn't follow them, but settled himself onto the floor beside Ba and Ma.

The monks and nuns, with their shaved heads and loose brown robes, waited cross-legged at the front of the temple. A very old monk sat in the middle.

From outside, Tinh heard the shouts of the little kids fighting their mock battles, using long stems cut from elephant-ear plants and soft old coconut husks that they tossed from behind the temple walls.

Lifting a wooden baton, a nun invited the temple bell, a large ceramic bowl. The bell vibrated in low, penetrating tones.

Each week Tinh waited for this moment when the world and his heart settled.

Even the little soldiers outside silenced their shouts. After the nun invited the bell twice more, women raised their palm-leaf fans, waving them gently.

The monks and nuns started their chant: “*In the precious presence of the Buddha, fragrant with sandalwood incense, we recognize our errors and begin anew. . . .*”

The words entered Tinh like soft rain.

“*The raft of the Buddha carries us over the ocean of sorrows. . . .*”

Tinh sighed, the knots inside him relaxing.

When the chanting stilled, the old monk began his talk: “Today I offer you a handful of diamonds. Not one diamond, but a handful.”

Expecting to see real jewels, Tinh looked up. But the monk opened his hand to reveal nothing.

“You may think we have little in our village,” the monk continued. “You may think

that we should be sad to be so poor. But we have the sun.” He pointed overhead. “And the moon, the source of all poetry.” He pointed upward again.

As the monk talked, Tinh studied pictures depicting the life of the Buddha. The scenes were painted on the eastern wall: the Buddha as a baby taking his seven famous steps, a lotus blooming in each footprint. The Buddha as a young prince. The Buddha reaching enlightenment under the bodhi tree with its green-heart leaves.

“You have the diamond of your mother. Even if your mother has passed away, you have her within you. You have the diamond of your father. . . .”

The monk’s voice was like the ocean at low tide. Tinh shut his eyes and let the words paint pictures in his head.

“The sea full of fish, the fresh winds, the breath flowing in and out of your body—all these things are beautiful diamonds in your life, shining day and night. The Buddha offers you these diamonds of true happiness. . . .”

“Go look after your sister,” Ma whispered. She leaned over Tinh, her long bangs grazing his forehead.

“*Now?*”

“I’m afraid she’ll be bullied. Or she might get hurt,” Ma insisted.

Tinh got up and stepped out of the temple, blinking in the bright light.

“Where have you been?” asked his little sister, Lan. Her legs were thin below her too-short dress.

“I stayed for the talk.”

Lan wrinkled her nose. “Make me a kite,”

she said. She held out two pieces of bamboo and some pink paper, a bit of string, and a bottle of glue.

“You brought everything,” he said.

“I remembered what you needed.”

Tinh stood on tiptoe and looked toward the soccer field. If there was a soccer game going, he certainly didn't want to spend time with his sister. But it was probably too late to join the game. Plus his cousins would tease him for staying in the temple.

Tinh sat down on a low wall and fastened Lan's bamboo sticks into the shape of a cross. When the sticks were firmly tied, he held the skeleton of the kite to the sky, imagining it floating in the soft blue.

Lan wiggled in anticipation.

As Tinh lowered the bamboo to his lap and

stretched the pink paper over the cross, he thought of how the next day his sister would run along the beach, flying this kite.

Last summer, Tinh had also flown kites. But when he'd turned ten at Lunar New Year, he'd left that childhood behind. Now, during the long days of summer vacation, it was his job to help Ba with the fishing.

"Hold here," he said to Lan.

Lan put her small finger on the paper while Tinh glued.

"You need more string for a tail," he said when the paper was in place. "And some bits of cloth to tie on to the string."

Just then, Tinh heard the shouts of Trang Ton, Dong, and Anh and then someone shushing them. Then, Tinh heard another sound—like a giant mosquito. He stood up to look.

Zooming ahead of the four boys came a

miniature red car. Tinh stepped back. The car drove itself. It ran up the dusty path and across the flagstones of the courtyard as if by magic.

The little kids stopped their war games to watch.

Adults leaned out the temple doors, fingers to their lips.

“Want to try, Tinh?” Trang Ton held out a small gray box. “Here, you just push this button to go forward, this one to go back. These”—he touched two more buttons—“make the car go left and right.”

Tinh reached for the remote control. It was heavier than it looked. He tapped the button on the left, and the car drove toward a palm tree. He maneuvered the car around the base of the tree. He drove it to the edge of the stone steps, then backed it up. He loved the feeling of power in his hands.

“Now it’s my turn,” said Phu, one of Trang Ton’s younger cousins.

Tinh handed over the box. This car was a diamond the monk didn’t know about.

No one in the village could afford a remote-controlled car. Trang Ton had an uncle who’d escaped by boat to America. That uncle worked in an office and sent back money and gifts like the soccer ball and the car. The uncle’s generosity enabled Trang Ton’s family to live in a brick house instead of a hut made of bamboo.

The bell sounded three times, and Phu held his finger over the remote control, poised for action. All eyes were on the red car, now half-submerged in a pile of faded bougainvillea flowers.

The vibrations stopped, and Phu backed the car up.

The adults emerged from the temple, talking and laughing among themselves.

As the nuns spread a feast of fruit on a long table set up in the courtyard, Tinh turned his attention from Trang Ton's red car. He loaded his arms with vanilla mangoes, finger bananas, a stick of sugarcane, and a bunch of longan.

He plucked a round longan fruit from the stem and sunk his teeth into the hard skin. The fruit burst open, white and sweet.