

LAN NGUYEN

A novella draft

Chapter One

One More Ride

Minh's wife had gone to her sister's apartment with their daughter and one suitcase.

He knew about the suitcase because Thảo had sent him a photograph of it. It stood beside the door, zipped and upright, requiring nothing from him.

The message beneath it said:

She asked if you were coming. I told her no.

Minh read this at a red light on Nguyễn Văn Trỗi. Around him engines crowded and complained. A delivery rider balanced three boxes of soup between his knees. A woman in office clothes slept against the back of her husband. Two boys on an electric bike watched a football match on the phone mounted between their handlebars.

Minh typed:

Five minutes.

He had been saying five minutes for three years.

A new booking appeared. The pickup was nearby and the destination was a market in the direction of Thảo's sister's apartment. One more ride. It was the kind of decision that could be mistaken for efficiency if you did not know the history of the man making it.

Minh accepted.

The passenger stood outside a bar with an old paper envelope tucked beneath one arm. He was a large Western man in his sixties, damp with sweat and pink around the eyes. He looked not quite drunk but recently acquainted with the possibility.

His name in the app was David Clarke.

Minh handed him the spare helmet.

David tried to put it on. It stopped above his ears.

“This is too small.”

Minh looked at him. The helmet remained the only helmet available.

David forced it down. His cheeks pressed outward beneath the straps.

He climbed onto the motorbike with difficulty, the old envelope now stuffed inside the mouth of his travel bag. Minh showed him the destination pin. David nodded vaguely.

“Near there,” he said.

Minh pulled into traffic.

For several minutes David moved badly with the bike. He leaned away from turns and corrected his balance too late. He smelled of airport, whisky and expensive soap.

Then he struck Minh urgently on the shoulder.

“Toilet.”

Minh pointed ahead.

“No. Now.”

There was nowhere. Metal shutters, food carts, parked motorbikes and narrow homes pressed against the street. Minh slowed beside a small repair shop where a family was preparing to close for the night.

He explained the situation to the owner, a compact man named Tâm with gray beginning in his hair.

Tâm looked at David, then at the toilet behind his shop.

“No.”

David doubled over slightly and pressed both palms together.

Tâm's wife sighed.

"Let him."

David removed the helmet. He shoved the old envelope deeper into his bag and left the bag hanging from the hook at the front of Minh's motorbike.

Tâm pointed toward the back.

David hurried through the shop and disappeared behind a plywood door.

Minh checked his phone.

Thảo had read *Five minutes*.

She did not answer.

Chapter Two

His Foreigner

The first five minutes passed without incident.

Minh watched Tâm stack tools in a steel cabinet. Tâm's wife swept metal dust from the entrance. A young man in a gray jacket stood across the street smoking beside a closed drink stall. His face was covered by a black mask. He appeared to be waiting for someone.

Ten minutes passed.

Tâm glanced toward the back.

"Stomach."

Minh nodded.

His phone vibrated.

Are you coming or not?

Minh typed:

I am coming now.

He did not send it.

He called David.

A phone began ringing behind the plywood door.

The ringing stopped. No one answered.

Tâm walked to the toilet and knocked.

"Hello."

Nothing.

He knocked harder. His wife joined him. Minh called again. The phone rang inside.

They tried the handle. The door opened only a few centimeters before striking something heavy.

Tâm's wife called for a neighbor.

Together the men forced the door inward. David's body lay curled against it, one cheek pressed to the wet tile. His trousers were fastened. One arm had folded beneath him. His face looked gray beneath the alcoholic red.

Everybody began helping at once, and none of them agreed on how.

Tâm's wife brought water. A neighbor said not to give him water. Someone rubbed medicated oil beneath his nose. Someone else lifted his feet. Minh knelt and checked whether David was breathing.

Outside, the young man in the gray jacket crossed the street.

He moved without urgency. He reached Minh's motorbike, pulled the key from the ignition where Minh had left it during the commotion, and climbed on.

The engine started.

Minh heard that.

He turned and ran.

The thief accelerated, but the repair shop opened onto a narrow service road crowded with parked bikes. Minh caught the rear rack before he could gain speed.

The motorbike swerved.

Minh pulled with both hands. The thief fell. The bike struck the pavement and slid into a stack of plastic crates.

They fought beside it.

The young man was smaller, but desperation had made him quick. Minh struck him once in the ribs. The thief drove a knee into Minh's stomach. Minh caught the mask and tore it away.

For a second they saw each other clearly.

The thief was barely more than a boy. He had a thin face, bad skin and one frightened eye already beginning to swell.

This recognition changed nothing.

The thief seized the spare helmet and struck Minh across the mouth with it.

Minh fell.

The young man lifted the damaged motorbike, climbed on and sped away. David's bag remained hooked at the front.

Minh forced himself upright and ran after him. He ran until the motorbike became one red light among many, then until that light disappeared.

He stopped in the road with blood in his mouth.

Behind him, the ambulance had arrived.

When Minh returned, the medical workers were examining David on the pavement. Tâm's wife stood near his head, answering questions she could not fully understand.

A worker asked who would accompany the foreigner.

Everyone looked at Minh.

"He is not my friend," Minh said. "He is my customer."

"Then who is coming?"

Nobody answered.

Tâm looked at his wife, his open shop and the stranger on the stretcher.

"I'll go."

He climbed into the ambulance.

The doors remained open while the workers secured David. Minh watched from several steps away.

He had lost his motorbike. His mouth was bleeding. His wife was leaving him. He had done enough.

The doors closed.

Minh sent Thảo the message:

I am coming now.

He ordered a GrabBike to her sister's apartment.

Chapter Three

Turn Around

Minh rode toward his family on the back of another man's motorbike.

The wind dried the blood at the corner of his mouth. He watched the city pass from a position he did not know well. For years he had transported other people through their nights. He knew their destinations, their shortcuts and the impatient pressure of their bodies. He had forgotten what it felt like to surrender the direction.

His driver took the correct road.

Minh looked at the map. The small arrow moved toward Thảo.

He thought of David being loaded into the ambulance. Tâm beside him, reluctant and frightened, pulled away from his own family and business because Minh had brought a foreigner to his door.

Minh locked his phone.

The traffic continued.

At the next intersection he tapped the driver's shoulder.

"Turn around."

The driver looked at him in the mirror.

Minh gave him the name of the clinic printed on the ambulance.

When he entered, Tâm sat beside David's bed beneath fluorescent lights. His hands rested on his knees. The moment he saw Minh, relief passed across his face.

“He woke once,” Tâm said. “He said things.”

Tâm stood. Responsibility returned to Minh without ceremony.

David woke again a few minutes later.

“My bag.”

“Gone.”

“My passport is in it.”

“The bike was stolen.”

David checked his pockets. His phone was there, but the screen remained black. He looked at the empty chair, then at Minh’s swollen face.

“Did they do that?”

“The man who took it.”

David stared at him.

“Why’d you leave the key in the bike?”

Minh did not answer.

A doctor said David had collapsed from dehydration, alcohol and medication taken without food. He wanted him to remain under observation. David insisted on leaving.

At the front desk, his remaining Vietnamese cash did not cover the bill. The clinic would not accept the foreign notes in his pocket.

Minh paid the difference by bank transfer.

“I’ll repay you at the hotel,” David said.

Outside, Minh opened the completed booking. The destination David had entered was a public market.

“Your hotel is here?”

“Near there.”

“What is the name?”

David remembered a word beginning with *Thanh*. There were a thousand businesses beginning with Thanh.

“The guesthouse wasn’t on the app,” he said. “I was going to direct you.”

Minh looked at the market on the map. It occupied several blocks and fed into a maze of alleys.

“My motorbike is gone,” he said.

David looked toward the road as if another should appear.

Tâm had been preparing to leave. He heard them.

“I have another bike,” he said.

The offer seemed to surprise him as much as it surprised Minh.

He called his wife.

Chapter Four

The Blue Wave

Tâm's wife arrived on a scooter. A nephew followed her on an old blue Honda Wave.

The Wave had faded bodywork, one mirror and a seat repaired with black tape. Its rear suspension appeared to have surrendered years earlier.

Tâm photographed Minh's identification and his Grab profile before handing over the key.

"My wife needs it at six," he said. "Don't bring it back empty."

Then came the instructions.

The electric starter did not work. The engine had to be kick-started with a little throttle, but not too much. The fuel gauge always read half-full. The left indicator sometimes became stuck.

"It turns off," Tâm said.

"It turned off last year," his wife said.

Tâm pointed to the starter button.

"Don't push this."

"Why?"

"Nothing happens. Then nothing happens for longer."

Tâm's wife produced another helmet for David. It was also too small.

He put it on without comment.

Minh kicked the starter until the engine caught. David climbed onto the short rear seat. The suspension sank.

“Don’t let it idle,” Tâm called.

The engine immediately died.

Minh started it again.

They pulled into traffic.

The blue Wave screamed at its maximum speed while the city passed them on both sides. Office workers, students, delivery drivers. An elderly woman wearing flowered pajamas glided by on a newer Wave and glanced once at David’s knees, which rose on either side of the tiny seat.

Minh kept his eyes forward.

David watched her disappear.

The phone-repair shop was closing when they arrived. The owner had already lowered one half of the shutter. Minh persuaded him to inspect David’s phone.

The charging port was bent. The battery had been drained and possibly damaged. The repairman could attempt a temporary repair.

“How long?” David asked.

“Forty minutes,” Minh translated.

They sat at a food stall across the street. David ate rice porridge because the doctor had told him to put something in his stomach. Minh drank coffee.

The search for Lan began there.

“Lan Nguyen,” David said.

Minh waited for more.

“Nguyễn Thị Lan?”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“Yes,” Minh said. “I know twelve.”

David studied him, uncertain whether he was joking.

At the neighboring table, Minh asked three women if they knew Nguyễn Thị Lan.

Two raised their hands.

The third pointed toward an apartment above the food stall.

For the first time that night, Minh laughed. David laughed too, reluctantly at first and then with the helplessness of a man discovering that his great private mystery had the equivalent of no address at all.

“Lan’s daughter arranged the room,” David said when the laughter passed. “Mai.”

“Her daughter?”

“Yes.”

He did not say more.

Minh’s phone lit up. He placed it facedown.

“Your wife?” David asked.

“She is leaving me.”

“Tonight?”

“She says.”

“You should go.”

“And leave you here?”

“I’ll manage.”

Neither believed this.

Minh said that Thảo knew he was working. People depended on him.

David stirred what remained of the porridge.

“Strangers are easy.”

Minh looked at him.

“My motorbike is gone.”

“I don’t mean easy like that. A stranger needs one thing. You do it. He thanks you. You know what kind of man you are.”

“And family?”

“They need things you cannot finish.”

Minh did not like the confidence with which he spoke.

“You don’t know my wife.”

“No,” David said. “I know something about being a husband.”

Across the street, the repairman lifted his hand. The phone had briefly accepted a charge, but he needed another hour to keep it alive.

The additional work cost money.

Minh paid the deposit.

Before David could make another promise, Minh’s phone began vibrating with messages from other Grab drivers.

Someone had seen his motorbike.

Chapter Five

The Photograph

A blurry photograph showed the stolen bike entering a repair market. David's bag remained on the front hook.

"My passport," David said.

Minh was already moving.

The old Wave refused to start. Minh kicked until his leg hurt. When the engine finally caught, David climbed on and wrapped both arms around him.

Other drivers became signs along the route. One waited at an intersection and pointed east. Another sent a picture of the alley the thief had entered. A third had seen the bike but could not abandon his own passenger to follow it.

Elsewhere in the market, the thief attempted to sell Minh's motorbike.

The buyer recognized the license plate from the driver groups. He pointed to the Grab markings, the cracked side panel and the damaged ignition.

"Papers?"

The thief shook his head.

"Then it is worth nothing."

The thief offered to accept almost nothing.

The buyer closed the gate.

In a service alley behind the market, the young man removed David's bag and searched it. He took the cash. He left the passport, medication, clothing and foreign toiletries.

At the bottom he found the old envelope.

A photograph slipped partly out. A younger David stood beside a Vietnamese woman. They were not touching, but their bodies had already made a private space within the larger world.

The image meant nothing to the thief.

He put it back and threw the bag behind a stack of empty drink crates.

By the time Minh and David reached the market, the motorbike had vanished.

They searched from the last confirmed sighting. A woman closing a drink stall remembered a bleeding young man standing near her crates. She pointed behind them.

David found the bag.

He checked the passport first, then the medication. His relief made him briefly look much younger.

Minh searched for anything that might identify the guesthouse. The envelope fell open.

The photograph landed face up.

David in 1994. Lan beside him. Her hair tied loosely behind her head. She was looking at David rather than at the camera.

"Lan?" Minh asked.

David nodded.

"You were together?"

"For a while."

"And you have not seen her since?"

"No."

Minh turned the photograph over. David took it from him before he could read the writing.

"Does she want to see you?"

David returned the photograph to the envelope.
His silence was an answer, though not a complete one.
The repairman called. David's phone was holding a charge.
They returned to the shop.

Chapter Six

The Messages

The phone came alive while connected to the repairman's cable.

Notifications filled the screen.

Ruth:

Did you land?

Then:

Take the tablets with food. They're in the front pocket.

David's son:

Just tell us you're safe.

His daughter:

Mum says you arrived. Please answer somebody.

Below them were the messages from Mai.

Where are you?

She keeps asking if you came.

The latest:

There may not be another night. If you are coming, come now.

David opened Mai's message first.

He found the address. Minh photographed it before the phone could fail again.

"You knew she was dying?"

David said nothing.

“You knew before I picked you up?”

“I had just landed. I needed a drink.”

“How many?”

David looked away.

He called Mai. The phone rang until it disconnected.

No answer.

The repairman unplugged the cable. The phone remained on.

Minh took the key to the old Wave.

David followed him outside.

They rode through traffic toward the address. The city was thinning. Restaurants had stacked their chairs. Families slept behind metal doors. Men hosed blood and scales from the pavement outside the late fish market.

The blue Wave began to cough.

Minh opened the throttle. The engine recovered, then coughed again.

Beneath an overpass, it died.

Chapter Seven

Under the Bridge

Minh tried the kick-start.

Nothing.

David checked the map. They were less than twenty minutes away.

“We can’t stop now.”

“I know.”

“Then push through.”

Minh kicked again. Pain rose through the leg the thief had struck.

David reached around him and pressed the electric starter.

The machine produced a weak grinding sound.

Minh slapped his hand away.

“Stop.”

“Then do something.”

David seized the handlebars and attempted to push the bike himself. Minh pulled it back. David shoved him.

“You can go home tomorrow,” David said. “I don’t get another chance.”

Everything in Minh became still.

“Tomorrow?”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“My wife may leave tonight. My daughter is waiting tonight. That man closed his shop and went to the clinic for you. His wife brought this bike. Drivers stopped working to find your passport. My motorbike is gone.”

“I know.”

“You know nothing. Your emergency is real. Everyone else can wait until tomorrow.”

“Lan is dying.”

“People are dying everywhere.”

David’s face changed. He said the thing he had protected through the clinic, the food stall, the search and the photograph.

“Mai is my daughter.”

Traffic passed above them. Each vehicle entered the concrete and left behind a few seconds of thunder.

Minh stared at him.

David told him that Lan had become pregnant after he returned home.

“You knew?”

“Yes.”

“And you did not come?”

“I was married. I had children.”

“You had two families.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

Minh laughed once, without humor.

David tried to explain, but the words exceeded Minh’s English. Minh opened Google Translate and typed with both thumbs.

He held the screen before David’s face.

A sixty-year-old foreign man destroys his life and comes to Vietnam to discover himself. How original.

David read it twice.

“My life is not shit.”

Minh did not understand.

David typed.

My wife is a good woman. My children love me. I love them.

Minh read it.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I love Lan.”

“And wife?”

“I love Ruth.”

Minh looked at him as if he had confessed to a mathematical impossibility.

David spoke slowly.

“A man loves what he loves.”

Minh understood enough.

“A man chooses what he does.”

David’s face tightened.

He typed:

Ruth told me that if I got on the plane, our marriage might be finished.

Then:

She packed my medication.

Minh looked toward the bag.

“My son drove me to the airport,” David said. “My daughter asked me to tell her I landed.”

“You did not.”

“No.”

Minh typed again.

You love people when they are far enough away that they cannot ask anything from you.

David read the sentence and thrust the phone back.

“That is not fair.”

Minh pointed toward the road, the city, the lost hours.

David seized his own phone and typed.

Men like you help strangers because strangers are easy.

Minh stepped toward him.

“Be careful.”

David continued.

I was unconscious. I needed a hospital. There was a problem, a bill and an address. You knew what to do.

“I saved your life.”

David typed:

Exactly. I made you necessary.

Minh’s hands closed.

David’s own hands had begun to shake.

Your wife does not need you to save her. She needs you to go home and stand in a room where you may be the one who failed.

Minh shoved him.

David shoved back.

“Don’t compare me to you.”

David did not need the phone.

“Why? Because you didn’t get on a plane?”

Minh caught his shirt in both fists.

“I did not abandon my daughter.”

“Not yet.”

Minh nearly struck him.

David did not retreat. He typed one final paragraph. Minh attempted to pull the phone away before he had finished. David turned his body, completed it and held the screen between them.

My failure began with one more night. One more job. One more person who needed me more than my family did.

“You know nothing about my family.”

David deleted the sentence and began again. Minh had to wait to be insulted. They stood close together, breathing hard, while David corrected a mistranslated word.

Then he pointed violently at the screen.

You are twenty minutes from them, and you spent the whole night proving you are a good man to someone you hate.

Minh released his shirt.

David scrolled and typed.

You help everyone because they thank you. Your family remembers every time you did not come home.

“There is no similarity between us.”

David looked at him.

“I started with one night too.”

Minh kicked the starter.

The old Wave came alive.

David moved toward the rear seat.

Minh pulled into traffic alone.

“Go home, Minh!” David shouted after him.

Minh did not look back.

David stood beneath the overpass with his bag, his phone and the address of a daughter who had lived her entire life without him.

Far down the road, the blue taillight stopped.

Minh remained on the bike. He did not turn around.

David picked up his bag and walked.

When he reached him, Minh said:

“I take you to the door. Then I go home.”

David climbed on.

The camera, if there had been one, would have remained behind them. Two men on a bad motorbike, moving away without forgiveness.

The left indicator began blinking.

After a long silence David said, "Your blinker is still on."

"I know."

"Turn it off."

"I can't. It's not working."

David leaned forward.

"Just push this."

"No. Don't touch."

David withdrew his hand.

The indicator continued flashing as they disappeared into the thinning traffic, promising a left turn they never took.

Chapter Eight

White Banners

Morning had begun whitening the sky when they entered Mai's street.

The address was correct.

White funeral cloth hung outside the house. Red plastic chairs filled the entrance. Shoes gathered near the threshold. Relatives moved between trays of food, incense and folded bands of mourning cloth.

Minh stopped the blue Wave across the alley.

The engine coughed once and died. The left indicator continued blinking.

David removed the helmet. A red line circled his forehead where the rim had pressed against him. He hung it from the handlebar and took the old envelope from his bag.

Through the open front of the house he could see the altar.

Lan's portrait stood among flowers and fruit. She was older than any version David possessed. Her face had widened. Her hair was shorter and touched with gray. The young woman remained in her eyes, although this might also have been something David placed there because he needed to recognize her.

The young Lan waited inside the envelope.

David looked at Minh.

Minh had promised to take him to the door. The door was ten meters away.

Neither man spoke.

Minh gave the smallest movement of his head toward the house.

David crossed the alley alone.

He stopped before the door and knocked.

Mai opened it.

She recognized him immediately.

For several seconds neither of them moved. David saw Lan in her face. Mai saw the young man from her mother's photograph trapped inside a foreigner more than sixty years old.

Her eyes filled.

David had rehearsed this meeting on the flight, at the clinic and throughout the night. Every sentence left him.

"Mai."

She nodded.

Her mouth tightened. Her chin began to tremble.

David's face broke with hers.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Mai covered her mouth.

"I'm sorry."

Hùng appeared behind her.

Mai turned and fell into his arms.

The sound that came from her was deep and involuntary. Hùng held her against his chest, one hand around her shoulders and the other against the back of her head.

David stood outside the house and began to sob.

Mai remained in Hùng's arms. David remained outside. No one crossed the threshold.

David looked back across the alley.

Minh remained on the blue Wave. The indicator blinked beside him, patiently announcing a turn that never came.

David looked at him as though asking for one final act of help.

Minh did not move.

Hùng opened the door wider.

David turned back and entered.

Chapter Nine

The House

The wall inside the house was covered with family photographs.

Lan and Hùng at their wedding. Mai as a small child between them. Mai in a school uniform, then in a graduation gown. Birthdays, hospital visits, restaurant tables and inexpensive holidays.

The photographs advanced through decades. Mai grew taller. Lan's face filled out and gathered lines. Hùng lost his hair.

The same hand that had held Mai at the doorway rested on her shoulder throughout her life.

Some time passed before anybody spoke. David did not know how much.

Mai stood several feet from him. Her eyes were swollen, but she had recovered enough to point toward a photograph of the three of them in Đà Lạt.

Lan smiled beneath a clear plastic raincoat. Hùng stood beside her without one, soaked and visibly miserable.

"She was angry with him that whole day," Mai said.

David looked at Lan's smile.

"She looks happy."

"Dad forgot her coat."

Hùng corrected her from across the room in Vietnamese.

Mai listened.

"He says she told him not to bring it."

Hùng continued protesting.

Mai almost smiled.

“He also says this story has been told incorrectly for twenty-five years.”

David looked again at Lan’s smiling face. The photograph contained happiness. The people who had lived through it remembered cold rain, irritation and an argument about a coat.

Beneath the photographs were the remains of an ordinary household. Lan’s slippers stood beside a cabinet. Reading glasses rested on a pile of unopened mail. Medication had been arranged in a plastic organizer. A rice cooker had been repaired with mismatched screws.

Two cups sat beside the kettle. One had a faded flower painted on it.

Mai approached a green curtain separating the front room from the room beyond.

She placed her hand against the fabric.

“Yesterday she asked if she looked old,” she said.

David lowered his eyes.

“Then she made me wash her hair.”

Mai drew the curtain aside.

David looked at Lan.

Her hair had been carefully washed and combed. Age had changed every part of the young woman in his photograph, but it had not erased her. Her face contained the life on the wall: the marriage, the child, the illnesses, the ordinary dinners and all the mornings David had never witnessed.

Her slippers waited outside the curtain.

David took the old photograph from its envelope. For thirty years Lan had remained young inside it. He looked from that face to the woman before him.

She had prepared for him.

He had arrived after preparation ceased to matter.

David did not touch her.

Hùng came to stand nearby.

David folded the photograph carefully and returned it to the envelope. Then he faced Hùng and offered his hand.

“Thank you for letting me into your home.”

Hùng took it.

The handshake was formal at first. Then Hùng drew David into a brief, awkward embrace.

David stiffened with surprise before holding him back.

The two men began to cry. David could feel Hùng shaking against him.

They held each other for several seconds.

They released each other and stepped apart, embarrassed by the intimacy.

As they moved back into the front room, David noticed one final photograph near the end of the wall.

Lan stood in a shopping center beside a life-size cardboard cutout of an impossibly handsome Korean actor. She had wrapped both arms around him and was grinning like a teenager.

David pointed to it.

“Who’s that?”

Hùng answered in solemn, careful English.

“Her boyfriend.”

Mai laughed despite herself.

David looked more closely at the photograph.

“Ruth loves Korean dramas too. She says those men always know what to say.”

Mai translated for Hùng.

Hùng replied immediately in Vietnamese. Mai began laughing before she could translate the answer.

“What did he say?” David asked.

Mai wiped beneath her eyes.

“He says they have writers.”

David burst out laughing.

Hùng laughed with him. Mai joined them.

For one brief moment, the house was filled with laughter beside the room where Lan lay.

Chapter Ten

Before Six

Minh returned the blue Wave to Tâm's shop before six.

Morning shops were opening. Pavements were being swept. Steam rose from the first pots of broth.

Tâm waited beneath the half-open metal door in sandals and yesterday's clothes.

The Wave coughed, shuddered and died.

Its left indicator was still blinking.

Tâm looked at the light. Then at Minh. Then back at the light.

He struck the plastic housing once with the heel of his hand.

It stopped.

Minh stared at him.

Tâm took the key and inspected the motorbike. The petrol tank was full.

Then he saw Minh's swollen lip and the bruise spreading across his face.

Whatever complaint he had prepared disappeared.

He hung the key on a nail and quietly rolled the Wave inside.

Minh ordered a GrabBike to Thảo's sister's apartment.

In another part of the city, the young thief finally found a man willing to buy Minh's motorbike for parts.

The payment was small.

The buyer examined the damaged ignition, the Grab markings and the license plate. He named a price.

The thief argued. The buyer began rolling the bike back toward him.

The thief accepted.

Cash changed hands.

A worker removed the mirrors, tore away the Grab markings and lifted the clear plastic near the handlebars.

Minh's family photograph fell onto the workbench.

The thief recognized the man whose face he had struck.

In the photograph Minh stood between Thảo and Nhi. All three were smiling.

The thief studied them for a moment.

The buyer swept the photograph aside and told him to leave.

The thief took his money and went.

Behind him, Minh's motorbike came apart piece by piece.

Chapter Eleven

The City Carries It

At her sister's apartment, Thảo sat on the edge of a bed beside the half-packed suitcase.

Nhi lay nearby beneath a thin blanket, pretending to sleep.

Thảo opened the location-sharing application on her phone.

Minh's dot had stopped at Tâm's shop. Then it began moving again.

Toward her.

Thảo watched it advance along the road.

A tear slipped down her face. She wiped it away with irritation, but another followed.

A moving dot was not an apology. It was not a repaired marriage. It was only a man traveling in the correct direction.

Nhi opened her eyes.

She saw her mother watching the phone. She saw the tears.

Without speaking, Nhi reached across the bed and placed her hand against her mother's back.

Thảo took her daughter's hand.

Together they watched Minh's location move toward them.

Minh rode behind another Grab driver through the waking city.

For the second time that night, somebody else carried him.

Storefronts opened. People swept the pavement. Parents carried children to school. Steam rose from carts along the road. The ordinary day assembled itself without consulting anyone's grief.

Minh's phone vibrated.

Thảo had written:

I can see you.

He read the message and put the phone away.

The wind moved against his skin. His swollen lip had begun to darken. He watched the city pass as if he had never seen it from this side of the motorbike.

At first nothing happened.

His eyes filled.

He blinked and looked away.

One tear moved sideways across his cheek. Then his breathing changed.

Minh bent forward.

The first sound escaped him before he could stop it. He covered his mouth. His shoulders began shaking. He tried to make himself smaller behind the driver, but the grief had waited all night and would not accept another delay.

He wept without dignity.

The driver saw him in the mirror.

He did not ask what had happened. He did not offer advice.

At a red light, he removed one hand from the handlebars and placed it briefly on Minh's knee.

The hand remained for only a second.

Then the light changed.

The driver returned his hand to the throttle.

The city carried Minh forward.