

Thanksgiving

"It's not too late to bail."

Jay's hand sweeps across the front lawn, featuring three rusted out Buick sedans covered in pine needles, a cluster of old dishwashers next to a crumbling storage shed, and eleven cats who yet to take their gaze off us since we got out of his pickup truck and slammed the doors shut. I'm juggling the pumpkin pie and pint of ice cream we picked up at the grocery store from earlier, and he's crossing his arms in disbelief, taking in the sight of his grandparents' dilapidated house.

"It's only for an hour." I bump his hip with mine. "Besides, how bad can it be?"

At least that's what I'm saying out loud, doing my best to ignore the conversation I overheard between my parents before I left on this trip: "Tôi đi em. She needs to know what she's getting herself into." I chalked it up to my dad watching too many Korean dramas, because I am certainly not the first twenty-one-year-old girl who wants to spend Thanksgiving break with her boyfriend. But now that we're walking up the moss-covered steps, all I feel is the urge to run when the front door creaks open and a Don Knotts-like voice screeches:

"You're late!"

What a bitchy way to greet someone who hasn't visited in over a year. I paste on a smile at the elderly woman standing at the door frame. She looks a wizened psychic, with her piercing blue eyes, half-moon glasses, and the menagerie of cocktail rings on her wrinkled hands.

"We already have pumpkin pie."

"Traffic was bad." Jay pecks her on the cheek and nudges me forward. "This is Vivian. Vivian, this is my grandmother. Barb Cranston."

I'm dying to point out that we can go pick up another flavor. But based on Jay's murderous look, I opt to keep my mouth shut as Grandma Barb snatches the items out of my hands and we follow her into the surprisingly tidy living area. Jay's mom, Tammy, rushes out of the kitchen to welcome us, and I'm struck by her slim figure, curly brown hair tucked into a ponytail, and Alice in Chains t-shirt.

It's no wonder she dates guys—"Not great ones," Jay always reminds me—that are a decade younger than her. Her small-town-beauty-pageant smile makes me glad we bothered to make the drive.

While Jay's hanging up our coats, I wave to his brother Kevin, who grunts a hello before turning back to the computer screen while shoveling potato chips into his mouth. A balding elderly man is already at the table, with a plate of pickled beets and white turkey meat. Jay introduces him as Grandpa Fred, whose blue eyes twinkle when I shake his hand. There are half a dozen Pyrex dishes in varying shades of autumn-festive brown, orange, and yellow on the kitchen counter—and looking over at the overflowing recycling bin, our meal seems to have originated from a variety of boxes, cans, and jars. Thank God I remembered to pack TUMS pills.

"So where are you from, Vivian?"

I peer nervously at Jay, who is hacking the turkey like the carving knife is a samurai sword.

"Washington state," I squeak back.

"Hmm." Grandma Barb lifts her mug to take a sip of tea before appraising me with a cool expression. "That's not what I mean. Where are you really from?"

Even though he's standing ten feet away, I can feel Jay's temper rising as I reluctantly give the answer I know she's looking for: "Vietnam," I say, wishing I had the knife so I can jab this lady's throat.

"But I was born in the United States."

"I figured. Your English is so good." She leans against her bar stool, her voice sounding like a bullhorn as she yells from the kitchen counter. "Freddy! She's Viet-nese! Remember that restaurant we went to last week?" She turns back to me. "He really likes pho. Have you had it before?"

I cringe at her mispronunciations. But this time, Jay comes to my rescue. "Of course she's had pho. And you're saying it wrong—it's the F word, without the hard stop."

"Watch your attitude, Jason!" I look around in vain, trying to figure out who Grandma Barb's talking to before realizing that beyond official documents, I've heard no one call Jay by his full name.

Grandpa Fred points to the crystal platter in front of me, piled up with rows of baby corn, pickle spears, and olives. I follow his lead and spear a scarlet red beet while Grandma Barb drones on about all the ways her eldest grandson has disappointed her: Not finishing his Eagle Scout award, giving up his track scholarship at Idaho State, and choosing to study computer science instead of accounting.

"I bet that out-of-state tuition is costing you a fortune." She lets out a cough. "I would know, since I paid for your father's degree. And we know how that turned out."

It takes all of my effort not to lunge at this 60-year-old woman. Tammy beats me to the punch, yelling, "Jay doesn't owe you a cent for Michael's mistakes!" and Grandpa Fred drops a spoon to the floor. But to my surprise, Jay ignores her, slamming into a chair next to me, and I poke a fork into what looks like a green bean casserole. Damn. Those crispy onions are good.

"Well, I'm glad he moved to Seattle for college," I interject, before I break apart a dinner roll and ask him to pass me the butter. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have met."

"Vivian and Jay met when he needed help with an essay. So cute." Tammy hands me a can of sparkling water and I smile in thanks. "We're hoping Kevin will follow in his brother's footsteps."

"I'm not going to college. I'm becoming a professional gamer," Kevin shouts from across the room.

Grandma Barb hacks a few times into a napkin, and I'm about to ask her if she wants some water. But no one at the table reacts, even when it sounds like she's hyperventilating. I munch my bread, taking care not to leave a trail of crumbs down the front of my sweater and only relax when the fit passes enough for her to complain about the saltiness of the gravy.

"He did the right thing, Barb. How else is this country going to beat the Japs?" Grandpa Fred sends a wink in my direction and now Jay is holding my hand so tightly that I have to smack his wrist to stop from crushing my fingers.

I don't know what to react to first—the lecherous look in this old guy's eyes, the overtly racist commentary, or the intermittent howling from what I assume are the cats outside.

But now I'm homesick for the version of Thanksgiving I grew up with. Right about now, my sister Chloe and I would assemble *gỏi cuốn*, or rice paper rolls stuffed with crisp vegetables, fresh herbs, and brick-red-cured slices of Vietnamese charcuterie. If I close my eyes, I can visualize my mom at the stove, crisping egg noodles for her legendary *mì xào* topped with baby bok choy clusters, prawns, and

shiitake mushroom caps. My dad would spread the tables with red tartan cloth and contemplate whether he needed to pick up another set of folding chairs, while Chloe and I remind him that most people end up sitting on the floor with paper plates balanced on their laps. And someone always volunteers to bring one of those pre-roasted turkeys from the grocery store and forgets to read the directions, blasting it in the oven til it resembles shoe leather—the only bright spot being the rice congee my mom made the next day, using the carcass for broth.

I shake my head when Jay asks if I want seconds, wrinkling my nose at the mini marshmallow, mandarin orange, pineapple, and Cool Whip concoction he comes back with. When Tammy asks for help in putting together dessert, I'm grateful for the distraction—though it makes me feel bad to leave Jay behind as Grandma Barb continues to pepper him with questions.

"Have you reconsidered my offer?"

"The answer is still no." Jay's fist smacks the table. "I am done with family loans."

"Just think—all of your student loans consolidated into one simple payment to me every month. 4% interest. A bank couldn't even get you a better rate."

I watch with bated breath as he glares at her. "I would rather be homeless and living in my truck than accept money from you."

"Don't be so sure about that. Because if you're serious about your girlfriend, I'll throw in a diamond as a bonus." In an elaborate gesture, she slips off a ring and holds it up. "Vivian. Do you like this?"

All eyes turn to me while I split a gooey berry pie into eight equal slices. The light catches on the facets of the round-cut stone, tucked inside a four-prong yellow gold band as I turn it over in my palm a few times. It's actually quite nice, now that it's isolated from the other gaudy pieces on her hand.

"Pretty," I say, passing it back to her. "But Jay and I have already talked about waiting until I'm done with law school." I throw her my biggest, fakest, fuck-you smile. "Plenty of time to save up for a bigger one."

Is it a lie? Absolutely. It took an Act of Congress to allow my parents to let me go on an unsupervised overnight trip with a member of the opposite sex, let alone agree to a betrothal. But after listening to this woman bully Jay for 35 minutes, I'm losing my filter of politeness. From the panic on his face, I know we're going to have to talk about this when we're alone tonight.

Grandma Barb buries a fork into a sliver of pumpkin pie, praising its blandness—"Other ones have too much cinnamon and nutmeg in them." In a shocking twist of events, Kevin pauses his World of Warcraft game to join us for dessert, removing two pieces of the berry pie I was working on before topping it off with a boulder of ice cream and a squirt of chocolate sauce, and now I'm having sympathy indigestion just looking at it. With a leaf-shaped sugar cookie, I plop back down next to Jay, who is shredding a napkin instead of enjoying dessert because he is actually a robot who has enough willpower to resist the lure of processed sugar. Or he ate too many marshmallows.

"Law school's going to be expensive. Last chance to take me up on my offer."

"We're leaving." I've never heard Jay's voice sound so bitter as he grabs my arm. "Come on, Vivian."

It strikes me as rude to rush out. But I obey, casting a helpless look at Tammy before waving awkwardly at Grandma Barb, who looks like she got exactly what she wanted. Grandpa Fred doesn't even acknowledge our departure as he spoons vanilla ice cream into his mouth, dribbling some of it on his pants.

"Happy Thanksgiving," I utter as I grab my coat and run after Jay, who I barely recognize as he paces next to the passenger door of the truck. After I slide in and buckle my seatbelt, he starts the ignition and floors the gas pedal, ignoring the hiss of the cats as they dart away from the reversing vehicle.

It's not until we hit the main road that he breaks the silence.

"Well. Now you've met my shitty family." The crack in his voice indicates that he's on the verge of tears, which is terrifying because I have only seen him cry once, when his dad sent him a Facebook message asking for a wire transfer.

I take his hand. "Your mom's great. But can you explain something to me?"

"Where should I start? My grandmother's desire to be a loan shark so she can assert power over everyone else? Why my mom still keeps in contact with them even though my grandfather molested her as a kid? The trash that's gathered in front of the yard?" He glances over. "Therapists and social workers have been trying to figure it out for years, so I'm not sure I can give you the answers you're looking for."

"Actually, I'm wondering why we ate so early. It's not even 4 pm."

Jay opens his mouth a few times and closes it, clearly flabbergasted at my question. "I don't know. We've always done it that way."

"Is that linner? Dunch? Is there a term for this?"

Now Jay is laughing, and it's music to my ears. Our fingers interlace, and he pulls my hand up to kiss it. "You were brilliant. Way to stick it to my grandmother. Except now I owe you a ring after you're done with law school."

Luckily, he's still holding my hand because I nearly tumble off the seat as his truck curves around a bend. "I'm sorry. What?"

"If you're willing to make the drive here, survive a meal with her, and keep your sense of humor intact, then we should definitely get married."

I stare at him. "So, you're asking me to spend the rest of my life with you, without a ring, driving down some random street in your hometown, without my parents' permission?"

"People do that? Because my ex-step-dad proposed to my mom at a Denny's and my grandparents definitely didn't know about it beforehand."

"Yes! There's a process. Permission, an engagement ceremony, at least six months to plan the wedding—"

"So basically, start saving now and we'll have enough by the time you pass the bar exam."

"You could always take your grandmother's offer. Pay off your loans, pawn the ring and use the money to buy something else."

"No way. Then she'd ask for it back at the next family gathering and it'd be more of a pain in the ass than me getting you what you want. I know how this game works."

He gives me a crooked grin before turning his eyes back to the road, making my jaw ache from laughing with tales of past Thanksgivings at the Abbott/Cranston household. Breaking into his Uncle Larry's house, who needed help out of his electric recliner when the power went out. His cousin Danielle getting into an argument with Tammy over wearing her Doc Martens indoors. His great aunt Marci's penchant for collecting napkins from various fast-food restaurants and showing up with them as her potluck contribution. "Christmas is even worse because of the presents," he groans, listing off items he's received from Grandma Barb over the years: a cat nativity scene; a Frosty the Snowman toilet seat cover; and a reproduction of a Fabergé egg on a styrofoam base covered by a glass dome that Tammy sold at a garage sale to Grandma Barb, who re-gifted it back three years later.

When we arrive at the hotel half an hour later, Jay asks me to pick out snacks at the gift shop before I head up to the room. So while he hauls our overnight bags and cooler inside, I snap photos of the oil paintings on display for Chloe, who replies with a flurry of emojis: First a monkey covering his mouth with his hands, then a king, and finally, a sponge, showcasing her displeasure that I get to gallivant across the mountains with Jay while she does hard labor and pacifies my mom's anxiety. But it's the text I get when the cashier hands me a chocolate bar and a bag of black licorice that makes me do a double take.

"Your boss is here."

My pulse speeds up as Chloe confirms my suspicions with her next message: "They're talking about your applications."

My thumbs fly over the keyboard, deleting a few variations of "WTF" before I settle on a shrug emoji and hop on the elevator. But inside, I'm fuming. So what if I only applied to schools in tech hubs so Jay can get a job? It's what I told Tuyet when we met up for coffee, right after I got my LSAT scores. "Law school is hard, Vi," she clucked, twisting the two-carat Tiffany's engagement ring on her finger as I picked at a scone. "On my first day of class, the professor asked who had a significant other. Then he advised everyone who raised their hands to break up with them immediately to spare themselves the pain later on." After asking her point-blank if my mom called her beforehand, she hung her head in guilt before offering me an internship at her firm.

The memory of her warning hangs over me like a storm cloud as I swipe the key card and push the door open. Our room isn't small, but looks that way because of the California king bed taking up most of the space, dressed in white linen and sunflower yellow accent pillows. I chuckle at the screen on the enormous flatscreen TV, playing a 90s R&B station as the gas fireplace crackles with flames. However, it's the soaking tub that excites me most, bordered with votive candles, a white orchid arrangement, and a bottle of champagne nestled in a silver bucket. Jay's already perched at the edge of the tub, testing the water temperature with his wrist as I exchange my clothes for a plush white robe.

"Very romantic," I tease as he appears behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "And probably expensive."

"That's what credit cards are for."

We stare at our reflection in the mirror, my head only coming up to the middle of his chest. Whereas my complexion is warm with golden undertones, Jay's is pale with skin that burns and freckles. His hair is a thick wave of chocolate brown; mine is made up of long jet-black strands that only curl with copious amounts of hairspray. He describes my eyes as golden-flecked brown; I could lose hours staring into his green ones that brighten with teal and dull to gray, depending on how he's feeling—a built-in human mood ring.

I spin to face him, giving his bicep an experimental squeeze. He protests when I poke his two-pack and retaliates by untying my robe, leaving me no choice but to step into the tub. The overflow mechanism burbles as we settle in and Jay complains about having to bend his knees to fit his long legs. But I refuse to let him leave, swiveling so I'm propped against his chest. He presses our palms together, comparing the size of our hands before I demand a neck rub, the calluses on his fingertips rubbing on my skin as he works the knots out of my shoulder blades.

"Let me guess. You're worried about next year."

As many times as we've had this conversation, it doesn't stop my imagination from running through the various scenarios. Jay and I living 3,000 miles apart, with Bluetooth receivers cybernetically implanted in our ears as we search for airline deals and negotiate who spends which

holidays where. Jay and I in the same city but on opposite schedules: Me holed up in the library while he works equally crazy hours for a fledgling startup that pays in stocks instead of salaries. Or the worst nightmare of all: Jay staying in Seattle and falling in love with his friend and research supervisor Amie, who is our age but finishing up a master's in computer science since she started college at 16. It doesn't help that she looks like a Bollywood movie star.

"There's nothing we can do but wait." Now his hands are gliding down my hips. "And if I really am your Dream Guy..."

"I should have never told you that."

"Why? It's fucking adorable." Even though the water is warm, I shiver at the sensation of his lips touching my ear lobe. "Maybe I manifested a short, dark-haired Virgo English major."

"You didn't even want a relationship."

"Are you ever going to let me live that down? I was trying to be honest with you."

"Nope." I scold my brain for freaking out about the future instead of enjoying this movie-worthy moment. But then his mouth drops to the crevice of my neck, and just like that, he's forgiven. The jets hum in the background as he tells me it's hard for him to sleep when I'm not in bed next to him—even though he can't stand that I hit the snooze button three times before getting up. That if he had all the money in the world, he would make sure I have an unlimited supply of taro bubble tea to drink. How excited he is to meet my extended family in Vietnam some day. For only having fifteen minutes of preparation, I'm pretty impressed by the time he wraps up and rumbles:

"Vivian Ngoc Luu."

I twist my head to meet his gaze. "Jason Andrew Abbott," I banter back.

"Will you,"—his green eyes are sparkling with mischief—"say yes when I ask you to marry me in the future?"

I torture him by humming the Jeopardy theme song before he tickles my ribs, leaving me no choice but to force out a snort of laughter out as I cry out:

"Yes! I love you. Yes."

He's smiling like he won the lottery, and I can see a film of moisture behind his eyes as we hold each other. Our kiss could make stars burst in the sky and if I was standing up, my ankle would have definitely popped.

Except now my mind is racing with questions. Does this mean Jay's willing to follow me wherever I get into law school? Will my mom let us live together in sin for the next three years? Should I tell him that most Vietnamese women keep their maiden name? Or that I want a fingertip veil and bouquet of white calla lilies and vendela roses? Or—

"We're going to be fine." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear as our lips touch again, chaste and soft.

I want so badly to believe him.