FAST FASHION IS CHEAP,
BUT SOMEONE HAS TO PAY
STITCHED UP
STEVE COLE
ILLUSTRATED BY
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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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Barrington Stoke

For Freya and Tilly

First published in 2022 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2022 Steve Cole
Illustrations © 2022 Oriol Vidal

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-80090-123-0

Printed by Hussar Books, Poland

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CHAPTER 1

A Stitch in Time

When I wake, I don't open my eyes. I know where I am. The hard, blunt sound of traffic and horns honking and people shouting feels like rocks thrown at my ears. The sound never stops, but it's even louder in the early morning.

I think back to when there was nothing in my ears but the clucks of our chickens and my parents' soft voices in the next room. Back when I was just Hanh. Hanh, the girl who went to school and dreamed about a better future.

Now I feel as hard and heavy as the wooden floor beneath me. I wish I had my sleeping mat, but it's back home. I remember helping to make it. I picture Ma working in our field, cutting and splitting the reeds for the mats and then drying them in the sun.

I think of how I helped to dye the reeds green, red and yellow in the cook pot with my older sisters. *"Hanh, you're spilling water everywhere!"* my sisters would say. The four of us laughed around the giant pot until Dad came in and told us off and we all took the coloured reeds outside to dry.

When the reeds were ready, Ma and Grandma would weave them into mats at the loom. They worked so fast, like two parts of the same happy machine. Ma and Grandma didn't speak much, but they smiled a lot.

My reed sleeping mat is so far away, but when I close my eyes, the smiles of my family feel closer.

A knee pushes against my ribs. I know it's only Ping, one of the eleven other girls in here. We go to sleep lined up on the floorboards like matches in a box. But most nights Ping twists round in her sleep till she's lying nearly sideways.

The other girls hate the way she does that. They used to pinch her to wake her up. Ping would pinch them back and then everyone would be shouting and we'd all be up. So I put up with Ping's knee in my ribs and we all sleep a bit longer.

The early-morning sun shines into dirty windows that are nailed down. Another day is beginning. Are my family out there somewhere looking for me? Will I ever be found?

"Hanh," Ping whispers to me. "Hanh, you crying again?"

"No way," I hiss.

Ping sighs. “Nor me,” she says, and wipes her cheek.

Then I hear the rattle of keys, same as every morning. The door shakes as the big lock turns. The door is thrown open. Our

supervisor fills the doorway. Her name is Yen. She doesn't look that mean, but she is. She has the big stick she always carries in her hand and a sneer on her face. The girls start to stretch and struggle up from the floor.

"Come on, pigs. Up!" Yen shouts at us. "Want your morning meal? Work for it. Another shipment came in last night. It needs turning round today."

Yen decides that Ping is too slow. She steps forward and kicks Ping in the leg. Ping winces, but she says nothing. None of us do. Yen will do worse if we say anything.

I lead the way out of the room and into the dingy corridor. The windows are boarded up so we can't see out and no one can see in. I give a longing look to the small bathroom as we pass it. No one's allowed to use it till we've worked at least two hours. We're only allowed eight minutes in the bathroom twice a day, so each trip needs to count.

We trudge down the stairs towards the Room. It's so noisy, we can hear it from down the hallway. The giant machines growl and blast, vibrating the door. The steaming hiss of the clothes presses sounds like a giant serpent. Male voices shout to each other over the chattering noise of metal needles punching into cloth.

Tuyet, my friend, has a coughing fit behind me. Tuyet coughs a lot these days. She had asthma before she got here and now it's worse. She's thirteen, just a few months older than me. Yen calls me and Tuyet "the babies" cos she's seventeen. Most of the others are fifteen.

"I can't go in, Hanh," Tuyet whispers. "My chest is so tight and I'm last for the bathroom today. I can't."

"You can," I say. "You can do this." It's like I'm telling myself too.

My eye is drawn to some graffiti carved into the wall above the door to the Room. It reads: *One way in, no way out*. I wonder who wrote it. How long they were in this place.

What happened to them.

But I can't give up. That's just not me. I take Tuyet's hand and I squeeze her fingers. "You can have my bathroom slot," I whisper. "I'm second up."

"I can't do that to you, Hanh," Tuyet says. "It's not fair."

"I'll take it," says Ping behind us.

Tuyet raises a fist to her and says, "You'll take this, snoop!"

Ping retreats and Tuyet follows, still coughing. Yen tells them both to shut up. But Tuyet seems determined to say something to Ping – it'll be nothing good, I'm guessing.

Well, whatever. I know Tuyet *will* take my bathroom spot. But I also know she'll give me a mouthful of her rice later to say thank you. Friends help each other. Besides, my name means "right behaviour" and Ma always wants me to live up to it.

I try. I do try. *Think positive*, I tell myself, over and over. If I keep going, the day will pass, minute by minute, until it's finally over. Then the day will drag itself off into the dark, same as the rest of us.

The Room is where I work, with the other boys and girls here. We make jeans and jackets. We cut, sand, embroider, press and distress the denim, working till our fingers bleed. For twelve hours each day, we turn out cheap fast fashion: clothes that will wear out as fast as we do.

Yen says the things we make are sold all over the world. Piled high in big, bright clothes stores. Made by us. Bought by people like you.

This place is our whole world, far away from yours.

And this is my story. I'm going to tell it to you.