

## Chapter 1



**Panduranga, Southeast  
Asia, AD 1053**

Champa (*Sh-am-pa*)

Four royal guards struggled to free the large wheel of the wooden cart from the muddy hole that stubbornly held it captive. The cart held a chest that was very heavy and made their effort all the more difficult.

Their party included a dozen of the biggest and most capable guards in the Champa kingdom along with two Hindu pandits. They brought with them four large, two-wheeled carts that carried the remaining wealth of the Champa Empire that once ruled this land for a thousand miles in every direction. It was now all but destroyed by the conquering Dai Viet forces that had swept down from the north. What remained of ornate palaces and temples was now reduced to these four large and heavy chests. Their flight south was now in its fourteenth day.

Princess Po tapped her foot impatiently as she stood nearby and watched the guards trying to free the cart. The wheel by itself was much larger than Po who was only eleven years old. But even so, she felt a part of the team and wanted to help. She joined the men, found purchase on the wheel and pushed with all her strength. The men made loud grunting sounds as they strained in their effort. She followed their example, but her exertions came off as a series of mouse-like squeaks that caused the others to spontaneously break into laughter. But with that, the wheel magically worked itself out of the hole, and their laughter became cries of triumph!

Big Sem picked Princess Po up and swung her about joyously. “Little flower, what would we do without you?” he declared.

He weighed more than three hundred pounds and was assigned as her personal bodyguard. Observing how tired she looked, he put her safely up on the front bench of the second cart; the one he managed himself. She settled in and looked at the dense jungle ahead. From her perch peering over the two mules pulling the cart, it didn’t appear there was any way to go forward. But it had been like that since the coast, and they had gone on just the same.

Princess Po was herself one of the treasures of the old kingdom. She was the only remaining heir to the throne of the once great Champa Empire. Though still very young, in a few terrible years she had already lived a lifetime. A scout had brought word the previous week that her parents and two younger brothers were slain at the hands of the ruthless Dai Viet forces.

Princess Po cried desperate protests when her mother insisted that she escape with this specially chosen group of men. They got away secretly in the night before their capitol was surrounded. Her royal presence inspired this small but determined company of dedicated Champa faithful.

Her mother’s choices for her to wear on this journey were mundane and presented her appearance commonly as any other child of her age. She wore a colorful weaved skirt and a loose teal top along with boots that protected her feet but that were not as comfortable as the gold sandals she commonly wore. Her jet-black hair framed her triangular face and presented her captivating glasz eyes perfectly.

When it became too dark to continue any farther that day, Tap, her teacher who she called Uncle Tap because he was like family to her, ordered that they stop and set up camp. He was the

nominal head of the group appointed by the king because he was the king's trusted advisor and Po's mentor. He readily accepted the assignment from the king to save the heritage of the great Champa kingdom, which he considered a sacred responsibility.

Tap saw Princess Po helping to unload one of the carts. He smiled because that was her way and she had endeared herself to everyone in her party by insisting on helping with the work. Tap did not approve but he always acquiesced to her wishes. He took Po's hand and led her to a log in a small clearing by a new campfire. "Sit down, little flower, and talk with me while the men sort out our camp," he said softly while warming his hands. "I need you to lighten my spirits, little flower. I confess I am weary after our long walk today."

Tap was not an old man, but not a young one anymore either, and his endurance was little of what it once was. Their escape was successful thus far, but he knew it was only a matter of days before the trailing Viet forces would overtake them if they did not persist in their forced march. He had a desperate plan to preserve their heritage and get them safely away, but only if they arrived soon at their first destination. Tap hoped this night's rest would give them all the energy they needed to continue on their journey at the hurried pace he had set.

As a group they wanted nothing more than to fall onto their mats and sleep. But in deference to Po, they instead took the time to make an orderly camp, set down sleeping areas, and cook rice over a warm fire. The pandits seemed tireless and were very helpful, but afterward, they went off by themselves and went through their nightly prayer ritual. The others talked of many things, and as their bellies filled, they grew more positive in their banter. Po listened quietly with heavy eyes, and finally fell asleep, snuggled in the lap of her teacher.

They were awakened in the middle of the night by a young scout who had been sent behind by Tap to keep watch on the advance of the conquering army. He told them with frantic gestures that the invaders were only a day behind.

Though still dark, the group quickly repacked their belongings and again made their way through the dense jungle. The path they made seemed ominous in the darkness compounded by a myriad of creature sounds that hid and threatened nearby.

Po was greatly relieved when several hours later the jungle opened to a flat plain of wild grass, cactus, and low brush visible through a mist in the early light just before dawn. She could see foothills leading to high mountains far beyond.

"Is that our destination, Uncle Tap?" she asked.

Tap put his hand on her shoulder and only smiled an answer. He thought to himself *where is it?* He did not remember the temple being this far, but he was much younger when he last traveled to this plain.

He was about to seek the advice of the two pandits who were with them when the morning mist cleared somewhat, and in the distance on a hill that overlooked the plain they saw a small temple with three towers lit like a beacon in the rays of the morning sun.

"It is karma, my brothers," said Tap joyously. "The gods are still with us. Come, we must hurry."

Two hours later, they arrived at the mouth of a nearly invisible cave on the far side of a very rocky hill near the temple. Tap went inside to inspect the cave and to see if it was as he remembered from a visit many years before. When he determined that nothing had changed, he came out and signaled the carts to be brought close to the entrance.

With six men lifting each one, they brought the heavy chests down from the carts. It took another strenuous effort to deposit them within the cave. They barely fit through the opening and back into the confines of the small cave.

On the top of the first chest, Tap placed a scroll on which he had carefully recorded the story of their Queen, their history, the royal lineage, and their mission. Before he finally exited the cave, he placed two golden statues of their gods in front of the chests to protect them.

They worked quickly and closed the cave entrance with many large rocks. They gathered brush, and detritus from the adjacent area and covered the entrance to look like the rest of the hill. When they were through they left no sign they had been there, or buried anything within the now invisible cave.

It was midday, and the two Hindu pandits came to speak with Tap. They were very concerned and after they revealed their secret, they requested that he help them.

They led him to an adjacent hill that was between the cave and the temple. They worked back several large rocks to reveal a partial opening. They explained to Tap that there was a chamber within that was once thought only accessible from the temple. That temple access was bricked over and hidden many years ago as the Hindu pandits began to abandon the area and move back to their homeland. Within this chamber were the collected offerings of devoted Hindu followers over many centuries and from many lands.

The gold within meant nothing to them. There was no reason to keep it because it brought only conflict and suffering when they sought to bring peace and enlightenment to those they nourished with their teachings. Thus the gold was secretly collected and deposited there for as long as any of the priests could remember.

Recently, they had received a message from the last caretaker of that temple explaining that during one of his daily walks, he had discovered this outer cave access. One of the pandits, Havta, had traveled here at that time to help to cover up this outer access. But it was not as well hidden as the one they just concealed and if anyone heard a rumor of the Champa treasure being in the area, no doubt someone would find the entrance to the buried temple treasure.

Among his many talents Tap in his day had been a skilled builder and he readily consented to their request for help. Moreover, he wanted to make a few additions inside the chamber to ensure that in the remote chance it was discovered, no one would ever be able to take the gold. After he explained his plan to the pandits, they heartily approved.

He chose a golden brick he found within that cave and deviously made the entrance dependent on it. He then looked around the area and found the poisonous plant he needed. He told the pandits to grind it down into a powder and bring the remains to him. He warned them to be very careful because the poisonous powder when airborne was lethal.

By late afternoon his new construction within and the careful undermining of the chamber's entrance were finished with near perfection. In the end, the two hills blended in with those around them leaving their secrets well hidden.

Satisfied with their effort, they gathered their remaining belongings and bundled them onto four mules. They dismantled the carts and as part of Tap's original plan, constructed a comfortable litter for their new Queen. The litter looked appropriate and fitting for a Queen of any age.

Tap had given Po royal silks to change into while they worked and even showed her a stream nearby where she might bathe.

When she joined them once more, she was surprised and delighted to see what they had made for her. Tap fixed her hair in a more formal style that together with a few gold accents and jewelry added to her royal appearance.

He put his hand gently on her shoulder and led her halfway toward where her family heritage was now buried in the cave. They stood in silence together for a moment looking at the new rock formation that covered the cave where the Champa treasure was buried within.

Tap bent down on his knees directly before her so she would mark the importance of what he was about to tell her. He had done this many times when he was teaching her over the years and she focused on his words.

“Remember this place, my lady. Someday you must return here. You are our Queen now. Our heritage is your responsibility, and the lives and memories of our people will be left for you to preserve for all time.”

His voice was broken, and she saw his eyes mist in the reflection of the sun.

She acknowledged his charge to her with firm lips and a solemn nod.

They turned and looked at the area of the former cave once more, but this time she studied it and recorded to memory every detail of the rock formation that guarded her family heritage.

When she was finished, he hugged her warmly and advised, “Your life is going to change now, my lady. Remember that I will always be here for you and ready to help in any way you wish. Come now, we must be on our way.”

When she turned around, she was surprised to find that every man in the group was kneeling before her, indeed with their heads pressed to the ground. She took a deep breath as she realized she was leaving the ‘little flower’ behind forever. With an almost ritual respect the guards helped Queen Po to a comfortable seat on her new litter.

They walked proudly then, escorting her back down to the plain where they had first entered the area. They stopped and took one last look, as the sun was about to set behind the temple. Po gave a tearful smile, for it was a beautiful sight. The three temple towers looked as if they were ascending gloriously to the heavens.

With no further time to waste, Tap directed the royal party of twelve guards, two pandits and one young Queen on their way following the sunset to the distant mountains and their final destination beyond. It was a hidden valley paradise called Siem Kulea. For many years, in that valley a close and devoted following of Champa faithful would prosper and live happily under the wise rule of the young Queen Dau Te Po.

In that far land, time would pass and become memories. Memories would become legends, and legends would be judged in kind.

## Chapter 2



### Chicago, 1985

People always remember their first impression of Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. Especially in the summer the view in every direction can be breathtaking. It is a spectacular stretch of downtown from the river and the terra-cotta Wrigley building, to the historic Water Tower and the one hundred story John Hancock building with its rooftop observation area. There are literally hundreds of inviting upscale shops and fashion outlets to explore along the way. It is a feel-good kind of walk.

Feeling good was just what Maisong Sambaht was doing. If you were fortunate to pass by her walking along Michigan Avenue that bright sunny day you might turn as many did for another glance in her direction. Her friendly and confident demeanor reflected her surroundings, and both were inspiring.

Ten years earlier, at the age of eleven she fled as a refugee from Vietnam on a boat with her aunt. When their boat overturned in a fierce storm, her aunt was lost. For a year, she went from one refugee camp to another until a kind elderly couple in San Francisco took her in and gave her a home. Fortunately, during that time alone she somehow learned to speak and read English well, which helped her to kick-start her education when she enrolled in middle school soon thereafter.

Academics were easy for Mai but making friends was not. There are times when children have been known to be cruel and cold-hearted. From the very start, her fellow students branded 'the new foreign kid' as an outsider. She was judged harshly because of her background at first, and then because of her superior intelligence, which she demonstrated daily in her classes. She grasped new ideas and concepts easily. She was gifted with an understanding far beyond what was proffered by the teacher or written in the books. She skipped a grade twice, first in middle school and then in high school, which only exacerbated the problem of making friends.

Perhaps it was just as well, as she came to regard her fellow students as children preoccupied with adolescent agendas for which she had little interest or time. The girls always talked about boys and boys always talked about sports. Added to this equation was the fact that she was very beautiful and very attractive to boys while girls resented her for the same reason.

It was in her second year of high school that two Vietnamese boys befriended her soon after they arrived at the school. They were brothers one year apart in age and one or the other ended up in most of her classes. The brothers became protective of Mai and from the first meeting they could be seen together whenever possible. They told her they were of Champa heritage, an ancient indigenous people who through time had migrated all over Southeast Asia.

Learning for Mai was most engaging and she eagerly devoted most of her time to her schoolwork and studies. She graduated high school at the top of her class but declined to be the Valedictorian. Mai saw the irony for her who had been a loner for one reason or another during most of her schooling to be asked to represent her class at its culminating ceremony.

She attended Stanford University on a full scholarship. During her last year, her foster parents died in a tragic car accident on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. She was alone again, and after graduation she decided it was time for a new start.

She applied and was accepted at Northwestern Law School in Chicago. Again she was at the top of her class, when after two years the money for her tuition and living expenses was depleted. She could have applied for a loan but that was not her way. In the summer between her second and third year, she decided to take a break and find some sort of employment as a source for the funds she would need to finish law school.

As she walked down Michigan Avenue, she looked forward to her first interview and was confident she was well prepared. She visually took possession of every shop along the way because this was to be her city now and she embraced every part of it.

She had done her research and was dressed immaculately in a light teal business suit that mirrored her eyes and would fit well within the corporate world she hoped soon to join.

Her delicate features, triangular face and shoulder length black hair gave her a charming and attractive look. Her smile was engaging with crimson lips and dimpled cheeks. But it was her eyes that held everyone's attention upon meeting her. They were glass in color, friendly and wise at the same time.

She was smart enough to be aware that the one area where she might be lacking was in social skills. She still had no close friends but had many acquaintances she encountered as an adult who respected her talent and abilities. She hoped her resume would give her a bridge to a new life and perhaps along the way allow her to gain some real friends. She wanted that more than anything now. She felt as a flower, blossomed and ready for everyone to notice.

Incredibly, she still had not made up her mind about what particular profession she wanted to pursue as a career. Her interests were varied and pointed in several directions. Her many talents included exceptional skills in programming in six different computer languages. She also had a unique understanding of numbers and data. She could ascertain relationships in data that gave her an advantage over most everyone, especially when programming and working with figures. She would have been welcomed in California's legendary silicon valley but she did not want to spend the rest of her life computer programming. She was more interested in the communications industry and in areas such as advertising or television. Whatever she chose, she wanted to be challenged and a part of something grand.

In graduating at the top of her class at Stanford she had accumulated many awards and accolades along the way, all of which were highlighted in her resume and accented by her two years of law school. She was positive everyone who interviewed her would be properly impressed and ready to hire her on the spot. She planned to have many job offers from which to choose.

## Chapter 3



### Chicago, 1985

Two weeks later Mai was still searching for a position that would challenge her skills, engage her interests and provide an adequate income. She had been offered several secretarial positions, but thus far she had not been considered for any position of more substance.

At the end of the day, she found herself again frustrated and weary from her lack of success. On the way to the station to board the el for a ride back to her apartment she whimsically dropped into a downtown bar to assuage her disappointment with a cold drink. She had never in her life had alcohol of any kind, but that day she decided she needed a drink.

The bar was mostly empty at that time and she sat alone. She candidly informed the bartender it was to be her first drink ever and asked what he recommended. After telling her it was on the house he suggested she try a daiquiri and she discovered she liked her first taste of alcohol.

The bartender's name was Dan and in the next thirty minutes they exchanged life stories and became acquainted. Her sense of him was that he was a good person who was genuinely interested in knowing her story. It was refreshing after two weeks when she had experienced so much rejection.

At one point Dan offered his learned advice to her. "Life is like that, my friend. It can back you into a miserable corner if you let it and it will affect everything you do. You might get the idea there's a dark cloud hanging over you. But it's just testing you to see if you got what it takes. My sense of you is that you got that and a lot more. Stop worrying. Your future is out there waiting for you. You'll find it and then everything will come easy for you. The future for you starts tomorrow and it's going to be grand!"

Dan's positive attitude made her smile and brightened her spirits. It was while sitting there that her eyes roamed to the television mounted at the back of the bar. She observed an engaging female features reporter on the afternoon news that inspired her to think there might be a place for her somewhere in the television news industry.

Dan saw her looking at the television and commented, "That's Catherine Marsh. She works at WGNR just down the street from here. I like her features a lot. She really has her act together. If you ask me, she should have her own show. I would sure like to meet her someday."

The next day, Mai made it through the application process at that same television station, and even gained an interview with WGNR's personnel director Milton Briggs. She was surprised with her unexpected progress and hoped it was not another exercise in futility. While waiting she silently tapped her finger on her leg while her foot danced in unison on the floor beneath her chair.

Briggs perused her resume with little comment other than a mumbled 'uh-huh' here and there peppered within a chorus of heavy breathing. His suit coat was thrown over a chair to the side of his desk. By the look of it she suspected he wore the same shirt the day before.

When he was done, he looked up and said, "Your resume is very impressive, Ms. Sambaht. But I am sorry to inform you that we do not have any openings for someone with your talent and

particular skills at this time.”

She gave a sigh to herself and decided this was further proof that she was going to have to find a different path on her journey to personal success. It appeared that while her attractive appearance could get her in the door, her resume placed her at a level on the corporate ladder where she was not welcome.

She offered him a smile and replied, “That is most unfortunate. I was sincerely hoping to begin my career working at WGNR. I actually thought my resume would be strong enough to merit a position as a part of your team.”

“Yes, well, we have very few openings at the moment,” he said. “You seem attractive enough, perhaps you would consider a position as a secretary or receptionist. I’m sure my assistant can find you something in that area.”

“Mr. Briggs, I came to the United States as a refugee when I was eleven years old. I was an orphan who after some time was fostered by a family in San Francisco who were kind enough to take me in. Even with that start, I graduated college at Stanford University with one degree in Computer Science and another in Communications.”

“And you note on your application that you graduated Summa Cum Laude as well,” he added. “I see you list a number of awards and accolades among your amazing academic achievements. As I said...most impressive.”

“Yes, that’s correct, and now I am ready to make a path for myself in the world of television news. I think my resume should warrant more attention than that of a secretary,” she protested realizing this interview was ending like all the rest.

Mai’s cognitive strength gifted her with a sixth sense, which aided her in judging the people she met. She could not read their minds exactly, but she could gain a feel for a person’s sincerity and honesty toward her. Everything she sensed about Milton Briggs was that he did not believe her resume or rather did not want to believe it. He had entirely no interest in hiring her.

Mai bristled inwardly, but she did not let it show. She found a smile instead to hide her true feelings. “I’m sorry this did not work out. I will not take up any more of your time.”

Not for the first time Briggs observed that she was strikingly beautiful and a few thoughts made him blush. He quickly recovered as he realized she was now the one judging him and drawing her own conclusions. He became uncomfortable before her gaze and took refuge as he collected her resume along with her application, and pushed them across his desk toward her.

He shrugged his shoulder and folded his hands over his belly in response. “I’m sorry. Even if your resume was valid, we have no use for a computer programmer at this time. We are more personal in our approach to the world around us. It is a necessary part of our daily routine. It was nice meeting you, Ms. Sambaht. I wish you well in your search for a suitable position. Please leave your resume and application with my secretary in the outer office. You never know, something may turn up in the future. Thank you, for coming,” he said politely.

Suddenly, the door to his office burst open and the same attractive features reporter who Mai had witnessed on television the night before marched in. She walked right up to Brigg’s oversized desk as if on a mission and declared, “Milton, you promised me you would hire a new producer to work with me on my projects. That was two weeks ago.”

She wore a white silk blouse with beige slacks, and appeared ready to do battle if she did not receive an adequate response.

She absentmindedly picked up Mai’s resume while she presented her demand. “I can’t go on like this. I’m overwhelmed and it’s affecting my work on camera. I need...wait...who is this?” she asked reading over the resume.



Milton Briggs perked up at the sight of the gorgeous blond features reporter who was now well known throughout the industry. "Hello, Catherine. I was just finishing this interview," he responded. "Ms. Sambaht was applying for a position here and I told her to leave her resume and application with my secretary.

"Now, Catherine, I assure you we're doing all we can to find the right person for you. But you have to be patient. These things take time."

Catherine did not respond as she continued reading over the resume and then reached for the application form. She looked that over quickly and then looked directly at Mai. "This is your application and resume?" she asked.

Mai stopped gathering her things, and looked up at her. "Yes, mam, that's mine. I've just been told it's very impressive but it seems Mr. Briggs is not interested in hiring me anyway," she commented with a glance toward Briggs. "I was just leaving."

Catherine smiled at her candor. She made a decision and said, "Milton I will continue this interview upstairs."

"Well now, wait just a minute, Catherine. I'm the personnel director and I make these kinds of decisions. You have to trust my long experience in these matters and I have already concluded this candidate would not be a good fit for us," he protested.

"Mai...your name is Mai, right?" Catherine asked turning to her.

"Yes...yes it is," Mai replied with a bright face.

"Mai, come with me. I want to talk to you and see if you are indeed as impressive as your resume. Milton appears not to know a good thing when he sees it and you may very well be just what I'm looking for in a producer."

Mai couldn't believe her good fortune. The very woman who had inspired her to look for a job at WGNR was going to interview her! She grabbed up her things and hurried to follow Catherine who was already out the door. She looked back at Briggs as she left and noted he was half out of his chair with his mouth hung open in an unspoken protest.

Mai studied Ms. Marsh from the side as they rode up to the thirtieth floor in the elevator. She thought she was even more attractive in person than on television. She wore her blond hair up and out of the way, the same style Mai had chosen that morning. Her jewelry was functional with a small gold broche added to accent her silk blouse. Mai was genuinely excited and took an instant liking to her.

Catherine led her to a small office with a spectacular window view of downtown Chicago. "This is my office, you may sit here," she told Mai pointing to the empty chair in front of the computer at her desk.

Mai settled in front of the computer and Catherine began. "Mai, as a bit of background, things are changing fast in our industry and those who want to get ahead need to be at the forefront of those changes that are going to affect all that we do in the near future. This computer sitting in front of you is the tool that will drive that change. I confess I don't know enough about how it works to make the best use of it or even anticipate the changes I have no doubt are about to happen. I see on your resume that you like to write computer programs. That's a plus for anyone wanting to work as a producer for me. I need a program that I can use to collect my interviews and organize the corresponding data. The one that some ding-a-ling in our company bought and placed on all of our computers is cumbersome and not at all intuitive. It's made for an accountant and not for a writer. I hate it and I know we can do better. Can you fix that? Can you help me?"

"Oh, I may have something already, let me show you!" Mai replied eagerly reaching for her briefcase. She pulled out a disk and put it into the front disk drive of the PC. Catherine was

surprised to see a formal Menu appear on the screen in front of Mai.

“Wait! What’s this? Where did you find that?” she asked.

“It is a desktop presentation software that I developed that makes it easier to use the program. You can see the selections offered for what you might want to do right on the menu,” Mai explained.

Catherine quickly looked over a friendly menu of options for a writer. “Mai, this seems much more practical and easier to use than what we have,” she told her. “Oh my god! It even has a spell check? May I assume you wrote this?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” Mai replied. “I should have explained that better. I do like to write programs and I think I’m very good at it. If I need something on computer that I don’t have a program for, I write one. It is not difficult for me.

“The spell check that you see is still a work in progress. What you see there took some time since a very large class of students took on the project and attacked an entire dictionary by hand. That was when I was at Stanford. But it has become very useful and it’s almost complete.

“There is a new commercial program that just came out not too long ago called Microword that is a very good writing program and it has spell check too. But what I don’t like about it is that it doesn’t connect to a database as my program does.”

Catherine sat down beside her. “The program I envision needs to be able to search my interviews and notes for connections and key words, etc. I need my interviews to be able to interact with one another. There is currently no program for anything such as that,” she commented. “One thing I would really treasure is if I had a database of my contacts with relevant data on each.”

“I have something like that feature in this program. I used it to write all of my research papers for school. It worked very well. Here, I’ll show you.”

For the next thirty minutes Mai went over the program and features. At one point Catherine replaced her in front of the computer and began using the program. “I really like the main menu. It makes it simple to use and get at the information you need. Mai...this is amazing. But OK ...now I want to send my work to the news editor to review. How do I do that?”

“Look at the top menu. Do you see where it says ‘send’? Open that and you will see a list of those you may want to send it to. Do you see where it says ‘add’? That is where you can add the names. Of course, that will remain empty until you set up a network here within the company. I know how to do that if you decide it is something you wish to do.

Catherine was fascinated. She turned to Mai and said, “Tell me about yourself. I want to know everything.”

They spent the next half hour talking as Mai told Catherine about her adventurous past. As she talked, Catherine liked her story and even took notes. With a nod she picked up the phone and called Milton Briggs in personnel.

When he answered, she told him, “Milton, I’m hiring Mai as my producer. What are we paying her?” She listened to his answer and replied, “No, no, double that. Hell, I’ll bet before the year’s out you’ll be ready to pay her much more. Trust me, Milton; you do not want to let her get away. She is the real deal and knows her stuff.” She listened for a moment and replied, “Milton, I’m telling you, we are hiring her as of now. If I have to get Howard involved in this I will, but you won’t like it. You know what happened the last time. My next report very well may be about the discrimination I have witnessed toward hiring women at WGNR, and you can bet I already have a list. Get the paperwork up to me right away. She will be working out of the empty office next to mine from now on.”

Catherine put down the phone with a satisfied look on her face. She glanced at Mai and

said, "You're hired, that is, if you want the position as my producer. Your paperwork is coming up for you to sign. I hope that's OK."

Mai smiled and observed, "You're something of a real deal yourself, aren't you? Wow! Yes. I want the job!"

"Ms. Marsh, This is what I dreamed would happen two weeks ago when I started interviewing. Thank you for taking the time to let me show you what I can do. I believe this was meant to happen. I have a lot to offer in the way of skills that I think can truly help you with your projects. I promise I will work hard and I won't let you down."

Catherine smiled. "Call me Catherine, please. Come on. It's lunchtime and I know a little place nearby where we can talk and get to know each other better. From now on we're going to be working closely together and it's important that you know me, and all my quirks. I should warn you. I decide things on the-spur-of-the-moment and act just as fast. I think I've finally found someone who can keep up with me."

They talked for an hour while they ate, which continued afterward over coffee. People in the small restaurant came and went in that time and they barely noticed. The more Mai learned as they talked, the more she wanted to know. On the other hand, Catherine, the professional and very skillful interviewer kept Mai talking about herself, her past and her amazing array of skills. They became real friends in that short time.

Because Catherine gave her this opportunity and believed in her when so many had brushed her off, she made a personal commitment then and there to dedicate herself to Catherine's success. That was going to be easy because Mai genuinely liked her.

At one point Catherine told her, "I have a very close friend who's in town from St. Louis today. He's a creative director from an advertising agency. I have known him since high school and many regard us a couple. I don't know. I really like Mark. That's his name, Mark Doyle. But I don't see us getting married or anything like that. He's attending a photo shoot with a local photographer named Jack Largent today."

She paused a moment holding her thought. Mai sensed she really liked Mark but there was something else Catherine wasn't telling her.

"Will you see your friend Mark while he's in town?"

"He's taking me to dinner tonight with some of those from the photo shoot. Hey! I want you to come and meet him if you're willing. I guarantee you'll like it...it should be great fun," she said.

Mai was surprised at the invitation and she was eager to accept. She looked forward to meeting Catherine's friends and making some new friends of her own. She was beyond ready. It was time and she was tired of being on her own, alone, and in this huge city. Yes, she wanted friends and lots of them!

Catherine did not realize Mai was already convinced. "You have to come, Mai. I insist. You will also get to meet the photographer, Jack Largent. He's one of the best advertising photographers in town.

But then Mai remembered her circumstances. "Well honestly I would love to go. But I confess my reluctance is based on the fact that I don't have anything to wear. I'm afraid you're talking to a pauper. I spent all of my meager funds just to be presentable for these interviews."

Catherine nodded and made a decision, "Okay. We can go back to the office, you can sign all of your paperwork and we can see about getting you an advance. With my approval it shouldn't be a problem. I want you dressed properly if you're going to work for me. You'll be making a lot of contacts for me and recommending those I need to interview as part of your assignment. Heck,

you may be able to write it off on your taxes. I know I do. First impressions are very important in our business.

“Since you’re starting work tomorrow and I’m between stories, we can take this afternoon off and go shopping. I know just the place. While we’re back at the office, I will update my secretary. This should be great fun.”

Mai let Catherine’s enthusiasm envelope her and then she had a thought. “Sure,” she replied. “But I wonder if afterward we might stop at a bar I know and have a daiquiri? I want you to meet one of my new friends. He’s not going to believe what has happened. I can’t wait to see his face when he meets you!”

