



## Chapter 1

# A New Beginning

**I**t was a cold, crisp day in Texsun City. Mai Pham sat in her room, listening to the crashing waves at the nearby beach. She was excited. More than excited. She was elated. She'd never felt this way before.

After Christmas break there was usually nothing to look forward to. Just the monotony of school. The kids at Summit Middle School were always so excited when they returned after the holidays. Mai thought about the

delight in their voices as they caught up with friends and bragged about their gifts and vacations.

But Mai's life wasn't set up that way. Her family didn't even celebrate Christmas. Friends were minimal.

This year was different, though. In the fall a new student transferred to school: Carson Roberts. Mai knew she had found a kindred spirit. Quiet Emma Swanson felt the same way. Neither fit in with the popular cliques. But the three girls had created an unbreakable bond.

This semester Mai was happy to return to school. She was ready to see her new friends. They made her feel free, even though her parents, especially her father, kept her on a short leash.

Mr. Pham ran a tight ship. She dared not cross him. The first time she had ever disobeyed him was because of Carson. When

the girls' PE lockers were broken into in the fall, her father ordered Mai to never hang out with Carson again.

But Mai went straight to her mother that very day, barging into her master suite. Her mom was in her enormous closet, choosing an outfit for a church meeting. You really couldn't call it a closet. It was more like another bedroom. It was that impressive. There were at least one hundred pairs of designer shoes, glass cabinets for her handbags, and a jewelry island in the center of it all. There was even a comfortable sitting area.

"Mom, Father is being unreasonable. You know I'm not to blame for my clothes being stolen. I did nothing wrong!" Mai had said.

"Calm down, Mai. I've already spoken with your father. Everything will be just fine," her mother had said. "I'll handle him."

"You didn't have my back at school. You never stood up for me."