

Chapter 16

America the Beautiful

"Greetings to you, Father, and Merry Christmas," Phil said when he realized it was Mark Roades calling. "I hope you're not calling to cancel coming to the farewell dinner my wife and I are hosting for Rosemary after her last day."

"No, not at all. I'm looking forward to it. But I do happen to be calling about Rosemary. I ..."

Phil interrupted him. "Actually, Father, you've called at a pretty bad time. I'm expecting a houseful of guests for a party any moment now. As a matter of fact, Rosemary is coming after work. She's one of the invited guests. You're more than welcome to join us, too."

"Why, that's mighty kind of you. What's the occasion?"

"Oh, my wife's from Vietnam. Today, she became a United States citizen, and we've just returned from the swearing-in ceremony. It's a big day for her. She's so excited and so proud. We're having a celebration party."

"That *is* special. Absolutely, I'll stop by for a short while and give my congratulations. I have your address from your invite to the farewell dinner, so I know where you live. I'll discuss what I was calling you about when I see you."

As soon as they hung up, Phil turned around and saw Linh high on a ladder.

"Linh, be careful," he yelled to his daughter. "We don't want you falling."

"Stop fussing, Dad," she replied, pinning the red, white, and blue bunting into a corner of the drapery's valance, completing the loop around the room. "I'm not a kid anymore." She stepped down from the ladder and hugged her father.

"I know," said Phil. "I just wish I'd been there for you when you *were* a kid. To see you grow up." They both looked around the room and admired their decorations. Apart from the bunting draped from the ceiling around the room, "Old Glory" was a dominant presence in the corner. Cardboard

replicas of the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, the White House, the Washington Monument, and Mount Rushmore all adorned the mantel and the end tables. Small red, white, and blue foil stars were scattered across the main coffee table. A stack of drink napkins sporting the words “God Bless America” were placed strategically on both ends of the wet bar.

Father and daughter walked into the kitchen to look at the buffet spread they’d prepared for their guests. It was simple Americana, more like a Fourth of July picnic, but it was what the guest of honor wanted and what she enjoyed most. A big bowl of potato salad alongside a colorful dish of fruit salad was positioned at one end of the table. A large platter of fried chicken occupied the center with room for the hot dogs behind. Linh lifted the lid of the large saucepan to check on the corn on the cob and began extracting them with the tongs. She placed them in a bowl at the end of the table alongside the rolls, hot dog buns, condiments, and the platter of deviled eggs. At a nearby table, patriotic-colored plastic knives and forks were spread next to the alternating red, white, and blue paper plates with matching napkins.

“Dad, why don’t you go and see what’s happened to mother? She should be here to greet the guests.”

At that moment, Kim-Ly appeared in the doorway. “I *am* here. How do I look?” she asked, striking a pose. “Is it a little too much for the occasion?” Her diction was almost perfect, and Phil marveled at how adroitly she had mastered the language through sheer hard work and determination. He looked at his wife. *She’s as beautiful as ever.*

Linh eyed her mother’s floor-length blue skirt, white shoes, and short-sleeved, red-sequined top. The earrings in the shape of the Statue of Liberty did not go unnoticed, nor did the charm bracelet with the differing landmarks of their adopted country. “Just a bit over the top, Mother, considering the food we’re serving,” Linh offered drily.

“I think you look splendid, my sweet,” Phil said proudly extending his arms to hug her. “This is *your* party, *your* day and you can do what *you* like.”

“That’s what I thought. After all, I’m an American now.” She beamed. “That means I have the freedom to express myself as I please.”

They all laughed.

The doorbell rang heralding the arrival of the first guests. Kim-Ly went to greet them, while Phil started the music. He had recorded a special CD of patriotic songs, and the sounds of “America the Beautiful” welcomed the first group of guests. There was much excitement and joy as Kim-Ly welcomed the friends she had made since arriving in America. Many of them were from the hospital where she had worked as a nurse for most of the time.

Their friends continued to arrive, and the party was in full swing. Everyone was savoring the food, and Phil made sure that the hot dog tray was filled, as he boiled more on the stovetop. There was much merriment. After most people had eaten and seemingly enjoyed the buffet, Phil finally stopped the music and drew the crowd’s attention. The doorbell rang, and Linh opened the door to let Mark Roades in. She motioned to him to be quiet, as Phil was about to give a toast to his wife.

“Dear Friends,” Phil started, his arm around Kim-Ly’s shoulders. “Thank you for being here tonight to celebrate my wife’s citizenship. I must confess it took Kim to teach me to appreciate America—the country where I have taken so much for granted. Kim was overwhelmed when she came to Las Vegas from Vietnam. It was a huge adjustment for her. Yet, she embraced our country, our culture, and our way of life. It was she who reminded me of the many blessings we have here in America. I’ll always be grateful to you for that.” Phil looked at Kim-Ly lovingly. Then, as an afterthought, he added somewhat impishly, “Well, that and a few other things.” Everyone laughed. “I’m so proud of you,” he continued. “And I’m equally proud of my daughter.” Phil beckoned Linh to join them. “Thank you, Linh, for taking a few days off from your important work at the United Nations and for flying in from New York to share this special day and be here for the party.” The assembled crowd applauded.

“Hey, what was the swearing-in-ceremony like, Kim?” someone from the crowd yelled.

“It was amazing. I have a certificate, and I actually received a letter from the president welcoming me to the United States,” she boasted. People gasped in awe. “How many of you here in this room can say you have received a letter from our president?” she continued proudly, as she held it up for all to see. “We all said the Pledge of Allegiance, and they played lots of American songs. It was very solemn, but I enjoyed it very

much. All my life, I didn't know anything about "the American Dream," and now, like many immigrants from all over the world, here I am living it." She was radiant as she looked at her husband and daughter. Everyone applauded again, and some whistled loudly expressing their happiness for her.

"Wait here, honey," Phil commanded, as he and Linh disappeared into the kitchen. Hidden in the back was a cake in the shape of the United States. They hurriedly lit a few candles, and Phil carried the cake into the living room, singing "God Bless America" as he went. The guests joined in and a few wiped tears from their eyes as he placed the cake on the coffee table, in the middle of the room.

Kim-Ly blew out the candles, and Linh brought in plates and forks and proceeded to slice the cake, handing out pieces to those nearby, asking them to be passed around. Phil started the music back up and went to see who had arrived as he was about to make his speech.

"Ah, pleased to meet you, Father Roades. Thank you for coming. Let me introduce you to my wife."

"Oh, we can do that shortly," he interjected. "Let your wife enjoy her moment in the spotlight. I am curious, though. Your marriage certificate lists her name as Kim-Ly, yet you called her Kim."

Phil laughed. "Yes, her real name is Kim-Ly. It means Golden Lion. But as she has become more Americanized, she prefers to be called Kim. It's so much easier for everyone."

"And the young lady you introduced, is that your daughter?"

Phil could see the confusion in Mark Roades's eyes. "Yes. I was separated from Kim at the end of the Vietnam conflict. I didn't know Linh existed. She tracked me down. It is a long story, but through my daughter, I reconnected with Kim. Neither of us had married anyone else. When we first reunited, I wondered whether I was in love with just a memory." There was something wistful in his voice.

"In love with a memory of Vietnam?" asked Mark.

"No, not Vietnam. My memories of the loving and comforting times with Kim. My times with her were a touch of sanity in a crazy world. But we're so very happy together

now—here.” He paused as if lost in thought, and then continued. “Linh means “Gentle Spirit” in Vietnamese. My wife and daughter could also have their names reversed,” he chuckled, as he looked on with admiration at his family. “Kim is a gentle and caring spirit. She works at a hospital and is very devoted to her patients. She worries about them and cries when she loses any of them. Linh is indeed a golden lion. She is courageous and fears nothing and no one. I’ve been truly blessed, Father. And, by the way, talking of blessings I wonder what happened to my good friend, Rosemary?”

“I’m sure she’ll be along later. Shortly, after we spoke, she said Buster was not looking well, and she was taking him to the vet. She probably just got a little delayed there.”

“I hope nothing happens to that dog. Rosemary would be devastated. Oh, and what was it you wanted to discuss about Rosemary?”

Mark Roades proceeded to unveil the plans for Rosemary’s party.

Phil was excited. “A surprise party. What a fantastic idea. Absolutely, you can count us in. We’ll call the Bella Del Mundo when we receive the official invite and tell them. It would be nice if Linh could come, as she was there at our wedding—odd as it sounds. The UN sends her all over the place. We never know where she will be. Maybe she’ll be close by and can join us.”

“We’ll need to come up with a reason as to how I came to be here tonight,” Mark said.

“Not a problem. I’ll just tell Rosemary that I called to check that she was definitely coming, and you answered the phone, and I invited you. I’m sure the Lord won’t mind a little lie under the circumstances.” He smiled. “Come, let’s get you some food and you can meet Kim and my daughter.”

Mark followed the host through the room. Sounds of Lee Greenwood singing “I’m proud to be an American, where at least I know I’m free,” started to emanate from the CD player. A couple of people started to sing along. The guests began to link arms, as more and more people joined in.

As the crowd sang heartily and joyously, Phil looked at Kim-Ly who was smiling and seemed so radiantly happy. She was thoroughly enjoying her celebration party and was

obviously grateful for her life in her adopted homeland. He wondered whether she ever thought about her prior world in Ho Chi Minh City, now thousands of miles and a lifetime away.