

2. Phailin's Prank

Storm clouds rolled in from the Western Mountains with the rumble of thunder, but Phailin didn't notice. She was far too busy watching the other girls from her hideout in a tall teak tree.

She'll never see it coming, she thought to herself, grinning and squinting her eyes to focus on the girl walking in front.

Kneeling in the tree, Phailin was as quiet as a stalking tiger. In fact, she imagined that she was a tigress, crouched and invisible, stalking her unsuspecting victims, ready to leap from the tree and pounce on them.

Phailin was always hiding in trees, ducking behind boulders, lurking in dark corners, spying on her classmates and playing practical jokes. However, the other girls wouldn't call them jokes because they never seemed to laugh. But Phailin didn't care, of course, because she always laughed.

This prank she had been planning for almost a month, one long month since her fourteenth birthday party—a surprise birthday party.

Between the dark mountain peaks and black clouds brewing behind her, orange rays from the setting sun squirted out like a squashed mandarin.

Phailin tightened her grip on the thick, green vine. *Just keep coming*, she thought, *you're walking right under it*. She breathed slowly, controlling her excitement. She knew the importance of control. Her pranks, especially this one, depended on patience, practice and precise timing. And if she missed, ... well, Phailin never missed.

That's it, Waan. You're going to get yours. Phailin kept thinking about her target from her camouflaged hideout, thirty feet above the ground, in a tall teak tree disguised within a long grove of other tall teak trees. Most of the trees shot up over 100 feet into the air and lined the mouth of a canyon. A thin, tired path wound its way through the trees where the three girls of the Mien tribe were walking as they had done so many times before.

They didn't notice Phailin up in the teak tree and had no idea of the true, dark nature of the storm brewing over their heads. They had arrived in the high, green meadow earlier in the afternoon in order to pick flowers for their mothers. Now they were heading back through the canyon in the Minor Mountains to a much larger valley on the other side that was home to the girls' tribe.

Phailin let her mind drift from the girls below to thoughts about her tribe and especially her mother and father on the other side of the canyon. They were probably sitting quietly on their mats, her mother preparing dinner like she did every night and her father reading old books in the last light of the day. *I don't want to end up like my parents*, was all that she could think about.

The people of the Mien tribe spent their days harvesting rice in swidden-fields that they slashed and burned in order to plant. Unfortunately, these fields would provide a fertile growing season for only a few years. Then the tribe would have to move on to another valley, cut down

and burn another strip of land, and build another step-home on yet another hillside. The Mien were a proud and industrious people, but to Phailin her life always seemed to be moving on, always moving on to another something.

She preferred to spend most of her days on the high meadow side of the canyon, running through the knee-high emerald grass, swinging in trees like the monkeys, forging paths up the rocky slopes of the much larger Western Mountains and talking to her only true friends: the elephants.

But up in the teak tree, hand over hand and on the tips of her toes, Phailin inched forward on the thick limb. Suddenly another groan of thunder broke the silence of the cool, fall afternoon. She took her eyes off her target for a split second to look over her shoulder—a thick darkness was approaching from the Western Mountains at the other end of the meadow, and fast.

“You’ll wait, storm!” Phailin mumbled gruffly but clearly under her breath. She turned again to the girls approaching her trap. Her greatest prank was about to befall, well, actually fall on her greatest enemy, Waan.

And, for just a brief moment—and unknown to Phailin—the storm did wait.

“I can’t believe what Teacher said. Can you, Mali?” Waan asked covering her mouth to be polite. Waan was always polite.

The three girls from the Mien tribe bounced happily toward the grove of teak trees on the path through the canyon. They had been picking orchids for a class project. They were to dry the flowers overnight, press them between wooden blocks at school the next day and then glue them to rice paper with tree gum so they could present them as gifts to their mothers.

They had dared to venture to the far side of the meadow right up to the base of the Western Mountains where a small stream flowed from a dark cave. By the entrance to the cave, orchids of every variety grew hanging from rocks and branches. The girls had spent the afternoon searching for and gathering the flowers. But not one dared enter the cave. Good Mien girls didn’t go into such dark places as a cave.

On their way back to their tribe, each girl carried a woven basket full of flowers. The setting sun ignited the reds, oranges, blues and purples. All the colors of the rainbow reflected off the girls’ cheeks already flushed with the cold and short hike through the meadow.

Waan, the prettiest of the group, walked in front. She had found the most rare and beautiful of all orchids, the dragon orchid. Its eight, ruffled petals in red and white stripes opened like a dragon’s mouth. Waan thought it was the most beautiful flower she had ever seen. She touched one of its long, silky petals.

“Oh, Waan. We’ve always thought those things about Phailin,” Mali replied with more openness. “Teacher was just saying what we’ve all been thinking.”

“Yes, but to *say* something is different than to *think* something. Don’t you agree?” Waan still spoke in a very quiet voice.

Mali tried to answer. “I don’t—”

“But Teacher did not say those things to US!” Ratana interrupted. “We should NOT have been listening to the Council. I feel very ashamed for what we did.”

Waan felt badly, too, and rubbed the palm of her free hand on the folds of silk at her side.

The three girls were dressed in traditional Mien clothing. A black cloth headdress stood high on their foreheads, pulled tightly past their ears, and draped down their backs. Each wore a black, silk dress with a pink scarf tied around the waist and seven bands of sky-blue cloth—the symbol of their particular tribe—laddered up each sleeve. Colorful, silk embroidery covered the entire

dress. Some had flowers, others had scenes of mountains, still others had animals. Every dress was unique to the girl who wore it. But everyone envied Waan's dress.

Also, they all wore silver necklaces of tiny rings interlocked one to another. The girls of the tribe were always adding rings that they received at holidays, birthdays and even for getting good grades or learning a new skill. Waan's necklace had the most rings by far.

Looking around the field, however, the darkening sky suddenly worried Waan more than sneaking behind the Council's hut and listening in on their elders.

"As I was saying," Mali continued, having no clue as to what was happening above her head or in the trees. "I don't think there is a difference between saying a thing and thinking a thing. Some people just have the courage to speak out loud."

"Like you, Mali?" Ratana jokingly added. "You always blurt out what you're thinking."

"Be quiet, Ratana!" Mali snapped.

"Maybe you should think twice before opening your mouth, Mali," returned Ratana.

"And maybe you should just not open yours, Rat..."

"Please, don't!" Waan turned and stopped the girls from arguing and from walking. "We should all think about what we did."

"But Teacher was speaking to the Council. She didn't mean to hurt her. The Council only means to help Phailin. Their decision must be right. Yes, I think their decision must be right. They have good intentions," Ratana added. "My momma says that it's our intentions that make us who we are."

The girls stood in silence thinking about their own intentions as the sky grew darker over their heads.

Waan felt even worse now. She felt her intentions weren't so good. After all, it was her idea to sneak behind the Council's hut and listen in during the meeting. But she thought they would only be speaking about the New Year's celebration festival. The tribe was putting on an elaborate play about how their people left China, headed south over many mountains and arrived in the green hills of Siam. Waan had tried out for the lead role, and her teacher was making the decision about who to cast. Waan was only hoping to find out who got the part. She really didn't know they would be talking about Phailin, and certainly didn't know they would be saying those things.

Finally, Waan broke the silence, "Perhaps we could help Phailin. We could become her friends. She'll need good friends."

Up in her hideout, Phailin could not hear what the girls were saying about her. She only watched and held the vine with tight fists. She looked down the length of the green rope, draped from tree to tree, leading to a limb right over the path where Waan, Mali and Ratana were walking.

Even though her family was not poor, Phailin just didn't look as pretty or well-groomed as her classmates. Her hair was always sticking out of her headdress. She had no embroidery on her dress which she knew made her mother feel ashamed, and she wore no silver necklace as she never cared enough to collect silver rings.

She just didn't want to learn the things the other girls did. She couldn't sew or cook or dance. She didn't like her studies, being in plays or collecting flowers. She was always getting in trouble from her mother and her teacher for wearing pants like the boys. But to Phailin, it was just easier to climb trees in pants than in a dress.

There were two more things, however, that made Phailin feel even more different from the others. First, she believed she could speak to the elephants. She never admitted this to anyone,

not even her mother. But recent events with a new, silvery-gray friend had confirmed it. It was her big secret! But she really believed that the elephants listened to her, obeyed her. Sometimes, if she listened really closely, she even thought they spoke back to her. They were the only friends she had.

The second difference was that she was the only person in the whole tribe with blue eyes. In fact, her name, Phailin, meant sapphire! Her eyes glowed like tiny, blue sapphire jewels set in her faint yellow skin. Not even her mother or father or grandparents had blue eyes. She never told anyone about the elephants, but she could never hide her eyes!

But more than anything she hated Waan. And she was going to get Waan for bringing the worst gift to her fourteenth birthday party last month. Phailin didn't even want to have a party. It was her mother's idea to invite her classmates over for rice cakes dipped in sweet mango syrup. She felt awkward accepting gifts from kids that barely spoke to her in school. Waan came from the wealthiest family in the tribe but brought, at least in Phailin's blue eyes, the cheapest gift.

Come on, keep walking, Waan. You can't delay your punishment!

Phailin gently pulled the vine tight.

"I don't know about being her friend," Ratana said. "She spends all her time with the elephants."

"She smells like them, too!" Mali said.

Ratana laughed at this. Then felt ashamed. "Stop, Mali! You shouldn't say that." Ratana now scolded.

"Well, I only mean if she cleaned herself up a bit, took a bath, combed her hair, that sort of stuff, it'd be easier to be friends with her."

Even though Waan knew it was true, she glared at Mali for saying it. "Come on. We should be getting back to the village."

The girls started walking again toward the narrow canyon to their village, their eyes looking down at the ground. They did not notice the two threats beginning to take shape above their heads.

"And you still don't know if you got the part," Ratana said to Waan.

"I don't think I want the part anymore," Waan replied.

The storm couldn't hold back its anger any longer, and suddenly a clap of thunder echoed through the valley.

The sound was so loud that it shook the tree Phailin was hiding in from root to limb. She had to grab onto the branch above her head just to keep from falling out. Once she recovered her balance, she realized that the key to her greatest prank had slipped out of her hand. She looked around. The vine was barely hanging on the end of a limb far below her. Her heart beat so fast she could feel it thump against her chest. *I've pulled off pranks like this before, a hundred times before,* she thought. *Why am I so scared?*

Another growl of thunder came from the far, far west, beyond even the Western Mountains. It came from the very Himalayas! The thunder came from a place Phailin had never even dreamed of.

Phailin turned and noticed the black clouds gathering and swelling far off in the horizon where the sun was shooting its last orange rays. The gray-black clouds thickened and seemed to be growing, as if they were dark animals eating the blue sky and drinking the setting sun. *I won't let the thunder stop me. I've spent too much time in preparation. I will get Waan if it's the last thing I ever do!*

The girls in the field turned and looked behind them at the same time. Their mouths dropped open, and their eyes bulged.

“Did you hear that?!” Waan asked with a quivering voice.

“Hear that?! Do you see that?” Ratana yelled pointing to the west. “The Gods must be very angry.”

“It’s just a storm. They always come from the west. The Council would have said something if the Gods were angry.” Mali tried to calm her friends down, but even she was nervous.

“Well, I still think we should get back to the village.” Waan said as she started walking faster.

“Yes, I don’t want to get my dress wet,” Mali said as she ushered the other girls past her. In fact, Mali, who was the bravest of the girls, had never seen such dark clouds. One cloud was far bigger than the others, and growing quickly. It seemed to be growling like a great black bear as it wrestled with the other bears, like it meant to scare the others away from whatever it was protecting. The cloud would reach out a great paw and swipe at the others as it grew.

Phailin saw the girls looking scared. *Just wait and see how scared you really get, Waan!* Phailin swung from branch to branch like a monkey, sometimes hanging from her hands, then her knees, flipping over backward and then forward, until she reached the branch with the vine-rope stuck on it. She surprised even herself how easily she moved around the tree.

“Got it,” she said softly. She looked down to see if the girls noticed her swinging through the tree. They walked quietly but quickly below her, and they had not noticed a thing. *They must be too scared to notice!*

At the other end of the vine, Phailin had carefully placed a bucket full of warm, steamy elephant dung knotted between two branches. With one pull, the bucket would tip over and spill its smelly contents all over Waan. Her beautiful dress with all its colorful stitching would be splattered in brown manure. Her silver necklace wouldn’t be so shiny either. *That would teach her a lesson for the cheap gift!*

Phailin reeled in the slack in the vine like she would the fishing line on one of her many fishing trips with her father: slowly and steadily, letting it loose if it pulled back, then reeling it in some more.

A few raindrops fell from the sky. The drops were as big as mango nuts and hit the ground with a thud. The sky grew darker.

Waan spoke with a tremor in her voice. “Let’s hurry!”

Ratana was even more scared. “I don’t like this. Something isn’t right. I can feel it.”

“It’s just a storm, Ratana. I promise.” But Mali really wasn’t sure either. She had never seen such blackness in the sky. And it seemed to be taking shape. Mali couldn’t take her eyes off it. Then she just stopped cold.

Waan was the next to notice. She didn’t want to turn around but felt an invisible pull on her shoulder, like those times when she knew her teacher was watching her from behind while doing her calligraphy forms. She turned and she did see. Trying to break the storm’s grip, she pleaded, “Please, Mali come on! The rain is coming.”

Mali stared at the sky, feet stuck in the softening ground. The thick, black clouds had taken the shape of a man’s face, an evil man’s face that had no eyes. His mouth opened like a large

black cave. Mali was almost paralyzed with the fear. But it wasn't exactly a face, Mali thought. No, it was...

"MALI! COME ON!" Waan yelled into Mali's pale face as she shook her friend's shoulders.

"Yes, yes, let's go."

Mali and Waan dropped their baskets of flowers, orchid petals blowing everywhere, bunched up their dresses in their fists and began to run down the path that led back to their village. Ratana was already way ahead of her two friends.

The rain came down hard now and pelted the red and white striped dragon orchid laying on the ground until it melted into the mud.

That's right, run, run right into my trap! Phailin stared at the girls coming towards her. *Of course you're scared of a storm.* Just a few seconds and her plan would be complete. As she tightened her grip on the vine, thoughts of her grandmother invaded her mind.

Her Grammy Lin had died the same day as the day Phailin was born, fourteen years and one month ago. And that's the only thing Phailin knew about the day of her birth. Her parents never spoke about it. Sometimes Phailin even thought her mother blamed her for her grandmother's death, that somehow Phailin's birth somehow took Grammy Lin's spirit.

To the Mien people, ancestors were worshiped as gods and protectors of their families on earth. It was even common for the spirits of ancestors to visit their relatives in dreams to give words of wisdom, advice, comfort, and sometimes even warning. Phailin had never been visited by a deceased relative. That was, not until her fourteenth birthday last month. That night her Grammy Lin came to her in a dream—the very day of Grammy's death and Phailin's birth. And she had been coming back to Phailin's dreams every night since.

She thought about talking to her mother about it but was too scared. The dreams were hazy, and her grandmother was tense but not angry. Her grandmother was telling her something in the dreams, like instructions or something. But when Phailin awoke the next morning, she could never remember what her grandmother had said. She could only remember that she had had the dream.

Sitting in the tree, however, with storm clouds growing and just before pulling the vine-rope to her greatest prank, Phailin suddenly remembered the dream. No, she wasn't remembering the dream. She was hearing it! Hearing her grandmother's voice! As clear as if her grandmother were sitting right next to her. Yes, somehow over the thunder—or *in* the thunder?—Phailin was hearing Grammy Lin's voice! The grandmother she had never met and barely knew anything about was speaking to her. The same voice as in the dream. Phailin recognized it immediately. She knew it was her grandmother. Only this time Phailin wasn't asleep.

The voice scared Phailin, and she almost forgot why she was hiding in a teak tree during a thunder storm. With every word the thunder grew louder, as if the thunder was competing with her Grammy Lin, trying to drown out her words. Yes, the thunder was battling her Grammy Lin.

No, no, stop. It's just the thunder, she thought. *Your Grammy Lin is not speaking to you. You're in a tree and it's just a storm. You're not asleep. YOU'RE NOT ASLEEP!* Then Phailin yelled out loud: "YOU'RE NOT ASLEEP!"

This time it worked. The voice listened. The voice stopped. And Phailin remembered where she was—in a teak tree. She looked down from her hiding place just as Waan was about to run underneath the bucket.

Phailin stared at her enemy and gently pulled on the vine just to tighten it. She had placed a small stone in the path directly underneath the bucket so she would not miss her target. Phailin was very smart. She knew how to play jokes on people. She would not miss on this one.

Waan was just a few steps away from the stone. Phailin grinned in excitement.

Waan was two steps away. Phailin tensed every muscle in her body and got ready to pull on the vine.

Then, just before Waan placed her foot next to the stone, a loud crack of thunder rang through the valley. The roar was so loud it could actually be felt and seen moving through the air. It came crashing down from mountaintops far, far away like large tumbling stones, an avalanche of visible sound.

The ground trembled like an earthquake. The tree Phailin was crouched in warbled like it was made of rubber.

The girls walking along the path fell to their knees. They covered their faces in horror. The thunder seemed to never end, and the dark clouds, bitter cold and full of mist, flooded the green valley. The storm just growled and howled like an animal in pain, relentless and suffering.

Phailin heard her grandmother's voice just as she slipped and fell out of the teak tree:

"PHAILIN! IT IS TIME TO FIND HIM! YOU MUST FIND HIM!"