

1.

Sibyll shivered in several long, hard, sweaty convulsions as she huddled up into her own body under the covers of her sheets. Somewhere outside the perimeter of her consciousness, the high-pitch horn of an alarm clock peppered the silence of her bedroom. She didn't need it, but it sounded out anyway until her fumbling right hand found her iPhone on her bedside table and her thumb slipped across the bottom of the screen in a short, defiant dash.

She was getting sick. Maybe it was all the drugs, which had kept her up for the last four days straight. Maybe it was that right now she needed her parents more than anything in the world, when they were far away in Malibu at some movie star's birthday party sipping old-fashioned Martinis on the beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean while it was three in the morning in her luxury apartment on the banks of the dirty River Bund in Shanghai, where she was all alone.

These things didn't help. They definitely didn't help at all. But it was more than that. It was because she knew that out there, there was a video of her. It had her naked body on it. It had her whole shivering little girl demeanor on it. It had her face on it. And it was all in the hands of a bunch of people determined to use it against her.

She had often whined to the envious crowd of friends and family that doted on her that she was fast becoming the most photographed girl in the whole of Shanghai. Now there would be an entire thirty minute video of her ensconced in a sado-masochistic orgie for a billion plus people to get off to instead. Never mind that she had screamed out for them to stop once it had got going. She had obliged them in the first place. Face, or *mianzi* as the Chinese called it, was a stubborn sticker, and once it

was torn off the blank canvas that was your reputation, the marks it left on the surface still stuck to your fingers with the remnants of its gluey backside.

The thoughts made her wretch. This wasn't a pleasant wretch, however. It wasn't like when she wanted to wretch just after she had a line of coke. It wasn't going to bring on that warm calm, followed by that razor-sharp, skyscraper-high mental agility.

Cocaine was like a love affair: there was no alternative emotion that went with it other than an all-consuming obsession. On the surface it felt great, like the most exhilarating rush of pleasure and passion combined into a single moment in time. But underneath the high lurked a more demonic reality held together by a thread of lies and poor decisions made in a state of exaggerated confidence. You always imagined that you could handle it all, until the day that you couldn't.

Sibyl turned over in her bed. Somewhere, in the ten minutes she had managed to slide into a sort of semi-unconsciousness, she had peed herself in her bed. That was the other thing about coke: it was a dirty intoxicant, forcing you into involuntary actions against your free will. And then, one day, it burnt through the wall of your sub-conscious, so that the hell-fire that was the same secret magic that had once made you feel victorious now ensconced you in a wall of flames, surrounded by only the most vulgar of the sins that you had committed.

She rubbed her eyes; the soft secretions of water from her tear-ducts stung from all the drugs. But she wasn't crying; she'd done plenty of that already.

Her Louis Vuitton suitcases were stacked upright on the other side of the room. They had all been neatly packed for her, all three of them, by her servants earlier in the afternoon when she had been over at Jasmin's house getting high for a final time before her solo send-off. On top of one of the suitcases her personal maid,

Ma Ai, had set out her checkered maroon-and-baby-blue Prada Gruvee handbag with charcoal-grey straps and zipper. *Nice choice*, she thought to herself absent-mindedly.

Sibyll was a straight-A student, the best of the best. She was Dame of the Shanghai Sorority, and on her way to becoming an A-list celebrity in China. She spoke English, Mandarin, Cantonese, French and German, all fluently. Bright, alert, together, on top of the world: this was what she was. She was what every girl in her teens and twenties – and not a few in their thirties – wished they were too. She had everything that every Shangainese girl dreamed of: she had it all.

And there was a video of her out there somewhere, forcing her to give it all up.

Unlike on her matinee sojourns to work at Theo Farrell, the world's most exclusive advertising agency, which she made in the luxury of her chauffer-driven car, it was humid and sweaty in the back of the cab she was riding to the airport in. Under his breath, she could hear the cab driver mouthing a string of vulgarities in Cantonese. He probably assumed she couldn't understand them.

*Rich mongrel white-devil trash, pig-fucking wench – look at her monkey-brained hairstyle ...*

It was classic working-class Chinese racism, directed at her equally divined Chinese and American biology. At least he didn't recognize who she was, that was the main thing. To have taken her limousine would have alerted the media when all she wanted was to get out of here quietly, without Shanghai's poor excuse for celebrity reporters following her with their trillions of inane questions about why she was absconding at the height of her fame.

Outside, there were no people walking around right now either at this hour, except for the few wandering peasants on the hunt for leftover food and illegal work, hurriedly dashing in and out of the scaffolding of tomorrow's gleaming skyscrapers that were under construction like wild creatures navigating a concrete jungle, trying to avoid the plain-clothes government spies that would sweep them away quicker than they had made passage into it.

Once she had remarked to her cousin Chanel that she felt an affinity with them, scrambling into the back seat of her limousine behind its blacked-out windows just to avoid the nocturnal predation of the new class of Chinese tabloid journalists that hunted her from exiting expensive nightclubs. But spying them like this, a pang of unfamiliar guilt surged up inside her. It was a horrible, truly delusional analogy, for

their realities were as far from one another as was the sun from Pluto, the vast chasms between their existences separated by the casino-effect wrought upon the country in the past two decades of capitalist cronyism.

As it whirled passed, this city, which it had always seemed a stretch too far of her imagination to call her home now seemed to her like one of the many half-flaming cocktails served late into the night in the numerous bars spilling out into the square of the open air nightlife district in Xin Tian Di. Enormous flashing red-and-white triangles and long, dimly-lit opal-tinted rectangles, and flat, partially-lit blocks of various geometrically-flattened cube-like configurations cast against a uniform layer of deep-space-blues dominated the core spectrum of her optic senses. Somewhere in between these broader shapes were a whole circus-parade of the circles and dashes and lines of *pinying* characters, flashing out unchanging weather forecasts for the week ahead and the censure-heavy good news of the country's rising dominance over the rest of the world, intercepted by commercials for Chinese-built automobile loans and one-child family life insurance packages that whirled endlessly on-and-off the gigantic electronic billboards, multi-billion dollar annual revenue pit-stops for Asia's array of golden-oldie brands gone boldly contemporary in the *blink-blink-blink* of the dragon's eye.

Until recently, she had been the face of many of those brands herself.

But not any more. That was all going to be ancient history now.

Sibyll Jiang YuZheng Lincoln was once the face of Shanghai high-society. It was the name that everybody wanted to be associated with. Now it would be the name of just another half-Chinese expatriate living unbeknownst to her new friends in a kind of exile in Dubai, where she would take up her new role at Theo Farrell as the ad agency's Director of Europe, Middle East and Africa operations without a fuss, and

where she would try and make a sort of peace with herself by putting her head down and getting on with building a new life for herself without causing a stir.

There were a few who might recognize her, but only in the way that expatriates all vaguely recollect each others' names from their myriad cornucopia of past experiences spent wandering their working lives across the globe in the nomadic search for new friends and newer opportunities. It was the exact same way people back in the States recalled the names of the various domestic rural skiing and seaside resorts where they had once holidayed long ago as kids, a momentary recognition flashing across their eyes followed by a badly-disguised instantaneous searching of their heads for the finer details that never came.

“That was Mama,” said Chanel, replacing her rose colored Virtue embossed in a petal composed of twenty half-carat diamonds on the oversized crystal coffee-table. “Sibyll’s plane left last night. Her parents still don’t know a thing – Mama’s just telling her what she’s telling everyone else: that she got a job offer she couldn’t refuse in Dubai.”

Her friend Jasmin knew that Dame Ming-hua, China’s richest woman and the first woman to be pegged as the communist party candidate for the PRC’s Premiership one day, was telling her daughter more than this, but she said nothing.

“Which is a little strange, but it’s not so far fetched, I suppose – I mean, *Co-Director* of Theo Farrell at twenty-two years old; that’s got to have taken a lot of *huilu* somewhere along the line. It can’t all have been Sibyll’s doing, certainly. My dear Mommy, she’s so much stronger than I am or ever will be.”

“Rubbish,” said Jasmin sweetly, sucking-up to the heir-apparent of the Shanghai Sorority, but agreeing silently that yes, the creation of a brand new management position for such an inexperienced hire inside one of the world’s largest American multinational advertising empires must have required a hell of a lot of *huilu* – bribes, as they were known in Mandarin.

She went on praising her friend, who was right now her one-way ticket to the top of the Shanghai social pyramid.

“You’re incredible. You’re three years her junior and already you’re going to be Dame *yourself* –”

“It’s not a done deal yet,” said Chanel, but both of them knew it was. It was the only way the Zheng family could conceivably avert a calamitous loss of face. Chanel’s mother, the indomitable Dame Zheng Ming-hua, had just about managed

to make it look like Sibyll had a genuine reason to defect to Dubai so suddenly, but even so, the rumor mills were in full swing now. Everyone was wondering what it was Shanghai's most powerful and prestigious family had done so wrong for its heir-apparent – the twenty-two year old beauty queen, society girl, face of local advertising and future *politico* Sibyll Jiang YuZheng to disappear all of a sudden off the face of the earth. No mind that she had received a huge promotion, unprecedented in the sixty-five year history of one of the world's largest ad agencies: she had had it all already here in Shanghai; here in China, the only place anyone wanted to be these days. And she'd given it all up, without so much as a statement to anybody, all to apparently pursue the corporate ladder in Dubai. Had she offended someone high up in the Communist Party? That was the question on everyone's lips right now. If so, good riddance to her future career as a policymaker in China. And that was a big, big deal, too: for as the only one of the Zheng family who had both American and Chinese nationality, it was obviously the intention that Sibyll would be the uncontested caretaker of the country some day; the only one who could manage to straddle the increasingly complex process of Americanization that China was undergoing these days.

With Sibyll's resume including a period as Dame of the Shanghai Sorority, a position which itself was elected by an anonymous, silent committee inside the Chinese government, and her status as niece of a woman who would then be an ex-Premier of the PRC, herself a former Sorority Dame, it would be a done deal. That had clearly been the plan, at any rate.

Chanel knew about the sex tape, because her mother had told her.



In that sense, the Zheng Family wasn't in the clear yet— the video still lay out there, in the hands of their enemies. And there was no way to tell whether that video was the only copy, anyway.

As Chanel's best friend, Jasmin knew that something was amiss – she knew that Sibyll wasn't leaving because Theo Farrell had made her an offer she couldn't refuse. Still, Chanel hadn't told her friend what the actual reason for Sibyll's rash departure was: why her mother had been frantically making phone calls and pulling strings for the past 24 hours to get her cousin on the fastest plane out of Shanghai. She probably assumed it was something to do with Sibyll's drug problem, which had become more and more a liability lately, thought Chanel. In a very real way, that was the right answer, too – after all, Sibyll would never have gotten herself – and the family, *damn her!* – into all this mess in the first place had it not been for her ongoing battle with amphetamines.

Chanel heard Jasmin's familiar squeaky whine, which always indicated the vocative.

"Sorry, Mindy, I was miles away. What were you saying?" she said, using her friend's pet name, which her father, the banker Duke Overbagh, had invented for her long ago. Jasmin hated that name, but had grown to tolerate it when it came out absent-mindedly, and only when it was used by *very* close friends or immediate family members, such as was the case here.

"I think that we should make plans for the Sorority just in case it does turn out that you are appointed Sorority Dame, though, Chanel. You know how Dame Ming-hua can be, after all. She's going to want a thorough plan, and she's hardly going to accept the explanation that you can't have possibly seen your promotion coming."

Although Chanel knew that this was her friend's way of working her way in to one of the two privileged spots available as her First Lady in the sorority, Jasmin had a point. If Chanel *was* the one appointed as Dame of the sorority and it turned out that she had nothing specific or original planned to propose for the future of Shanghai's most elite society – especially given the state of current events in the family – her mother would be nothing short of highly displeased. She might even reverse her decision: although highly unlikely, Dame Ming-hua could be most temperamental like that. Whatever the case, it wasn't worth chancing.

“Well, Jasmin: it goes without saying. My number one to the Dameship is none other than First Lady *Jasmin Overbagh*.” She let it sink in, expected though it probably was given Jasmin had been her best friend since the two girls were in Kindergarten.

“*Ooooooohh*, Ma'am Chanel, thank you, thank *you!*” said Jasmin with a little squeal.

“You can call me Ma'am *only if* it's me who gets to be the Dame.”

“Of course, I'm sorry. But it *will* be, I just know it *will* be. *It has to be!* You've been a member of the Sorority since you were sixteen You're Dame Ming-hua's *daughter*, for Chrissake, and you've said yourself how much she's been doing to smooth this over! Lixue Lai is theoretically in the running I suppose, but –”

“That's the other thing – Lixue Lai will be gone. I am striking her from the sorority!” said Chanel firmly.

Jasmin's surprise was hard to conceal. “You mean, she's getting –”

“Yes, she's gone.” To get rid of a sister was highly unusual, even in an unprecedented circumstance such as this one. Usually it meant that the sister had transgressed a fundamental rule of the society, or had lost such a degree of face in

society that she had become a liability to the *mianzi* of the sorority itself. “I’m within my rights to expel her, and as such, she is no longer a sister. She can’t be trusted – that’s all I want to say about the matter. Let’s not bring her up again, OK?”

Jasmin nodded her acknowledgement. Since Chanel couldn’t tell Jamsin the circumstances surrounding her cousin’s abdication, she wasn’t in a position to explain her reasoning behind wanting Lixue Lai out of the Sorority. Lixue Lai – literally, *beautiful snow* in Chinese – had been a close confidant of Sibyll’s. For that reason only, people might think that Chanel wanted to replace her with her own, personally-loyal lackey in her place. But that wasn’t it.

The real reason was that Lixue Lai was the twenty-four year-old younger sister of Mason Feng Lee (Mason “Sharp Blade” as the Chinese translated his name, all too appropriately). Together with her twenty-six year old cousin, Konrad Von Kyburg-Wintethur, who she deeply, deeply despised, Mason was the owner of HaiSoc.com, formally known as the Shanghai Social Service.

In a country where the barriers to entry in terms of starting a social network were as high as the government approval you were granted to start one, unlike in the rest of the world, very few online social platforms existed. That made the social networks in China much more powerful – and comprehensive – technological interfaces than their international peers. It was the reason that most American technology companies didn’t stand a chance breaking into the domestic mainland Chinese e-commerce space: the dominant platforms were already here to stay. The Shanghai Social Service was one of just a handful of these oversized, all-powerful social networking platforms, offering Shanghai users in addition to their own social networking pages their daily fill of the news, entertainment (including online gaming, which was another social network of sorts), music, e-mail, online payment and

messenger platforms. What's more, HaiSoc was expanding outside Shanghai soon, into other areas of the mainland. Soon, when you made a phone call, used a credit card to make a payment for something, read the news, played a game or did anything of a handful of things online it would be some version of the HaiSoc interface that would capture the activity.

Obviously, all this was why Sibyll had chosen Lixue Lai to be her First Lady when she had been appointed Dame two years ago. But the more Chanel thought about the threats to release the file with her cousin in an S&M orgie, the more she realized that to make good on those threats even just a little, you'd have to get past China's strict internet censorship regulations, and you'd have to have a hell of a lot of distribution advantage. The only person she could think with those advantages at her disposal, including the kind of proximity to her cousin that enabled the recording of the sex act in the first place, was Lixue Lai. Of course, in her own defense, Lixue Lai would probably argue that for these reasons it *was least likely to be her* who was making the anonymous threats; besides, what did she have to gain? While she might not ever stand to be Dame of the sorority, since she was required, as per the society's rules, to resign in a little over a year when she turned twenty-six, as Jasmin pointed out, in the event of the abdication of Dame Sibyll, First Lady Lixue Lai was hardly likely to be considered a real contender against her rival Second Lady Chanel Minzhen Zheng, who was the daughter of the most famous former Dame of all the sorority. Still, the whole tawdry affair seemed a little too close of a call to make Lixue Lai completely innocent, and that meant that Chanel would see to it that she was gone.

“Also, I plan to create some new rules. It’s time a new sense of order prevailed among the sisters,” said Chanel. “I find it totally ridiculous that we sisters just trust one another, without having anything to hold against one another as *insurance*.”

That also took Jasmin by complete surprise. “What d’you mean – the Sorority is *all about* trust. Isn’t that kind of the point?”

“Trust, yes, but not *blind faith*. At least it won’t be under my tutelage. I plan to make sure that all new entrants to the sorority are completely vetted, properly this time, and that in particular, the Sorority Dame holds a certain – grip – over the other sisters. That will mean you too, unfortunately,” said Chanel. “But there should be a certain price for climbing this high, I think,” she added after a little consideration.

Suddenly Jasmin wasn’t so sure that being a part of the Shanghai Sorority was all she had hoped it would be, and yet there was no turning back now, not at this stage. Not now that she had effectively accepted Chanel’s offer to be her First Lady.

Dame Ming-hua listened to her father, the senior party official Zheng Chao, explode over the phone in a cascade of blasphemies and said, “Ni bu shuohua name duo de xiedu, Baba.” *Please don't speak so many blasphemies, Papa.*

But that only brought on his wrath all the more. “Ta bushi bun ...” *She isn't ...* he began earnestly, his tone suddenly descending into abject revile. “She’s not even one of them stupid inbred stacks of meat as are most of those rich kids today, filthy fornicators of livestock that they are! So why does the dog-fucking whore have to go and star in a porn movie? Do you know the mianzi this has cost us inside the party now? I’m not talking in Shanghai, where no frog-humping son of a bitch knows what’s decent any more, so corrupted are they by money, money, money! But I’m talking in Beijing, right where I am sitting now, with our dignified party members! And they’re all asking me, *Honorable Chao, when we bestowed such honor on your oldest grand daughter by making her the Dame of the Shanghai Sorority, why did she run away at the first opportunity she was given by an American marketing company to earn American dollars?* Shove all the pants in the universe up my ass, it's like having a shit-throwing contest with a monkey!”

“Papa, accept my apology if the decisions I made hurt you in any way. I didn’t consider that Theo Farrell was an American company; I just tried to tie up a plausible explanation as fast as I could before Niece Jiang’s orgiastic romp had a chance to tear down the edifice we have built: indeed, the whole Zheng family-name was at stake. We had only a day to make the arrangements,” Dame Ming-hua explained wearily, in one of her rare displays of humility that were exclusively reserved for her father and only a handful of senior party members, all of whom were his closest friends. “But the

threats were real. We know they were real because the video footage was sent to us from inside the American consulate. They planned to use it against us – *against China even!*”

“Those foreign devils, the pig headed rotten eggs! They can go eat shit!” yelled Honorable Chao. “Maybe that might slim them out a little after too many hamburgers and pizzas, and clean out the shit-odor of the smelly slave wench-whores who they pass off as their wives!”

“Papa – I don’t mind your swearing so much but remember when you are doing so that your two graddaughters are both children of white devils! To call them smelly slave wench whores whose cunts need a cleaning is unbecoming.” Dame Ming-hua’s regained sense of entitlement was all the more formidable because of her staunch observance of moral codes: she never swore, she never put down her opponents – she never allowed anyone to move her to an irrational place out of emotion. Thus her firmness suddenly silenced her father.

“I think it's better we change the subject for now until we learn more. We have people looking into this. We think that coming from the US Embassy anyway, this is highly likely to be an American plot.”

“I’d love to see some of these so-called modern Han Chinese usurpers face eight generations of their ancestors!” said Honorable Chao. “They’d show them a quick ride to hell! Piss-ants! Just because we worked harder than anyone in this God-forsaken world to get what we have ...”

“That may be so,” Dame Ming-hua said, both intercepting and cutting short another of her father’s oncoming tirades. “But we have to keep working at it. I am just the daughter of a party official still, a successful business woman, and my daughter,

who is the one we must rely on now, is barely nineteen years old. When can you get the committee to swing the endorsement for my daughter?"

Honorable Chao sighed dramatically. "I don't know. It won't be as easy as you think, you know? Now that grand daughter Jiang has left the seat wide open, what do I tell them in our family's defense? *Oh, I'm so sorry it didn't work out, but her piss-whoring cousin, my other mongrel Chinese white-devil grand daughter wants a go at the job if that's OK?*"

"No, you tell them the truth *without telling them all of it*. Tell them that young girls will be young girls. That young girls make mistakes, and that there was a mistake made. That's all you say, nothing more. It'll cost us *mianzi* but it's up to Chanel to earn that back for us now. Then tell them that as a gesture of reconciliation over the debacle with Niece Jiang, subject to a satisfactory conclusion of affairs by close of business today, Zengky Bank will open every member of the committee a ten year unsecured line of credit for an amount up to ten million US dollars at our branch in Switzerland, repayable in local currency at the end of the term. They won't refuse my daughter's appointment then."



Dame Ming-hua looked her nineteen year-old daughter up and down as she strode up to the entrance of her formidable office, and thought, not for the first time, how despite being three-quarter Chinese, how much like her father – who was half Swiss – she looked. Perhaps it was just the fashion – the dark bangs tinged with a caramel-red, the *haute couture* synthesis of her simple Elie Saab spaghetti-strap together with the voluminous soft-metallic azure-charcoal Armani pants and simple, thigh-high open-toe Chanel boots – but that wasn't just it. It was the European pronouncement of her nose, she figured, which was so much more apparent when she was wearing all her make-up.