



## CHAPTER 4

# Sharlot

The car ride takes forever. Literally. Once we get to the heart of the city, we run into traffic that would put LA's to shame. We're stuck for so long that I grow tired of drawing and pack up my tablet, taking out my phone instead. Thank god I've got my spare battery with me. We're fourteen hours ahead of LA, so it's now almost two a.m. there. I aim the camera out the window and take a photo, then post it on Insta Stories with the caption "Loving the big city!" It only makes me feel worse. But it's not like I'm going to post it and say "Stuck in purgatory for the rest of the summer yay #fml." That wouldn't be cool. Instagram is for toxic positivity only. Twitter, on the other hand . . .

Nah. Not in the mood for that hellscap. Instead, I text Michie, telling her I miss her, which is true, at least. Then I open my text thread with Bradley. The last few texts have all been from him.

**Bradley [07:34PM]:** Hey, I know u broke up with me and stuff, but like . . . r u ok? No one's heard from u

**Bradley [07:34PM]:** I'm so worried, I hope ur mom hasn't done anything bad

**Bradley [08:11PM]:** Text me when u get this

And so on and so forth. My thumbs hover over the keys for an eternity, my heart thumping wildly. I should reply to him. The poor guy deserves better. I mean, is there another human as decent as him out there? I literally dumped him, and here he is, concerned about my well-being. I hadn't even told him that I'm being kidnapped to Indonesia.

But every time I think of Bradley, I think of me falling apart in front of him like a complete idiot. I think of him seeing me unmasked, without the layer of acidity I always wear, and the thought is like an ice pick stabbing straight through my brain. I shake my head a little and shove my phone back in my pocket. Texting Bradley is definitely something that needs to be done, but not after a twenty-hour journey with my mother.

Eons later, as I'm nodding off, Li Jiujiu announces, "Here we are!" in the type of voice that makes me think he really needs us to see the entrance to the driveway. I jerk awake and – okay, it actually is worth seeing. Apparently, Li Jiujiu lives in an actual mansion.

"Ah, the old house." Mama sighs happily.

I stare at her. "What do you mean, 'the old house'? This is where you grew up?"

"Yes, this is Ah Gong and Ah Ma's house. Was," Mama adds, her expression turning sad for a moment.

“But we’ve remodeled it, obviously,” Li Jiujiu says.

I have to tell myself not to gape as the ornate front gate swings open and we go into the driveway. Dang, Mama’s family is loaded. How come I never knew? I mean, in LA we’ve always been comfortable in a very firmly middle class way. “Are we Crazy Rich Asians?” I blurt out.

They both throw back their heads and laugh. “No,” Ma cries between peals of laughter.

“Of course not!” Li Jiujiu says. “We are just average Chinese family. Qing Pei, you not teach her about Chinese Indonesian history?”

Mama sniffs, and I grind my teeth, biting back yet another acidic retort.

“Ooh, okay, Li Jiujiu tell you later. Come, now we go inside and you have shower, everything, then later dinner.”

As soon as I get out of the car, I go to the back to get my luggage, but Li Jiujiu tells me not to bother and ushers me inside the mansion. The interior of the house can only be described as a rococo explosion. Everything is exceptionally ornamental and theatrical – the pillars drip with bouquets of flowers and birds carved painstakingly out of stone, the walls have layers and layers of curved molding, and the furniture is all curved with dainty legs and bursts of intricate engraving. There are huge, elaborate chandeliers in every room – the foyer, the living room, the dining room. I feel as though I’ve just stepped into an opera house. It all feels a bit ornamental, though, like a stage set.

“Ah, Qing Pei!” a woman calls out from the other end of the house. She hurries over with a big smile and outstretched hands.

Mama's smile is a bit less open. "Sao sao, you look very healthy," she says. I estimate that *sao sao* means something along the lines of "older brother's wife." Chinese family titles are painfully specific, and I have no idea what I should call my maternal uncle's wife. Maybe I can just call her Auntie.

"Aduh, no need to call me that, just call me by my name." The woman air-kisses Mama and then turns to look at me. When she speaks to me, she does so in English. "You must be Sharlot. How lovely to finally meet you. I'm your auntie Janice." Whoa. Her English is flawless, with a vague British accent. I mean, it's better than Mama's, and Mama has spent half her life in America. I sneak a glance at Ma, and sure enough, she's noticed how much better Auntie Janice's English is. I can tell by that tiny pinch in one corner of her mouth. I try to feel smug about it – hey, it was Mama's idea to come all the way here – but I can't. Instead, I'm almost overcome by an urge to pat Mama's shoulder. We're not really the hugging type. With some effort, I squash the urge and give Auntie Janice a smile big enough to rival hers.

"Hi, Auntie Janice. It's nice to meet you."

"Gosh, aren't you pretty?" she says, pinching my cheek like I'm all of five years old. "Oh, there's Kiki. Kiki, come. KIKI. KIKI."

I turn, expecting a Pomeranian, the way Auntie Janice is calling, but it's a girl around my age.

"This is my youngest, Kristabella," Auntie Janice says, pulling Kristabella and positioning her in front of me like some mannequin. "Kiki, this is your American cousin, Sharlot."

Kiki gives me a once-over and I have to stop myself from

quailing under the scrutiny. It's weird: in America, Asians from Asia are called FOB – Fresh Off the Boat. It's a disparaging term, but everyone in school uses it, especially the Asian Americans. And right now I feel like the out-of-place FOB. Which I guess, technically, since I literally just got off a plane, I am? I really did not see this plot twist coming.

Kiki isn't gorgeous, but she's the kind of cool that would make people stop mid-sentence and stare as she walks by. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's her clothes – she's just wearing a button-down and slacks, but somehow they fit her so well they look tailored, clinging to her silhouette without being tight. Maybe it's her asymmetric bob that falls elegantly over one side of her face. Maybe it's her flawless skin. Whatever it is, she oozes effortless perfection, and I am seriously regretting my choice of fashion. The ripped jeans I thought would symbolize defiance and coolness now make me feel totally dumb. And my shirt, after my long-ass journey, is not faring well at all. Rumpled, stained, probably has an intense stink too.

“Hi,” I manage to finally say. It comes out as a squeak. “I'm Shar.”

“Kiki. Come, I'll show you to your room.” Like her mother's, Kiki's English is perfect, with a slight British accent.

I look back at Mama, for once seeking a bit of comfort from my mother, and find her thin-lipped. She gives me a little nod. Go. I'm not sure what comes over me, but I reach out and give her arm a squeeze before I follow Kiki.

We go up the richly carpeted stairs, and Kiki points at the first door. “This is you. I'm next door, and my parents' room is at

the end of the hallway. Your mum's room is that one." She points at the door across from mine. Mum. I've never heard anyone call their mom "mum" outside of a Netflix show.

The inside of the guest room is just as lavish as the outside. There's even a four-poster bed. And, of course, another chandelier. Do they sell these things at every street corner or something? I mean, there was one above the landing of the stairs and there's another out in the hallway.

Kiki catches me gaping up at the chandelier and scoffs. "They're Chinese-made, so they're dirt cheap. The wiring isn't great. We need to change the bulbs, like, once a month. Everything in here's like that. Looks great but is actually a cheap copy."

"Oh, okay." I'm not really sure what to say to that. I look around and see with a start that my luggage has been placed here. I wonder if Kiki's going to go so I can unpack and then go shower the smell of airplane travel off me and – I don't know – probably have a good cry or something. Instead, she crosses the room and plops onto a sofa right next to the picture window.

"So, what's your story, Shar? Is that short for Charmaine? Charlene?"

"Sharlot."

Kiki nods. "Did she spell it correctly?"

I bite my lower lip.

"Because there's a Michael in my class," Kiki says with a grin.

"Michael? That sounds fine."

"It's spelled M-a-i-k-e-l."

"Ah." I sigh. "She didn't spell mine correctly, no." I walk over

to my luggage and unzip it pointedly. This should be a hint for Kiki to leave. It's not that she's being unpleasant, exactly, but I'm so tired, and I am desperate for a few minutes to myself. What time is it in LA? Maybe Michie – Oh. It's around four a.m.

“Mum says you got knocked up.” She says this so casually, with her pert little chin in her pert little hand like she's asking me about the weather.

I straighten up so fast I get dizzy. “Excuse me?”

Kiki shrugs. “My mum. She says you were sleeping with some American boy and got pregnant, that's why you're here.”

“Jesus.”

“Not true?” Kiki gives me that calculating glance I'm fast becoming very familiar with. “You don't look pregnant.”

“I'm not – god. Fuck your mom.”

We both gasp. I didn't mean to say that. Oh my god. What is wrong with me? Why do I do this? Why am I all fight and no flight all the time?

But then Kiki's mouth quirks into a grin, and before I know what's happening, she's laughing uproariously. It feels like the first true thing I've seen ever since I got here, and the relief is so immense it floods through my entire body and I start laughing too.

“Oh my god, I can't believe you said that!” she cries between cackles.

“I know, I'm so sorry.”

She shakes her head, still laughing. “It's fine.” She takes a deep breath and composes herself. “If it makes you feel better, I don't think Mum believes it herself. Well, actually, I don't know.

I never can tell which lies Mum believes and which ones she pretends to believe just so she can tell everyone about it. She's a bit of a c-u-next-Tuesday, you know?"

Whoa. Okay. And here I thought I had a difficult relationship with my mom. But I have never called my own mom – or any other woman – the c-word and I have to say, it's pretty shocking hearing it from someone who looks like Kiki. I plopped down on the sofa next to her.

"So. Not pregnant. Why're you here?"

I shrug. "Am I not allowed to visit my mother's homeland? Don't tons of our cousins visit here?"

"Yeah, the ones in the US and UK come back once a year, usually. Ones in Aussie come back twice a year. But you," she says, pointing a finger at me, "have not set foot in this country in the entire seventeen years you've been alive. So everyone is just a tad curious about why you're suddenly here."

This sends a shot of dread crawling down my spine. "Everyone?"

"The family. You know."

"I don't know, actually. Um. How big is it again?" I mean, I know Mama has six siblings, and each of those siblings had more than two kids, and some of those kids – my cousins – are grown-up and have gotten married and produced their own kids . . .

"Big. Last I checked, there are sixteen of us in our generation and – I don't know – maybe seven in the next gen? I'll have to check if Ci Genevieve's given birth yet."

Sixteen of us. Fifteen first cousins. Good lord.



“And they’re all wondering and, like, making up stories about why I’m back here?”

“Not all.” Kiki rolls her eyes. “I mean, some just don’t care. Like Ci Genevieve, she’s all about her firm. And her babies. Ah, good ol’ Ci Genevieve, always making the rest of us cousins look bad. This will be her third child, you know, and she still hasn’t taken a single day off work.”

“What does she do?” I vaguely know of a family business in . . . real estate? Plastics? Pipes?

“Private equity. She didn’t go into the family business. She’s making it all on her own and setting the bar way too high for the rest of us.”

“Ah.” Great, so the only person who doesn’t care is some ancient overachieving cousin. “So, Genevieve doesn’t care –”

“Cici Genevieve. You can’t just call her by her name, that’s so rude. She’s older than us by like, fifteen years.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. It’s like this all over Asia – age matters a lot, so if you’re older, the younger person needs to call you by a title and definitely not just by your name. “So Ci Genevieve doesn’t care, but everyone else does?”

“Yeah.” Kiki looks closely at me. Way too closely.

“You’re really different from how I thought you’d be.”

I shift uneasily, unable to tell whether she means it as a good thing or a bad one, but before I can ask, she springs off the sofa and tells me to get some rest before dinner, then leaves the room. And just like that, I’m alone, feeling emptier than I have ever felt in my life. It’s not just the long journey, it’s that I’ve returned to my mother’s homeland to find that I’m a complete stranger, an

outcast even, and there's something so painfully lonely in that realization.

Tears prick my eyes. Before I can stop myself, I reach for my phone and send a WhatsApp message to Bradley. Just two words: *Save me.*