★

"Is it just me, or is this bullshit?"

The ducks sit on top of a large metal grill, a skinny rectangle as long as a pool table. Glowing coals underneath. The duck at one end is crispy brown, like Peking Duck. Which I love, but who knows how long it's been sitting here? Moving down the row, the next duck is . . . I don't know, boiled, maybe, the flesh a little grayish. The one after that is raw, I think, its feathers plucked, the naked skin yellow and pimply.

Harrison Wang shrugs. "As a piece, I think it's not terribly sophisticated."

Harrison, who knows from sophisticated, has dragged me along to this art opening. Some new-artists collective way the fuck out in Tongzhou, an eastern suburb of Beijing, in a patchy area of old red brick buildings and white-tiled storefronts between high-rise developments where the buildings are named "Rotterdam," "Bordeaux," and "Seattle."

I mean, Seattle?

The opening is in a tumbledown warehouse across the ring road from the fancy developments, behind a row of cheap restaurants, electronics stores, foot-massage joints and

"barbershops." 拆—*chai*, the character for "demolish"—is already slapped up with white paint on the exterior walls.

Inside, it's a dirty concrete slab, some lame performance pieces, big acrylic paintings with a lot of naked butts, cartoon farts, and McDonald's references. It's freezing, which is why I was drawn to this stupid duck thing in the first place, because the lit coals make it warm. Guests and artists mill around, drinking Yanjing beer and eating *yangrou chuanr*, which normally I'd be all over, but the meat on these is so small and gristly that I wonder if it's actually mutton and not dog instead. Or rat.

I was born in the Year of the Rat, and eating my birth animal seems like it would be bad luck. So I stick to the beer.

"Why are we here, again?" I ask.

"I'd heard good things about the painter," Harrison says, flicking his hazel eyes at one of the giant canvases, one where a fat naked guy whose face is done up in Peking Opera makeup lies sprawled across a red Ferrari, his guts spilling out of his sliced-open stomach.

"Really?"

"I agree with you, it's disappointing."

I hold my hands over the grill. They're red with cold, throbbing like I've had them dipped in an ice bucket. I should have kept my gloves on.

Harrison doesn't seem cold. He's wearing a knee-length coat, black, some kind of soft, thick wool, and a black-and-red cashmere scarf. He looks like the centerfold in some men's fashion shoot.

He's my boss, sort of.

I manage the work of a Chinese artist. An important one. Which is pretty funny, considering that I know fuck-all about art. Which is why, I guess, Harrison keeps trying to get me to learn.

"This duck thing is lame," I mutter.

The next duck, predictably, is a dead one with all its feathers still on. Just a whole dead duck. Lying on the grill. Long neck stretched out at a weird angle where I have to think, Oh, they killed it by breaking its neck. The exposed eye looks like dead, rubbery plastic. Some feathers have fallen onto the coals. They smell like burned hair.

"But why is it lame, Ellie?" Harrison persists.

"I don't know, because it's a bunch of dead ducks lying on a grill," I say.

Except the last one isn't dead.

It's wrapped in Saran Wrap sealed with duct tape. Hardly even struggling by now. Lying on the grill, making little duck noises, you can't even call them quacks. Shuddering.

"This is fucking disgusting."

"You don't think that it is perhaps a statement on the reality of what we consume?" Harrison asks mildly. "Stripped of its packaging?"

"I don't care."

I'm going to do one of two things. I'm going to run out of the room, or I'm going to pick up the duck.

I pick up the duck. It quacks and convulses in my arms.

"Hey!"

Somebody—the artist, I guess, some tall guy with glasses, wearing a green Mao jacket over a Polo shirt, a real one, with the little horse (I think it's supposed to be ironic)—comes running over. "You can't do that!"

"I'm responding to the piece, asshole."

He tries to grab the duck, and I kick him in the shin.

"*Saobi laowai!*" he yelps.

"Yeah, your mother, whatever." I've been called worse.

The duck squirms in my arms.

A couple other guys coming running over, and suddenly it seems like most of the crowd has turned toward us.

Hey, it's a better show than the art.

"How much for the piece?" Harrison asks.

"What?" Asshole Artist stutters.

"How much for the piece?" Harrison pulls out his wallet. It's this beautiful soft leather thing that's thin enough to disappear in his back pocket. And yet I'm sure it holds plenty of money.

THAT'S HOW WE END up at a veterinarian's office in Sanlitun with a dehydrated, malnourished duck.

"Stay overnight, I think she is okay after that," the vet says.

Afterward, we go to a rooftop bar where the "mixologist" does a pretty good margarita.

"There's a wildlife sanctuary in Yanqing County that I think will take her," Harrison says.

I stare out the window. There's a great view from here of Sanlitun Village, this upscale shopping mall with edgy smoked-glass buildings, overpriced hamburger restaurants, and all kinds of luxury shops including an Apple Store, where people line up and riot over the latest iPads.

"Thanks," I finally say.

Harrison shrugs. "You were right. It was bad art."

# CHAPTER ONE

I SERIOUSLY NEED TO get out of Beijing.

There's the fact that the air is trying to kill me. No joke. The American embassy over in Chaoyang does readings of the air quality in Beijing, since the Chinese government doesn't, or won't reveal the results anyway. A while ago it was so polluted that they ran out of normal descriptions and came up with one of their own, so what went out over Twitter was that the air was "crazy-bad."

Thanks, guys. Remind me not to breathe.

There's also the fact that it's been another long winter, and while you think I'd know what's coming after three years, it still takes me by surprise: months of wind so cold and dry that sometimes I feel like I'm breathing razors. Now that it's the last day in February, temps are getting up above freezing at least, but it's still the kind of cold that settles into your bones and makes my leg ache even more than it usually does.

My apartment's comfortable. There's a central furnace that controls the radiators in the living room and the two bedrooms; the enclosed balconies provide a buffer against the chill. I broke down and got a cheap flat-screen at Suning, and I have a stack of DVDs from my favorite DVD store off Andingmen, every

American movie or TV show you could want. I've got take-out menus from half a dozen restaurants, and right at the end of the alley there's a great jiaozi place and some snack stands, plus there's a tiny store about the size of my bathroom that sells toilet paper and Yanjing beer and a bunch of snack foods, including my favorite spicy peanuts, that's just across from the entrance to my apartment complex.

So it's not like I really have to leave my apartment all that much right now. Or go very far if I do.

It's just that I can only take so much of my mom without a break, and I've about reached my limit.

"Ellie, do you know where's the best place for me to find peanut butter?" she asks from the doorway to my bedroom. "And chocolate chips?"

"Any of the foreign supermarkets'll probably have them," I say. I'm sitting on my bed with my laptop propped on a pillow on my legs. I don't really look up. She's always asking questions like this, and I admit I tune them out a lot of the time.

"Really? Because I went to . . . what's the name of that French one? Carrefour? And they had peanut butter, but it was chunky and I need smooth. And I didn't see any chocolate chips at all."

"I don't know," I mutter. "You could always buy chocolate bars and hit them with a hammer."

"I guess I could."

Now I do glance away from my screen. There's my mom, her streaked, bleached hair rising in a halo of static, wearing a Sunrise T-shirt (I'VE FOUND MR. RIGHT AND HE'S PERFECT! ISAIAH 62:5) and sweats, solid through the middle like a pound cake, the bramble-rose tattoo above her elbow sagging a bit, which is what happens to a tat inked twenty-five years ago.

"Aren't you cold?" I ask, because even with the radiators on I'm wearing a sweatshirt.

She snorts. "Not right now. I've got my own heat." She mimes fanning herself. "Hot flashes."

Like I needed to know.

"The thing is, I want to make my special chocolate chip cookies for Andy," she continues, cheeks flushing.

And that's when I know I've got to get out of Beijing: *That nice Mr. Zhou next door* has become *Andy*.

Given my mom's track record with men, no good can come of this.

"Maybe try Walmart," I mutter, and turn back to my laptop.

I LOVE MY MOM.

Seriously, I really do. She did the best she could do with raising me, which maybe wasn't always very good, but she comes through when it counts, like after I got blown up in the Sandbox, for example, leaving my leg busted in too many places to count and the rest of me not much better.

It's just that a month now, living in my apartment in Beijing? That wasn't what I had in mind when she said she wanted to come and visit me.

"Just to see how you're doing," she'd said, "since you don't have time to come home."

This of course was a lie on my part. I didn't want to come home. Long story.

After a couple of weeks, where I did my best to show her the tourist sites—the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall, the Silk Market for fake Prada, and the world's largest IKEA store—she showed no sign of going anywhere, other than to the guest room in my apartment by the Gulou subway station, which used to be my office. I finally asked, "So, Mom, when's your flight home again?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "It's really up to you."

"What about work?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated. As I recall, she twisted her hands together. "The job didn't really work out."

IT'S NOT HER FAULT, I tell myself now. She worked hard for years. It's not her fault that the US economy is in the toilet, that she's fifty-one years old and no one wants to hire her for anything. Not her fault that Refinancing Roulette didn't pay off. The condo was a shithole anyway. Sometimes it's even sort of cool having her here, like when she makes tacos, cooking being an activity at which I suck.

But I seriously need some away time from her right now.

"Don't talk to me about Jesus," I said about three days after she got here, Jesus being one of the things that we used to have in common, but that pretty much got blown up along with the rest of my life, in Iraq. Mostly she's been pretty good about it, but every once in a while Jesus slips out.

For example: "You know, that nice Mr. Zhou next door belongs to a church. And I think it's Christian, more or less. They worship Jesus anyway. He invited me to attend their service. Would you like . . . ?"

"No thanks."

Like I'm going to go to some weird-ass Chinese underground house church, featuring Brother Jesus Christ of the Righteous Thundering Fist, or what have you.

Like I'd set foot inside Sunrise, for that matter.

Sunrise is the church that my mom and me used to go to in Arizona. It's a big church, in this fake-adobe complex that always reminded me of an Indian casino. But I still used to believe in it all. Take comfort in Reverend Jim's air-conditioned sermons. Snap my WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? rubber bracelet against my wrist when I needed an invisible helping hand.

When people talk about how your faith gets tested, they always say that trials make your faith stronger. What they don't say is that sometimes faith just dissolves like desert sand between your fingers.

"Do you feel like going to Walmart?" my mom asks. "You know, you could use a few things for your kitchen. You don't have a single spatula."

It's fucking cold outside, and so far the lack of a spatula does not seem to have negatively affected my life. "Sure," I say anyway. "Just let me finish some emails."

I should get out of the house, I tell myself. Two P.M. and I've done nothing today but sit on my ass, surf the Net, drink coffee, and eat spicy peanuts and shrimp chips.

It's right about then I hear the underwater gurgle signaling that a contact of mine has signed onto Skype. I don't bother to look who it is. I do have a couple of emails to answer: a request from a San Francisco gallery for a couple of Lao Zhang's paintings to exhibit for a show titled *A Remix of Progress: The Disjunction of the Status Quo*; somebody named Vicky Huang representing some Chinese guy I've never heard of, Sidney Cao, claiming he's a big art collector who wants to arrange "a private viewing" of Lao Zhang's work, and Lucy Wu wanting to know if I can make her opening in Shanghai on March 12. I guess I should do *something* productive today. That is, other than buying a spatula.

I decide to answer Lucy first. Sure, I'll go to her opening. She usually has good wine, and maybe she can explain to me what "the disjunction of the status quo" means.

Besides, Shanghai would be getting out of Beijing, right?

That's when the Skype phone rings.

I switch windows. It's my buddy Dog Turner calling.

"Hey, Baby Doc!"

"Hey, Dog. Hang on a sec. Lemme put on my headset."

Dog twitches on the screen while I untangle my iPhone earbuds.

"Lookin' good, Ellie," he says.

"You, too."

He doesn't, really, but what am I supposed to say? Even with the low-res camera on his computer, I can see the indentation in his skull where the RPG hit. If he sat farther back from the camera, I'd see the arm that wasn't there, but frankly, I'd rather not. I think about that too much, and my own arm starts to hurt, and my leg, which pretty much hurts all the time, although I'm getting better at ignoring it. Thanks in part to the fresh supply of Percocet my mom brought me. When I asked her about it, she just giggled and said, "Well, I still have friends."

In the aquarium light of the computer screen, I see Dog twitching in his chair. Spasms cross his face like sudden ripples on a still pond.

"What's up, man?" I ask. "How's the family?"

"Mostly good." His mouth twists.

"Mostly?"

"Kids are good. Wife . . . I make her crazy." He grins lopsidedly. "You?"

"Fine," I say.

I know something's up with him. We're buddies and all, we keep each other posted, but it's not like we talk all the time. It's hard for him to talk, for one. The TBI, the traumatic brain injury, really fucked him up. Plus, there's the whole thing where we messed around back in Iraq, and even though it didn't really mean anything, I still feel a little weird talking to him too much when he has a wife and a couple of kids. It's almost worse since he got hurt in Af-Pak, because I wish I felt comfortable talking

to his wife. Like, if the situation were different, I could say, "Hey, Natalie, what can I do to help?"

Which is pretty fucking stupid, actually. Because there's nothing I can do to help.

"Lookin' good, Ellie," he repeats.

"Thanks."

"I want . . ." He screws up his face again. "I need . . . I have this . . ."

I wait.

"My brother," he manages.

"He's in China, somewhere," Natalie explains. She's taken over for Dog, who got all agitated when the words he wanted wouldn't come. "We got a postcard a month or so ago from some place called . . . Yang shoe?"

"Yangshuo?" I guess.

"I don't know." She rolls her eyes, impatient. "Someplace with weird-looking mountains."

She's a San Diego girl, I know. A couple years older than me. Thin and tan, with that whole "I jog and do yoga" body and the beginnings of hard lines on her face: around her mouth, outlining her cheeks.

"Probably Yangshuo."

"Whatever." She heaves a sigh. "The thing is . . ."

She glances over her shoulder. Dog is there, hovering, scooting around in an office chair like it's a bumper car, occasionally waving at the screen.

She runs her fingers through her highlighted hair. "He wants Jason to come home."

"So why doesn't he?"

She pauses. Looks sideways for a moment. "Jason has some problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"He's . . ." Her voice drops. "He's not stable. He's on meds. And we think maybe he went off them."

"Meds for what?" I ask. "What's the diagnosis?"

Not like I'm an expert, but when I trained to be a medic, we covered the basics.

"I . . ." She hesitates again. "Manic depression. Doug doesn't like to—"

"What?" Dog says. "What don't I like?"

"He's a little in denial," she whispers. "But it's made Jason . . . He's acted out before. We're just worried about—"

"It's FUBAR!" Dog shouts in the background. "Jason's not a head case!"

"Okay, okay," I say. "So you don't know where he is?"

"No." She glances over her shoulder at Dog, then back to me. "I know it's crazy, even asking you. I tell him China's got a billion people or whatever, but he won't . . . he won't listen."

"Doesn't fucking hurt to ask," I hear Dog say.

I think about it.

"It's not totally crazy," I say.

OKAY, THE ODDS AREN'T great. But it's not impossible.

Here's the thing: China is a big country. *Huge*. With more than a billion people.

But most of them are Chinese.

There are a lot of Westerners who live here, for sure. And tourists. I don't know how many, but enough so that in most popular tourist places it's not like a Westerner is a total Martian or anything. In Beijing no one notices or particularly cares. Yeah, some old auntie might remark to her buddy on the neighborhood committee, "Hey, *laowai laile*!" but it's hard to keep track when there are so many of us.

That said, someone is still watching.

Places like Yangshuo, a major hub on the banana-pancake backpacker circuit, known for its weird, beautiful mountains, "quaint" villages tucked along rice paddies, rivers where you can float down a bamboo raft, sucking down beer—yeah, lots of foreigners go there, for sure. But they tend to congregate in certain establishments.

It's possible I could find someone who'd seen Jason. Who maybe had even hung out with him. Who might have an idea where he is.

WHAT I SAY TO Natalie and Dog is, "Yeah, it's pretty much a long shot. But, you know, send me whatever you got on him and I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks," Natalie says, brushing her hair out of her face again, which I think she's doing because she's tearing up and she doesn't want me to see. "Thanks. It means a lot to Doug. I know you guys are friends. I mean, I know . . ." She blinks rapidly. "He's said a lot of really nice things about you."

"Heh," I say. "Doug's a good guy."

There is a long and somewhat awkward silence. Natalie stares into the webcam, blinking now and then. In the background Dog scoots up to the screen on his office chair, puts his only arm around Natalie's shoulders, and squeezes.

"I'm an asshole!" he says, grinning.

JUST TO CLARIFY, IT'S not because I feel guilty or something that I am thinking about helping Dog out. It's because you help your buddies. That's just the way it is. You help the people who were there for you, is all. And Dog . . . well, yeah, he's kind of an asshole on the one hand. On the other, he was a buddy to me during my first duty assignment in Iraq, in

Mortaritaville. I was as young and dumb as they came, nineteen years old, a good Christian girl.

Maybe he acted like a friend primarily to get into my pants, which I gotta say worked well for him. But when I think about those times now, mostly what I remember is that he was still my friend.

Plus, Yangshuo is supposed to be beautiful. And warm. As mentioned, it's ass-freezing cold here in Beijing, and the air is "crazy-bad."

Then there's this: "Ellie, are you ready to go to Walmart?"

Here's my mom, hovering in the doorway, with a stout Chinese guy standing slightly behind her, his hands clasped in front of him like he's a singer in a choir waiting for his cue.

"Do you mind if Andy tags along?" my mom asks, a little hesitantly. "He needs a few things."

"Yes." Andy nods vigorously. "Socks. And candles."

"Sure," I say. "Fine."

I insist we take a subway there, even though Andy claims to have a car and my mom doesn't understand why we don't just cab it—"But, honey, the taxis are so cheap here!"

"Because if we take a cab, we sit in the same fucking traffic as everyone else, that's why," I say, not for the first time. "And people here drive even worse than in Phoenix."

Plus, I still don't like riding in cars very much. I'm better about it than I was, but I don't like being stuck in traffic, a sitting target. That's how you get blown up. Outside the wire you haul ass.

Okay, I know where I am and that I'm not going to get blown up in a Beijing taxi, probably. Sitting in traffic just makes me nervous sometimes.

We pass the random bronze statues of little kids playing on

the dead grass, the tiny kiosk where the guy makes *jianbing*, which is sort of a Beijing breakfast burrito and one of my favorite foods ever, and trot down the long staircase to the subway.

"*Yi zhang piao*," I tell the attendant behind the Plexiglas window. I have my *yikatong* card, but my mom hasn't taken the plunge, so I buy her tickets whenever we go someplace. It's like neither of us wants to admit that she's staying here.

"Anal constriction," Andy says in English, carefully sounding out each syllable. "Anal constriction is key."

"Oh, really?"

We put our bags through the X-ray machine that no one pays attention to and head down another set of stairs to the platform. It's not too crowded this time of day. We line up at the shortest queue I can spot, toward the back of the train. I watch the ads for banks, cell phones, and real estate flicker on the dark wall across from us.

"Yes," Andy says. "Anal constriction. And denting naval."

"It's a part of the religious practice," my mom explains. "Kind of like tai chi."

"What does this have to do with Jesus?" I mutter.

"Brother Jesus wants us to be happy," Andy explains. "With anal constriction, you can say good-bye to sad feelings. And take back your youth." He turns to my mom and smiles. "Increases staying power."

She blushes a little as the rush of warm air from the inbound subway hits the platform.

And this is another reason I need a break from my mom: the longer I'm around her and Andy, the more I feel like a pissed-off teenager. As opposed to, you know, a pissed-off twenty-seven-year-old.

★ ★ ★

By the time we return from Walmart, with chocolate chips, spatulas, peanut butter, candles, and socks, there's an email from Natalie with an attachment: a photo of Jason.

I stretch my bad leg out on my bed, battered white MacBook propped on a pillow on my lap, and open the attachment.

He's a kid. Younger than me. Longish brown hair. Full cheeks and a backpacker beard. Pretty brown eyes, almost toffee-colored, with flecks of gold in them. A soulful expression, like the dude should be playing an acoustic guitar at some college open mic night or maybe pulling espressos at the local coffee joint.

"What do you feel like for dinner, hon?" my mom asks. "Maybe tacos?" She holds up an avocado. "Look what I found at the Carrefour!"

"Sure. Sounds good."

I go back to my laptop. I have the usual pileup of email in my inbox to deal with.

There's a knock at the front door.

My mom glances over her shoulder and pads off to answer.

The water guy, maybe? Though he usually comes in the early afternoon. The security door to the building is always propped open till later in the evening, so it could be anybody.

I hear a man, his words too faint to make out. And then my mom.

"Ellie," she says, a flat note to her voice. "There's two policemen here to see you."

# CHAPTER TWO

I TELL MYSELF NOT to panic.

I'm better about stuff than I was. My heart's pounding, but it's not so bad that I feel like I'm going to throw up. They could be here for all kinds of reasons. Checking to make sure I registered my mom at the local Public Security Bureau, maybe.

I stand up, wincing as my foot hits the floor, and hobble into the living room.

The two men stand in the doorway.

"I said they couldn't come in till you checked their IDs," my mom hisses. "Since I can't tell what they say. I don't think they speak very much English anyway."

The two men are wearing dark blue uniforms with silver buttons, silver wings on their epaulets, and winged bars on their chests. One has his overcoat slung over his arm—the younger of the two men, tall and slender. The other is middle-aged and stocky, with a pockmarked face. He stands behind the first one, looking bored.

"Ellie McEnroe?" the younger one says, only the way he says it sounds more like "Mack-in-arr."

"Yeah?"

"Can you come with us, please?"

"Why?"

"Just for a talk. To have some tea."

I can see the patch on his shoulder. "*Guo Nei Anquan Bao* . . ." something something. My written Chinese sucks. But I'm pretty sure I know where these guys are from.

"We can talk here," I say. "I have all kinds of tea. Your choice."

He hesitates. Glances over his shoulder at his companion, who half raises an eyebrow and makes a tiny smirk. "I don't think," the younger one says, "this is convenient place. Because my English is not very good. So much better if we go talk with my . . . my *laoban*? My boss? So we can understand each other. Just a short talk."

I think about refusing.

When they ask you to "drink tea," it's not exactly official. It's not exactly optional either. It's a way to try to gather information, to intimidate you. But you're not getting arrested.

Yet.

Not that they'd arrest me. I'm not Chinese. They'll just kick me out of the country, if it comes to that.

But I'd rather it didn't come to that.

I shrug. "Okay. I need to use the bathroom first."

Now they step inside. "No time for that," the younger one says. The older one flanks him.

For a moment I think they're actually going to drag me out of here. My heart's pounding so hard I'm starting to shake. I hope they can't see it.

I'm tired of being scared.

"Really?" I say in Chinese. "You want me to liberate myself in your car?"

At that the older one lifts both his eyebrows and makes a little snort.

I grab my canvas bag off the coffee table. Young cop starts to object. Old cop just shakes his head.

Yeah, I'm going to make a phone call, assholes. What do you expect?

Mom follows me toward the bathroom.

"You're not going with them!" she says. "Are you? We should call the American embassy."

"It's just for a talk. Not a big deal."

"Who are they?"

"Domestic Security Department. They're like the . . . the . . . kind of like the FBI."

They're in charge of tracking "subversives," such as democracy activists, environmental crusaders, underground church members, pissed-off petitioners, miscellaneous malcontents—basically anyone with a point of view that isn't in line with the "harmonious society." They have plainclothes spies, a vast network of informants, I don't know how many millions of them.

Not that my mom needs to know this level of detail.

"But why are they here? Why do they want to talk to you?"

"I don't know," I say, though I have a pretty good idea. "It's probably just . . . some of the people I know, some of the artists. They do stuff that's kind of controversial sometimes."

I go into the bathroom, shut the door, and turn on the water in the sink. Get out my iPhone and touch a number.

It rings a few times and goes to voice mail.

Fuck.

"Hey," I say, in English, "I'm going for tea with the National Treasures. Thought you should know."

I hit the red DISCONNECT button. And then I pee. Because I actually need to go.

When I exit the bathroom, my mom is facing the two cops, hands on her hips, like she's daring them to take a step closer.

I gather up my coat and a hat. "Remember that number I gave you?" I say. "The one I put on your cell?"

She nods.

"If you don't hear from me in a couple of hours, call it and explain what's going on. And if there's no answer . . ."

I think about it.

"Yeah, call the embassy."

We ride in a squad car, heading southwest.

The older cop drives. The younger one sits next to me in the back and tries to make polite conversation. I wish he'd shut up. I need to think. To get my story straight, plan what I'm going to say, what's safe to admit and what isn't.

"Your Chinese is really good," he says. "Really standard."

"Thanks."

"Where did you learn it?"

"Here."

"How long have you been in China?"

"Three years."

He shakes his head. "We learn English in school. I study a long time. But I don't speak it very well."

"Helps to be in the country," I say.

He sighs. "Yes. But I think I won't have that opportunity. Very difficult in my position." He hesitates. "I like American movies and TV shows very much," he says in English. "To practice English. I watch . . . *24. The Sopranos. Sons of* . . ." His brow wrinkles. "*Ah-nah-key.* I am not sure, how to say. They are bad men. Criminals. They drive those . . . those . . ."

"Motorcycles," I supply.

"Yes!" He mimes twisting the handles. "Very dangerous!" His eyes light up, and he grins.

I keep thinking we're going to stop. We pass the local police

station. Then monumental government buildings with the state seal attached to the concrete like a giant badge stuck on awkwardly with a pin.

But we don't stop. We keep driving. West, then south.

After a while I have no fucking clue where we're going. The traffic's so bad that the cop takes sides streets, nothing I recognize.

Besides, no one goes to South Beijing unless they're going to the new train station. This far south? I don't even know what's here.

The farther we go, the more it looks like we're not in Beijing anymore, like we've suddenly been transported to a podunk third-tier city in some interior province.

White-tiled storefronts. Cracked plastic signage. Discount malls plastered with billboard-size ads for products you've never heard of, European-looking models advertising watches and shoes, everything grayed by pollution. Vendors who look like peasants with stuff to sell spread out on blankets on the sidewalk: DVDs. Socks and underwear. Barrettes and hairbrushes. Random shit.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask.

"Not far. Just a place . . . that's comfortable. To talk."

And that's when I really get scared. I think maybe they're just going to make me disappear.

No, that doesn't make sense, I tell myself. If they were going to do that, would they send guys in uniforms? Would they do it in front of my mom?

Wouldn't they do it off the books?

I tell myself this stuff until I'm calm again. Calmer anyway.

We turn onto a busy street with the typical iron fence dividing it, so pedestrians can't cross and drivers can't make turns, and for some reason I think about what a pain in the ass

those iron fences can be, like they go out of their way to make simple things difficult. We pass trucks stacked with vegetables—potatoes, bundles of celery—that rumble down a narrow street toward some huge gray cement gate with a red badge and gold characters across the top, a guard box on either side.

Finally we get to the end of the block and turn left, into a walled, gated parking lot. In front of us is a large, blocky building, about ten stories high, the façade a combination of faux marble, metal sheets, and green Plexiglas. Red lanterns hang above the entrance.

The pinyin below the characters spells out HEXIE ANXI JIUDIAN.

Harmonious Rest Hotel.

We drive past the lobby, around to the back, through a metal gate, into a little service yard. There are rows of dumpsters, a couple of battered electric scooters, a warped ping-pong table, and a clothesline with hotel uniforms hung up, inside out, to dry.

"So we aren't checking in?" I snark.

The younger cop does one of those embarrassed semi-giggles. "Please wait a moment," he says, and gets out of the car. He jogs over to a back entrance and goes inside.

The older cop sits in the front seat and drums on the steering wheel.

Shit, shit, *shit*, I think. Even if this ends up not being a big deal, what are the odds I'll get my visa renewed if I'm getting hauled in to drink tea with the fucking DSD?

The young policeman comes trotting back and opens the car door. "Okay," he says, as cheerful as a tour guide about to show me some special scenic spot, "we can go upstairs now."

IT'S A "BUSINESS HOTEL," meaning stripped down, stained, and frayed around the edges but fairly clean. We enter

through the back door, past a curtained room that's some kind of staff facility: I glimpse cleaning supplies, stacks of towels, one hotel worker, a rosy-cheeked girl who hardly looks old enough to be working here, sitting on a metal folding chair, sewing a button on a uniform smock.

We go up three flights of worn carpeted stairs. The air smells like stale cigarettes, the smoke permeating the walls, the red industrial carpet; you'd have to tear the whole place down to get rid of it.

By the time we're on the third flight, my leg is throbbing and I'm just really pissed off, because people keep fucking with me, because I can't catch a break, because my leg really hurts, and I don't even have a Percocet.

Okay, I tell myself, okay. You need to keep it together. Don't lose your temper, and don't panic. Just calm down, listen to what they say, and don't give them any more than you have to.

I've been in worse situations than this, and I got through them.

This is nothing.

We walk down to the end of the hall, to a room like every other room. Room 3310. Young Cop has a key card, and I hear the insect whir as the door unlocks.

It's your basic Chinese hotel room. A bit larger than some of the places I've stayed, in that there's room for two club chairs and a little round table on a raised Formica-covered platform by the window.

A man sits in one of the chairs. No uniform, just a polo shirt and slacks. Middle-aged, a slight paunch hanging over his typically ugly belt with a square gold buckle, fake Gucci or Armani or something. Hair swept back in a Chinese bureaucrat pompadour.

"*Qing zuo*," he says, gesturing to the other chair.

I sit.

He doesn't say anything. Just sits there and smiles at me. I fidget. Maybe that's the point of the silence.

"You asked me here for tea," I finally say. "I don't see any."

"Ah." He nods. Motions to Young Cop, who quickly scoots over to the desk, where the hot water kettle is, and fills it with a bottle of Nongfu Spring water that's sitting next to it.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he says.

I shrug.

He leans back in his chair, twines his fingers together, rocking them up and down like he's contemplating the universe or something. I stretch out my bad leg, which has started to cramp up and is hurting like hell.

Neither of us says anything. Young Cop busies himself with opening up the complimentary tea bags and putting them into two cups.

The kettle hisses steam, and there's a loud click as it turns itself off. I flinch.

Young Cop pours water into the cups and carries them over. Sets them on the little round table with a rattle and retreats, smiling in that embarrassed way of his.

"You two can go," the man says to the cops.

After that it's just the two of us and more silence. The man sips his tea. So do I.

He's better at this silence thing than I am.

"You want to talk to me," I say. "I'm here. You want to ask me something? Or what?"

"I am just waiting. For my colleague. His English is better than mine." He looks at his watch, a fake—or possibly real—Rolex. "Perhaps there's bad traffic."

So far he hasn't spoken a word of English. Maybe he's telling the truth.

I hear the whir of a keycard unlocking the door.

"Ah. He's arrived." The man turns to me and smiles. "I think you know each other."

The door opens.

That's when I realize: I am so totally screwed.