

DRAGON DAY

Also by Lisa Brackmann

Rock Paper Tiger

Getaway

Hour of the Rat

DRAGON DAY

LISA
BRACKMANN

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CRIME**

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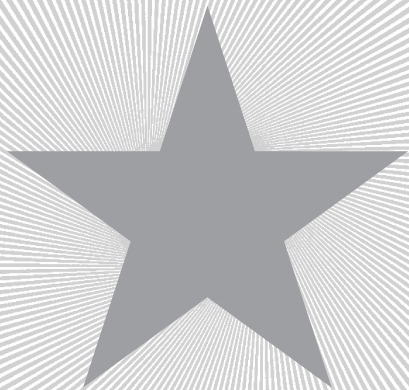
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*To my mom, Dorothy Carol Brackmann Galante,
who taught me to love books, baseball, politics and cats,
and has the best laugh I have ever heard.*

DRAGON DAY





DRAGONS AND CHINA. IT'S the biggest fucking cliché. If you ever go looking for books about China, you know how many of them have "dragon" in the title? Like all of them, practically.

Thing is, dragons are a big deal in China. The emperor's symbol was a dragon. Dragons are all kinds of good luck, and super powerful. They can control weather, especially the kind that involves water. Your village keep flooding? Maybe you pissed off the local river dragon. Dragons can hide among clouds, disguise themselves as worms, or grow as big as mountains. Out of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, Dragon is the one you most want your kid to be. Dragon babies are attractive, smart, natural leaders, bring good fortune to the family. Yeah, I know all the other animals are supposed to have positive characteristics, but come on. You're telling me you'd choose to be a Sheep over a Dragon?

Me, I'm a Rat. Obviously I'm not winning any zodiac beauty contest. Sure, they say we're clever survivors, and that's useful, I guess. It's true I've survived some pretty crazy shit.

On the other hand, if I'm so clever, why do I keep walking into it?

If you believe in any of this Chinese astrology, it's way more complicated than just the animal year you were born in. There's

an animal for your birth month, for your birthday, for the hour you're born, and there's all this other stuff having to do with the four elements—or maybe it's five—and stems and pillars, and I have no idea what any of that means.

All these things have to do with your luck, or lack of it, and what kind of person you are. Because it's not like every single baby born in a Dragon year turns out to be smart, good-looking, and destined to rule, right?

So maybe you're born in a Dragon year but on a Sheep day. And maybe some of those Sheep have Dragons inside.

CHAPTER ONE



I'M EYEING THE BOTTLE of vintage Moutai on the table and wondering if it would be unforgivably rude of me to pour myself another shot.

I don't even like Moutai. But Sidney Cao singing "Feelings"? I definitely need something.

We've finished the Château Mouton Rothschild ("Genuine one," Sidney promised), and there's nothing else left on the table to drink except Pepsi.

"Feelings . . . nothing more than . . . feelings . . ."

I'm sitting in a private room in what I'm told is one of the three most expensive karaoke bars in Shanghai. The weird thing is, it's not in a super-upscale neighborhood like the Bund or Nanjing Road, the French Concession or the riverfront in Pudong. Instead it's this area west of the Shanghai train station that looks pretty typical: grey high-rises, broad streets choked with traffic and torn up by subway construction, nothing green in sight except for the occasional strange paint job. Vendors selling socks and DVDs and steamed buns crowd the sidewalks, along with bicycles and electric scooters.

This place though, outside, it's a façade pretending to be marble that's slathered with neon, fiberglass columns, and turrets surrounding tall, fake-bronze doors. The cars double-parked in the street are Beemers, Mercedes, Ferraris, a Rolls,

and a Bentley. On the inside there's a huge lobby four stories high that you have to go through a metal detector to enter, and when you do, you're surrounded by the fronts of fake buildings, like a movie set of a European village, all painted white, and everywhere you look, there are gilded planters and gold chandeliers, Plexiglas kiosks advertising luxury goods, giant ornate mirrors, and the kind of fussy carved furniture that belongs in a *Three Musketeers* movie with dudes wearing long powdered wigs, except instead of being white like it usually is, the furniture's painted peacock blue and neon green.

Also grand pianos. There are several in the cavernous lobby, black Steinways, sitting beneath a painted sky hanging four stories up that gradually changes from sunny blue with popcorn clouds to a garish red sunset.

No pianists, though. Maybe the pianos are just for decoration.

Our private room is pretty cozy, with fake Renaissance paintings on the red-flocked walls, which I have to say do not go very well with the peacock blue and neon green Musketeers furniture. But whatever.

I'm sitting next to Lucy Wu on one of the couches. Lucy, my sometime partner in the art business, owns a Shanghai gallery, and she dresses the part. She wears crazy designer stuff a lot, but tonight she's outdone herself outfitwise. It's this short, sleeveless, white dress with daisy-shaped cutouts and a halo of wispy white ostrich feathers, paired with red leather boots. Her shiny black hair is cut in this blunt anime style, and she's wearing bright scarlet lipstick, thick mascara, and eyeliner like on a cartoon Cleopatra.

"Feeeeelings . . . Oh, oh, oh, feeelings . . ."

"One more chorus," she says to me, all the while keeping a big smile on her face.

Sidney really can't sing. I mean, I can't sing either, but I'm not the one standing up there with the microphone. So far this evening, Sidney has regaled us with "Yueliao Daibiao Wode Xin" ("The Moon Represents My Heart"), "Home on the Range," and "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman"—"Cultural Revolution favorite!" he explains with a big laugh.

I'm just about to reach for the Moutai when the song ends. Lucy smiles, showing her perfect tiny teeth, and claps. I smile and nod and clap.

Vicky Huang, the fourth member of our party, sits straight backed, not smiling, because this is serious stuff apparently, and she's staring up at Sidney and applauding like she's witnessing the Second Coming.

Sidney beams and approaches our little group of couches, microphone in hand. As he does, our very own private waitress, dressed in a French maid's outfit, emerges from the shadows of the back wall, where she'd blended in like one of the paintings.

Smiling, without saying a word, she refills the tiny crystal flutes reserved for the Moutai.

"*Ganbei!*" Sidney says, raising his glass.

"Oh, thank God," Lucy Wu murmurs in my ear.

I lift my glass. We clink. And Lucy, who is about the size of an anorexic hobbit, downs hers in a single "*Ganbei.*"

I don't do as well. I know this is expensive stuff and prized in China, but it's about 110 proof and tastes like sweet and sour paint thinner, with maybe a dash of soy sauce. The Moutai catches in my throat, and I cough.

"Now, Ellie, I think it is *your* turn!" I look up, and there's Sidney holding the microphone in his outstretched hand.

"Oh, no, that's okay," I say. "I'm . . . you know, I can't really sing."

“Everyone can sing! You only must express what’s in your heart!”

Believe me, buddy, you don’t want to know.

“I . . . uh, my throat’s kind of sore.”

“Then you should have more Moutai!” He doesn’t even need to raise his hand. He merely flexes his fingers, and the waitress rushes over to refill our glasses.

“Just sing something!” Lucy hisses in my ear.

“Why don’t *you* sing something?” I hiss back.

“Because he asked *you*.”

“What shall you sing, Ellie?” Sidney asks.

I really don’t want to sing. But a good rule of thumb? Don’t piss off Chinese billionaires.

Especially don’t piss off Sidney Cao.

I mean, it’s not like he *seems* scary. He’s wearing his usual golf shirt, slacks, and ugly designer belt, this sixtyish guy with prominent cheekbones, a bony nose, and crooked teeth. Which he could obviously fix if he wanted to. But he doesn’t seem to care.

“I . . . um, where’s the book? I’ll take a look.”

The waitress quickly fetches the Big Book of Karaoke Tunes, a red leather binder with an embossed gold crest on it, some kind of made-up coat of arms. I start flipping through it. I have no freakin’ clue what to sing. “My Heart Will Go On”? I don’t think so.

“While you decide, I will sing,” Vicky Huang announces. She rises.

I think of Vicky as Sidney’s enforcer. I doubt that she’d actually break my kneecaps, but she’d know who to call. Like the dude in the nice suit standing sentry by the door. There’s nothing about him that sticks in your head. He’s just this

slightly taller-than-average Chinese guy with a thick neck and a crew cut.

Vicky, on the other hand, stands out. She's wearing an outfit that might look cute on a young, thin, twenty-something girl: brown leather hot pants over black leggings and a tight, fuzzy pink sweater. On a middle-aged, chubby woman with a cloud of teased, dyed black hair sporting red highlights, not so much.

Sidney hands her the mike like he's passing a loaded gun. I drink my Moutai, which I've decided is not so bad, at least situationally.

She takes her place in front of the giant flat-screen karaoke monitor. Stands there with this deadly serious expression, like she's facing a firing squad or has otherwise found Jesus.

The music begins. Swells. Building up to something big. On the screen there are random nature scenes and a young couple sitting on bright green grass, staring at each other, holding hands. Cartoon hearts drift up into the pixelated sky.

Vicky Huang opens her mouth, and out comes, "*The hills are aliiiiive . . . with the sound of muuuusic . . .*"

What I wasn't expecting: Vicky Huang can actually sing.

Sidney claps wildly.

LUCKY ME, VICKY GETS on a roll and sings four songs, and by the time she's done, Sidney's ready to bounce. This whole long night, he hasn't said one word about why he wanted me and Lucy to meet him in Shanghai for karaoke, but that's the way business gets done here a lot of the time.

When we gather in the lobby, next to a Lucite display advertising Rolex, the fake sky is black, with a full moon and clusters of stars. A jazz combo plays around one of the grand pianos,

a song that would be kind of mellow if it weren't amplified to the point of distortion.

"Thank you for the lovely evening," Lucy says to Sidney. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you while you're in Shanghai."

"Of course, of course! We will talk. Perhaps tomorrow?"

Vicky Huang consults her iPad. "Two P.M." It is not a suggestion.

Lucy doesn't miss a beat. "I believe I'm available." She turns to me. "Ellie?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sure." I mean, what else am I going to do, other than try to score soup dumplings? Which sounds like a great idea, actually.

I'm the one who hooked up Lucy and Sidney. And even though Lucy thanks me for the connection, I feel a little queasy about it. Because I like Lucy a lot. We work together. She's a friend. And getting involved with Sidney is a really mixed bag.

"Shall we meet at the gallery?" Lucy asks. "I have a show up now with an emerging artist who may interest you."

"Of course, of course." Sidney sounds distracted. "Vicky will arrange."

Sidney Cao, in addition to being a ruthless billionaire guy, is seriously obsessed with collecting art. He has a collection that blows a lot of museums out of the water. Everything from Vermeer to Warhol. More recently he's gotten into contemporary Chinese art, which is how our paths happened to cross. I manage the works of an important contemporary artist: Zhang Jianli, my friend Lao Zhang. "Lao" means old, which he's not; he's maybe forty, but it's also a term of respect and friendship.

A lot of people respect Lao Zhang.

My ending up as his representative was kind of an accident,

and though I've come around to thinking that the art gig isn't bad in theory, some of the complications—drinking tea with Domestic Security, karaoke marathons with a homicidal billionaire—are starting to wear on me.

Okay, maybe “homicidal” isn't fair. Maybe he just told his muscle to do whatever it takes to arrange a meeting with me to discuss Lao Zhang's art a couple of months ago, and what it happened to take was . . . well, killing people. Stuff happens, right?

Besides, I'd probably be dead if he hadn't. I was in the middle of some serious shit at the time, and the people his men killed weren't exactly my friends.

“Can I drop you at your hotel?” Lucy asks me. She drives a cute MINI Cooper.

“That'd be great.” I'm staying at my usual Shanghai rack, this funky, sprawling nineteenth-century hotel at the north end of the Bund. It's getting kind of pricey, over seventy bucks a night, but I have this thing where I get comfortable someplace and that takes the edge off the ol' PTSD hypervigilance, especially in a city as crazy big as Shanghai. This hotel, I know where it is, how to get there, I know the menus at their bar and café, even a couple of the staff, who recognize me when I check in. I feel, if not exactly safe, safer.

“Ellie, do you still have time tonight?” Sidney asks. Suddenly. “For a nightcap?” Emphasis on “cap.” He giggles. As if he's nervous.

Sidney, nervous? I've never seen *that* before.

I'm not liking this at all. And I'm past ready to go to my familiar hotel and burrow under my queen-size comforter.

Don't piss off the billionaire.

“I, uh . . . Sure.”



WE END UP AT some club over in Pudong, driven there in Sidney's Bentley, the driver a rent-a-thug I don't recognize, the plain-wrap bodyguard riding shotgun. The club is in the penthouse of a crazy high-rise that looks sort of like a giant bottle opener, on the bank of the Huangpu River. Floor-to-ceiling windows a couple stories tall. A huge aquarium that takes up an entire back wall, containing a pair of sea turtles, a stingray, and a hammerhead shark. I guess they all get along.

Sidney and I sit in a high-backed, private booth up against one of the windows overlooking the river. I have to admit it's a pretty cool view, the old, restored European buildings on the Bund, science-fiction skyscrapers lurking behind them like invaders from another planet, obscured by mist. Boats tool up and down the river.

The whole time on the ride over here, Sidney made small talk—about his museum plans, about art he wants to buy. Whatever it is he wants to talk to me about isn't something he's willing to bring up in the backseat of his Bentley. Apparently it has to wait for another overpriced drink in some pretentious hangout for assholes with too much money.

"What can I get you for drink, Ellie?" Sidney asks.

"Whatever you're having," I say, and immediately regret it. Because what if it's more Moutai?

Instead the waitress, a drop-dead-gorgeous woman wearing a skintight black dress, brings us this fancy cut-glass bottle of liquor the color of bloody amber. She pours two glasses—snifflers, I guess they're called—about a quarter full.

"Courvoisier L'Esprit," Sidney announces, holding his snifter up to the table lamp, this glowing, egg-shaped thing that

I guess looks pretty cool but that doesn't cast enough light so you could actually read a menu by it.

I lift up my snifter, too, wait for Sidney to clink and take a little sip.

Well, okay, this tastes pretty good. Like smoked apricots and honey.

"I am investor here," Sidney explains. "So they keep a few things I like for me."

"It's really delicious," I say.

He turns and stares out the window. The mist has thickened, making everything seem out of focus. Unreal. I look the other way and watch the hammerhead shark slowly cruise the length of the aquarium with a couple flips of its tail, one rubber black eye peering out in our direction.

I read somewhere that hammerhead sharks are actually pretty harmless—they just *look* deadly.

"Maybe you wonder why I want to talk to you this evening, Ellie," Sidney finally says.

"I, uh . . . art?" Because I figure it must have something to do with Lao Zhang. Sidney's been dying to get a few of Lao Zhang's pieces for his collection. Like I found out a couple of months ago, he's willing to go to a lot of trouble to get them. The problem is, because of some recent complications with China's Domestic Security Department, I can't really sell him any. We made this arrangement where I donated him one (long story), but now I'm thinking one wasn't enough. That he wants a different piece, maybe one I can't donate in good conscience, one of Lao Zhang's major works that could bring him a lot of money—if he were allowed to sell it anyway.

"No," Sidney says. "It's because of Gugu."

Gugu?

CHAPTER TWO



“GUWEI,” SIDNEY SAYS, SHAKING his head. “I must correct myself. Gugu was his child name.”

“Your son?” I ask.

“Yes. The younger one.”

Sidney has three children. For a guy as rich as Sidney, China’s official one-child policy is more like a mild suggestion.

Two boys and a girl. That’s all I knew about Sidney’s kids. Now I know that one of them’s named Gugu. Guwei, that is.

“Oh,” I say. “So Guwei, he’s interested in contemporary Chinese art?” Because I can’t think of anything else I’m involved with that a son of Sidney’s might care about. It’s not like I have connections with Ivy League colleges, or Wall Street firms, or really much of anything, other than Beijing dive bars and cheap dumpling restaurants.

Sidney sighs and lifts his hand. Immediately the waitress appears. She pours us both more of the fancy cognac.

“No,” he says. “He does not care for the art. He cares for the expensive cars and clothes. Girls. Things like that.”

Not my MOS, that’s for sure.

Sidney leans forward. “I think maybe he falls into some bad company.” A reluctant confession.

“I see,” I say, but of course I really don’t. So the kid’s a

spoiled little emperor, driving hookers around in his Ferrari or whatever. What's that got to do with me?

"I warn him, but he doesn't listen. I tell him maybe I take away his money, but he already has his own. 'I can make more,' he tells me. 'I don't need anything from you.'"

The way Sidney hangs his head, I feel a little sorry for him. A guy so rich he owns his own ghost city, and he still can't get his kid to listen up. Which doesn't answer the essential question: Why me? Because I'm such a fuckup that he thinks maybe I can give him advice on how to deal with another one?

"I think it is because of this *American*," Sidney says suddenly. Like it's a curse word. "I think he is the bad influence on my son."

"Oh," I say. "Sorry." Maybe I'm supposed to be apologizing for the sins of my countryman.

"I investigate him," he says, jabbing a finger in the air. "He is a businessman. A *consultant*." He spits that last word. I kind of don't blame him. It's harder to be a total con-artist foreigner than it used to be, but there are still plenty of sketchy white dudes calling themselves "consultants," or "market-intelligence strategists," or whatever.

"What does he want with Gugu?" I think to ask.

"Don't know. Gugu won't say."

And all of a sudden, I'm getting a feeling why Sidney invited me out tonight.

"So . . . OF COURSE I'D be glad to help. But . . . it's not like I have any connections who can tell me about this guy. *Wǒ meiyǒu zhèyàngde guānxi. Nǐde guānxi bǐ wǒde gēng hǎo.*"

My *guanxi*, my connections, aren't as good as yours. Not even close.

Sidney waves his hand, as if he's swatting a mosquito. "Not about *guanxi*. About moral character."

"Okay," I say. "Moral character. But, um . . . I don't know that I'm . . . I mean . . ."

"You are American," he says, jabbing his finger again. "You are the better judge. You can tell me, his, his . . . *shenqian*."

His intentions.

My head is spinning. And not because of the Courvoisier.

Okay, maybe a little.

"But . . . if Gugu won't talk to you . . . why would he talk to me?"

"Gugu likes foreign girls," Sidney says, with a smile that I am thinking is not about finding something funny or pleasurable. "And he is staying in Beijing now."

"But—"

"Vicki will arrange."

Oh, shit.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that when Vicky Huang arranges something, it stays arranged.

"ON THE ONE HAND, it's good to have a powerful patron. On the other . . ." Harrison Wang pauses as his *ayi*, "Annie" from Fujian, brings out two steaming mugs of coffee.

"*Yili, ni bao*," she says to me. She's a middle-aged woman, small, thin, all tendon and bone. "*Ni xibuan chi shenme?* Omelet? French toast?"

I'm really not hungry. Mostly I'm tired after an overnight train from Shanghai, where as usual I didn't sleep much. "Just coffee, thanks."

The coffee is amazing, of course.

"Micro-lot, single-estate, from El Salvador," Harrison

explains. “Fresh harvest.” He sips his. “I’m investing in a new coffee business. Something a little more specialized and upscale than Starbucks. We’re opening first on Doujiao Hutong and then in Sanlitun if the demand is there.”

I got back from Shanghai on the overnight train around 9:00 A.M., dropped my bag off at my apartment, and headed to Harrison’s place. After the karaoke marathon with Sidney the night before yesterday, I called Harrison to arrange a meeting.

I never wanted to get involved with Sidney Cao, but he didn’t leave me much choice. He’d wanted a piece of Lao Zhang’s art, and he was going to get it no matter what it took. If that had been the end of me and Sidney, I’d count myself lucky. Maybe even have a few warm fuzzies for the guy, since he did kind of save my ass.

But that wasn’t the end, and now I’m getting tangled up even deeper. I don’t like the feeling.

Harrison and I sit in the breakfast nook of his penthouse apartment in central Beijing, on the southern edge of Chaoyang District. He’s dressed for business meetings, which means slacks and this beautiful button-down shirt so totally, absolutely black that it’s like staring into a black hole, looking for stars that aren’t there, or that you can’t see. Which is pretty much Harrison’s MO.

“So what’s the other hand?” I ask.

“His power is connected to certain factions in the government. If those factions lose out in the coming leadership transition . . .” He sips. “I think these beans may be a little overroasted.”

This whole thing is making my head hurt. “Well, *you’re* powerful.”

Harrison laughs shortly. “Not like Sidney Cao.”

Harrison is my boss, sort of, at a distance. He set up the foundation that I use to sell Lao Zhang's art. Or *was* using, before Domestic Security got on my case. Otherwise he's a venture capitalist/patron of the arts with an interest in "concepts of community in postnationalist societies emerging from the New World Disorder."

This is from our nonprofit's mission statement. I didn't write it.

"Who's he connected with?" I ask. Not like I'm any kind of expert in Chinese politics, but I've paid enough attention to get some idea about the Chinese Communist Party's different factions. That the CCP *has* different factions anyway. I couldn't tell you much about what any of the factions stand for. Just that some of them go back to family feuds from before the Cultural Revolution.

"From what I know, Tuanpai—Communist Youth League. But I've heard he has some contacts with the Shanghai gang as well. And of course there are the *bong er dai*."

The "princelings"—children of the original revolutionaries. Richer than shit, a lot of them.

Harrison takes another exploratory sip of his coffee. "Anyone with his amount of wealth obviously has some high-level relationships."

"What do you think I should do?" I ask.

"Well, it will be hard not to go along with him for the time being."

I don't need this. I don't need to get any more involved with Sidney Cao than I already am. I mean, he has people killed. It's not relaxing to be around.

"Great."

Now Harrison puts down his cup and focuses on me. "What

I recommend is that you do as little as possible to fulfill your obligation. Meet his son, meet this American, offer your expert opinion. That's all he's asked of you. Don't volunteer anything else."

Like I'd do that.

I'M HEADING TO THE nearest subway stop, thinking about a nap. The last thing I want to do is think about all the potential complications with Sidney and now his kid.

I'm sleepy, and I'm distracted, so when the door of the black Buick parked with two wheels up on the curb opens in front of me, my first reaction is just to step out of the way.

Then two guys get out, two muscular guys with short haircuts and nondescript clothes.

My heart pounds in my throat. Not this again.

"*Qu liaotianr*," one of them says. Let's go for a chat.

"Just for tea," the other says, smiling.

CHAPTER THREE



“I ALREADY TOLD YOU. I don’t know where he is.”

Pompadour Bureaucrat leans back in his chair. He doesn’t sigh or anything like that. Just gives me a look over his steepled fingers before picking up his glass teacup and blowing on the steaming water, pushing around the leaves that float on the surface till they sink to the bottom.

“Nothing has changed?” he finally asks.

“No. Nothing.”

Which of course is a lie.

Like before, he’s interrogating me about Zhang Jianli—my former sort-of-not-quite-boyfriend and current client. Lao Zhang, who got into trouble with the government a year ago for having the wrong friends and creating a community that helped like-minded people find one another. “Government doesn’t care for it when too many people get together,” he told me once. As far as I know, he hasn’t actually been charged with anything. Not yet anyway. That isn’t how things work in China. First they decide you’re a threat. Then they find a label for it.

And also like before, I’m sitting in an anonymous room in an anonymous “business” hotel that reeks of stale cigarettes and fake-flower-perfumed room deodorizer. This time the hotel is somewhere in west Beijing, in Fengtai. I know this because of

the billboard we passed that said, in English, WELCOME YOU TO FENGTAI! LEADING EXAMPLE OF AN URBAN-RURAL INTEGRATION DISTRICT AND AN ECO-FRIENDLY RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT. FULLY INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BRAND-NEW CITY IMAGE OF AN ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY BEIJING!

You'd think in a city like Beijing, Rising China's capital, full of shiny new architectural wonders by famous avant-garde architects, high-speed trains and freshly built subway lines crisscrossing the city like a spider's web, with luxury malls displaying endless amounts of Gucci and Prada and designer crap, that they would have worked a little harder on fixing the Chinglish.

Not so much.

I have time to be thinking all this because Pompadour Bureaucrat is fond of long silences as a part of his interrogation method. Like if he sits back and blows on his tea long enough, I'm suddenly going to break down and confess all.

I'm not naïve enough to think that's all he's going to do. At some point things have to escalate, right? And it's not like I'm some badass who's going to hang tough if things get really bad.

This is the second time Pompadour Bureaucrat and the Domestic Security Department have asked me to "drink tea"—that's cute secret police talk for "interrogation, off the record."

He did offer me actual tea, for what it's worth.

I don't know this guy's name. I don't know his title. I assume he works for the DSD, but for all I know, he could belong to some other Chinese security agency. It's not like he's going to show me his credentials or explain himself to me.

The only thing I know for sure is that he has the power to fuck with my life.

Now Pompadour Bureaucrat does sigh. A long exhale that

sinks the remaining floating tea leaves. He's a middle-aged dude with that swept-back, dyed-black hair that just about every Chinese official seems to favor, wearing a black suit, a white shirt, and a red tie with a pattern of white dots. More formal than the last time I saw him. Maybe he got a promotion. Maybe he's inspired by the 18th Party Congress coming up, 'cause he's dressed like every single one of those Standing Committee guys you see displayed in awkward lines in the official photographs.

I focus on the tie. If I stare long enough, the dots look like they're moving.

"You know, your status here can change at any time," he finally says.

Like before, he speaks to me in Mandarin. I don't know how much English he understands, if any. My spoken Chinese isn't bad, but I'm not sure it's up to this.

"*Wo zhidao.*" I know.

I try to hide the shiver. Because he could just mean, *We're revoking your visa and kicking you out of the country.* Which would suck. But lately I've been thinking about leaving anyway. It's just getting too weird here.

But he could also mean, *We're throwing your ass in jail.* An official prison or a black jail, off the books.

And that whole prospect, I don't do so well with that.

"I can only tell you what I know," I say. "I know Zhang Jianli's email address. I already gave it to you."

"But you manage his art." He smiles, baring his teeth. "Hard to understand how you can do this without knowing where he is."

We've been over this before.

"He left me instructions. It's not so hard."

“You sell his art, then.”

“I *sold* some art,” I correct. We haven’t sold a thing since February. When this whole “fun with the DSD” game started.

“You sell his work,” Pompadour Bureaucrat repeats. “Then how does he get paid?”

My heart thumps harder. This is a sensitive subject. “I just collect the money. He hasn’t taken any yet.”

A frown. “But this is a little strange. This is his money, after all. His work. He behaves . . . almost like a man who is no longer alive.”

Oh, shit.

I do not like where this is heading.

“All I know is what he told me. What I told *you*. He wanted some time away from Beijing, so he could work. Get fresh ideas. Too many distractions here.” I risk a tiny smirk, ’cause I just can’t help it. “See, he likes coffee. He’s not so fond of tea.”

I STUMBLE OUT OF there in the late afternoon, into the yellow-grey haze of a hot May afternoon. Smog mingles with the dust of a construction site, where this huge jackhammer thing rises like an insect on steroids above temporary metal walls covered with photo murals of new, modern China: sleek high-speed trains, spaceship skyscrapers, and, to show proper respect to tradition, and tourism, the Temple of Heaven.

I’m pretty sure it’s a subway they’re building. They’re building them everywhere. I wish it were done, so I could ride down some long escalator, past ads for Lancôme and real estate and cell phones and socialist modernization, into some shiny new train that would whisk me away, underground, below all the traffic and noise, and I’d emerge in my own neighborhood, safe at home, like magic.

Yeah, well, that's not going to happen.

I limp past a yellow Home Inn and signs for some sports complex left over from the '08 Olympics, and I can see a line of tall, straight trees in an empty field at the side of an expressway, maybe a ring road, but I don't know which one, because I've hardly ever been to Fengtai before, except for the Beijing West Railway Station, a place I hate that's hard to avoid: ugly Soviet mainframe built like a cheap brown suit topped with Chinese pagodas. I'm a lot deeper into Fengtai than that, though, right at the edge where it turns into crumbling old villages and farmland.

A taxi, I think. I need to find a taxi.

Either that or a drink.

I buy a bottle of Nongfu Spring water at a newsstand and take a Percocet.

I NEED THEM, I tell myself. It's not like I'm some addict who just wants to get high. I'm in pain most of the time. The Percocet takes the edge off. I mean, what else am I supposed to do? I've tried acupuncture. It helps, sometimes. So does exercise, sometimes. Tried smoking pot or hash, which helps, too, but, you know, it's technically illegal, and with the rising tide of shit I'm already in . . .

I feel like the little boat that's about to get swamped.

I sit in the back of the taxi and tell myself to think about something else. Something that doesn't make my heart pound and me break out in a cold sweat.

Like, what *am* I going to do when I run out of the Percocet stash that my mom brought me from the States? That's really gonna suck.

Another good reason to leave the country.

If they'll let me.

I stare out the window at the barely crawling cars on the Third Ring Road, at banks of skinny high-rises, whatever colors they once were bleached by smog, their rusting balconies crowded with laundry.

Well, at least they let me out of that cheap-ass hotel.

ANOTHER REASON TO LEAVE: the fucking construction in my neighborhood.

This big stretch of Jiugulou Dajie is torn up, with temporary walls and those blue-trimmed white construction dorms and giant machinery pounding away at the earth, and I swear I feel like I'm living inside a fucking drum sometimes. Another subway line that's going to hook up with Line 2 at my stop, Gulou, and while I'm totally in favor of subways, this is really starting to suck. All my favorite snack stands are gone, swept away for no real reason that I can see. I mean, they aren't digging the line down there, I don't think—they just decided to knock a couple blocks down because . . . I don't know why. No one does. Shit like this happens constantly, and you mostly have to guess at the reasons, because no one is going to tell you or ask for your opinion.

'Cause if they had, I would have said, *Whatever you do, keep that yangrou chuanr guy! He makes the best mutton skewers in Beijing!* I used to love to watch him work, carefully dusting the chunks of meat with red spices, rotating them just so, and it was good meat, not some tiny, gristly hunks of who-the-fuck-knows-what animal. It was weird, because he was so into it, so happy doing this simple thing, it seemed like. I would stand there sometimes, waiting for my skewers, wanting to ask him, *So what's the secret of life?* Because I was pretty sure he had the

answer. Something to do with taking pride in doing simple things well or some bullshit like that.

Now he's gone, and I don't know where. I never had a chance to ask. No warning. I just walked down the street one day and all those guys were gone—all the stands in front of grey old *butong* buildings, all those blackened metal grills, the little signs for *chuanr* made from tiny red lights on twisted wire frames. The old buildings, too. All gone. Replaced by temporary metal fencing, with slapped-on billboard murals of high-speed trains and the Temple of Heaven.

Fuck this, I think, unlocking my apartment door. If I can't sell Lao Zhang's artwork, I'm not going to make enough money to pay for this place anyway.

There's an explosion of happy barks and yips. My dog, Mimi.

I open the door and she's dancing around: a medium-size, long-haired yellow dog with a dark muzzle and a feathered tail. She sees me and puts her paws up on my hips, but gently, looks up at me with this *Omigod, I love you more than anything!* expression.

She needs a walk. I can tell. And in spite of the fact that there's major serious shit I need to deal with, in spite of the fact that what I really want to do is drink two or three large Yanjing Drafts (because that's what it takes to get any kind of buzz off the weak-ass beer here), what I decide to do is take the dog for a walk.

First things first, right?

WE WALK AROUND THE *butongs* behind the Bell Tower a little while, past the community hospital and the police station hiding in the narrow alleys, by the industrial-looking grocery

and butcher where everyone's lined up at a window to buy fresh *baozi*, past a trendy-looking bar/restaurant where you still have to use the public toilet across the alley. Finally Mimi does her business (a two-bagger). "We'll go to the Drum Tower later, okay?" I tell her. Lots of people in the neighborhood like to bring their dogs out to the plaza between the Drum and Bell Towers, but not until after dark, when all the tourists have gone. It's a big problem here, finding any kind of open space where your dog can run around a little. Another reason to leave, I think.

But where would I go? This is the question that always stops me.

I'd better think about what's on my plate right now, I tell myself.

So while Mimi sniffs at some interesting stains on a grey brick wall, I get out my iPhone. Stare at it. I don't exactly want to send this email. I'm really not ready to deal with the person on the other end.

It's not really a choice, I tell myself.

I launch the VPN on my phone, open up my email, and type: "*Do you have time to meet?*"