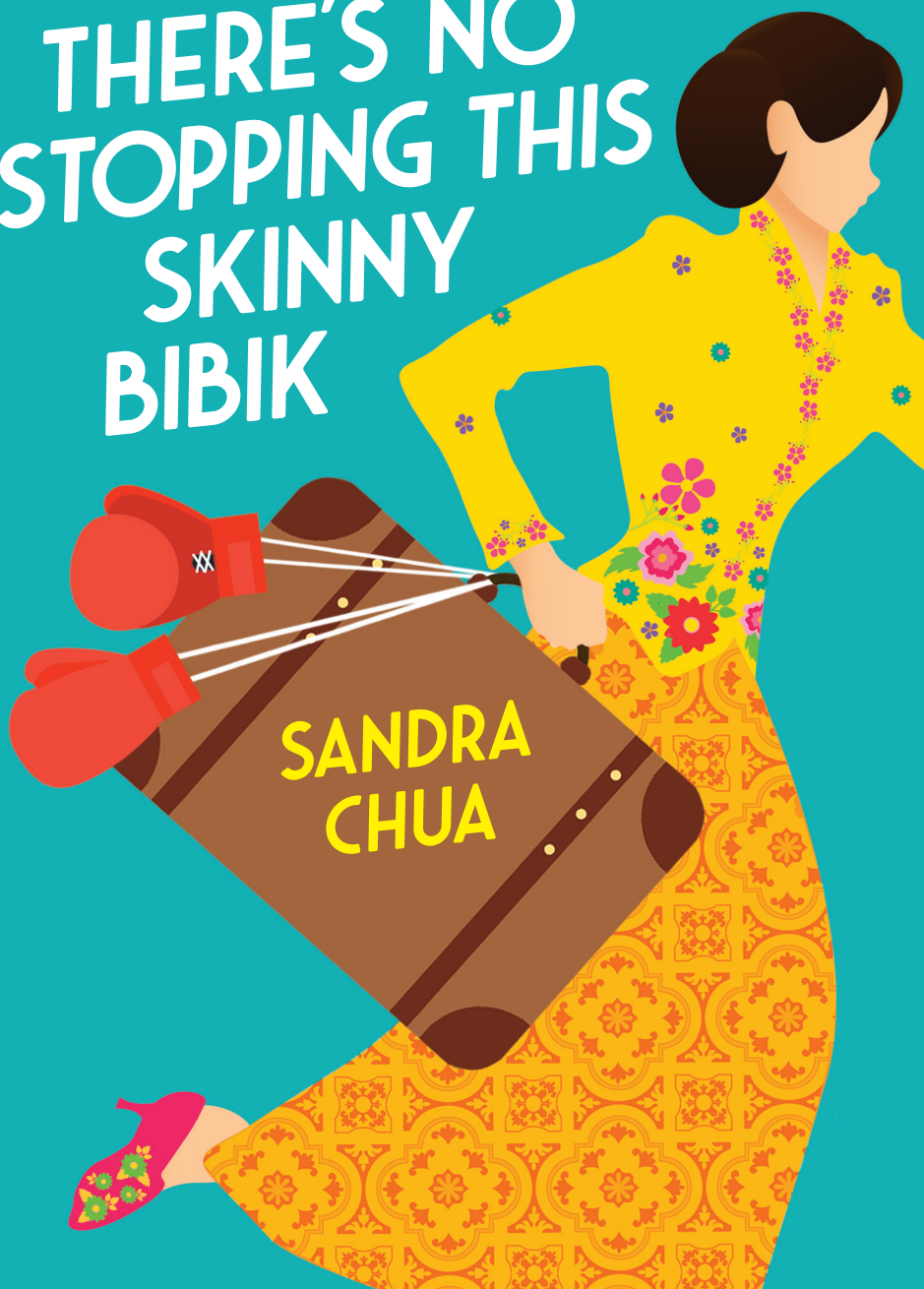


SEQUEL TO *THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SKINNY BIBIK*

# THERE'S NO STOPPING THIS SKINNY BIBIK



“Nyonya Charlie aka Charlene Neo is a charmingly contradictory heroine in the true Peranakan and adventure tradition...with a touch of romance thrown in.”

—**OVIDIA YU**, author of *The Cannonball Tree Mystery*

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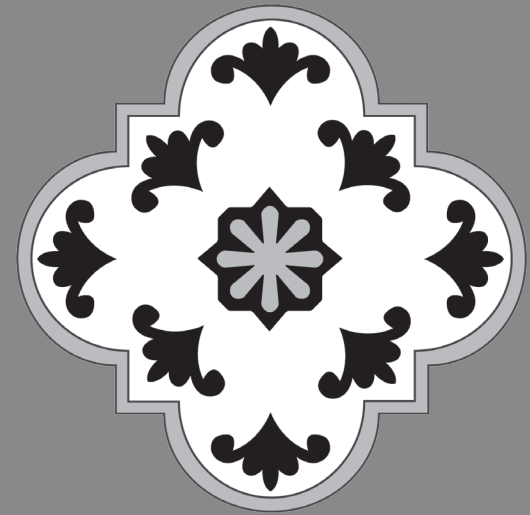
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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**E**  
EPIGRAM

*To my daughters, Jacqueline, Samantha and  
Kimberly, millennial and Gen Z nyonyas who keep  
me clued in to testicle-chewing fish, OnlyFans  
subscriptions, eyebrow enhancements and more*



PART I

# 1

## Tarantulas and Other Encounters

Charlie Neo wasn't expecting any trouble when she joined the short queue at the collection counter. She was at Customs House in Penang to sign for a parcel that required inspection. But before she could get to the front of the line, she heard panicked screaming coming from an adjoining room.

She immediately left her place in the queue and ran over to see what the commotion was about, almost crashing into a female employee rushing out of the X-ray room.

A man, presumably the manager, came from behind Charlie and grabbed the woman by the arm. "What is it?" he demanded.

The woman could hardly speak between terrified sobs. "Labah-labah! Spiders! B-b-big spiders!" she finally gasped. "Th-th-they escaped!"

"Mati mampus!" the manager exclaimed, aptly describing

the dire situation they were in. He roared, “Call the exterminators!”

The Customs House staff rushed to comply.

“Nanti sekejap. Hang on,” Charlie interjected, not wanting to see the spiders killed. “I may be able to help. I’m experienced in capturing wildlife. Can you tell me exactly what happened?”

By that time, a small crowd of curious customers and employees had gathered around the manager and the sobbing employee.

“We heard scratching noises coming from a parcel. It’s supposed to contain toys so we sent it through the X-ray machine. The box had live animals inside! When it came out of the machine, it fell off the conveyor belt and split open. That’s when I saw the giant spiders crawl out.” The woman started crying again.

“What do the spiders look like? How many escaped?” Charlie tried to calm the woman down by speaking slowly and in an even tone of voice.

“Big,” the woman said, stretching the fingers and palm of her right hand wide. “At least three ran away. They are very fast! They look poisonous. It’s too dangerous to go in there.”

“Tarantulas,” Charlie said, looking at the manager. “They are venomous but a bite won’t kill a human. You can call the pest control company for backup, but I’ll probably be able to catch the escaped ones before they arrive. I’ll

need gloves, a torch light, a stick and boxes with air holes to keep them in.”

“I’ll help you,” said a deep, gravelly voice.

Charlie sought out the source of the voice and found a tall young man who looked unkempt, with hair that flopped over his forehead and obscured his eyebrows. The hairs on his chin were just shy of becoming a straggly beard. He was wearing a loose tee-shirt advertising a brand of beer, baggy board shorts and flip-flops.

Charlie hesitated. She could certainly do with the help, but from a guy who looked like he lived rough on Batu Ferringhi beach? She required someone reliable, not a hobo who looked like he’d never attempted an honest day’s work in his life.

She scanned the small crowd of kaypoh—nosy—onlookers hopefully. No one else volunteered. The Customs House manager avoided eye contact.

Charlie sighed. “Thank you, I could use the help. Do you have experience with tarantulas?”

“No,” admitted the man. “But I’m not afraid of hairy bite-y things. I’ll follow your lead. Are you an entomologist or something?”

“Something like that,” Charlie answered, surprised that a hobo knew what an entomologist was. “In Singapore, I worked in an agency that rescued endangered wildlife.” By that time, the gloves and other tools arrived.

"I'm Stephen Fraser," the man said, extending his right hand.

*Stephen Fraser.* Why did that name sound familiar? Charlie didn't have time to ponder. She took his hand and shook it.

"You can call me Charlie," she said, pulling on the gloves and cautiously entering the X-ray room. She motioned to Stephen to follow her and she quickly closed the door before any creatures could escape.

Inside, they saw the damaged box on the floor. Charlie inspected it and found six tarantulas housed individually in acrylic cages. Four other cages were cracked and empty of their occupants.

"Looks like four spiders escaped," she said, lifting the intact cages carefully and placing them back on the conveyor belt of the X-ray machine.

"Anything I should know about tarantula attacks?" Stephen asked nervously as they looked under the machine and in nooks and crannies for the arachnids.

"Yes," Charlie stated matter-of-factly as she gingerly poked around stacked boxes with a stick. "When threatened, they raise their front legs and may charge to bite you; but mostly, they are not aggressive if you approach them carefully. They also have a nasty habit of ejecting hairs from their abdomens as a form of defence. The hairs, if they come into contact with skin, will cause an allergic

reaction like redness and itchiness. If a hair gets into your eyes—that'll be really bad news."

"Charming," Stephen responded.

She spotted the first one hiding amid a mountain of parcels. Gently coaxing it out with the stick, Charlie managed to get the spider to crawl onto her gloved hand. Cupping it with the other gloved hand, she expertly popped it into a cardboard box that Stephen was holding.

An hour later, Charlie managed to box all four escapees after finding the others hiding in plain sight on the air-conditioner, under a desk and inside a wastebasket.

"Just as well they are only giant spiders and not teeny-tiny poison dart frogs or scorpions or vipers," Charlie commented to Stephen as they gathered all the spider boxes and prepared to leave the room. "It would have taken us a lot longer to catch those."

Stephen grimaced. "You say you do this for a living? It was a conscious career choice?"

Charlie laughed. "I get that a lot. 'What's a girl like you doing with creepy-crawlies? Beasties that kill you!'"

When they exited the room, the crowd outside applauded. The pest control people were waiting as well. Dressed in hazmat suits and carrying tanks of insecticide, they entered the X-ray room to ascertain that no more venomous wildlife was present and hiding in the post. Charlie was glad that the rescued tarantulas had been



spared certain death.

Unsure about where the spiders should go next, Charlie called a Malaysian contact of hers located in Kuala Lumpur.

“Puteri,” she said in Bahasa Melayu when her call was answered. Puteri, or “princess”, was Charlie’s pet name for Tunku Miriam Iskandar Shah, a minor member of the Malaysian royal family. Miriam headed a private animal conservation outfit called The Wildlings Initiative.

“Charlie?” Miriam replied. “You’re calling from a Malaysian number. What a surprise.”

“Yes,” said Charlie. “I’ve recently moved to Penang from Singapore. Listen. I have a situation here that I need help with. I have ten tarantulas that have to be housed. Can you tell me where to send them?”

“You’ve left Singapore?” Miriam asked. “We have to catch up. Meantime, I know the spider expert at the university in Penang. You can send the hairy critters to him. I’ll call and make arrangements.”

As Charlie waited for the details to be sent by Miriam, the local police arrived and began taking statements from the customs officers.

“If you raid the recipient’s home address or workplace, you’ll probably find more smuggled creatures,” she said to the investigating officer in fluent Bahasa, noticing in her peripheral vision that Stephen was still hanging around and looking at her with interest.

“In Singapore, we stumbled on a shipment of poison dart frogs from South America. When we raided the address on the delivery order, we found tanks of piranhas and even a baby boa constrictor. Turned out the man was obsessed with the Amazon and tried to recreate it in his HDB apartment,” she added, switching to English. “Chances are, these tarantulas are not this person’s only acquisitions. He may be a dealer in exotic animals.”

With the police business completed and the instructions given to the customs officers on where to send the tarantulas for safe-keeping, Charlie went back to the collection counter to retrieve her parcel. She found Stephen there signing for a crate of what looked like camera and recording equipment.

“You speak Bahasa. You’re Singaporean Chinese?” he asked.

“Yes, I speak a form of Bahasa. I’m of Peranakan descent, that’s why,” she explained.

“You know, you’re really interesting. Can I interview you on camera? You can describe what happened here today and even mention the poison dart frogs in Singapore. I’m a broadcast journalist with a new cable channel. Maybe you’ve heard of me? I think this would make a great documentary,” he said.

Charlie now remembered why the name Stephen Fraser seemed familiar. He was the popular presenter with a Hong Kong-based TV channel called HKBN. At work in

Singapore, she had watched a news special about a market in Wuhan, China, that sold wild game. Workers at the market had reportedly fallen sick with a mysterious disease. The programme was presented by Stephen Fraser.

The Stephen Fraser of the small screen didn't look anything like the man standing in front of her. That Stephen Fraser was blessed with a mixed Scottish-Chinese ancestry. Well-built and good-looking, he was always impeccably groomed and dressed in sharp grey suits with perfectly accessorised neckties.

*Whoops. He's not an unemployed beach bum after all. Goes to show, first impressions are always so important, as Mummy keeps drumming into me,* Charlie mused.

That distinctive gravelly voice, though. It was unmistakably news-anchor-like.

"Oh no!" she said to Stephen, genuinely dismayed. "I hate being in the media spotlight! Please leave me out of it. But you're right. Smuggling of exotic pets across borders is a real problem and rampant in this part of the world, but it's not well known. It'll be good to expose the illicit activity. Many customers of exotic pets don't realise that they are breaking the law.

"As for getting me involved, just say you caught the tarantulas by yourself and don't even mention my existence."

"Bad experience with the media?" Stephen guessed.

"Traumatic! Horrifying!" She shuddered. "Never again,

if I can avoid it." Charlie took a deep breath and turned towards the exit.

"No, wait, where are you headed? I have wheels. I'll give you a lift," Stephen said.

"No thanks, I'll call a cab," Charlie replied, wanting to get as far away from the news hound as possible.

"I insist," Stephen said. He picked up her parcel and dumped it on his trolley, on top of the crate of equipment. Then he pushed the trolley in the direction of the car park. Charlie had little choice but to go with him.

The "wheels" turned out to be a large jeep. The back was filled with even more equipment. As Charlie gave directions to her apartment, Stephen filled her in about what he was doing in Penang.

He had left HKBN for a start-up news and lifestyle channel called Asia Roundup, which was setting up shop in Penang. The TV studio was located in a new technology park in the Bayan Lepas district of Penang Island. Stephen was staying at the old Eastern & Oriental Hotel in George Town while searching for an apartment to rent.

On her part, Charlie told him that she was in Penang on a social visit pass. She had given up her job in Singapore to live indefinitely in Penang with her boyfriend.

Stephen looked interested. "Does that mean you're free to take on part-time work?"

"Well, I'm a gig worker at the moment," she informed

him. “My cousin is the curator at the Peranakan Historical Society and I’ve been roped in to do all kinds of odd jobs when he requires extra hands. It’s not full-time work and the pay hardly covers my taxi fares.”

“Asia Roundup is looking for assistants and I think that’s something you could do,” said Stephen. “You could help with research, set up interviews and carry out some reporting. The work is important for news gathering.”

Charlie grimaced. “Ugh. This is unexpected. I don’t have any experience and I’m allergic to the media. I’m the last person you should ask to do this.”

“I saw how you reacted the moment trouble started at the Customs House. You were not afraid to take charge and you jumped right in. You have good instincts. And you’re fluent in Bahasa. I think you’d be an asset to my team,” said Stephen.

They had arrived at the condominium where Charlie was living. *Time to make a polite exit. I hope I never see the man again*, she thought, grimacing internally. Outwardly, she gave Stephen a bright smile.

“Thanks for the lift.”

“Aren’t you at least going to say that you’ll think about it and give me your telephone number and full name?” he persisted.

“I don’t think so,” Charlie said apologetically, as she tried to whisk her parcel out of the car boot.

“Well, at least give me your phone number in case this gets worse and I need to call you for advice,” Stephen said, turning to face Charlie and pulling down the neckline of his tee-shirt to reveal an angry red rash.

Charlie’s eyes widened in shock. “You’re covered in spider hairs! Why didn’t you say anything? We need to neutralise the toxin!”

“It stings and I’ve been resisting the urge to scratch,” Stephen admitted.

“Come upstairs. An alkaline soap will probably ease the discomfort,” Charlie said, pulling Stephen to the lift.

In the bright and airy twenty-fifth-floor apartment, Charlie pushed Steven into the bathroom. She made him take his tee-shirt off, and using the edge of a credit card, she gently scraped the affected area to remove the miniscule spider hairs. Then she applied liquid soap and rinsed the skin.

“Don’t put your tee-shirt on. It probably still has hairs. Let me see if there’s a lotion for insect bites in the medicine box. You may need to visit a doctor for an antihistamine shot.” Charlie left Stephen in the bathroom and went to her bedroom.

While she was rooting through the medicine box for the lotion, she heard a loud crash and grunts coming from the living room. She rushed out to see Stephen grappling with a man she didn’t recognise. He was dressed in black, and about the same height as Stephen but much slimmer. The

attacker, however, was frighteningly vicious.

He wrestled with Stephen and in a few quick moves, got behind him and pulled him to a sitting position on the floor. Once he had the bigger man at a disadvantage, he wrapped his right arm around Stephen's neck in a painful chokehold. One strong yank and the newsman's neck would break.

"Stop this!" Charlie yelled.

At the sound of her voice, the two men stopped struggling with each other. The man in black let go of Stephen, and they both stood up and glared at each other, murder in their eyes. Then the man's eyes softened as he noticed Charlie, and she finally recognised him.

"Sheng, what is wrong with you? What is going on?" Charlie felt bewildered by the violence. A wooden side table lay broken on the floor.

"I came home, saw you enter the bedroom and a half-naked man about to follow you in," Sheng growled. He stood with his fists bunched, jaw set, narrowed eyes filled with aggression again. "I moved to stop him and he threw a punch at me."

Stephen, scowling, didn't take his eyes off Sheng for a second. His body was also tensed, with fists clenched, as if ready to strike in an instant. "I didn't hear him approaching me. I felt an arm block me and when I turned, I saw a man in black and assumed he was an intruder about to harm us."

"Well, stop it, both of you. Stephen, this is Sheng, my partner. Sheng, this is Stephen Fraser, formerly of HKBN channel. We just met at the Customs House."

Stephen relaxed and seemed to realise what a disturbing sight they must have presented to Sheng. "Sorry for my state of undress," he attempted to explain. "There was a spot of trouble and—"

"Trouble?" Sheng cut in, somewhat icily. "Yes, I can understand that. Trouble tends to seek Charlie out. Or is it the other way around?"

Charlie sighed and spoke to Sheng in a patient tone of voice. "Stephen is a victim of a spider attack—wait!" she added, putting up her hand when Sheng's expression changed to scepticism. "I know that sounds unbelievably silly, but it's the truth!"

Between the two of them, the story was sorted out and Sheng appeared less angry.

"I apologise for the misunderstanding. I realise that I should have said something before grabbing you," he said.

Stephen nodded. "Apology accepted. I'm sorry for throwing the first punch and breaking your furniture."

They shook hands and Charlie was relieved.

"I should go, thank you for the medical treatment," Stephen said.

But Charlie couldn't allow him to walk into the posh Eastern & Oriental Hotel in his current half-naked

condition. She attempted to find something for him to wear.

His size was a problem. He was broader than Sheng and none of Sheng's tee-shirts would fit him. Charlie finally found a loose windbreaker that he could throw over his bare shoulders. Once that was solved, the man was ushered out the flat, leaving just the two of them.

"I know you wanted to help the man, but don't you think bringing someone you just met into your home might just cause misunderstanding?" Sheng asked Charlie testily.

"Ooh. Were you worried about my virtue?" teased Charlie. Sheng was still angry, she could tell. She tried to lighten the mood and sauntered seductively up to him. When she got near enough, she suddenly knocked him off balance with her forearm and pounced on him.

Sheng was now lying on the floor of the living room with Charlie sitting on his chest. He was completely incapacitated and could not budge.

"This is exactly what I mean. Your violent nature will get you into trouble with the law one of these days. Strange men are enticed by you but have no inkling of the danger they're in," he gasped. Charlie's weight on his chest seemed to be making it hard for him to breathe.

Her looks were deceiving. She was slim and willowy, and few people suspected that she was a taekwondo black belt who was also skilled in mixed martial arts. Charlie had the ability to take down most experienced fighters and all

unsuspecting strangers who tried to get fresh with her.

She knew it was one of the reasons Sheng was so enamoured with her. They were each other's favourite sparring partners and their shared interest in martial arts was the spark that kept their relationship fresh and engaging.

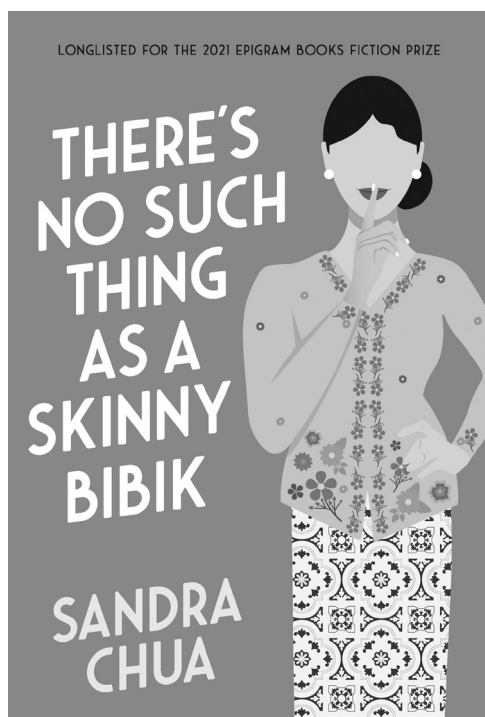
But Charlie also knew Sheng had hidden skills when it came to martial arts. The moment she shifted her weight, Sheng threw her off and pinned her to the ground. They grappled for dominance until Charlie started laughing and finally surrendered.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Sandra Chua** is the author of *There's No Such Thing as a Skinny Bibik*, longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize in 2021. A former magazine editor and meddling mother of three exasperated daughters, she is also an avid bookworm, K-drama addict and Domestic Goddess wannabe.

**LOGLISTED FOR THE 2021 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE**



***THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SKINNY BIBIK BY SANDRA CHUA***

Charlie has always been too tall, too skinny and too wild to ever be considered a proper nyonya. Her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother are always looking on in disapproval, yet Charlie knows she must follow her heart in career and in love. That becomes complicated when three men fight for her affection, a major smuggling ring must be investigated and the paparazzi cannot get enough of her!

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—OVIDIA YU, AUTHOR OF *THE CANNONBALL TREE MYSTERY*



Nyonya Charlie has found love,  
or so she thinks.

Rebel that she is, Charlie Neo chooses love over her family when she decides to leave Singapore for Penang to be with her ex-spy boyfriend. There, she struggles to build a new life, working various jobs, including as an assistant to a TV news anchor, and reunites with a grandaunt who is her own brand of hot-blooded bibik. But after becoming embroiled in both a money laundering scheme and the kidnapping of two genius hackers, she goes running back to her Peranakan roots.

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