

KARINA ROBLES BAHRIN

# THE ACCIDENTAL MALAY

WINNER



EPIGRAM  
BOOKS  
FICTION  
PRIZE  
2022

“Slick, sharp and  
full of the frustrations  
and joys of modern  
urban Malaysia.  
A joy to read.”

– TASH AW



“Desire, religion and politics collide in this delicious début by Karina Robles Bahrin. Slick, sharp and full of the frustrations and joys of modern urban Malaysia, *The Accidental Malay* is a joy to read.”

– **TASH AW**, celebrated author of *We, The Survivors*

“An intriguing story, beautifully paced, centred around the many complications of love in Malaysia. Its truths will be controversial but there’s no denying Karina’s storytelling talent. A very enjoyable read.”

– **MARINA MAHATHIR**, writer and activist

“Delightfully transgressive, *The Accidental Malay* is a deeply nuanced study in the sometimes suffocating intertwining of race and religion for Malay-Muslims. Part comedy of errors and part social drama, this novel adds to the slowly burgeoning but altogether necessary postcolonial body of works on Malay people by Malay people. For regional readers, it needs to be on your must-read list to better understand thy neighbour. For international readers, it’s a worthy read on race and identity.”

– **SUFFIAN HAKIM**, bestselling author of *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher* and *The Keepers of Stories*

“A sharply observed, elegantly crafted culture-clash state-of-the-nation drama that is not only witty but heartfelt.”

– **AMIR MUHAMMAD**, author, filmmaker, publisher at Buku Fixi and EBFP 2022 judge

“A novel both generous and scathing; both honest and nuanced; both grounded in human emotion and engaged with history and politics. Most of all, *The Accidental Malay* is both entertaining and important, a fast-paced, character-driven, furious and yet somehow joyful exploration of Malay ethnoreligious supremacy in Malaysia and its effect on real people’s lives.”

– **PREETA SAMARASAN**, author of *Evening Is the Whole Day*

“Braving the intersections and contradictions of race, class and gender, one woman’s private campaign for self-definition becomes a search for love amidst corporate manoeuvrings, familial pressures and the challenging complexities of her country’s cultural politics.”

– **CYRIL WONG**, poet, fictionist and author of *This Side of Heaven*

“They say to never equate a writer to his or her book, as they are two separate things, but *The Accidental Malay* has Karina’s gumption and bravado. This is a novel that is truthful, humorous, sharp and yet is an ode to Malaysia’s political circus. Read this book and prepare to get angry, laugh and hoot at the outrageousness.”

– **DINA ZAMAN**, writer and co-founder of IMAN Research

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KARINA ROBLES BAHRIN

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*For M.*

*Siapa yang makan cili, dia lah yang terasa pedasnya.*  
He who eats the chilli is the one who feels its heat.

–Malay proverb

So much for torrid sex tonight.

At least, the bartender is used to her waiting, sometimes for a little while, but other times till closing.

Tomorrow, Jasmine Leong Lin Li might make an obscene amount of money. But right now, she slams back five shots of tequila alone in her favourite bar on Changkat. Iskandar, her lover, is not coming after all. His wife has taken ill with a cold.

At forty-one, she is the ideal mistress—not a wife, never a mother, and gainfully employed, with little need for matrimony to complicate matters.

So much for their little celebration. And after months of her haggling with leery merchant bankers, way past the hour the men should have gone home to their spouses.

At some point, in snatched phone conversations, there was talk of a vacation, just her and Iskandar, to a jazz festival or a safari. He was meant to conjure up some business deal so they could get away for three weeks. Except now he isn't here for even one miserable drink.

Thank God she didn't order a bottle.

It is 1am on a Wednesday. There are only a few stragglers left by the time she exits Luccio's. The concrete pavement is slick with leftover rain, steam rising from the asphalt on the road. Her thick, wavy locks instantly go frizzy in the humidity. She pulls an elastic band off her wrist and gathers her hair into a messy topknot. It is late; no need to fuss with the hairdo.

She isn't beautiful, but attractive. Men have described her as "interesting", their blooming desire quelled by a hint of fear. A warning sign that if they get too close, she might possibly render them stupid or scared, their weaknesses revealed on their own.

Her bartender hails a taxi and Jasmine climbs in, waving a tipsy goodbye. The driver noses the vehicle through the detritus of Ladies' Night Wednesday. They slip down narrow Jalan Alor with its fierce flaming woks and flimsy plastic stools, through the expanse of shiny Sultan Ismail's skyscrapers and out onto the expressway.

Here, and sometimes even overseas, people call Jasmine the Bak Kwa Princess. To the city's other socialites, it is cause for slight derision. Being named after sticky pork jerky is hardly the height of glamour, unlike those whose fathers run fleets of private jets or hock jewels to their rich friends' wives and mistresses. But to Jasmine, it is only a name.

After all, the country's capital in 2010 isn't any worse for wear despite its swampy origins. KL, Kay-Yell, Kolumpo, Koala Lumpa—nothing people call it reminds them of the mud. Yet it is there, crippling its inhabitants' legs, willing them to stand still if they get too ambitious, its cold, squelching grip a reminder not to stir the water up too much. By now, people's noses no longer wrinkle from the stagnant stink. It has seeped into their bodies through the shuffle of their footsteps, muddling their moral compasses, blurring the bright black lines between gods.

## 2

It has taken several lifetimes to get here.

Thirty seconds to 9am.

On stage, Jasmine gives her sombre, charcoal jacket a cautious tug, hoping its drooping top button will not fall off. Its thread is anchored on the jacket's inside with a scrap of Sellotape scrounged from her car's glove compartment. She didn't double-check today's outfit last night, too drunk by the time she got home.

Only one other woman stands on the small podium, flanked by a retinue of men. Jasmine's grandmother, Madam Leong, is the company's CEO. Her son, Jasmine's father, was murdered in the racial riots of 1969. Her husband died the year before that from cancer. Decades of cutting through the coarse male fabric of business dealings have left her insides scarred and hardened. She seldom, if ever, has shed a tear since her husband's passing.

In seconds, Phoenix Public Limited will debut on Bursa Malaysia. The Leong family company, more than a hundred years old, is now becoming a twenty-first century entity.

Though they stand in KL's stock exchange, Phoenix got its start in Ipoh, the northern town once famous for its tin ore. The company now owns one-third of Ipoh's property developments. Yet, despite its name being plastered on billboards heralding new townships and commercial districts, everyone still knows it for its bak kwa. Malaysian Chinese living abroad acquire cartons of it on their homecoming sojourns. Phoenix bak kwa is the staple of Lunar New Year reunions, boxes of it sold stacked



in front of shops next to crates of mandatory mandarin oranges. People flock to Ipoh on weekends to take photos inside the flagship colonial shophouse, a national heritage property.

There are rumours that Phoenix intends to distribute its bak kwa abroad. A sure bet, some say, thanks to the Chinese diaspora spread across all corners of the globe. A Michelin-starred chef once pronounced Phoenix's pork jerky the most heavenly mouthful he had ever savoured.

Jasmine can almost taste the sharp tinge of victory in the back of her throat. She leans towards her grandmother, her Jimmy Choos shooting vertiginous pain up her calves. "Poh Poh, I think we might be worth a billion ringgit in a moment."

One moment could balance out the ledger of debt a granddaughter has accrued since being orphaned at birth. One moment could make eighteen long months of boxed lunches and late-night pizzas in the office all worth it. One moment could shift the compass of her fate, edging it truer north where she might at last feel she belongs.

For one moment, Jasmine is five again, holding up a piece of clean, white paper by its corners, afraid to smudge it with her fingers.

On the last day of her first year in kindergarten, Jasmine knocked on her grandmother's bedroom door. She had something to show her. The result of endless attempts at learning to write her own name, which was very long, far longer than "cat" or even "ambulance", or whole sentences copied from her *Dick and Jane* books.

Grandmother loomed—slim, severe and complete—in a black, knee-length samfoo with tiny pink flowers.

Jasmine held up the piece of paper, her damp fingers careful to only pinch its upper corners. All the way home from school, on the twenty-step walk to its gates from class, in the back seat of the car, up, up to Grandmother's doorway, she had held it, arms now aching a little.

"Poh Poh, I can write my whole name. I don't need to go to school any more!" An offering held up for scrutiny, obscuring Jasmine's view of Madam Leong.

Grandmother laughed, a tiny snigger, fingering the words on the

paper, before snatching the gift from Jasmine's grasp. She reached down and pinched Jasmine's chin between bony thumb and forefinger, holding the child's gaze.

"You think this is all it takes? Well, at least you're better off than your cousin, Kevin. I am told he cannot even read yet. But then again, boys are always slower. At least, at first. Because the world waits for them, they are in no hurry. But you, you are a girl." Grandmother tapped the tip of Jasmine's nose. "You can never do enough. You will always need to do better. Nothing is ever promised to girls."

As the crowd counts down, Jasmine realises no one really sees her.

It is difficult to be noticed next to Madam Leong, who stands straight despite her eighty years, her almond eyes elongated even more by her taut, silver chignon. The Madam never wears heels; she does not need them. Her presence diminishes the tallest of men, their eyes widening in fear of her shadow.

At zero, the audience roars in unison.

Madam Leong strikes the gong with a resolute blow. Its sonorous timbre echoes round the listing hall. For a moment, it is the only sound, until the giant screens in the gallery flicker to life, signalling the market's opening. Rows of letters and numbers fill the screens, representing companies listed on the stock exchange. Somewhere down the middle is Phoenix, displayed by its code: PHX. Next to it, figures glow green. Jasmine watches as the digits tick upwards, her hands clasped beneath her breastbone like a choir girl. The nails from her right hand form small indentations in her left palm.

The company debuts at almost twice its initial asking price. Phoenix Public Limited is now worth 950 million ringgit and rising. Not quite a billion. Not yet.

"Perhaps tomorrow," Madam Leong mutters, staring into the crowd, lips stretched in a practiced smile.

Still, raucous applause rises from the din. Cameras flash in a frenzy. The stock exchange's chairman offers Madam Leong a timorous handshake in congratulations. The merchant bankers' nervous frowns stretch into open-mouthed schoolboy grins. The men pat one another's backs, pumping their fists, giving high-fives.

The media cameramen edge closer to the stage. Jasmine and her grandmother join hands and raise their arms in victory.

Yet Jasmine feels unmoored. The tips of her fingers tingle with doubt. The iron grip of her grandmother's hand while the cameras click leave her bones throbbing with a dull, empty ache.

If asked, most in the room, except maybe the catering crew, can name her. And perhaps tag on "multi-millionaire" as a descriptor. Beyond that, she is no one to this sea of people. Not someone whose presence creeps into their dream-filled sleep or invades their idle thoughts with worry over her well-being. And certainly not one whose empty seat would be noticed at family gatherings.

The only chair waiting for her is on the eighteenth storey of an office tower in Damansara Heights. In a city ignorant of her exile, her only custodian is work.

Except, perhaps, for Iskandar.

Scanning the room, she spots him, a lanky apparition that catches her by surprise, leaning against the large glass windows, at a distance from the crowd. He winks with a slight incline of his head, a lazy smile crossing his face. He gazes at her for a small moment before walking away to the coffee station.

Jasmine lets out a small sigh, rubbing one ankle with the pointed tip of the other foot's shoe, feeling the tug of desire rise in her throat. At least he made it this time. But before she can reach the buffet line, a parade of waiters emerges, bearing trays of food. Weaving between them, she almost collides with the last one.

"Oh, ma'af, Puan," he addresses her in Malay.

She glances at his fair-skinned face, his narrow eyes and thin lips. The slant of his cheeks, the tonal seesaw of his voice. Chinese.

She thinks to correct him, but doesn't. They all get it wrong, anyway. The Chinese men think she's Malay. And the Malays assume she's Chinese. Always addressing her in the other's language, so sure they are that she isn't one of their own. The Indians stick to English, probably on account of her expensive handbags, but maybe they're also just a little smarter.

Perhaps it is her oval eyes that end in an upward tilt, her hair that tumbles down her back in waves, her breasts that are just a little too generous, her brisk stride. The full mouth anchored by a dimple on each side. The careless toss of her handbag on car seats. The lack of a cooing, flirtatious lilt in her voice, even when she wants a favour.

Or it could be that they all just have poor vision. Strangers are uncertain when they encounter her, until she tells them. At times, she is tempted to lie, but she hasn't, although there are moments when it is hard to resist. Like when she is buying batiks on Jalan Masjid. Except her accent would give her away, the Malays sussing out her Chinese-ness from her stilted, sing-song pronunciation.

By the time she manoeuvres her way to the coffee station, Iskandar is nowhere in sight. Rake-thin Mr Chew, her grandmother's assistant, is waving from the edge of the room, his finger jabbing the face of his watch.

It is rare that anyone could pull off mustard yellow with panache, but the pert, small-breasted reporter wears her pencil-line dress with the air of a haughty swan. As the woman settles into her seat, fiddling with her tape recorder and flipping the pages of her spiral-bound notepad, Jasmine eyes her in silence from across the conference table.

Outside, refreshments are being served, with the fragrant scent of nasi lemak seeping under the meeting room's doors. Jasmine remembers that she skipped breakfast, and hopes there will be some food left over once this interview is done. The nasi lemak served at company listings is

reputed to be the tastiest in town. She jiggles her leg beneath the table, impatient for a plate because, by God, she's earned it.

The reporter is from *The Market Watch*, the nation's leading business paper. Its Sunday edition is scrutinised at length by financial types over cups of viscous Hainanese coffee and bitter weekend espressos. Phoenix has been featured several times in the past few months, with analysts weighing in on its forecasted listing price.

Today they beat all the pundits' expectations.

The reporter appears ready now, her spine straight, pen poised in her left hand. "Right, shall we start?"

At first, the questions are standard issue. Jasmine answers them in her usual perfunctory manner, reeling off sales projections and market share numbers. In truth, she finds most local journalists boring, with their vapid questions that she can easily tick off on her mental checklist.

"Miss Leong, are there plans for you to take over leadership of Phoenix?"

This catches Jasmine off guard. Most journalists are not normally this forward.

The reporter notices. "Madam Leong is getting on in years, and I thought with the listing..."

Jasmine stiffens. The issue of her grandmother's retirement has only been raised by her two aunts, the other major shareholders of Phoenix. But never discussed directly with Madam Leong, and certainly not with outsiders.

Last Lunar New Year, Treasure Leong, Jasmine's auntie, mounted a small inquisition during her annual visit home from Vancouver, where she had lived for years with her own family. Over the mahjong table, after Grandmother had retired for the evening, Seh Gu Treasure made the first overture.

"Ma Ma needs to let go. She's already eighty."

Treasure's older sister, the formidable Tai Gu Ruth, sniffed. "Seventy-nine. She's seventy-nine. We're all getting old."

This was where all big conversations began in their family, or perhaps most Chinese families now for hundreds of years. Fingers picking up and sliding smooth mahjong tiles on the felt-covered table while marriages were dissected, children waved like trump cards, and husbands, oh those husbands, bemoaned as the acquired handicaps that are the necessary burden of a responsible Chinese wife. For decades, it was Madam Leong and her two daughters at the table. But five years ago, the matriarch announced her withdrawal from the post-reunion dinner custom, choosing instead to retire to her room after the last dish had been cleared.

Since then, her seat was occupied by Jasmine or one of her other cousins, whose presence did little to curb the Leong sisters' frank debates. Sometimes the pair, addled by a touch too much wine, broke out into songs from their giddy youth, their drunken wails of laughter keeping Auntie Treasure's husband and children well away. Everyone knew not to interrupt the Leong sisters and their rare merry-making.

But most of the time, it was like this. Small vipers of shared but unspoken thoughts tossed out, writhing into the open without warning, uninvited.

That night, it was Jasmine's turn to take the third seat at the table.

"It's easy for you to say, you don't even live here. Your life is good." Auntie Ruth straightened the row of tiles she had stacked.

"What do you mean? As if yours is any worse," Auntie Treasure shot back. The deck now complete, each of them drew their own thirteen tiles to start the round.

Jasmine examined her own tiles, arranging them to form clusters. The hand was a good one. She might win.

It was Auntie Ruth's turn to start. She tossed out a tile and exchanged it for another from the deck, her poker face giving nothing away. "At least you still have a husband." Her tiles click-clacked in between her words as she rearranged them in a new order. "And your children don't want to come back here anyway. Why should you care who runs the

company? As long as the cheques keep arriving.”

Treasure Leong looked up from her hand. “Who says? Eh, this is Ba Ba’s company we’re talking about, our heritage. As for husbands, have you seen mine ah? He’s not exactly Rock Hudson, you know.” She picked up a new tile with a grimace, gesturing to the snoring lump on the sofa.

Ruth Leong cackled. “Rock Hudson? Rock Hudson’s gay lah! What for you want a husband like that?”

Her sister sniggered. “Who knows? Maybe if you had a husband like that you would still be married.”

“Iieeeyeerr! Talking nonsense lah you!” Auntie Ruth’s screeching laugh rang through the living room. “Nah, Jasmine, your turn!”

Jasmine drew a tile from the deck. It formed a meld with two others in her hand. “Pung!” She set the three tiles down in front of her, discarding another.

“Wah! So fast! See, Che,” Auntie Treasure said, addressing her older sister. “This is what we need, someone who moves quickly. Jasmine should just take over Phoenix.”

Auntie Ruth stayed silent, her mouth set in a firm, straight line. But her vipers remained in their nest that night. The fluorescent glare of her baby sister’s words left no hidden space for negotiation.

The rest of the game progressed, without a word uttered at the table except to declare a meld. In the distance, a lone dog barked in the muted, lukewarm evening. A string of firecrackers went off in successive bangs two houses away. A motorcycle squealed down the road. The grandfather clock in the living room struck eleven. And the conversation hung unfinished in the smothering night.

The haughty swan reaches a slim arm across the table to grab Jasmine’s hand. Looking her subject in the eye, she lowers her voice. “If I were you, I’d want to be CEO. You’ve certainly earned your seat at the table.

After all, there aren’t any men you have to climb over. Not like the rest of us.”

Jasmine withdraws from the woman’s grasp. A knock at the door reveals Mr Chew. “Madam is leaving,” he says.

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” Jasmine promises to answer further questions via e-mail. “Maybe you could come to our party this evening. At the Hilton. Everyone will be there. Mr Chew will get you an invitation.”

As she strides across the listing hall, Jasmine stops several times to shake hands with well-wishers. She reaches the foyer to find her grandmother already standing on the top step, waiting for her car.

“Your jacket is missing a button,” Madam Leong says. “I presume the interview went all right?”

Jasmine takes in a sharp breath. Grandmother always knows when she is off-kilter.

“Oh, it went, fine. The usual.” Jasmine shrugs her shoulders.

“I don’t suppose she asked when you were going to become CEO?”

“Wh-what?”

A soft laugh escapes Madam Leong’s lips. “And you didn’t give her an answer.”

The car arrives. Madam Leong steps into the back seat, the driver closing the door. The window slides halfway down, and her grandmother beckons Jasmine closer.

“Tonight’s party. Make sure you keep the merchant bankers happy. Who knows? Maybe you might meet one that you like. I am heading back to Ipoh. This city is too noisy. Or perhaps, I’m just tired.”

“Yes, Poh Poh.” The aunts will be there. The cousins too. “We’ll manage.”

“Of course. But you are the host, Lin Li. Stop letting your Tai Gu bully you. And make sure the drinks don’t run out.” The window rolls up, leaving Jasmine staring at her own tilted reflection in its tinted surface.

She watches the car glide down the slope of the stock exchange’s driveway, towards the oncoming crush of lunchtime traffic.

Nothing escapes the old lady. She must sleep with one ear awake.

## 3

Even without Grandmother present, the Hilton ballroom teems with KL's rich and infamous. Pastel lights cast blue and mauve shadows over the cavernous hall. This is not the usual Phoenix dinner with its old web of Chinese tradespeople. Those are in brightly lit Chinese restaurants, the loud clanking of chopsticks against bowls and frequent cries of "Yam Seng!" forming a cumulus of chaos over the room.

This is a lot more civilised. A live quartet accompanies the soft chatter. Walking through the crowd, Jasmine catches snatches of Hakka and Cantonese amid the English conversations. Some of the old tradesmen look like uncomfortable schoolboys, pulling at ties and shoving hands down their trousers to tuck and re-tuck shirts that keep bunching at their waists. Their wives have predictably almost risen to the occasion; the off-the-rack sequinned gowns and tulle skirts only give away their less-than-couture origins upon closer inspection. It is not often their kind gets a chance to rub shoulders with the who's who of KL, or dress up to the nines. Even the haughty swan is present, scribbling in her reporter's notepad, sheathed in a high-necked, turquoise cheongsam.

Tired of small talk, Jasmine finds her cousin Kevin at the champagne table. She snags a bottle from the bartender. "Grab the glasses," she says, gesturing.

Outside, there is a rooftop garden. The city lights wink in the distance. From their vantage point, KL looks all grown up, a far cry from its mosquito-infested beginnings. A rare breeze blows, cooling Jasmine's bare shoulders. A couple of wrought-iron chairs and a table

sit in the middle of the garden's astroturf.

Jasmine plonks herself onto a chair, cross-legged, her evening gown hiked up to reveal thighs starting to show hints of cellulite. Already there is a tiny tear in the hem of her dress delivered by the heel of her Louboutin. She should have had the darned gown shortened before tonight, but really, she has little time for such trivia. "Gimme," she says, holding up the bottle.

Kevin hands her a champagne flute with a flourish. "And there it is. The Ipoh in you comes out after all."

She pours herself too much champagne, lights a cigarette. "Does it ever leave?"

Kevin takes a swig straight from the bottle. "Not when half the town is in there." He waves towards the ballroom. "Speaking of which, did you know Kuan Yew is now calling himself Olivier?"

Jasmine sputters, champagne dribbling down her chin. "Kuan Yew from Ipoh? The athlete from school with the booming voice?" The boy whose naming caused a stir among the Chinese community in Ipoh, the one whose parents saw fit to christen him after the prime minister of their southern neighbour, instead of a famous Malaysian Chinese. To the Laus, it was merely a dream expressed—that one of their children would become a towering man, like the one they so admired. The rest of Ipoh, especially the monied crowd, put it down to bourgeois aspirations. After all, the Laus were only goldsmiths; they certainly never descended from owners of actual mines.

"Wait, the same Olivier who's the new managing director of RSE?" Jasmine says. Royal Swiss Equities is an important potential investor in Phoenix.

"Yep," Kevin grins. "One and the same. Not bad for a goldsmith's son, eh? He just moved back here from Australia."

"Holy shit, he just introduced himself to me. I thought he looked familiar. Why didn't he just say so?"

Kevin shrugs. "I hear he's in the market for a wife. His father is on his case for a grandchild."

“He can’t need his father’s help in *that* department,” Jasmine remarks. Kuan Yew’s broad shoulders have stood him in good stead. She imagines that many women wouldn’t mind being swept up by his stature. “I should have known it was him with that deep voice.”

After finishing her O-Levels at an English boarding school, Jasmine went home to Ipoh for the summer before she began university. Grandmother surprised her with a graduation gift—a slim, gold bracelet in a modern design that encircled Jasmine’s wrist, catching the sunlight.

The small act of generosity was unexpected. Grandmother’s gestures were usually more austere. Jasmine wore the bracelet every day with pride, never taking it off. But it was a tad loose, too large for her bones.

One day, out of boredom, she offered to help Ah Tin, the cook’s daughter, in the kitchen. The maid dispatched Jasmine to do the dishes; there had been a gaggle of Phoenix’s most important distributors at lunch. A stubborn wedge of chicken curry, slightly burnt, proved too much for the dish sponge, despite Jasmine’s vigorous scrubbing against the wok. She picked up a piece of steel wool and attacked the wok with more vigour, her hand moving roughly back and forth over the blackened crust of curry.

By the time she noticed, it was too late. Her wrist was bare. The bracelet had slipped into the sink’s yawning drain hole.

“Shit!” Her heart pounded with alarm. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, I’ve lost it! Ah Tin!”

At the sound of Jasmine’s voice, Ah Tin stopped chopping onions, rubbing her hands dry on her sarong. Peering down the sink hole, she stabbed its innards with a chopstick in a desperate attempt to fish out the bracelet. They shone a torch light down the hole, but nothing gleamed back. The bracelet was gone, washed down the old pipes, sentenced to a death among Ipoh’s sewage.

Distraught, Jasmine sat on a wooden stool, trying to slow her

laboured breathing. “Ah Tin, quick, where did Poh Poh buy it? I have to get a replacement before she finds out I’ve lost it.”

The maid told her the bracelet was procured from the town’s goldsmith. But she didn’t know how much it had cost.

Jasmine still had some British pounds in her wallet, left over from her travels and savings from school. She counted the money out with care, shoving it deep into her jeans pocket. Grabbing her bicycle, she checked her watch; Grandmother was taking an afternoon nap, giving Jasmine two hours to cycle to town and back.

The shop had not changed much since she first left for England. A row of glass cases flanked each mirrored wall. They were filled with gold trinkets on beds of red velvet. Bracelets, necklaces, rings, earrings, and the obligatory section of jade pendants. Standards for a Chinese gold jewellery concern.

There was not a person in sight when she entered the shop. It was Ipoh; no one robbed stores in broad daylight. Walking towards the rear of the shop, she poked her head through a curtained doorway into a dark corridor. A wall divided it from the rear of the establishment. She could hear Depeche Mode blasting through the thick air.

“Mr Lau? Mrs Lau?” Jasmine shouted above the din.

There was a stirring, then the music turned down. Kuan Yew emerged, his hair in a short, spiky fauxhawk. He was wearing an old singlet and a pair of sports shorts with twin blue stripes running down the sides. Sweat slicked his broad, square shoulders.

“Oh hey, when did you get back?” Kuan Yew said with a surprised smile. The last time Jasmine had seen him, they were twelve. He led them both back to the front of the shop.

“Just last week.”

Taking his place behind one of the glass cases, Kuan Yew propped his elbow onto its surface, resting his chin in his cupped hand. He gestured for Jasmine to sit on one of the swivel stools across from him.

“Man, you’ve changed,” he said, his grin mischievous.

Jasmine looked down at her jeans and tee-shirt, puzzled.

“The make-up, the hair... You sure you’re Jasmine Leong ah?”

She swiped off her lip gloss with the back of her hand.

“Oh, wait, you’ve... You got a little of that stuff on your face.” Kuan Yew reached out for a tissue from the box on the counter, then blotted her left cheek. “There, all better,” he said, still grinning.

Jasmine felt her cheeks burn. If not for the fact that she was in a jam, she would have fled the shop already.

“Can you keep a secret, Kuan Yew?”

He sat up, alert. “Hey, buy me lunch? I need someone to tell me what it’s like, living abroad. I’m leaving for Australia soon. You’re the only person I know who has done it. Left here, I mean.”

Jasmine heaved a sigh of relief. This she could do, no problem. It was a small price to pay for his confidence. She told him about her predicament, how the bracelet Grandmother had bought her went missing. And she needed to purchase a new one, so Poh Poh didn’t notice.

“Ah, my father told me about that bracelet. Your Poh Poh came in to buy it last month. Spent a long time in the shop too. I think it’s over here.” He moved to another glass case, retrieving an identical bracelet to the one she lost. “Except I should adjust it, so it doesn’t slip off your wrist again. It’ll take a week. Think you can delay your grandma till then?”

“But what about your father? He’ll tell her.”

Kuan Yew smiled with a small shake of his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just write up a bill for some fake person. Tell him it’s some girl I know, and I’ll deliver it once it’s done.”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes, lips pursed. “Some girl in some nearby town, I’m guessing?”

He threw his head back, his thundering laugh a familiar comfort. Jasmine giggled in return.

They went to a char kway teow stall in a quiet side lane. He ordered for them, pulling out a plastic stool for Jasmine so they could take their seats at a rickety fold-out table. Jasmine inhaled the steaming black noodles, polishing off her plate before he was even halfway through his meal. She told him stories, of how alien she’d felt when she first got to

England, and how white people ate rice with forks instead of spoons. Of the cold and the wet, the unending dreariness of it.

“But at least you’re going to Perth. It’s not that bad there, I imagine.” Jasmine wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

Kuan Yew nodded. “I hope so. My mum’s packing me sweaters and a jacket. I managed to get one on our last trip to KL. Is winter colder than aircon ah? We don’t even have aircon in our car.”

“You’ll be fine, Kuan Yew. I can’t imagine you won’t.” Unlike her, Kuan Yew had always seemed comfortable in his own skin.

Except this time, there was a glimmer of fear in his eyes. “I— I’ve never been anywhere else, Jasmine. Never even been on an aeroplane.” He looked down at his hands with their clipped, broad fingernails.

She took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Look, if I can do it, you certainly can do it better. No one’s gonna mess with you. Not you. Just, you know, put on your best Travolta face.”

When she tried to pay for their meal, she realised she’d only brought British pounds. Seeing her crumpled fistful of notes, Kuan Yew broke into one of his huge laughs. “I don’t think Uncle Kee accepts gwai loh money. My treat this time, Jasmine Leong Lin Li.”

A week later, he met her outside the town’s movie theatre. “Your new-old gift from your Poh Poh, all done.” He handed her a pink plastic jewellery box. She opened it and he took the bracelet out, then fastened it round her wrist.

It looked just like the one she’d lost, except there was now much less risk of this one slipping off.

A cloud promenades across the inky sky, revealing a full moon.

Kevin takes another swig of champagne from the bottle. “His younger brother is taking over the family business, you know. Kuan Yew isn’t interested.”

“And you?” Jasmine’s eyes narrow, fixing her gaze on her cousin’s face.

“Do you ever think of coming back? Running Phoenix?”

“You know my mother would love it.” Kevin rolls his eyes.

At dinner earlier, there was a mild skirmish when Kevin’s mother took Madam Leong’s empty seat at the head of the main table. But Auntie Treasure intervened, informing her older sister that the seat was Jasmine’s. Grandmother’s instructions. Jasmine knew Auntie Ruth was seething with discontent.

“Would you?” She takes a drag of her cigarette, exhaling a thin stream of smoke.

“I don’t know. Never really considered it. I mean, how can I possibly come back? At least in Singapore, I have some measure of freedom. Here, if I even look at another man, Ma Ma would hear about it in two seconds.”

“This town is too damn small.” Jasmine grits her teeth. “We’re both over forty now, Kev. Fucking forty. We can’t let these old ladies rule us for the rest of their lives.”

“Well, at least your paramour isn’t interested in going public. Where is he, by the way?”

Jasmine doesn’t know. Iskandar has not answered her calls. Texts to him appear still unread.

“Probably at some boring wedding.” She flicks a column of cigarette ash onto the astroturf. “I think you should tell your mum at some point, though, that you don’t want to come back. Or not, and just come back here to live. I could sure use the company. It’d be like old times.”

Kevin guffaws. “You and me? Superman and Wonder Woman? Racing round KL, saving the city with bak kwa ah?”

“Hey, watch it. I’m telling you, this rebranding could be just the thing.”

Jasmine has arranged for swag bags with surreptitious samples of Phoenix bak kwa for the non-Muslim guests to take home. Except not in their traditional boxes. She spent the last few months developing a new look for potential international markets. The guests tonight are her first test cases, and so far, word has been positive.

The bottle now empty, Jasmine and Kevin walk back to the ballroom. There, the wine and whisky still flow, but not a trace of the prized Phoenix pork jerky is in sight.

Somehow the Malays she deals with, even the ones who abstain from liquor, don’t mind the presence of alcohol in their midst. Especially when it comes to occasions like this, where drinking is de rigueur unless one wants to appear gauche. But the mere whiff of pork sends them retching, running helter-skelter in disgust. Their selective blindness never ceases to amaze Jasmine. Their terror of accidental sinning is so great, not even the Pope could outdo them in the fear-of-God department.

Yet there is always the odd one out. Tunku Mahmud, an elderly vestige of an old royal family, sidles up to Jasmine, whisky in hand.

“Grand party, young lady.” He strokes his carefully groomed white beard. “I say, I hear you’re giving out special treats to some VIPs.” His clipped accent betrays his English public school upbringing. His relative was once the prime minister.

Jasmine hugs the old man, inhaling the lingering aroma of cigars on his jacket. He was a friend of her grandfather, the other unknowable man in her life. Death has tossed her no favours. Since making Tunku Mahmud’s acquaintance at the Ipoh Country Club one summer, Jasmine always seeks him out when she is back in her hometown. Over the years, they have forged a covert friendship, sharing whiskies in the gloom of the club’s worn-down bar. Her grandmother probably knows of their meetings. After all, Tunku Mahmud occasionally dines in their Ipoh home, of late without his wife, who has become more devout, haunted by the advancing spectre of dying outside God’s favour; she would rather not risk eating off plates that may have known the smear of lard.

“I’ve already given a box to your driver, Tunku,” Jasmine whispers, a gleam in her eye. “And I told him to put it in your study when you get home.”

“That’s my girl. Can’t be too careful these days. Even the servants are becoming all holy-moly. Although what are they going to do? Report



me to the religious police? Still, I suppose one should be careful. Not worth the trouble if word gets out.”

Things have changed. Phoenix’s Lunar New Year celebrations are now held in halal restaurants, to the chagrin of their Chinese distributors. No more whole roasted pig on the table, otherwise they lose necessary allies for the company’s diversifying interests. Without the Malay town council heads, district officers and chief minister, no property developer could hope to build even a dog kennel.

“Make sure you let me know when you next come to Ipoh. This old man is running out of company at the bar.” Tunku Mahmud squeezes Jasmine’s hand and plants a kiss on her cheek.

At the dessert station, she bumps into Kuan Yew. “I believe I still owe you lunch,” she teases, reaching for a strawberry tart. Her debt from their char kway teow encounter years ago remains unpaid.

He is even more handsome now, his eyes softened with faint wrinkles at their corners. It has been decades since they last met, and time has been more than kind to him. There is no longer a hint of his small-town cockiness. He is polished and assured.

He suppresses a smile. “I was wondering how long it would take before you realised who I was.” His voice, still deep, now carries a slight Australian drawl.

His eyes sweep over her and she recognises that he likes what he sees. Unlike their last teenage encounter, her instincts this time don’t urge her to flee.

“Jasmine Leong. I always figured you’d end up doing something big.” He shifts his gaze around the room, a slow grin spreading across his face. He offers his business card. “We should catch up. Maybe drinks, soon?”

“Yes, I’d like that.” She means it and smiles back.

Walking away, he turns back to look at her. “It’s nice to know I was right all along. And I see you’ve managed to hang on to the bracelet.”

Jasmine glances down at her wrist. If Grandmother ever suspected, she never let on, even after all these years.

Kevin waves at Jasmine to come forward, just to the front of the stage. It

is time for the obligatory group photographs. The two aunts take their places in the centre, flanked by the rest of their small clan. Mr Chew, whose bowtie is already crooked, directs the motley crew, his skinny frame drowning in a dark blue polyester suit.

As Jasmine approaches, Mr Chew makes a sweeping gesture with his hands, parting the Leong sea down the middle and inviting Jasmine to fill the vacuum. The family closes ranks and smiles.

After the last guest leaves, Treasure Leong corners Jasmine in the washroom.

“I thought I saw you talking to Kuan Yew.” She powders her nose, even though she is only going upstairs to her hotel room.

“It’s Olivier, now. Or didn’t Tai Gu tell you?”

Auntie Treasure picks at a stray strand of grey poking out from her coif and pats it in place. “I think you and him would make beautiful babies. He’s turned out such a good-looking fellow too. And smart. Like you.” She shoots a glance at her niece’s reflection.

Jasmine dries her hands on a towel and drops it into a basket below the countertop, avoiding her seh gu’s eyes. Auntie Treasure, the benevolent fairy godmother. Unlike huntress Tai Gu, who pounces unannounced.

“All I’m saying is, you shouldn’t be alone lah, girl.” Auntie Treasure places a warm, soft palm on Jasmine’s cheek, her eyes kind and tender. “Once your Poh Poh goes, you won’t have anyone. I mean, there’s still us, but it’s not the same, and I’m all the way in Canada. Kevin will one day have his own family. Find someone to be with. It’s not good to grow old alone.” She clasps Jasmine’s hands.

But what about love, Jasmine wonders.

Later, she watches her aunt walk towards the lift, arm wrapped round her husband’s, their three twenty-something children tailing them. They don’t notice her, cocooned in their own shared banter, the threads that bind their immediate family so palpable that Jasmine can almost reach out and pull them close.

She checks her phone for the thousandth time. No sign of Iskandar. Not even a text.

## 4

The first time Jasmine and Iskandar met, she was wrestling with a warren of ketupats at a buffet table in London's Malaysia Hall. It was her second year of university at the London School of Economics. The rice dumplings packed into woven palm leaf pouches had got tangled, their thin, leafy cords intertwined. As she tried to extricate one from the bunch with her fork, several others trailed onto her plate.

"You should just use your fingers." A slim, attractive young man in a blazer and tee-shirt stood next to her, bemused. He looked like a Malay version of John Taylor from Duran Duran, Jasmine's favourite band.

"May I?" He pulled a string, shaking its attached dumpling free. He passed it to her on a clean plate, switching it with the one she was holding.

"I'm Iskandar, but they call me Alex here. Short for Alexander. I guess the Arabic version is too difficult for white tongues. Let's get you some rendang." He took her hand, clasping it tight, as if that was the way things had always been between them.

It was the end of term, the weather turned cold, and her stash of instant Brahim's rendang hauled from home had only lasted till the final exams. She was tired of the fish and chips from the local near her flat, and cooking was out of the question. The last time she'd tried, she set off the fire alarm in her kitchen. She yielded to his invitation, anticipating the taste of the rich, spicy beef stew on her tongue.

It was Aidil Fitri—the Eid celebration marking the end of Ramadan. Jasmine had only come for the food, otherwise wanting to avoid contact

altogether with other Malaysian students living in London. She had made acquaintances instead with her English university mates, and those from other countries. There was never a risk of them knowing anyone from home.

Iskandar heaped spoonfuls of rendang onto her plate, leading her to a table already occupied by some other students. They were all Malay from what she could tell, and probably well-off. A clutch of bored, attractive girls and their designer handbags ringed the table. The boys dotted between them looked like Duran Duran knock-offs.

Iskandar was still holding her hand. "Guys, this is..."

"Jasmine," she added in haste, forcing a smile. She had not planned on making small talk. Next to them, she was under-dressed, clad only in a hoodie and jeans. She and Iskandar sat and tucked into the rendang.

The other Malaysians assumed she was from KL. Jasmine didn't correct them. It turned out one also attended her university, but they had never met before this. The group was going to a club after dinner. Jasmine feigned fatigue.

"I'll drive you home," Iskandar said as they all got up. It wasn't an offer. The night wind blew its sharp winter chill, making her shiver. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea.

The car was warm. She sat with her coat on as Iskandar fiddled with the dials on the radio. "You actually went to Malaysia Hall all alone," he said, as if it was such an incredible thing. "Lucky me, then."

Like a slow mulled wine simmering on the stove, their relationship took root over Christmas, then New Year's, settling into the months that followed, without him asking for permission, and her not saying no. They fell into an easy rhythm, curling around one another, each reading their own assignments in libraries, on couches and park benches.

She stopped eating bacon and ham, seeking out halal grocers to stock up the fridge. It felt like a secret rebellion, one Grandmother would not condone. He made an exception for her favourite Chinese roast duck in Bayswater, picking the leavings from her share every time they had a meal there. He mastered the art of eating rice out of a bowl with

chopsticks. She learned how to use her hand, cupping the white grains at the tips of gathered fingers, her thumb sliding food into her mouth. As spring approached and the days lengthened, she retrieved his lost sock from under her sofa one morning and realised they were living together.

It was easy in London. His friends, despite their intermittent curiosity about the two of them, didn't ask pressing questions. They mingled like a herd, jumping in and out of each other's cars, flats and beds. But the boys never tried to flirt with Jasmine, and the girls circled her with a resigned weariness.

Her friends—the assortment of people she called round some evenings to her flat—were more inquisitive. At first, they were excited by the prospect of fate in bringing the pair together, two people from a “small” country—at least in their minds, though Malaysia was two and half times bigger than England—meeting in a city as large as London. Iskandar was the only Malaysian most of them had met apart from Jasmine, and he was nothing like her. They struggled to understand how, the whys not even arising in their consciousness.

She and Iskandar didn't offer explanations, the pocked terrain of their coupling a subject too scabrous to broach. Because it only mattered back home, where their differences were apparent in their mere names.

By summer, it was time for graduation. Neither attended the other's, not wanting to enter into difficult conversations with their respective families. Instead, they met afterwards, his posse and her rag-tag bunch at Turnmills, for one last, epic blow-out.

They packed up her flat that weekend, and spent their last night in London at his—a one-bedroom in Bayswater where many Malaysians seemed to end up, like ants marching a trail of crumbs to the nest.

In two days, they would arrive home, back to the sweltering, thick dampness of their birth country, their boxes of sweaters and coats to be stored in closets, unpacked. In two days, they would return to the layered folds of their respective families, ignorant of their combined existence. The tangle and twist of things that had been absent from their affair in London would reach out and ensnare them, throwing doubt on

their audacity and light on the impossibility of their secret togetherness. She knew she could not face it.

Jasmine was to join one of the big accounting firms. Grandmother had arranged it. Iskandar had a job waiting for him at the national oil conglomerate. Like many other Malays (even those from well-off families), he had to serve out his scholarship bond. His parents never had to worry about putting their children through university. The government took care of that. Unlike the Chinese, who had no safety nets waiting to catch their fall.

Jasmine watched the street traffic outside his bedroom window. She had never spent the night there before this. Too risky, with his block of flats occupied by Malays of all kinds: PhD students with their wives and three children in tow, embassy personnel who observed both Malaysian and English bank holidays, other government types from dubious departments one barely knew existed back home, even a sprinkling of corporate sorts who could never bring themselves to stray too far from the familiar. At Bayswater, rendang was easily found; all you had to do was knock on some doors.

His flat was now stripped of his presence, leaving only the standard-issue furniture and crockery. She traced a finger down the windowpane, chasing a trickle of rain.

He came up behind her, resting his chin on her head. “Duck rice?”

She declined to dine out, so he volunteered to get takeaway.

They sat in separate armchairs in the living room, eating their dinner. Already she could feel them pulling apart, like two halves of a cell dividing, their easy rhythm stuttering to a halt. A half-empty bottle of whisky sat on the coffee table.

“What's going to happen back home, do you think?” She chewed on a duck wing, watching him in the waning light. They had never talked about this before.

He pushed a shock of wavy hair off his face. “We're not in the nineteenth century, sayang.” He only used the term of endearment when he knew he was on rocky ground, needing some added traction.

“Although I didn’t think you’d want to get married so soon.”

She hadn’t even considered the possibility. Conversion to Islam was not an option for her. Grandmother would never allow it. And he could only marry a Muslim; the law said so. Either of them breaking tradition would cause a seismic crack in their families.

“Maybe this is where things end.” Her eyes welled with tears. “So we don’t have to say goodbye later. Because we...will.” She lifted her gaze towards him, reaching for his hand.

He looked as if she had just slapped his face. “What the fuck, sayang? You’re leaving me?”

She buried her face in her hands, rocking herself back and forth, crying without sound.

He kneeled in front of her, wrapping her in his arms. “We’ll make it all work. I’ll find a way for your grandmother to love me. And my parents, they’ll adore you. We’ll get married, and...and maybe have babies.” He was pleading now, his weight sinking, her body his ballast.

She straightened herself, gripping his shoulders. “We won’t. It’s not going to happen. I won’t become a Muslim. I don’t want to. And you cannot change who you are.” The truth, the real of it, the heart of them, had finally entered the room. And she had let it in.

Later, as the plane taxied on the runway and turned into its bay at Subang Airport, she planted a surreptitious kiss on his cheek. Already there were a few too many inquisitive eyes watching.

Retrieving their bags, they hugged like two firm friends, and walked towards the glass doors. His family engulfed him the minute he appeared, while she stood alone waiting for Uncle Boon. Iskandar looked back once, a hint of sadness tinged with hope in his eyes.

He finally officially left her two years after they returned from university, in a restaurant, halfway through dinner, in a room full of people. They rose from their seats right after he said it, her face concealed by her purse.

He waved for the car jockey when they reached the street, one hand still holding hers firm in his grasp. He hugged her to his chest while they waited for the car, trying to bury the sorrow that carved black trails of mascara down her cheeks.

His father had just had a bypass. Things were brittle and uncertain. His mother wanted him to get married. Soon. There was a Malay girl, a friend of the family.

Except he didn’t marry the woman then. They courted for years, and Jasmine stayed away, until one night in 1997.

That evening, the rain fell in torrential gashes, slashing its wet through the black Hong Kong sky. The Chinese were reclaiming the city after a hundred and fifty years, and she was twenty-eight years old. She was there for a good time with an English lawyer she had met in KL. Since Iskandar, she had stayed away from attachments, and besides, work kept her more than busy.

The party on the fifty-foot yacht was heating up, despite the chill of the churning rain. Revellers huddled under a canopy on the boat’s deck, trying not to spill their drinks every time the vessel swayed. Causeway Bay was filled with others like them, all jockeying for the best position to watch the fireworks.

The boat captain secured a spot at the front of the cordon. Before them, Hong Kong loomed, the tall columns of its buildings illuminating the shore. Puddles of light bounced on the waves in the bay.

Her phone buzzed. She retrieved it from her purse and flipped it open. An SMS from Iskandar: *I need to tell you something.*

Her heart lurched.

She descended into the belly of the boat, legs shaking, searching for an empty cabin. Finding one, she entered, shutting the door behind her. He picked up on the first ring.

“Hi.” His voice sounded weary. “I’m sorry.”

After years, suddenly an apology. “Iskandar, are you okay?”

“No.” Pause. “I don’t know. I need to see you.”

“I’m in Hong Kong.”

Silence. A stifled sob. Or perhaps it was just static.

“I can’t, Jasmine.” His words came in staccatos. “I keep trying, but you’re still there. Even if I...haven’t seen you. Even if...we haven’t spoken. You’re here, in my head. I—”

“Iska, stop.” Her chest tightened. She couldn’t breathe.

“I messed up, Jaz. It was my fault. I should never have left you.”

“Iska, why are you calling me now?” She didn’t know what she wanted him to say.

“I... I’m getting married.”

She could hear the muffled cracks of celebratory fireworks as they exploded in the sky, defying the rain. In the corner of the cabin, she curled into a foetal position, dry heaving, her body wracked with tears that did not come.

Later, she emerged to the rain thumping on the canopied deck. She made her way to the aft of the boat, staring into the black, choppy water. A part of her wondered what it would feel like to jump into its depths, the cold enveloping her, shutting out the pain.

“Hello, miss! Are you okay?” A coastguard in the boat next to theirs was waving. She nodded in response, not wanting to alarm him. He smiled and looked down at his shirt. He removed his metal badge and gazed at it for a moment before tucking it into his top pocket. Reaching into his trousers, he pulled out a different one bearing the new Hong Kong flag. He caught her looking and shouted across the pelting rain: “Things change, but we mustn’t forget,” and then shrugged, a wan, sad smile on his face.

The day of Iskandar’s wedding, Jasmine drank herself blind alone in her condominium. It was Lunar New Year, but she didn’t go back to Ipoh, unable to brave her relatives, especially Grandmother, afraid she would break down over reunion dinner.

Phone calls went unanswered. Messages unread. She played Billie Holiday on the stereo continuously, turning it up to drown out her confusion. After all, she and Iskandar had not been together for years. She couldn’t understand her despair.

It was Kevin who finally dragged her out of her stupor. On the third day of Lunar New Year, he turned up at her doorstep bearing bak kwa.

“Everyone’s wondering where you are. I told them you have a suspected case of mumps.”

She opened the door and let him in.

“Don’t even ask me to explain it.” She chewed on a piece of pork jerky, its familiar taste comforting, especially when chased with a swig of whisky. “This shit actually goes together quite well.”

They both got drunk that night and fell asleep in the living room, her on the couch and him on the floor.

But she was never one to wallow for long. By the time businesses re-opened after the holidays, she was back in the swing of things, the memory of Iskandar shoved in the dark, narrow crevice of losses she carried along with the fantasies she had of her father, the mother who was missing or dead, and all the love she would never know.

If not for the wedding of the KL mayor’s son nine years later, Iskandar may not have figured in her life again. Except KL is a town, not a city, not really, given the three degrees of separation for just about anybody, so fate might likely have found a different way to intervene. They were unfinished business meant to collide.

After the dinner reception, she stood in the foyer of the Mandarin Oriental, waiting for her car.

“Jasmine?” The familiar, soft lilt made her catch her breath.

She turned and saw his guarded smile, the ghosts of their past selves lingering in the corners of his eyes. He looked like he might shed a tear and laugh at the same time.

She kissed him lightly on each cheek, clasping his hands as if they were mere acquaintances. It was probably the closest thing to the truth. Her travel schedule kept her out of the country at least a couple of weeks a month. He revolved in Malay circles, circumnavigating the periphery of

powerful politicians on account of his father's association with them. His family had done well in recent years, scoring big construction projects across the country, thanks to his father's ties to a Cabinet minister.

"Do you have time for a quick drink?"

So he still drank, of course. "Maybe just one." She rang her chauffeur and told him to wait. Iskandar's wife was at home, unwell.

They sat in a far corner of the hotel's lobby lounge, settling into separate club chairs. Talk was of things that were of little real consequence—work, his parents, her grandmother, the latest jazz album, that giraffe hotel in Kenya, how he bought a guitar and had taught himself to play.

"I bet you're quite good at it," she concluded.

"I played a gig the other month!" A light, real joy, reflected in his eyes.

"I should come and listen, maybe one day."

"I wrote a song, I played it that night."

About us? she wanted to ask, but stayed silent. Because in truth, there had been no one in her life after him. At least, no one of consequence. Besides, Grandmother kept her busy enough. So busy she didn't even have any friends, really. Just people who invited her to places and parties, mostly work-related. Even baby showers and hen nights were obligatory drop-ins—things that kept her on the radar of the daughters of very important people.

They didn't make love, not then. Nor the next week when she saw him in a bar, where he played the song he had written. He strummed the guitar on stage and stared right at her, making her cheeks burn until she had to leave.

It happened a month later. He rang her one night, his voice jagged and torn.

"I just punched a hole in my bedroom door. I need to get out of here for a while before I do something I might regret."

Jasmine was alarmed at the simmering anger in his tone. Without thinking, she invited him to her condo, imagining his slender frame broken.

He arrived sporting a swelling right hand, its knuckles beginning to

show signs of bruising. She sat him down at her dining table, examining the damage. It looked superficial. "Was it a teak door, at least?" She couldn't help the small giggle. "Or one of those plywood things? Because if it was just one of those..."

He leaned forward and kissed her before she could finish. The sex afterwards was familiar, yet oddly new, a questioning urgency burning in her thoughts. All through it she wondered about the wife, but didn't ask, afraid he might stop, that things might just cease and deflate.

After, he told her about his marriage. How he and his wife had been trying to conceive, except she kept miscarrying and was becoming increasingly distraught. A part of him felt relieved every time, but he couldn't tell his wife, of course. Guilt hung in the sag of his shoulders, which hunched from the weight.

"I should never have married her," he said. "I'm just not brave enough, after all. Luckily, you knew better. Because God knows, the last person I ever want to hurt is you."

She gathered him in her arms then, rocking his body like a small, forlorn child. Should she wish him a baby? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that his presence felt right, as if he had come home from a long sojourn, placing his battered, sorry burdens at her feet. The things that were missing from her life since they had separated were back, to be laundered and stored in some secret closet.

These days, home is a penthouse on Federal Hill, the kind where macaques sometimes still appear on the tennis courts, its grounds ringed by a thicket of trees. With a swim-jet lap pool on its veranda, the kind that emits currents, allowing Jasmine to clock distances in never-ending strokes, the city as a distant backdrop. Far enough from the thick of it not to taste the choking, daytime rush hour smog. High enough not to hear the scream of drag racing motorbikes in the dead of night. Buildings and people are now merely faraway pinpricks of light, punctuating pockets of

darkness where humans lie sleeping, or empty offices wait for morning.

Jasmine is sipping a martini (perfect and dirty, stirred) in her swimsuit when the front door beeps at 2am. She is still buzzing from the excitement of the public listing and the gala.

“Oh, you’re damp,” he says with a grin. “Entertaining your Bond girl fantasies again, I see.” He walks over to the stereo, lowering the volume. “Babe, pity the neighbours.” The unit below is empty; it belongs to Auntie Treasure, who is never there. But she has never told him that.

Jasmine slips back into the pool, her finger crooked, beckoning him in. He undresses.

“Well, this all seems a bit unfair,” he says as he nuzzles her neck, fingering the shoulder strap of her one-piece.

“Winner’s pick.” She moves his hand down to her waist.

“You’re KL’s golden girl now. I need to up my game.” He is proud of her, she can tell, from the way he holds her at arm’s length, as if re-appraising her value. He just made a few million ringgit himself from her company’s listing this morning, despite Phoenix’s bak kwa reputation.

Jasmine wonders how he reconciles it. “You Malays are something else. You don’t just have one set of rules, especially when money is involved. Sometimes I think you’re more Chinese than us. I never know where the lines are with you people...”

“I told you. We may not be your customers, but we certainly don’t mind your money.”

Jasmine gives him a playful shove. “That’s not all you don’t mind.”

She climbs out of the pool and offers him a whisky.

He waves her outstretched hand away. “Not tonight. Trying to cut down. Ramadan is almost here. Gotta face the music soon.” The annual cleansing of sins. Thank goodness she’s not Catholic, merely Christian.

She dangles her legs in the water, one hand stroking his now-wet hair. “Ugh, I need to exercise a bit more.” She pinches her midriff, poking the modest roll of fat. All those nights working late and eating junk food have started to show.

“Maybe you should try fasting. Since it’s Ramadan.” He looks up at her, caressing her thigh.

“Stop it,” she sighs, pulling her legs out of the pool. “Stop trying. I’m not going to be a Muslim. You know this.”

She doesn’t see the point of it. After all, he is married to a bright-faced hijabi he still has sex with, judging from the miscarriages. She is more than a little tipsy when the words slip out. “How did you manage to leave the house at this hour? Didn’t your wife wonder where you were off to?”

He climbs out of the pool, wrapping a towel around his torso, shaking his head like a lean, wet dog. “I just...left. She was sleeping.” As if this is an explanation.

Over the last four years, they have kept things going by gliding over the little details. Telling each other just enough, without letting on too much. It is their unspoken shield from wasteful hurt. Whatever time they spend together is confined to a small, narrow space, muffled by hours of missing the other, concealed beneath their external, everyday lives. Time is always in short supply, so it is used judiciously—for lovemaking and laughing, holding their secret dreams up to the light. He still wants to be a musician; she still fantasises about going on safari. They don’t have the luxury of a real good fight—skirting each other in a shared home, seething with anger and desire at the same time. Their arguments always have abrupt endings, with him walking out and them not speaking for days until one or the other gives in. Then they reconcile, the lost hours in between unmentioned, so there are gaps in their knowledge of each other, of things that perhaps don’t matter, but in the end are of real consequence.

He motions for her to sit next to him on the lounge, and she acquiesces. He pulls her close.

“I can stay,” he offers. This time he knows he has missed too much.

She almost refuses, not wanting to make trouble. But she doesn’t want to be alone tonight. She won today and wants all the spoils of victory, even if its shiniest baubles are make-believe.

So she leads him to the bedroom, switching on the front door alarm before turning off the light.

Their lovemaking is hungry, the kind of sex tinged with angry yearning that only the knowledge of parting surfaces. It is truth and lies sliding on sheets, the ones too painful swept to the ground like unnecessary pillows that only get in the way.

In the morning, his fingers are entwined in her hair. She lies there, not releasing herself from his sleeping grasp. She doesn't want to go to the office. She doesn't want him to go home—that blank vacuum they never speak of.

But life has a way of finding its path, its heft pressing in, demanding to be examined, laughed at and cried over in the spaces between the loving. The ridiculous wants to be made sublime. The dreary made special. And the minutiae of things magnified, shaping a fine mesh of nerves that fuse two people together.

## 5

By the time she gets to the office the next morning, Phoenix is worth a billion ringgit.

Jasmine finds Mr Chew waiting in the lobby. Seeing her, he stands, folding the newspaper in haste. They walk past the pool of a hundred or so employees, down a corridor that ends at a large red door carved with gold phoenixes. She stops just left of it and enters her office. Sunlight streams in through the half-drawn blinds.

This is what winning feels like. No different from before except for the little things—the extra-wide smile of the receptionist, the quiet nods from the workers in their cubicles. Before, they would bury their heads in their laptops, looking up only to acknowledge Grandmother.

Mr Chew has had too much coffee, a thin film of sweat shining on his brow. “The merchant bankers want a meeting. And the *Market Weekly* reporter called. She needs you to answer her e-mail. For the interview.”

“Tomorrow. I can meet them tomorrow.”

“Olivier Lau's secretary wants to know if you're free this evening. And your aunts are on the way.”

Jasmine's head jerks up. “My aunts? Why are they coming here?”

“I-I don't know, Miss. I thought you had scheduled it. I'll set up the conference room.”

“No. I'll see them here, in my office.”

At eleven, her aunts arrive.

“This is a pleasant surprise!” Jasmine shows them to the sofa. “Yum cha, Tai Gu, Seh Gu.” She offers them each a cup of tea. “I didn't know



if you had breakfast yet, so I only managed to get some pastries. If I had known you were coming...”

“Oh no, no, it’s okay. I just thought we’d drop in on our way back to Ipoh.” Auntie Treasure is all smiles, but her voice is brittle around the edges.

They expect her to ask how they are going to get there, just as a matter of pleantry, but she doesn’t. She smiles back, her glance flitting from one aunt to the other, waiting for them to continue. She doesn’t have time for small talk this morning. And they really should have called first.

Auntie Treasure clears her throat. “Lin Li, your tai gu has something to ask you.”

Ruth Leong takes a deep breath, her eyes shooting darts at her younger sister. Turning to Jasmine, she says, “I want you to ask your grandmother to give Kevin a position at Phoenix.

That viper, at last, revealed.

“I know you’ve worked very hard these few years, girl,” Auntie Treasure coos, her head cocked to one side. “And you must be tired, so tired. So maybe Kevin can help take some of the load off you. We just want what’s best for you both. Think about it. You’ll have more time. Maybe find a husband. Have children of your own.”

“We want him to be the new CEO,” Auntie Ruth interjects, her voice firm, unyielding. “He is, after all, a man.”

And Jasmine is not. At forty-one, she is still just a girl who takes care of things, dusting the throne and tidying the palace until a male is ready to become emperor.

“Fuck you,” Jasmine mutters under her breath. Then louder. “Fuck you! This is bullshit.”

She has never told them off before, let alone hurl expletives in their faces. It just isn’t the thing to do. It wasn’t how she was brought up.

Auntie Ruth stands, bumping the coffee table’s edge. The teacups tremble. “Ni hi chung fan shu,” she hisses. “Your mother abandoned you after your father died. If Ma Ma hadn’t taken you in, you wouldn’t even be here. Who knows where you came from? Your mother could be some night club bar girl for all we know.”

“But my father is a *Leong*, and so am I.” Jasmine is standing now too, her calves arched for a fight. “Kevin is a Chen. He is still his father’s son. Not a Leong. Not like me.”

A small cry escapes Auntie Treasure’s lips, her hands pressing her mouth. “Oh Jasmine, I didn’t want to do this. Of course you have every right to be angry, but I just thought...”

“Leave,” Jasmine retorts, holding the door open. “Leave before I never speak to you both again.”

At the doorway, Auntie Ruth pauses, her eyes blazing with anger. “You and me,” she says, pointing her finger at Jasmine, “all three of us, are the same. Your seh gu and I made sacrifices for this family, all the while knowing it was only to make way for your father. A man. It’s time you knew your place in this family.”

Victory is a fragile thing. It can never long withstand the twin sledgehammers of ambition and envy, its armour crumbling at the first heavy thump of danger at the door. When the enemy is within, the instinct is to flee. And perhaps seek solace close to home—a spot down the road where she can hide for a moment, one eye on the little fires blazing in her own windows.

Two and a half hours later, Jasmine is at Ryokan, a Japanese restaurant housed in a bungalow on Embassy Row. The waitress leads her upstairs to a private dining room with a view of the garden below. She thinks she is early, but Kuan Yew is already there, waiting with a bottle of cold saké.

“Sorry, I know you said ‘drinks later’...” She greets him as he stands, air-kissing his cheeks on both sides.

He laughs.

She throws him a puzzled look.

“It’s just...” He waves his hand left and right of his face, then back and forth between them.

They both burst into laughter, realising the strangeness of her earlier

gesture. Their kindergarten selves would have been appalled.

They skim through the years, catching one another up. His mother's death two years ago. His father's gradual retreat from the world since then. Her work in Phoenix, his in Australia after graduating with a degree in finance. Jasmine's college days, filled with bad food and the rations of Brahim's and Maggi cup noodles to stave off her longing for home. To him, they were staples that kept him alive. His meagre pay from working a pizza delivery job barely covered rent. His father only sent enough money for tuition and books; they couldn't afford more back then. But they don't talk about lovers.

Lunch eaten, she grows quiet, unwilling to leave. It feels safe here with him. No danger.

"Coffee?" he offers, pouring the last of the saké into her cup. "Unless you have someone waiting."

She summons the waitress and orders an espresso. Double shots.

He leans back in his chair, a quizzical expression in his eyes. "I've never seen someone win the stock market lottery and look like they wanted to give it all back."

"You'd be amazed what crawls out of the woodwork," she says. Because the world comes knocking when you have a windfall, with its long list of debts you never knew you accrued.

She didn't mean to, but she tells him about the visit from her aunts. Because he is an old friend, long-lost yet still familiar, a witness to a small part of her past, to whom her history doesn't need explanation.

When she finishes, he asks, "And what about Kevin?"

She wants to say: He's gay. Coming home would smother him. His mother doesn't know. But that isn't her secret to share, so she keeps it. "I haven't had a chance to speak to him today."

"I doubt Madam Leong will let her daughters dictate things. Not while she's still alive."

Maybe he's right. She should know, but she doesn't, her Poh Poh still an opaque entity. And this isn't the sort of conversation Jasmine can have with Grandmother over the phone.

Besides, her aunts have beaten her to it. By now, they will have arrived in Ipoh. Jasmine pictures them having tea with Grandmother. Auntie Treasure twisting her fingers, wishing she were behind a stray garden bush. Tai Gu, the tiger, chin high, her long-stored tears locked away, bracing for the hurt, but prowling forward despite it.

By evening, Jasmine is exhausted. She unlocks her condo door and kicks off her shoes at its entrance.

There is music playing, a saxophone solo, its twirling notes lingering in the air. She sees a suitcase, enough for a week's stay, next to the shoe cupboard.

Iskandar is sprawled on the couch, smoking.

"I thought you quit." She straddles his torso and plants a brief kiss on his cheek.

"Hey there, golden girl. Sorry, I let myself in. Surprise." He sits up and stubs out his cigarette, arms circling her waist.

"Going somewhere?" Jasmine motions to the suitcase.

"That depends." He averts his head and then mumbles, "I left. Well, she threw me out. So, I left." He lifts his gaze up towards her, questioning.

"Again?" Two years ago, he spent a month in her condo, back when his wife found out about them. But she thought Iskandar and his other half had reached a détente since then. Just like she has. Two women with separate lives, resigned to a common fate entwined in one man. Jasmine wonders if, this time, his wife has had enough.

He shrugs, shaking his head.

"Well, fuck." She rolls her eyes. "I guess I wasn't the only one who got blindsided today. Move over." She pushes his legs away, making room for herself. A sheaf of magazines slips off the couch to the floor.

"Whisky?" He lifts his glass from the coffee table, takes a sip.

"No, I've had too much to drink." She massages her temples, a headache forming at the root of her hair.

He raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything.

She tells him about her aunts' visit. He tries to soothe her, one hand caressing her back in long, slow strokes.

When she gets to the part where she cusses her aunts out, he stops her. "You told your tai gu to fuck off? What the hell did she say?"

"She told me to dig a hole and plant potatoes. It's a Chinese thing. Essentially: go kill yourself."

"Holy shit!" he barks out, laughing. "You Chinese are harsh!"

She gives him a playful shove, pouting. "I thought you were on my side."

He reaches out, hugging her close, planting small kisses in her hair. "Sayang, you know I am. Do you want me to stay?"

A small laugh escapes her lips. She feels like crying a little, but she mustn't. "Or what? Let you run loose round KL so you can pick up some other woman? And piss off your wife and me even more?"

A hurt look crosses his eyes. "All I've ever wanted is you."

Except she cannot afford him.

"I can never compete with your family, Iska. The wife, your parents. God. The odds will never be on my side."

She leans on his arm. He slouches down further on the sofa, her head slipping into the curve of his neck. The evening azan floats in the distance, calling Muslims to prayer. She frowns. "Is that a new guy? The tune is a little different."

"Sounds like it." He pauses, eyes narrowed. "I like the old one better."

"Me too. He had more style."

"Yeah." He nods. "That guy was like a Thelonious Monk. This one's more like a...Kenny G."

They laugh and snuggle closer. He traces a circle on the palm of her hand. The sky darkens. Sunsets here are sudden, a mere fifteen minutes. Unlike its languid descent from the English skies, the sun here departs in a hurry.

He straightens himself, facing her, both hands now on her shoulders. "Let's get married. You can come work for my family's company instead.

Fuck it. I'm done living life the way everyone thinks I should."

For a moment, she is happy. Then: "I'm not becoming anyone's second wife, Iska. And you know I don't want to be Muslim."

"I'm divorcing her." There is weariness in his voice. "We don't love each other anyway. Maybe she loved me at one point, or thought she did, and I just did what I thought my parents wanted. But I am done, whether you marry me or you don't."

She stares at him, open-mouthed, blinking.

Iskandar strokes her cheek. "I think it's time I stopped being unfair to both of you. To all of us."

She draws a long breath, and her stomach grumbles. "Let's eat," she says, leafing through a stack of delivery menus.

After dinner, they watch TV on the sofa, one of those travel shows featuring eateries that only locals would know. They spoon like teenagers, his arm wrapped around her torso. He slips a hand under her blouse, seeking the familiar, soft curve of her middle.

"London," she says.

"Mmm..." he murmurs. "We used to do this a lot then, didn't we?"

"No, look! There's the street where we used to live!" She turns to glance at him, but his eyes are closed.

"Iska, that's where the fish and chips shop was." She points to the TV screen. "The place is now an Italian bistro."

He is paying attention now. "Maybe that's what we should do. Just chuck this all in. Get the hell out. Leave. Things were good in London. It was just you and me."

She twists round to face him, almost rolling off the couch. He catches her.

"What's really going on with you, Iska?"

He lets out a long sigh. "My father wants me to run for office. He thinks it will help us get bigger projects."

She sits up, turning to face him. "What, politics? Stand for election? Do you want this?"

"Of course not!" He sits up too, his elbows resting on his legs, fingers

curled in exasperation. But that doesn't matter. Not here. Not in a place where politics are merely a fast pass to government megaprojects and creaming of public coffers. It doesn't matter what one really wants. Just toe the line and, above all, be Malay. Never question the leader: it gets you everywhere. And those at the top of the ladder are always trying to push the rest off.

"Are you sure you won't even consider it?"

He looks at her hard, incredulous. "Sometimes I wonder what you actually think of me. Or maybe, I shouldn't ask. Fuck, I probably deserve it."

She is sorry. She wishes love weren't so complicated. Maybe it's why she stays, the thought of starting over just too overwhelming. The sorting, the picking, the tidying of feelings before the jagged pattern of love is revealed takes time, years perhaps. At least with him, she doesn't have to deal with the other things, like in-laws and relatives. The house of their loving is sparse, furnished to a Scandinavian degree of minimalist utility. Function before form. Need before want. The dream purposely omitted from its walls and floors.

"Do you even love me?" His words cause tears to well in the corner of her eyes. She is silent, staring straight ahead.

All those times she has loved him while apart. Not calling, not seeking, not trying to make his life more difficult than it is. The settling for small snatches of time. The moments she orchestrates in her head when he is away, lining up the fragments of her separate life, picking the most important bits so she can arrange them neatly for when he arrives.

How does she tell him that he is like a ghost, his presence a constant unseen beside her? Every funny thing someone says, each shiny object, an exciting new possibility, all of it weighed for its importance, its capability to make him feel thought of, missed, adored, considered and measured for their value to please. Does she love him? She doesn't know how not to.

The hurt crawls out of her core, up her throat, blooming in hollow sobs.

He starts to cry too. "I should have never left you."

But there is no place on the map of this country for them. Perhaps elsewhere, but not here. Except here is where the rest of them resides, in the folds of their suffocating families, the fine leaf veins of rules that keep scoring the lines of separation between her and him, as if determined to make them choose. Love over blood and money. One love of a lifetime over generations of others. Leaving before staying. Self before others. Him over them—the only people who gave her a home when her own parents disappeared.

The carriage of her life is already full, its doors barely able to close, open-shut, open-shut, stalled. She is in the doorway, one hand on the outside, clinging to him, not wanting to let go, while the familiar crowd inside holds onto her collar, her elbow, her ankle, her purse, her waist. Her hair comes undone from its twisted chignon, its tumble a weight causing her to look back.

She doesn't know how not to love him. And she doesn't know how to leave him. Her body is bruised from the constant banging of train doors that threaten to someday close shut.

But when has that ever mattered?

"This can't be all there is." He is rubbing his face with his palm, his cheeks wet. "We just keep getting carried away by the current of our parents and families, and when does it stop? When do we get to jump out of the goddamn river, and...and take that hike into the woods, or climb a mountain, or just freakin' pitch a tent and do nothing if we feel like it? When?"

Maybe never. But then again, she hadn't stopped to consider it before. Life puts one thing after another in front of her, like a magic pavement built by a knowing hand. Grandmother always has plans.

A black and white portrait of Karina Robles Bahrin, a woman with short, light-colored hair, looking slightly to the left with a gentle smile. The background is dark, making her face the central focus.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karina Robles Bahrin got her first break as a writer when she guest edited a weekly teen column in *The New Straits Times* a very long time ago. Her short fiction has been published in venues such as *Urban Odysseys: KL Stories*, *KL Noir: Blue, A Subtle Degree of Restraint & Other Stories* and *Malaysian Tales: Retold & Remixed*. She is a former columnist with *The Heat*, a weekly by Focus Malaysia. She currently lives and works on the island of Langkawi, Malaysia. *The Accidental Malay* is her first novel.

“An intriguing story, beautifully paced, centred around the many complications of love in Malaysia.”

– MARINA MAHATHIR

“Part comedy of errors and part social drama, this novel adds to the slowly burgeoning but altogether necessary postcolonial body of works on Malay people by Malay people.”

– SUFFIAN HAKIM

Jasmine Leong wants to be the next CEO of Phoenix, her family's billion-ringgit company known especially for its bak kwa. But when Jasmine discovers she is actually a Malay Muslim, her newfound identity threatens to upend her life and ambitions. Set in Kuala Lumpur and other areas of Malaysia, *The Accidental Malay* examines the human cost of a country's racial policies, and paints a portrait of a woman unwilling to accept the fate history has designated for her.

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