

R I V E R E A S T,
R I V E R W E S T

A U B E R E Y L E S C U R E



曾经沧海难为水

—元稹

FOR ONE WHO HAS SEEN THE VAST OCEAN, ALL ELSE
CAN HARDLY BE CONSIDERED WATER.

—*Yuan Zhen*

PART I

ALVA

SHANGHAI, 2007

A man called Lu Fang stole Alva's mother in Grand Ballroom B of Shanghai's Imperial Hotel. The 88,888-yuan luncheon wedding came with five cold appetizers, two soups, four meat dishes, three seafood dishes, plus Western-style black pepper steak, sugar-cream cake, and artificial flower bouquets. So expensive, yet so tasteless, Alva thought as she took in the windowless function room, the musty red-and-gold carpeting, the fabric petals scattered over each banquet table. Nothing like the white and pastel weddings of American movies, the candles and gazebos, the bridesmaids in their flowing gowns. Then again, her mother wasn't that kind of bride.

Alva didn't know any of the guests—they were all Lu Fang's acquaintances. Her mother had wanted a big wedding, and he'd managed to fill the space with his business connections. Alva was at the VIP table with some longtime clients of Lu Fang's and their plus-ones, some so conspicuously young they were obviously little honeys and not wives. Along with the plus-ones came a glinty display of Chanel and Louis Vuitton bags—slung over chairs negligently, though not negligently enough to hide their logos.

"I heard the bride's well-connected in America," a woman said, leaning into her neighbor.

"I heard she used to be a movie actress," the other woman, a business wife with tattooed eyebrows, replied.

"A famous one?"

“Never heard of her before today.”

“Still. Lu Fang was born with some blind luck. An American actress. Why is she with *him*?”

Lu Fang stood onstage beneath an arch of pink balloons, his three-piece suit fitting him like sausage casing. The grease on his nose shone under the spotlight.

“Where is she?” one of the guests at Alva’s table whispered.

The preset meal was growing cold. Several suited men had started smoking; another stealthily shoved a pork cube in his mouth.

She’s going to make you wait and savor her entrance, Alva thought. Even if it means entering a smoky room crammed with strangers gawking at the Chinese man waiting for his foreign bride.

Alva couldn’t understand why, out of all the men Sloan had been with over the years, it was Lu Fang who’d made the cut. He was in his fifties, chewed with his mouth open, wore suits with cheap satin sheens. He liked quoting poems in his thick Dongbei accent. Alva had noticed these traits with the distant condescension of a teenage girl when he’d come to their apartment for regular checkups. Technically, he’d been their landlord, a businessman leasing a spare property in Pudong. In the two years they’d been renting his apartment, Alva had seen him five or six times at most. Clearly, for her mother, it’d been a different story.

The business wife continued, “I heard the *laowai* is no spring chicken. She already has a kid.”

“That’s her right there,” the other woman hushed, jutting her chin toward Alva.

“The mixed-blood? Can she understand Chinese?”

Alva focused on staring vacantly at the stage, where the emcee was pacing in front of Lu Fang, smiling with practiced joviality and repeating into the microphone, “The bride is arriving soon, soon!”

“I guess she doesn’t understand,” the other woman said.

“She looks more Chinese,” the business wife declared, switching from Mandarin to Shanghaiese. “Not one of those lucky mixes with big eyes and white skin.”

“Pity,” replied the other.

Alva took a gulp from her Wangzai milk. She loved this canned milk-flavored drink as a kid. Today, though, it tasted like syrup, cloying, neither milk nor cream. Half-and-half, just like herself. She wanted to say, I was made and raised in China, you old hags, and I understand Shanghainese perfectly. Yet they were right about the unlucky mix. She was half-and-half, white-Chinese, but with the wrong distribution of ingredients. Black hair, single-lidded eyes, slightly olive skin. To this day, she really did look nothing like her mother.

“Sad, that she’s the only family. I thought there’d be more Americans. What about Lu Fang’s relatives?” the business wife asked.

The other woman shrugged. “I heard he’s from some small town close to North Korea. Maybe he doesn’t want his poor relations here.”

“You think his family *disapproves*?”

“Of the laowai? I wouldn’t care if I were him. His company is exporting prefab housing parts to America.”

“Then she’s good for business.” They laughed, loose behind the presumed safety of a linguistic wall. Alva was tearing the fabric petal to shreds, digging her nails into the glue dewdrops. This was all a joke to them, a business transaction, idle gossip, but it was Alva’s life. It was Alva’s *mother*.

The music cut abruptly to something orchestral. “The American bride!” the emcee shouted.

Sloan was finally here. Age forty-six and a bride for the first time, she glided along the red carpet in a lace-accented silk *qipao*. The emcee led a rhythmic clap that died down once she’d reached center stage, where Lu Fang stood beaming. Sloan’s ash-blond hair fell pin-straight down her back and her cheekbones glowed with shiny dust, sparkles on white marble. She’s beautiful, Alva thought.

“Tight dress, eh? Western women aren’t afraid to show skin,” the business wife whispered.

Sloan slowly turned to face the crowd. Her eyes scanned the tables, looking for someone. Alva raised her hand and gave her mother a small wave, a signal there was still time to escape. The door’s that way! But Sloan’s gaze swept past her, past the rows of business guests, and fell

to the back corner of the room. The videographer stood there next to his tripod. He made the thumbs-up signal. Sloan threw back her blond mane and gave the crowd her best Hollywood smile.

A round of clapping followed the ring exchange. Her mother repeated “I do” (我愿意, more like *I’m willing*) after the emcee. It was official. Alva used to think that Sloan would leave China, that one day she’d give in to Alva’s pleas. “We’ll move to L.A.,” Alva would say. “We’ll rent a tiny apartment with a communal pool. We’ll watch matinees and drive to the Pacific, just like you used to when you lived there.”

“Maybe, maybe,” her mother had said.

There was a flurry of camera flashes. Now Sloan was a proper *tai-tai* here in China, anchored by a husband and an apartment. Her arms encircled Lu Fang as they posed for photos, pointing to a distant mold stain on the ceiling. He clutched her waist, bloated, red-faced, clearly overwhelmed.

“Let’s toast to the newlyweds, and a new era of Sino-American friendship!” the emcee said. Everybody scuttled up, raised their porcelain shot glasses.

“May your hair whiten till your golden age! May your love be deeper than the sea!” they cooed.

The emcee green-lighted the dinner’s commencement, and the screen of cigarette smoke thickened as waitstaff poured and replenished bottles of Maotai and Great Wall. Alva reached for a chicken wing and gnawed it ragefully. In the din of the reception hall, amid burps and cheers and hollers, the business wives’ gossip grated against her ears.

“I heard the laowai raised the kid in Shanghai by herself.”

“You said she had family money?”

“I don’t know. She must.” The woman whispered more closely. “At this age, she can’t be living off her looks, if you know what I mean.”

Lu Fang and Sloan were making their way to Alva’s table in fits and starts, stopping to greet this manager and that *taitai*. Alva had never known her mother like this, expertly knocking back *baijiu* toasts like she’d been on the banquet circuit her entire life. The Sloan she knew would have called this the Convention of Tycoons and Gold Diggers,

mimed cocking a gun to her head for every one of the emcee's cheesy jokes. But not today. Sloan was perfectly focused, her performance devoid of irony. She had a captive audience of hundreds, a makeup artist, and a videographer. Lu Fang had delivered it all. Sloan was the star of the room and she knew it.

Alva set down her chicken bones, cleared her throat until the whole table stared. "I heard—" Alva said in Shanghainese, loudly.

The women stiffened, their conspiratorial expressions suddenly alert.

"I heard she's marrying him for his money," Alva continued.

The business wives went bug-eyed, and a suited man coughed uncomfortably. "This child is funny . . ." one of the women began, then paused. Lu Fang and Sloan had finally reached their table and were pulling out the seats next to Alva.

"It's the truth," Alva murmured in Shanghainese.

"Partner!" Sloan exclaimed as she gave Alva a sideways embrace. "Having fun?"

"We've just met . . . your wife's daughter," the business wife said to Lu Fang in a pinched voice.

Lu Fang swiveled toward Alva. "My wife's daughter? Oh. Manager Feng, we're all family. Alva is my daughter now too." He squeezed out a tentative smile.

Alva winced. "I'm not your daughter," she said.

Lu Fang stiffened in his sausage suit. Sloan glared at Alva, then said to the table, "This child lived in China her whole life, but somehow still doesn't know how to speak."

Everyone rattled out dry chuckles. Manager Feng paused for a second before saying, "Your Chinese is so good."

Sloan murmured the traditional deflection, "Too high of a compliment."

That was her mother's special trick, how she could shift attention to herself in any setting: her Chinese was *so good*, a fact that usually spooled out the requisite ceremony of niceties. "Where did you learn it?" "Here, in China." "How long have you been in China?" "Twenty-two years now." "What? You're practically an honorary Chinese!" And Sloan would toss

her blond hair over her shoulder, laugh, and say with an insouciance that made Alva cringe, "Yes, I'm basically Chinese."

Manager Feng now said in a honeyed tone, "Sloan, your linguistic skills will be very useful for Manager Lu's business, I'm sure."

"Oh, I know nothing of business," Sloan said.

"No matter. Clients love an international consultant," a suited man said.

Sloan studied her teacup. "I suppose I could go on some business trips."

"Absolutely," Lu Fang said. "You know how poor my English is."

"Very poor," Alva muttered.

Lu Fang went on, oblivious. "There are many factories to visit down in Dongguan. Manager Feng and I are talking about some big expansions, aren't we? Sloan can help me evaluate manufacturing properties, from a Western perspective."

"Is that how you and Sloan met?" the other business wife asked. "Real estate dealings?"

"In a sense," Sloan said.

Manager Feng smiled. "Your daughter was telling us that it's going to be . . . very good business for everyone."

Lu Fang's gaze was flitting from his associates to Alva. He spread his arms grandiosely. "Should we toast? If we're all going to be doing business together . . ."

Sloan turned toward Alva. "Alva, pour Manager Feng and the other guests some Maotai."

"That's a good idea," Lu Fang said. He handed Alva the bottle. With stiff hands, she received it. She knew she was too deep in this game of debts and favors. It was a heightened art form, hidden dimensions folded into appeasement, flattery, and camaraderie, so opaque you emerged feeling like a debtor without knowing the reason. She poured the pungent alcohol into their outstretched cups. No one thanked her—only Manager Feng emitted a triumphant little "humph."

Lu Fang raised his Maotai and smiled pleasantly toward Sloan and Alva. "To new family."

Alva scrunched the mangled fabric petals in her palm. Around her, the perm-haired women and fat-necked men echoed the disingenuous toast. Sloan held Lu Fang's hand, her long white fingers interlaced with his thick, yellow-nailed ones. A sickening sight, those wedding rings. And yet the gesture seemed natural, almost instinctual. Was it so easy, Alva wondered, to pretend yourself into another life, even when the rest of the world knew it was a farce?

Sloan had told Alva about Lu Fang's proposal on a late spring evening in early May. They were lying on the cool balcony tiles of their rented apartment, listening to crickets and the intermingling sounds of televisions drifting from high-rise windows. Sloan pressed her cold Tsingtao bottle against Alva's cheek. "Lu Fang asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

"What?" Alva sat up so fast she'd knocked the Tsingtao sideways.

She barely knew him. When they'd started leasing Lu Fang's apartment two years ago, Sloan had introduced him as the landlord. There were times when Alva had come home from school and found him on their couch, taciturn. Sloan sat across from him in the big armchair by the banyan plant. Mr. Lu came to look at the air conditioner, she'd say. Or the water heater.

Alva didn't especially take notice. It seemed unlikely this terse, fleshy man had become her mother's "friend." Although in the past, Sloan had many "friends" that Alva seldom met. The "friends" were, for some reason, always Chinese. In Sloan's stories so-and-so always approached her, accosted her, bought her a drink. When Alva was younger, Sloan had a rule that she'd never spend the night away: "Mommy will be home when you wake up tomorrow." And she'd pay a neighborhood *ayi* a pittance to watch her daughter. Alva overheard these neighborhood *ayis* talking in Shanghainese, calling her mother an easy woman. ("The state she comes home in. Stinking. What do you think she does out there all night?") But Sloan always kept her promise. When Alva woke up, Sloan was there next to her, even if her breath was stinking of rotten eggs and something sour.

Alva knew to never think too much about these “friends.” They came and went. She and her mother were partners.

Sometimes, when Sloan had a “friend,” their lives would get better for some months. Sloan’s wallet fatter with pink Mao bills, and they’d go on “splurge” trips to the supermarket—Alva always went straight for the imported cereals, Honey Nut Cheerios and Lucky Charms. But these boons, like the friendships, were short-lived. “They don’t actually like *me*, partner,” Sloan once explained to Alva. “They like foreigners. And I don’t like it when they take advantage of me.” Alva didn’t quite understand what advantage was being taken when the “friends” were usually so generous, almost unfailingly Chinese businessmen who frequented the two or three Bund-side bars her mother loved most. She could imagine Sloan doing the Hollywood actress thing, laughing loudly with the bartender in Chinese, smudging lipstick on glass rims, drunk on attention and imported chardonnay, daring the businessmen to approach her.

When Lu Fang conducted his landlord visits, Sloan displayed flowers and fresh fruit on the dining room table—an attempt to evoke a more put-together lifestyle, so he wouldn’t think they lived like slobs, which they did. They spent entire weekends in their underwear. They boiled instant noodles in cardboard cups most dinners. That’s how they used to live anyway, in tiny rentals in Shanghai’s older, more decrepit neighborhoods in Puxi, where they shared a mattress on the floor. These habits were hard to shake, even after they moved into his two-bedroom in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Century Park. Everything in Pudong was newly developed—the streets wider, the buildings shinier. It’d been a patchwork of empty fields only a decade ago, and now it was where well-to-do Chinese families rushed to buy property.

About a year after Lu Fang began his intermittent landlord visits, Sloan had asked, “What do you think of him?”

“I don’t know him,” Alva had said.

“This apartment, this neighborhood, your new school—aren’t they better?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s because Lu Fang is giving us a very good deal.”

“Okay.”

But Alva had always thought Lu Fang would meet the fate of Sloan’s other “friends.” He was so average, and silent, not particularly friendly with Alva. When her mother tired of him, the only pity would be that they’d probably have to move out.

“Marrying him can make our lives a lot easier,” Sloan said that night in May as she broke the news, avoiding Alva’s panicked eyes in the balcony’s darkness.

“Mom, we don’t need him. We can move again.”

“We’ve never had a life as comfortable as this one, partner.”

True enough, their pantry was always stocked with big, colorful boxes of Cheerios and Cocoa Puffs and Special K. And Alva’s new school, Mincai, had shiny red rubber tracks.

“Mom, we’re fine.” The spilled beer trickled along Alva’s leg. “We don’t need him.”

Sloan’s eyes were closed. “Sometimes, partner,” she said, “when an opportunity presents itself, you have to play the part. Sometimes you can’t say no.”

And Alva said no, no, no, but the matter had already been settled without her.

From the hallway, Alva watched the bosses and taitais file out the door, many wobbly from drink. The banquet hall was booked for another wedding that night. The staff was already clearing away detritus and spills. The emcee stood onstage making the final staid jokes—forecast of a Pacific rainstorm in the bedroom, ha ha—to disband the straggling guests.

At the last occupied table, Sloan was nodding along to some manager’s story, her eyelids drooping. Lu Fang had lit a cigarette and was tapping its ashes onto the peels of a clementine. He forced a laugh at something the manager said, but when he glanced down, his smile slipped for an instant.

When Sloan and Lu Fang finally left the Grand Ballroom, Alva

followed them onto the street. The bellboy, a shriveled old man with stained teeth, hailed a taxi to take them home.

Lu Fang passed out in the front seat, snoring loudly, mouth agape. Sloan looked out the window, turned away from Alva. They crossed the river eastward by way of Nanpu Bridge. Skyscrapers along the Pudong shore glistened in the mist. The river, opaque and mud-colored, roiled beneath them, engorged by a week of drizzling rain.

Neither Alva nor her mother liked this kind of mist. Sloan used to take Alva outside to chase epic downpours, sheets of water cascading with a thunderous pitter-patter, diffusing the sticky humidity of Shanghai summers. Now, Alva cracked open her window to air out the adults' alcohol breaths and meat fumes. But the wind whooshed loudly, and Lu Fang let out a startled snort. Sloan said, "Close the window, partner."

And Alva said, "Maybe you should stop calling me that."

Sloan widened her eyes, the foundation cracking at their corners. There was an immediate churn in Alva's stomach. She didn't want her mother to be mad. Not today, not with this man in the car. The rolls of skin on his neck were all Alva could see, the tiny black hair buzzed short, the slightly yellowed shirt collar, his entire body an unfamiliar mass in this car, in their apartment, in their lives.

The taxi driver turned the radio knob, filling the car's frozen silence. As they descended the elevated highway off the bridge, Alva reached across the car seat for Sloan's hand, a wordless apology. For a moment it seemed like Sloan would ignore her. Then she let her hand fall against the leather, accepting Alva's grasp, the ring cold and sharp-edged between their fingers.