

The Beijing Office

by

G.T. Lee

1. Prologue

Gem still remembers the first day she started at Potts & Crouch's Beijing Representative Office. It was nothing like any of the offices she'd worked at in Australia.

Working for a national firm in Brisbane was not something Gem ever had expected to be doing. Her mother had been a legal secretary all her working life, and had succeeded in drilling into Gem's head that being of Chinese origin and being able to speak fluent Mandarin meant eventually starting a law firm with Mum, one that specialised in conveyancing and serving an exclusive group of clients from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong that had followed Mum around for the last ten years.

But the problem was that, at university, Gem found property law mind-numbingly boring. She often sat in the lecture hall frantically jotting notes as Professor Ravi droned on about the latest amendments to the Land Act, all the while thinking she'd rather be in a criminal law lecture. She grew up devouring every Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys novel she could get her hands on. But she studied law because:

- 1) Mum said her grades were good enough to get into law school in the best university in Queensland, so why should Gem want to study modern history and English literature? ("What are you going to do with an Arts degree, *bar?* Don't argue with me, study law, graduate with honours, get qualified and open a law firm with me! You hear?")
- 2) It was not in Gem's nature to argue with her mother.
- 3) Gem naively thought that practicing law involved some degree of detective work, so she could fulfil her childhood dream of following in Nancy Drew's footsteps. (Boy, was she ever wrong about that.)
- 4) Gem thought that lawyers made a lot of money, so she would be able to retire by 40. (Wrong again.)

Law school was uneventful. Gem passed all her exams with flying colours but didn't manage to get high distinctions in the subjects that mattered, like corporate law and tax law.

Gem dutifully applied for all the jobs advertised on the notice boards at the University of Queensland Law School office, even applying to law firms in towns she'd never visited in her life, like Gympie and Bundaberg. She received a grand total of zero requests for interviews from the 124 applications she sent out. This was the first big blow to the ego she'd experienced in her life. Gem experienced her first bout of depression.

Dad, trying to make conversation with Gem while she's pretending to watch the Australian Open, "Daughter, why are you watching TV when you should be applying for more jobs?"

"*Ba*, I applied to every law firm in Australia already. No one wants me."

"That's because you're so lazy, watching TV all the time."

Gem, raising her voice, "*Ba*, didn't you hear me? No one wants to hire me!"

"How can that be? You already have a law degree. When I graduated from Nanyang University in Singapore, every timber company in Sabah wanted to hire me! I was hot stuff! You are lazy and stupid, that's what you are."

Gem knew better than to continue this conversation with her father. The last 'conversation' had gone south at lightning speed, with her father recounting all the sacrifices he'd made for the family and the lack of appreciation he received from his children.

So she nodded along to the rhythm of her father's rant with her eyes fixed resolutely on the TV. Once you block out the content of his rant, his voice was actually quite soothing . . .

Right before Christmas, Mum told Gem about a job opening at N&H, a medium-sized Queensland firm, which was looking for a Mandarin-speaking lawyer. Gem applied, was called in for an interview, and got the job. It took all of 10 days. Gem shed tears of joy when she received the letter in the mail, offering her a full-time position as solicitor at N&H on an annual salary of \$40,000. Dad was so proud of Gem, he took a picture of her business card and sent pictures of it to her aunts and uncles in Sabah.

Thus Gem began her career working as a lawyer in N&H. It was nothing like *Ally McBeal*, *Law & Order* or any of the American sitcoms about life in a law firm. For as far back as Gem could remember, there had been 20 boxes of documents in her office, and on top of them were files for her eclectic mix of clients from China, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. She trudged along, enthusiastically doing whatever was handed to her by the partners, and after two years distinguished herself as the office expert on spouse visas. Yes, she became the legal gun for ladies who married Australians so they could leave their developing countries behind and live a life of comfort in the country of their dreams.

One of Gem's best clients was a 70-year-old man whom the receptionists in the office called Mitch the Sleaze. He was onto his fourth marriage, to Meena, a lady in her mid-30s from Micronesia, who he claims had won a dozen local beauty pageants and loved him unconditionally. Why was he Gem's best client? He said the same thing about his last two wives, both from

Micronesia, and the Department of Immigration granted them both spouse visas to live in Australia.

This is where Mitch the Sleaze's story gets complicated. Micronesian wife No.1, whom he had known for a month before marrying, eloped with a younger man within a year of arriving in Brisbane. Micronesian wife No.2, whom he had known for a week, never shared Mitch's bed, let alone had sex with him. Mitch claims it was because of his hip replacement surgery (he was 66 then), but neighbours claimed they saw a Micronesian lady lying face down on the grass in front of the house, covered in dew, who had woken up when Mitch came out and dragged her back into the house. It was these same neighbours who tipped off DIMIA¹, which then came to arrest Micronesian wife No.2. The last Mitch heard, Micronesian wife No.2 had been deported and she had left happily, shouting that Brisbane was boring and nothing like Micronesia. They had been married for a grand total of two months.

Gem worked on the spouse visa applications for all of Mitch's Micronesian wives, including Meena. Since Mitch had exceeded the sponsorship limit for spouses in his lifetime, Meena's application had been promptly rejected by DIMIA. Mitch begged Gem to take Meena's application to the Migration Review Tribunal by getting on his knees in the reception area, grabbing Gem's hand, crying and creating a scene. The managing partner who walked by and saw the scene told Gem in no uncertain terms to deal with the situation "immediately" or else she would be fired "immediately". She reluctantly agreed to act for Meena and got Mitch back on his feet.

This turned out to be the turning point in Gem's life. See, Gem hated Mitch the Sleaze with a vengeance. Every time he was at reception, he terrorized the receptionists with his overbearing advances, including leaning over the reception counter while speaking to them. The receptionists had threatened to report Mitch's behaviour to the police as sexual harassment if Gem didn't put a leash on him. Gem didn't particularly enjoy her meetings with Mitch, which usually meant tangoing around the meeting table as Mitch kept moving forward and Gem moved backwards to avoid any spontaneous body contact. Not to mention his spit, which sprayed in all directions when he was declaring his love for Meena and decrying the stupidity of DIMIA for rejecting her spouse visa application. On top of it all, Mitch the Sleaze never paid the firm's invoices on time; Gem felt like she was drawing blood every time she chased him for payment. And each time, he would turn up at the office with a recycled envelope of cash to pay the overdue invoices, together with a stack of sexually explicit letters from Meena, which she sent

¹ Department of Immigration, Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs. The people who think they control the number of new migrants moving to Australia.

because she couldn't afford to call him on the only telephone available in her village. On more than one occasion, Gem had considered bringing a sexual harassment claim against N&H for making her read those letters.

Thank God Gem had other clients too. She was particularly fond of her Chinese clients, who were mostly filthy rich and loved seeing her. Gem's favourite client was Mrs Li, who owned a property development company in Shenzhen and was reported to be worth \$100 million.

Mrs Li called in on Gem one day on a legal matter and stayed a little longer to chat.

"Gem, you are so smart and linguistically talented. You speak English and Mandarin, and you read and write Chinese," said Mrs Li. "There is a huge need for bilingual lawyers like you in China. You should consider finding a job in China."

"You are so kind, Mrs Li," said Gem with a sweet smile. "I've never been to China before. I have no idea how I can find a job in China while in Brisbane."

"How do you think I built my business, Gem?" boasted Mrs Li with her hand on her heart. "I have contacts in the public and private sectors in Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai. Just give me your CV and I'll find you a job in China."

Gem thanked Mrs Li profusely and emailed Mrs Li a copy of her CV the next day.

Months went by and Gem didn't hear from Mrs Li. One day in summer, Gem had taken a sickie after one too many tequila shots at a colleague's leaving party the night before. She didn't hear her alarm go off nor the fifteen times her mobile rang. She woke up with a throbbing headache and was on her way to the kitchen when she saw the time (4pm in the afternoon) and frantically picked up her BlackBerry to check her emails. She groaned at the fifty unread messages, until she saw this.

From: Yan Li [liyan888@163.com]
To: Gem Chu [gchu@N&H.com.au]
Received: 20 November 2009, 10:55 am
Subject: Beijing job!

Dear Gem,

Are you ok? I called you on your mobile, you didn't pick up. I called you in the office, your secretary say you haven't come into the office whole day and your boss mad at you. What happened to you?!

Sorry for not contacting you so long. Many new construction going, my phone rings all day everyday. Even when I busy, I don't forget finding you job in China. China economy booming, so many opportunities for smart girl like Gem.

One of my friends in Beijing, Joe Chen, he partner in UK law firm Potts Crouch We know each other since studying Beida. He also studied Masters in Boston, work there for 2 years, and came back Beijing because this UK law firm give him partnership and pay him big salary. My friends say he make RMB 1 mil a month plus bonus just to have dinner with big boss from Coca Cola, Shell and Boeing. No wonder he return to Beijing!!

So, this Joe, he ask me if I know good lawyer, speak very good English and Chinese. I told him yes, and I sent him your CV. And he say when he can interview you on telephone. That's why I call you many times today. Please reply, then I know you not dead.

Very worried about you.

Yan Li

Managing Director

Shenzhen Shengli Construction Company Limited

Proud supporter of Guangzhou ASEAN Games 2016, and Greenpeace

Please only print this email on recyclable paper.

Gem had never heard of Potts Crouch. But that didn't stop her from pressing 'Reply' and typing at lightning speed:

From: Gem Chu [gchu@N&H.com.au]

To: Yan Li [liyan888@163.com]

Received: 20 November 2009, 4:21pm

Subject: Re: Beijing job!

Mrs Li,

It's so good to finally hear from you! Very sorry about not picking up your calls. I felt very sick today. I just woke up to check emails.

Thank you so much for remembering me for this job at this UK firm. I am free any time next week to do a telephone conference with Joe Chen, name the day and time. Looking forward to it!

Will call you later to discuss your Gold Coast mall project.

Kind regards,
Gem Chu
Associate
N&H Solicitors & Notaries
Brisbane, Queensland

Two weeks later, Gem did the interview with Joe Chen. She received an offer two weeks after that. On the same day, she received a letter from the Migration Review Tribunal, notifying her that her application to have Meena's spouse visa application reviewed had once again been unsuccessful. Gem heaved a sigh of relief she wouldn't have to handle the appeal as she'd tendered her resignation earlier that day.

2. Business in China

CHINA BUSINESS DAILY

W-Mark, Bonjour battle for CHC

By J.B. Marshall

Monday, February 21, 2010

CHC, a Taiwan-based mainland supermarket chain, has announced that all of its mainland China operations is now up for sale.

Our sources at CHC indicated that there are only two serious bidders for CHC's China operations: America's W-Mart and France's Bonjour. Both bidders are leaders in their own respective home markets.

W-Mart already has 200 stores in China, and has been pursuing an aggressive acquisition strategy to penetrate second- and third-tier cities. Bonjour, on the other hand, is looking to enter the Chinese market by acquiring CHC's 346 stores located in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and 25 other second- and third-tier cities in China. CHC claims its retail operations in China are easily worth US\$1 billion. The successful bidder for CHC will become the number one retailer in China.

Sources familiar with the bidding process said that both bidders have engaged advisors to commence the extensive due diligence process on CHC's stores and bid preparation.

The deadline for the submission of bids is sometime in mid-March. CHC has not indicated a preference, but it is rumoured that CHC will make its choice based primarily on the cash offered. Sources familiar with CHC have alluded to the possibility that CHC is selling its lucrative mainland business to meet the financial commitments created in the course of building its mainland business. CHC refused to comment on this point during yesterday's press conference.

Beijing has given high priority to boosting domestic consumption in a bid to reduce reliance on exports as the mainland's main economic engine. Demand is likely to get a further boost from the central government's adoption of a new tax code that effectively reduces consumers' tax burden.

China abolished restrictions on foreign companies operating in the domestic retail market in 2004, putting them on an equal footing with domestic rivals for the first time, according to agreements it made when it joined the World Trade Organization. In the last five years, an unprecedented number of foreign retail giants have entered China by either establishing wholly-owned supermarkets or buying out the stakes of their China joint venture partners, despite economic forecasts stating that China's economy is set to slow to single-digits within the next 12 months.

3. Orientation

To this day, Gem still can't decide what to think of her first day at work at Potts & Crouch. The HR lady, Shelly, had asked Gem to come in at 9:30am. Gem confirmed the time three times since she'd never known starting times later than 8:30am. Orientation had been relatively quick and painless, then Shelly had taken Gem around the office to meet everyone.

Potts & Crouch's Beijing office was located on the 28th floor of the Mandarin Centre, right smack in the middle of the CBD. Shelly told Gem that all law firms wanted a space in the Mandarin Centre because of its excellent *fengshui*, supposedly a major contributing factor in the growth of Potts & Crouch's business in China. After Joe Chen secured the lease on this auspiciously numbered floor by calling in a favour from a college friend working in the Beijing mayor's office, he paid an exorbitant amount of money to fly in a *fengshui* master from a monastery in Sichuan to advise on how best to renovate the space. The floor-to-ceiling glass walls and doors (for maximum circulation of prosperity), the positioning of Joe's office (for the promotion of his career and manhood), open plan seating (for optimal cooperation between colleagues) and the beige colour scheme (for stress relief) were the result of hours of consultation with the *fengshui* master. All the lawyers and legal assistants sat with their backs to each other but never to the walls or the doors.

Gem's first impression of the office was how empty it seemed. Shelly explained that most of the staff were still away for the Spring Festival holidays. Gem later realized that she meant Chinese New Year.

Joe wasn't in his office when they stopped by; his secretary, Cream, said she would call Gem when he returned. Cream was an unusually good-looking Chinese lady, gifted with all the assets most Asian women lacked: an hourglass figure, large round eyes, double eyelids, a button nose, a small mouth with full lips, and waist-length, luscious jet-black hair. That day, she flaunted her curves in a body-hugging dress that looked like it ended right under her panty line and a pair of Christian Dior booties. Gem had to ask Cream to spell her name, as she couldn't quite believe anyone in the world would want to be called by a noun describing a food/beauty product. After Cream spelt her name with pride and a twinkle in her eye, there was an awkward pause as Gem tried frantically to work out what to say to her next.

"So, Cream ... why did you choose this English name?" Gem asked in Mandarin.

"Oh! I love Michael Jackson, and my favourite song of his is called Cream! Of course it's easy to pronounce and spell, and no one else in the office has it!" explained Cream in Mandarin, swelling with smugness for claiming a Western song as her own.

Gem was just about to point out that Cream was a Prince song when Shelly whisked her away to her new office. Shelly introduced Gem to Huang Shan, the associate with whom she'd be sharing an office.

"Joe thinks it's a good idea for you to sit with Huang Shan, as he's one of the most experienced associates in the office," explained Shelly as she led Gem to her desk. "You can ask him any questions about Chinese law. He'll know the answer."

'So this is what ass-licking in China sounds like,' thought Gem after hearing this.

"Hi, I'm Huang Shan. You must be my new officemate, Gem," said Shan in Mandarin, standing up to shake Gem's hand.

"Yes I'm Gem; nice to meet you," said Gem, holding out her hand. It took Gem a while to realise her hand was still out, not having felt Shan's light, distracted handshake.

Shan smiled with his mouth but not with his eyes, and asked her a few perfunctory questions before saying he had to get some urgent work done.

Gem decided she didn't like her new officemate enough to make further effort and decided to settle in at her desk.

The resident IT guy, Bing, was sitting at her desk, setting up her computer. He showed her how to use the firm's software. Gem liked Bing immediately. He looked like the dozens of Chinese men she'd met in Beijing – shorter than her, skinny but not scrawny with a squarish face, pigeon eyes and a flattish nose. He spoke Beijinger Mandarin in a singsong, teasing manner and never answered any of Gem's questions directly.

"So how do I find precedents on the intranet?" Gem was barely masking her confusion at Potts & Crouch's complex intranet site.

"Well that depends on what precedents you're looking for, how long ago it was created and the author of the precedent," Bing said. "No one in this office uses the standard precedent. These bloody lawyers all prefer to format their agreements differently to 'improve the document.'" He rolled his eyes while waving his hand at Gem's computer screen. "You people have no consideration for the poor sods like me who have to keep track of the hundreds of precedents on the firm's system. *Kao!*²"

Gem couldn't help but laugh as Bing continued his spiel. She only realised after he left the office that she still had no idea how to find precedents on the intranet.

Gem had just found the precedents folders, when Desmond barged into the room.

"You must be the new girl, right?" he barked.

² "Shit" in Chinese, a means to express dissatisfaction, and anger.

“Yes ...” replied Gem tentatively. She remembered Shelly introducing Desmond as a newly promoted senior associate. Desmond was on the phone the entire two minutes they were in his office, and did not acknowledge their presence. He looked to be the same age as Gem, but with permanent furrows in his forehead, a dark complexion, pigeon eyes, high cheekbones and a pouty mouth. Gem thought he only needed the word ‘Ass’ carved onto his forehead for his image to be complete.

“Joe asked for you and Shan to come with me to his office immediately for a meeting. We’ve just been engaged by Bonjour to work on their bid for CHC.”

Gem, Shan and Desmond filed into Joe’s office with their pads and pens. Joe was on a conference call with some men speaking heavily French-accented English. He gestured for them all to sit down.

“The due diligence for CHC’s stores will require me to put every lawyer in the office full time on this project. We’ve looked at the online data-room today and there’s one thousand five hundred and eighty documents to review just in the real estate section. I suspect there’s more in the corporate section since CHC opened a holding company for each store.” Joe put heavy emphasis on the words “one thousand” and “documents”.

“I understand, Joe, but it has to be done. Our shareholders in France need it,” a baritone voice boomed from the telephone speaker. “We won’t ask for an estimate of fees at this point in time since we don’t know how much work is involved yet.”

“It’s great that you agree with me, Pierre,” Joe said with a big smile. “Let me introduce you to the core team who will be working on this project.” He then introduced Shan, Gem and Desmond to Pierre and his team. The call ended with a list of follow-up tasks to be completed by Potts & Crouch and Bonjour.

Joseph turned to Gem, looking quite pleased. “Welcome to Beijing! Now for the bad news. You’ve just been put on the biggest project this year. We’ve been asked to conduct due diligence on all of CHC’s mainland companies and stores, which total about 800 entities. Our deadline is unfortunately only two weeks away, so everyone working on this project will have to work every day until we send out the bid letter to CHC. Any questions?”

Gem was still busy writing notes when Joe finished his spiel, and it took her 10 seconds to work out that he was asking her a question. Before she could respond, Desmond eagerly piped up, “Leave this to me, Joe. I will send an email to every associate and legal assistant in this office and gather them for a meeting to allocate the work for this project. I’m not sure what Gem can contribute to this project since she doesn’t read Chinese.”

Gem interrupted, “I can read Chinese, thank you very much.” Inside, Gem was fuming. Who does this guy think I am, a pushover?

“Actually, since this is a labour intensive project,” said Joe, “I want all three of you to lead the due diligence work on different parts of the material. Desmond, you will be in charge of real estate, Gem will be in charge of corporate and Shan will be in charge of all remaining parts.”

The three took more notes as Joe droned on with instructions before leaving his room. Desmond was visibly upset at Joe’s decision to split the project into three. He thought he should get the whole pie since he was the senior guy. Why is this bitch from Australia leading a significant section on her own? Joe can’t possibly be interested in her sexually; she’s too tall and big and plain!

Meanwhile, Gem was very pleased with being assigned such a high profile project on her first day at work. Having worked for numerous Chinese clients in the past, she was confident that she’d be able to pick out the main issues in the corporate materials – with a little guidance from her team of legal assistants, of course. She frowned when she realised she couldn’t remember the names of any of the Chinese colleagues she met briefly this morning. Why don’t they all have English names?

Shan turned out to be the winner, because he’d already looked at the materials and was confident he wouldn’t be spending his weekends in the office, like the other two suckers. Most importantly, he wouldn’t be working under Desmond. The last project they had collaborated on had turned into a Desmond show, where Desmond put Shan down in front of the client and took credit for all the work Shan had done. When he confronted Desmond, Desmond ignored him. Shan resented Joe for promoting Desmond instead of him, especially since he’d been at the firm two years longer than Desmond. Shan didn’t review a single document because he resigned four days later to join an American law firm, which offered him double the salary and the title of Senior Associate.

4. Updates from Beijing

From: Lingling Chu [mrschu@yahoo.com]
To: Gem [gem.chu@gmail.com']>
Date: 7 March 2010, 7:31am
Subject: (none)

Gem:

Have you arrived in Beijing? How come you haven't called home to tell us how you are? Dad and I watched weather forecast in Beijing last night, and it's -13 degrees there! You better buy the thickest jacket you can find, so you don't freeze to death.

I still don't know why you want to move to Beijing when you have good job in Brisbane. Do you remember Auntie Rachel? She travels to Beijing regularly to buy stock for her shop in Brisbane, and she told me Beijing is crowded, dirty and polluted. She couldn't understand why you chose to move to Beijing to work too. Sigh ...

Anyway, call or write soon so we know you are still alive ah.

Love,
Mum

From: Gem [gem.chu@gmail.com]
To: Lingling Chu [mrschu@yahoo.com]
Date: Saturday 14 March 2012, 8:02pm
Subject: Re: Barely alive
Attachment: Snow in Beijing.jpg

Hi Mum,

Sorry for not writing sooner. I was put in charge of this huge project immediately after I arrived. I've been working till 11pm every night since then. My boss said I could leave earlier if I wanted to today, but it's already 8pm now, and I still have to review 10 documents. It's unlikely I will leave the office much earlier than yesterday. Sigh.

Because I've been working so hard, I haven't been outdoors much. The firm put me up in a serviced apartment right next to the office, so I literally walk to work in five minutes all indoors. But you are right, I will buy a down jacket when I have a chance to leave the office when the shops are open. My colleagues saw my woollen coat from Brisbane and suggested I wear it during autumn. ☹

Actually, I like most of my colleagues at this firm, except for this senior associate, Desmond. He is arrogant, self-absorbed and a complete control freak. The lawyer who used to share an office with me recently left because he hated Desmond, and didn't want to work on another project with him. Unfortunately now I have to work with Desmond, and I can understand why my officemate left the firm. I asked Desmond a question about China corporate law, and he pretended he didn't hear anything I said. Then my boss came to speak to him, and he was all attentive and responsive. I've met some creepy lawyers in my life, but this guy takes the trophy.

Oh oh ... you're gonna love this, Mum. My boss's secretary is called 'Cream'. I once heard her answer the phone like this: "Potts & Crouch, Cream speaking." I LOL right then and there, and everyone in the office looked up from their desks for a moment trying to figure out what the joke was. BTW, did you give your bosses shoulder massages when you were working in Trust Solicitors? Every time I've walked past my boss' office, she's in there either giving him a shoulder or chest massage. I never saw this back in Brisbane. How I wish my secretary would give me a shoulder massage once in a while ...

I was introduced to a new legal assistant who introduced herself as 'Alien'. I asked her: Alien, as in extra-terrestrial? She said yes! I'll tell you more of the insane English names I've heard in Beijing when I call you. Hopefully soon. Really depends on when we finish the report.

Here's a picture of snow I took outside of my office window.

I walked out of the apartment just to touch the snow yesterday morning. The snow was so thick and heavy. I wished I could have a snowfight with someone. ☹ I doubt I will ever meet a man working these hours. I do miss you and Ba a lot ...

I've been called into a meeting by Des the Pest. I'll try to call you and Ba next week.

Love,
Gem

From: Janice Preston [jpres@gmail.com]
To: Gem [gem.chu@gmail.com]
Date: 10 March 2010, 10:03 am
Subject: Update please!

Gem,
Did you get my last email? Or are you too busy working for partnership already?
Updates pls!!!

Xoxo, Jan
Sent from my Iphone. Typos are normal.

From: Gem [gem.chu@gmail.com]
To: Janice Preston [jpres@gmail.com]
Date: Sunday 15 March 2010, 11:05 pm
Subject: Re: Update please!

My dearest Jan,
I've been meaning to reply to your emails but I've been working round the clock since I landed in Beijing. I've been put on this crazy acquisition and the French client wants everything done yesterday. I'm still at the office writing this email to you. I'm waiting for some colleagues to send me their finished work. Gr... Arrghhh....

It's been bloody snowing every week since I got to Beijing. I liked it until I slipped and fell on ice this morning. I have a huge bruise on my thigh, it was black the last time I checked.

I haven't had much time to do much else in Beijing apart from working in the office. I've been working here for a couple weeks but I already find it sometimes frustrating dealing with the locals. We all look Chinese, but I definitely don't think Chinese. In fact, I'm still trying to figure out what goes through their minds.

I thought it'd be easier to make partner here in Beijing. But the more I see in P&C, the more I think I'm wrong. The two senior associates I work with regularly pretty much camp outside the managing partner's office, ready at a moment's notice to go see him. I'm still trying to get my head around that.

Not waiting for the work to come in. My brain is fried, need sleep. How's baby Ryan doing? Send me pictures when you get a chance. I miss you both so much.

Xoxo, Gem

5. Bird Project

The three weeks working on Project Phoenix (as the Frenchmen referred to it) were the most gruelling in Gem's career as a solicitor.

A typical day saw Gem coming into the office at 9:30am and reviewing emails of findings made by the three legal assistants reviewing CHC's corporate documents. Each legal assistant was allocated the corporate documents for 20 companies. To ensure they completed their share of the work, Gem asked each of them to send her emails of their review of three companies each day before they left the office. Gem couldn't remember a day when she left the office before 11pm.

When news broke of Shan's resignation two days into the start of Project Pheonix, it caused ripples throughout the office. Shan had been with the firm for more than four years and was the only employment and intellectual law expert in the office. He was well liked by everyone in the Beijing office, and by partners and senior lawyers in the Hong Kong and San Francisco offices. It was an open secret that Shan was joining a direct competitor and would be taking all his clients with him.

Joseph called Gem and Desmond into his office the day Shan resigned. When Gem entered the room, Desmond was already there and Joe was standing up. Gem noticed for the first time that the top of her supervising partner's head only came up to her armpit. "You should both know that Shan's resigned. I've been in meetings with Shan every day about the allocation of clients – not that his clients are any good," Joe said sarcastically. "I know you've both been working crazy hours lately to review all the documents and write up the due diligence report for Project Pheonix, so I won't burden you with Shan's workload. I've asked Sharon to take over Shan's work." Joe turned to Desmond. "I expect full cooperation between the three of you on this project. I don't have time to review the full report when it's finished so I've asked Sharon to do that." Desmond turned away from the intensity of Joe's stare in a vain attempt to hide his scowl.

Gem's secretary, Charlotte, had promptly updated her on the office gossip when she came to work a day after Gem started. So Gem was aware of the intense rivalry between Desmond and Sharon. Sharon had been working for Joe for more than six years and was Joe's trusted right-hand woman. Despite Desmond's apparent show of loyalty and devotion to Joe, Joe had never asked him out to lunch alone. The meaning of this slight was not lost on Desmond.

When Gem returned to her desk, she saw a bespectacled lady sitting in Shan's chair flipping through a ream of printed papers.

"Hi Gem! It's so nice to meet you. I'm Sharon Ding." Sharon stood up and greeted Gem with a big, warm smile. Gem shook Sharon's hand and sat down at her own desk. Sharon was of medium stature, a little on the plump side, and had a roundish face with dove eyes, a button nose and a small exquisite mouth. She had shoulder-length hair and wore a black dress, black tights and an ordinary pair of red patent heels. Gem could see that she must have been quite pretty in her younger days.

"How are you adjusting to working in Beijing? I hear you're from Brisbane. I visited my family in Sydney over the Spring Festival to escape the Beijing winter," Sharon said casually.

"I was pretty excited to see snow for the first time in my life, but the novelty wore off after a week," Gem responded with a giggle. "I'd choose summer in Sydney any time, for sure!" It's so nice to have a fellow Aussie in the office, she thought.

"I'm so glad you joined the firm. I felt so lonely being the only Aussie in this office," said Sharon earnestly. "Let's have lunch one of these days, maybe after we finish this manic French bird project." They both erupted into laughter.

After regaining her breath, Gem updated Sharon on her progress with the project and answered Sharon's questions. They kept small talk to a minimum, though Gem sensed Sharon would have loved to go on a tangent if time permitted. Gem enjoyed the half hour she spent with Sharon, and found it hard to believe Desmond could dislike her so much.

It wasn't in Gem's nature to compete with others, although she often compared herself to others. This was a direct result of her Malaysian-Chinese upbringing. She couldn't remember a day when her mother didn't compare her to either her colleagues' or the neighbours' children. It was irrelevant to Mrs Chu that Gem consistently won subject prizes for three subjects every year in high school, and graduated with second-class honours from law school. Mrs Chu never failed to mention her friend's daughter who graduated top of her business school and her colleague's son who was admitted to Harvard Law. Gem was too polite to remind her mother that she had been offered a scholarship to do a double bachelors in law and politics from Australia National University, but her mother had told her not to take it because her father had said: "It takes fifteen hours to drive from Brisbane to Canberra; too far away, *lah!* You better stay in Brisbane with us."

Partly out of filial piety, and mostly out of guilt (for what exactly she had never quite worked out), Gem stayed in Brisbane for university and then work, while discreetly fielding calls

from headhunters about jobs in Dubai, Hong Kong and China. To this day, her parents still considered her decision to take a job in Beijing a rash one.

6. Three Monkeys

The last thing Gem expected while working on Project Pheonix was how hard it was to extract information from the legal assistants who worked for her. She wasn't even sure if her expectations of the assistants were justified.

She asked different people in the office about the role of legal assistants, and received the following answers:

Joe: "I maintain an army [of legal assistants] on standby 24/7 specifically to do due diligence, and travel at a moment's notice. Please utilise Alien, Don and Kelly for Project Pheonix."

Sharon: "They all have law degrees either from China or overseas but haven't passed the China bar exam or been qualified overseas. Some of them have work experience from local law firms, but most of them don't. I use them mainly for legal research. I don't trust them to do any drafting."

Desmond: "They're completely useless. Most of them bought their university degrees on the black market. It's probably faster for you to do the work yourself."

Cream: "I get them to photocopy and scan documents for me, when I'm busy booking hotels and flights for Joe." (Yeah right, thought Gem who had seen Cream's constant updates to her Weibo³ account during office hours.)

Charlotte (over lunch for fear of anyone overhearing): "Some of the legal assistants have law degrees. Some have other degrees or diplomas unrelated to law, but have worked for many years in law firms. Alien is the niece of Chaoyang district AIC⁴, Don is the son of the managing director of Dangdang Publishing House – one of Joe's best clients – and Kelly is somehow related to Joe's best friend."

Gem very soon learnt why she was asked to use Alien, Don and Kelly. No one apart from Joe asked them to do any work.

Alien held a diploma in secretarial studies, wrote incomprehensible emails in English and refused to write in Chinese because she felt it was beneath her to do so. "I joined a foreign law so my English can improve," Alien told Gem, in Mandarin, when Gem begged her to write emails in Chinese. Since Alien refused to give in, Gem continued her daily hike to Alien's cubicle for their two-hour meeting to clarify Alien's sections of the due diligence report.

³ China's equivalent of Twitter.

⁴ Administration of Industry and Commerce = government organ in charge of monitoring registration and activities of companies.

Don held a Masters of Law from Stanford, but refused to do the bar exam because he was sick of studying and he reckoned it wasn't necessary to pass the bar to work in China. Gem was grateful she could at least understand his emails, even though they were in Chinglish.

Kelly was the legal assistant equivalent of Cream in terms of her looks, but thankfully not in terms of her abilities. No one knew whether she had gone to university, let alone had any qualifications. No one knew how she had learnt to speak English like an American, or how she kept abreast of the latest developments in the law and China's economy. Gem was constantly surprised by the quality of the work Kelly produced and enjoyed her no-nonsense work ethic. That was until she disappeared for two days and no one in the office could reach her either by email or on her mobile. Gem was just about to call the police when Kelly turned up to the office in her cute business suit, immaculate make-up and hair, and got straight to work. She gave no explanation for her disappearance and no one had the courage to ask. Not even Joe. When Gem asked Sharon about Kelly, Sharon looked at Gem, shook her head and said nothing. She opened a drawer on her desk, took out a wooden plaque and handed it to Gem. Gem looked at the plaque, nodded and left Sharon's office.

Everyone passing by Gem's room noticed this new decoration on her otherwise paper-strewn desk – a plaque with a picture of three monkeys sitting in a row. The first monkey was covering its eyes, the second its ears and the third, its mouth.

7. Collaboration

Sharon, Desmond and Gem finalised the first draft of the due diligence report two days before the actual deadline. Before sending off the report, Joe told them that the Shanghai-based client wanted a preliminary videoconference to discuss the key findings, rather than be surprised by the written document. The conference was booked for 9am to 6pm the following day. Joe asked the team leaders to come up with a powerpoint presentation to be displayed on Bonjour's screen while whoever was speaking.

Gem was tasked with preparing the first draft of the presentation. It was 4pm when Gem started typing up the bullets points for Charlotte to put into the presentation. Gem expected it would be another all-nighter for her since she'd have to wait for Sharon's and Desmond's comments on her part of the presentation. After having spent the last twelve days in the office working eighteen hours every day, she was really hoping to leave the office at 7pm so she could look at some apartments. It wasn't ideal to see apartments when it was dark outside, but that was her only choice since she had to move out by the end of March.

Desmond was the last to review the presentation and by 7pm he still wasn't done. From the short time Gem had worked with Desmond, she knew that half the delay was caused by him demanding his secretary make numerous changes, which invariably involved changing the format, font and graphics.

"My son is sick. I have to go now," Sharon said, close to tears. "What else does he want to change in the presentation?"

"I'm putting the finishing touches to the presentation," Desmond said, sauntering into Sharon's office. "I remembered five minutes ago that none of our biographies were in the presentation. How will the client know it's us who did all the hard work?"

Gem and Sharon were both speechless with disbelief at this and stared incredulously at him as he walked out the door.

"Joe specifically told me and Desmond that only his bio will be on the presentation," Sharon murmured. "Desmond is nuts to do this. Joe will just delete our bios anyway. I so don't need this now." She rushed out of her office, with Gem trailing behind her.

Sharon and Desmond started arguing in front of Cream's desk. Joe walked out of his office to see what the commotion was about. "What's this about? You're causing a scene in the office. Where is the presentation?" Joe asked Sharon and Desmond in a stern and angry tone. Desmond and Sharon stopped speaking and turned to Joe.

"Charlotte just emailed it to you, Joe," Gem piped in. "She's printing copies out for all of us to do a final review."

Without a further word, Joe stormed back into his office to review the presentation. Just as Sharon had predicted, he deleted the biographies Desmond had insisted on adding, plus an additional five pages, then sent the presentation to Bonjour, copying Sharon, Desmond and Gem. Gem noticed Joe took out the pages covering approximately half of the material issues that arose from the review of CHC's documents. With everyone's emotions running high, Gem didn't think it was wise to bring that up, especially since it was Joe who'd made the changes.

By the time Joe asked them to join him and Cream for dinner, it was 9pm. Sharon said she had to rush back to check on her son. Gem said she had to keep an appointment, a lie since she had called the real estate agent two hours earlier to cancel. Only Desmond expressed interest in dining with Joe and Cream, but Joe was so caught up in his *tête-à-tête* with Cream that he left the office without calling Desmond. Desmond only realized he had been left behind when Cream turned off the office lights, leaving him in pitch darkness.

8. Client Meeting

Joe and his team waited in the meeting room, while Bing dialled the number for Bonjour's videoconferencing service. This new Cisco videoconferencing system was the most sophisticated set-up Gem had ever set eyes on. Bing told her the experience would be like having the French guys in the same room. She asked him if her nostrils would be assaulted by their pervading cologne as well; Bing ignored her. Sharon suppressed her usually explosive laugh. These Beijingers have a strange sense of humour, thought Gem, when the executives of Bonjour flashed onto the screen.

After the initial pleasantries, Joe introduced the members of his team to his client, then the CEO of Bonjour, Pierre, introduced his team. Gem had to really concentrate to understand what Pierre said in English. She'd never heard anyone speak with such a heavy accent before.

"*Bonjour!* I 'ave 'ere with me Benoit, our CFO; Sophie, our in-house counsel; and Matthieu, our China operations director," Pierre purred while gesturing majestically at each person on his team. "We looked at the presentation you sent last night, and 'ave some questions. Joe, how would you like to proceed?"

Joe suggested that Sharon present the findings, with the Bonjour team asking their questions as and when the issues were presented. Pierre and his team nodded their approval, and Sharon started with the first slide in the presentation, which displayed quite beautifully on Bonjour's monitor. Pierre was pleased to see that the colours of the presentation corresponded with those of Bonjour's logo.

Sharon had had a meeting with Joe before the videoconference, rehearsing what she would say during the presentation. Desmond and Gem were there to answer specific questions from the client, but would not be doing the actual presentation because Joe did not think either of them could be trusted. Sharon, of course, knew Joe's deep insecurities and his need to always be at the front of the crowd. His 153cm frame, average looks and pettiness hadn't helped him develop much confidence or make many friends. So he focused on the one thing he felt he could control: his career advancement. Early in her career at Potts & Crouch, Sharon realized that in order to secure her position in the firm, she had to be the person who fed Joe's narcissistic nature and pandered to his desire to always look good and important. She was known in the office as Joe's right-hand woman. She did everything Joe threw at her and ensured the clients gave him the credit. She knew the colleagues who made an effort to stay close to her all had an agenda, with perhaps the exception of Gem. Sharon was always careful about what she said, even to Gem, because it was impossible to know who would betray your trust in that cesspool of vipers.

Joe was particularly annoyed that CHC's legal matters had been handled as sloppily as its financial affairs. Of the 80 stores, CHC produced registered leases for about half, and only twenty percent of the lease contracts had been renewed following proper procedures. The meeting with CHC's management was like speaking to a pack of wolves that thought the lawyers were the entree before the main course. They admitted that the remaining forty stores did not have lease contracts because their landlords were still in the process of securing land use rights from local government authorities. Gem was initially surprised to hear from CHC's management that it typically invests an average of RMB 1 million on renovating these stores – which they had no legal right to lease. And that the landlords claimed they hadn't been able to obtain land use rights even after eight years of signing letters of intent with CHC, because local officials raised their 'application fee' to 'speed up' the process of converting the land use rights every six months or so. Most of the letters of intent set out vague and brief terms and conditions about the future lease of the premises and both parties' rights and obligations.

The team at Bonjour barely lifted their eyebrows after Sharon finished her presentation on this point. "We've encountered at least two similar situations when we were looking to lease premises on the outskirts of Lanzhou, in Ningxia province," Pierre said. "In both cases, they were farmland waiting to be converted to urban land. The construction companies of both premises told us it takes on average at least two years and lots of communication with the local government to get the farmland converted and new land use rights certificates to be issued. But they managed to get construction permits from Lanzhou's construction department to build the premises while waiting for the land use rights certificate to be issued."

"So what's the progress with these premises?" Joe asked, with a view to getting this work from Bonjour in the very near future.

Matthieu spoke up this time, a strong British accent surprisingly, "We've heard back about the premises at Lanzhou East station. The construction company emailed us copies of the newly issued land use rights certificate yesterday. Renovations started after the construction company told us two weeks ago that the certificate would be issued once the official gets back from his business trip to South Korea." He sounded like he had a blocked nose.

Matthieu paused to blow his nose. "Sorry about that, I'm still recovering from a cold. The other premises in Majiapu, we're not hopeful about. The construction company spent the last four years waiting for the certificate to be issued. The land department promised it would be issued at the end of 2008, but we haven't heard anything from the construction company yet. Their managing director lost his temper at something the official from the land department said

at a banquet last week, and it ended up with some *bajiu*⁵ bottles getting smashed and some people had to get stitches in their heads. That's the rumour anyway.”

Pierre coughed and gave Matthieu a look. Matthieu got the hint and reverted to the original topic. “Our contact at the construction company told us about a month ago that there's still hope, but he didn't sound very hopeful on the phone. We'll give it another two months, before we decide whether or not to shelve Majiapu.”

Gem noticed no one was particularly shocked by what Matthieu said, as she suppressed her own feelings of shock and amazement. She'd seen some locals arguing on the streets outside Mandarin Centre, which was distressing enough. But a fight involving broken bottles and blood was quite another matter. She prayed silently that she would never witness something like that.

Sharon moved to the next slide, which addressed lease contracts. The Bonjour team frowned at the list of stores whose leases had not been renewed in writing because the management team at CHC said this was “how things work here”.

Sophie spoke up this time, her demeanour serious, her tone no-nonsense. “Our board in Paris expressed great concern about this issue after reading your slides, because all of these stores are in prime locations in key second-tier cities. Do you recommend we take over the existing leases or sign new contracts with the landlords of these 20 stores? Our team in the respective provinces have reverted with current rentals for similar spaces in those cities, and they are at least double the rental in the original contracts.”

“We understand your concern over this issue. CHC has made a verbal promise to assist the successful bidder to negotiate new leases for the 20 stores with terms as close to those of the original contracts as possible, but they will not accept a bid which includes lease renewals in writing, because they have no control over the landlords,” said Sharon. Sophie wasn't impressed by this answer and conferred with her colleagues in French for the next minute or so. Joe and Desmond stared at the screen intently, trying to make out what they were saying. Sharon and Gem checked their BlackBerry discreetly during this time, answering the emails that had come in while they were at the videoconference.

Gem was surprised to see a message from Sharon. She looked over at Sharon, who was typing away furiously on her BlackBerry. Her message: Really hope this VC ends soon. PP⁶ still in hospital now, high fever. Must leave at 6 today.

Gem replied: Shd be fine. J deleted half the slides! Ha.

⁵ Chinese rice wine, usually with an alcohol content of more than 50%.

⁶ short for Peter Pan, her son's name.

Sharon looked up from her BlackBerry, caught Gem's eye and gave her a smile and wink of acknowledgement. Gem had great admiration for Sharon. Sharon had told Gem that she was the sole breadwinner in her family. Sharon had applied to this firm after her husband, Yu, had pestered her for two years to move back to China. After years working in a warehouse in Sydney, Yu was ready to strike out on his own and build his own business. Sharon had a thriving career in a mid-tier law firm in Sydney and had been tipped for partnership when she received the offer from Potts & Crouch. Against her better judgement, she gave in to Yu's demands, accepted the offer from P&C, and turned down the partnership. They've now lived in Beijing for six years. Yu's consulting business is still in the red, while Sharon's career as a lawyer has come to a complete standstill, working for a partner who couldn't do without her, while at the same time was threatened by her and had no intention of ever promoting her. Sharon's cheerful exterior was a cocoon for her suppressed anger, resentment and frustration. Her only joy was to see her two-year-old son's smiling face when she got home from work, burying her nose in his hair and breathing in his scent, a mix of baby lotion and milk.

Pierre began speaking in English right then. "We understand CHC's concerns, but insist that this be included in the bid letter as a term. We'll leave it to your capable hands to draft this. Let's continue with the slides."

Sharon went through another three slides on real estate issues. The Bonjour team raised one or two questions, which Desmond answered since he was more familiar with the source documents. Joe piped in once or twice when he felt Desmond was going off on a tangent. They agreed to break and continue the conference after lunch to cover the remaining slides which covered corporate issues.

After lunch, Sharon started on the remaining slides. Joe had deleted all but three of the original slides covering corporate issues; this bothered Gem on a professional level and hurt her pride. CHC's corporate structure looked like a spider web, with the holding company set up in the Seychelles (not Taiwan, surprisingly). Every store had its own holding company set up in the province or city in which it was located. There was no system in place to manage the corporate records for these 80 companies. About a third of the business licences provided during the due diligence had expired, and no one knew if the business licences had been renewed. Almost all the companies did not have a complete set of minutes from their board meetings, and their articles of association were mostly out of date. These last two issues were the only ones left in the presentation after Joe's edit.

Since Joe had instructed her not to speak during the presentation unless asked to, Gem kept her mouth shut throughout her section of the presentation. She only spoke once or twice when the Bonjour team members asked a question to which Sharon didn't know the answer.

Sharon started on her part of the presentation at about 4:30pm, covering employment, intellectual property, litigation and insurance. "I read in the papers that CHC's store in Jinan was selling meat past its use-by date. It was a huge scandal for a while. How did CHC deal with that?" Matthieu wanted to know.

"Well ... we asked management about that," Sharon said. "They said they gave the meat supplier a stern warning, and sacked the store manager. They held a press conference to announce this, but the journalists didn't bother writing up the announcement because they were unhappy with the red packets they received from CHC." Gem noticed that, again, she seemed to be only one shocked by this.

Pierre concluded the video conference at 6pm, saying he would present the due diligence report to Bonjour's global executive board in Paris, which was due to meet in a few days' time. He specifically instructed that no further revisions were to be made to the bid letter for CHC until he had instructions from the global executive board. Apparently the board's main concern was still CHC's insistence on presenting their financial statements for the last three years only after they signed the bid letter.

Sharon bolted out of the meeting room, waving goodbye to the rest of the team. Joe's BlackBerry rang and, after a quick glance at the caller ID, left the meeting room to take the call. Desmond followed closely behind Joe. Gem was the last to leave the meeting room, not sure what to do with herself. This was the first time in four weeks she had no reason to work late. She suddenly felt very, very lonely.

CHINA BUSINESS DAILY**W-Mart Now Only Interested Party in CHC**

By J.B. Marshall

Friday, March 12, 2010

After two weeks of due diligence and negotiations between CHC and the two remaining bidders, W-Mart and Bonjour, CHC has shown a preference towards W-Mart as the ultimate buyer.

For a short period of time, there appeared to be a third competitor in the race to acquire CHC's China operations. It was rumoured that China's Dragon Trading, which owns and operates the local Aijia chain of supermarkets, had contacted CHC about its intention to also take part in the bid, but nothing eventuated afterwards. CHC's decision not to pursue negotiations with Dragon Trading was reportedly due to its concerns over Dragon's ability to secure sufficient financing to pay CHC's asking price.

The CHC spokesperson denied that CHC had conducted any negotiations with Dragon Trading, and confirmed that they are still negotiating terms in the bids received from W-Mart and Bonjour. The final decision will be announced after CHC's annual general meeting due to be held mid-March.

A source from one of W-Mart's advisory teams informed us on a no-name basis that CHC had not been forthcoming with requests for documents during the due diligence process. The financial advisory teams for both W-Mart and Bonjour had made repeated requests for the financial statements for CHC's China stores, all of which had been ignored by CHC. This adds fuel to rumours about CHC's liquidity problems caused by its overly aggressive expansion into third-tier cities in China, opening 30 stores in the last 12 months.

According to the latest report from China Development Panel on the state of China's retail industry, only 20% of the foreign retail chains who entered China five years ago

have become profitable. The main reasons for the failure of majority foreign supermarket chains to become profitable in China are (a) an over-reliance on brand name; (b) their inability to adapt their products to satisfy the tastes of local customers, and (c) the tendency for foreign players to rush into joint ventures with local companies, often with terms which are not in their favour.

10. See No Evil

8:30am. Joe was visibly upset when Cream arrived at the office. She quietly slipped into his office and shut the door behind her as soundlessly as possible. Joe was still deep in thought when Cream walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her touch and smiled feebly.

“Morning. You’re in early this morning,” Joe said to Cream in Mandarin, as he took her hand in his.

“What’s the matter?” Cream asked. “You look awful.” She moved behind her boss’s chair and put her other hand across his chest, hugging him from behind.

“The French have decided not to proceed with Project Pheonix. The shareholders refused to approve the bid before seeing CHC’s financials,” Joe whispered into Cream’s ear. “The bloody Taiwanese are even tougher than us Chinese. No amount of shouting and threats can change their minds about handing over their financials.”

“Well, this is not your fault. You’ve done all you could. Your team did all they could,” Cream whispered back. She’d wanted to tell him something, but decided against it last minute.

Gem walked past Joe’s office and pretended she didn’t see the both of them entangled in a crooked embrace through the glass wall. She was still having difficulty accepting that her boss was openly having an affair with his secretary without his wife’s knowledge. At least that was what other colleagues claimed. Joe talked occasionally about his children, but hardly mentioned his wife. In the office, it was almost like his wife and children didn’t exist. No one in the office seemed to think anything was amiss, except Charlotte and Gem.

“How long have they been together?” Gem once asked Charlotte while they were having lunch at a Japanese restaurant near the office.

“I think they started shortly after Cream joined the firm about four months ago,” Charlotte recalled. “I was originally the receptionist here, and Joe promoted me to secretary about the time Cream joined Potts & Crouch. She came over from a state-owned company in Beijing and had no clue about working in a law firm. Joe delegated the job of training her to me. Can’t say I was happy about that.” She frowned as the unpleasant memories returned.

“I understand your pain,” Gem piped in after swallowing a mouthful of sushi. “I asked her to photocopy a binder of documents once when you were on sick leave. She came to my office about two hours later asking me where the binder was. I went berserk and shouted at her for losing the binder. She’s been quite cold towards me since.”

“You should be careful how you deal with Cream. She tells Joe everything.” Charlotte looked at Gem with concern. “He once fired an associate for flirting with Cream during an office

outing. The poor guy wasn't very switched on, so had no idea he was hitting on the partner's girlfriend."

Gem gasped disbelievingly. "You can't be serious, Charlotte."

Charlotte maintained her serious demeanour. "I joke a lot about other things but never about office politics. Joe wasn't like this when his wife was still working at China World. She used to come by the office every day to have lunch with Joe, and she always said hello to me when she saw me at reception. We used to have long chats on the phone about this, that and other. I can tell Joe is totally henpecked. No idea why he's so scared of his wife. She's such a lovely lady."

Charlotte continued in a serious tone, "You should also know that Cream has a serious boyfriend, whom she introduced to all the secretaries when we had dinner together. He's second-generation rich, and educated in the States. It's a pity he has bad taste in women." Gem detected a hint of envy in Charlotte's voice and decided to change the topic.

"So are you dating?" Gem asked casually.

"Nope."

Gem was genuinely surprised. "That's not possible. I saw at least ten guys in this restaurant checking you out just in the last half hour. Hell, Okuyama's⁷ been in love with you for as long as we've been coming here. You could go out with any of them!"

"Gem, I don't date Asian men anymore, especially after being with a French guy for several years," Charlotte lit a cigarette as she spoke. Gem sometimes wondered if it was a curse or blessing that Chinese restaurants let people smoke indoors. "I dated a Chinese guy when I was still in Fuzhou. His only hobbies were computer games and watching TV. Every date we went on, we were either eating or shopping.

"I picked up a French penpal from a bulletin board once, and she told me about the things she did with her Italian boyfriend. They lived in Berlin, and they'd go hiking, travel together to new places all the time, and they took turns to cook dinner for each other. When I compared their relationship to mine, I felt so depressed and hopeless about my life. My French penpal encouraged me to break up with my boyfriend, move to another city, and start a new life. So ... I broke up with my boyfriend after I finished university and backpacked to Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. I met my ex in Myanmar. We were doing long distance for six months, then he found a job in Beijing. I moved into his apartment, and landed the receptionist job at P&C. That's how I came to be here, and I haven't looked back since." Charlotte looked off into the distance as she took another drag on her cigarette.

⁷ The restaurant manager.

“No wonder you’re so different from the other Chinese people I meet here,” Gem exclaimed. “Honestly, I don’t think I am attractive to Chinese men at all. Bing once said it’s because I have the three ‘highs’: high education, high salary and physical height.”

Charlotte burst out laughing at this. “That Bing, don’t listen to him. He’s dating an African lady now, also a lawyer. She’s got all the three ‘highs’ too! Gem, you’re missing nothing by not dating Chinese men. They’re boring and no good in bed, their manhood is unimpressive and they only know one position. You don’t need to see or experience it to believe it. Guess why even the local women won’t marry them. Ha ha.”

11. Hear No Evil

Joe broke the news to the three leaders of Project Phoenix. Bonjour's global executive board could not convince its shareholders to sign the bid for CHC, and hence they had to abort the project. He thanked Sharon, Gem and Desmond for their hard work over the previous four weeks and suggested that they take the legal assistants and secretaries who'd worked on Project Phoenix for a night out in appreciation of their hard work.

Desmond was upset. How would he meet his budget now that this deal wasn't going ahead? He'd have a hard time making a case for a promotion this year. He blamed Gem for being too aggressive with the Taiwanese guys on the last conference call when she asked them to hand over more documents.

Sharon, as usual, looked neutral, and was exchanging ideas with Joseph about the venue for dinner and karaoke. Joe called Cream into his office and she joined Sharon, Joe and Desmond bouncing around names of restaurants and karaoke lounges, none of which Gem recognised. She was happy to let her mind wander, enjoying the prospect of leaving the office at a humane hour.

"Ok it's settled. Let's go to Xiao Wang Fu for dinner, then take a cab to Cashbox for karaoke later," Joe finally decided. "Cream, can you make the reservations for this Friday?"

"Of course! How many people are coming?" Cream asked innocently, looking at Joe.

Joe had already turned his back to Cream and was skimming through his emails, pointedly ignoring everyone in the room. This was his way of saying the conversation was over. Gem had initially found it quite offensive but eventually got used to it after seeing Joe dole out the same treatment to everyone, including Sharon. Sharon and Desmond got up soundlessly from their seats and walked out, Gem following closely behind them. Cream was still standing at her spot in Joe's room when Gem closed the door behind her. As Gem walked towards her office, she saw Joe turn around and looked at Cream, while Cream remained standing. Even though the glass walls were soundproof, they watched until Sharon, Desmond and Gem were out of sight before Joe started speaking again.

"What's the matter, Cream? You look worse today than yesterday. Are you having a cold?"

"I've been feeling quite sick lately. I haven't been able to keep down any of my food," Cream said, taking a step forward towards Joe.

"Have you seen a doctor? I can ask my driver to take you to the hospital right now." Cream could see genuine concern on her boss's face.

“I went to Chaoyang Hospital last week, and I’ve been referred to a gynaecologist. My appointment is set for 5pm today.” Cream began fiddling with Joe’s Mont Blanc pen on his desk while staring out the office window at the CCTV Tower.

Joe was speechless for a full minute, as a flurry of thoughts ran through his mind. He’d always been very careful with his previous mistresses, and he was so sure he’d never made a mistake like this. Cream always stayed in the office until he was ready to leave and he’d take her back to her place. She’d invited him to her sparse apartment near Houhai the first time he took her home, one thing led to another and the next thing he knew, he was lying naked on her bed, his hand stroking her bare back as her naked body lay on top of him. He left that night at 1am and took a cab back to his villa in Shunyi. His wife, Helen, was already sound asleep by the time he showered and got into bed.

This was repeated every work night for the next six months, with the exception of the few nights he had to attend dinners with certain partners who frowned upon office affairs. Joe regularly took Cream to dinners with Chinese clients, who also brought their girlfriends. They would pit their girlfriends against one another, from their physical beauty to their drinking prowess. Cream did not have the prettiest face, but she was head and shoulders above the small-time actresses in terms of her figure. She also easily drank other girls under the table, which Joe was quite proud of.

Cream became uncomfortable with the long silence and coughed to get her boss’s attention. She’d waited for a week to break this news to Joe. She already knew she was two months’ pregnant, and she was positive it was Joe’s, because her boyfriend had been away in Shanghai the whole of January and most of February. She had known from the moment she received the offer letter from Potts & Crouch what Joe was really interested in. She had never worked in a law firm before, let alone an international law firm. Joe had tested her English, which was above average by her standards, but she could tell it was not up to Joe’s. The men she had dated in the past had painted a picture of what it was like to work in an international law firm, so she knew it wasn’t a bed of roses. She had been taken aback by Joe’s offer to take her home in his car a week into the job, and by his persistent requests in the car to see her apartment, but this was not the first time she’d been pressured into letting guys into her apartment. She’d obliged him all the way, even pretending she enjoyed having him inside her, all because she wanted to keep her new job and this was the only way she knew how. She thought nothing of Joe’s refusal to use a condom. To her, the fact that these rich, powerful men wanted to have unprotected sex with her meant that they wanted to marry her. Only prostitutes used condoms, and she definitely wasn’t one. After sleeping with dozens of men, she’d finally bagged her

second-generation rich boyfriend. She hadn't anticipated on getting an STD or pregnant however. Drinking as much as she did for this job, even she was surprised that her body was capable of conceiving.

Joe shook himself out of his trance. "I'll let the driver take you to the hospital to see the gynaecologist this afternoon. Let me know the results when you find out."

Cream, shocked by his response, put her hands on his shoulder, and shook him until his teeth rattled. "I am pregnant with your child. You know it's yours! I came to you for a solution, and this is the best you can do?" She gave him one last shake and walked out of his office with tears in her eyes.

Charlotte got to her desk just in time to see Cream sitting down at her desk, sobbing. She went over, squatted next to Cream and asked if she wanted to go outside for some fresh air. Cream shook her head, wiped away her tears, looked up and smiled at Charlotte. Charlotte realized immediately the cause of Cream's distress and walked back to her desk.

It took Joe a minute to recover from the shock of Cream's reaction, as he'd never been treated in such a disrespectful manner. As far as he was concerned, Cream had no reason to be upset at him; the baby might very well not be his. In any event, he'd always been able to work out amicable solutions for sticky situations like this. There was hardly anything these days that couldn't be resolved with money; it was just a matter of how much. Cream is a smart girl; she'll accept the cash and have an abortion if I ask her to, he thought. His phone rang, disrupting his train of thought and bringing him back to earth.

12. Chivas & Green Tea

It felt like an eternity until Friday arrived. The secretaries all brought party outfits, and the legal assistants were working doubly hard to get their work done and leave the office on time for the party.

Gem was looking forward to her first office party in China. She'd been to some karaoke lounges back in Brisbane with her Hong Kong and Taiwanese friends, but that was some time ago. She had overheard the secretaries exchanging stories from last year's Christmas party. Desmond had apparently started doing his salsa moves on the table after one too many glasses of red wine. Gem smiled at the prospect of seeing Desmond repeat his performance tonight.

"Hi, you're Gem, right?" a tall, lanky African woman with braids walked through the door, putting her bags on what used to be Shan's desk. She was wearing a light grey skirt suit, paired with a light pink blouse and sensible heels. Her face was narrow and her features strong. When she smiled, her thick, brown lips threatened to overtake the rest of her face.

Gem stood up at her greeting. "Yes, I'm Gem. And you are?"

"Sheila. I'm your new officemate. I'll be working for Mike, the Canadian partner who specialises in competition law."

"Oh I've seen Mike around." Gem recognised the name though she couldn't picture his face. Had she met Mike when Shelly took her around the office?

As if reading her thoughts, Sheila continued, "Mike is hardly in the office, so I'm surprised you've seen him at all! I've been working for Mike while based in Hong Kong for the last two years. When he decided to relocate to Beijing from London, I decided to join him 'cos I enjoy working for him. It's not every day you have a boss you enjoy working for."

Gem was taken aback by Sheila's open and frank manner. The same words coming from a male associate would've come across as boastful and pretentious; but from Sheila, it sounded like the most natural thing for her to say. That required skill and poise.

"Well, it wasn't such a difficult decision since my boyfriend is based in Beijing," Sheila chirped on while she unpacked her things. Bing tiptoed into their office when Sheila was bent under the desk, tugging at the plugs. He looked at Gem, placed his index finger on his lips to indicate silence and quietly crept behind Sheila.

"You've met Bing, right? He's the IT guy around here. Actually, where the hell is he?" Sheila turned around and let out a scream when Bing put his arms around her tiny waist and lifted her up, chuckling the whole time. Gem was surprised to see this display of affection and emotion from the normally wooden Bing.

Sheila recovered from the shock and began giggling like a teenager. Bing put her down and asked her if she needed help carrying anything heavy, to which she replied no. He then turned on Sheila's computer, explaining the differences between the systems in Hong Kong and Beijing and how to find information specific to the Beijing office, all in pretty good English, albeit with a strong Beijinger accent. Gem found it amusing how differently Bing had treated her when she'd asked questions on her first day. It would be months before she learnt that Bing had given her a typical Beijinger welcome since she understood Mandarin. He couldn't joke that way with Sheila since she only understood English, but had been working hard at improving his spoken English for her sake.

6:30pm. Everyone in the office buzzed into action. The ladies' room was packed with secretaries and legal assistants changing into their party dresses and putting on make-up. The men stood around the reception area chatting about nothing in particular while they waited for their female colleagues.

Gem and Sheila were also in the reception area, chatting to each other since Sheila couldn't follow the guys' conversation in Mandarin.

"You have an unusual English name, Gem," Sheila remarked. "Most of the Hong Kong Chinese I've met either like to call themselves names ending with 'y' – like Kelly or Penny – or follow Chris and Gwyneth's example by naming themselves after fruit."

"Ha. Well, my mom said my dad made a mistake filling out my birth certificate. He has exceptionally neat handwriting, but the Malay clerks in Sibu had difficulty reading his handwriting. My name was meant to be 'Jenny', but they wrote it down as 'Gem'. That's probably a blessing in disguise, because I hate the name Jenny."

"Yes, you're lucky. I know at least 20 Jennys in Hong Kong alone." Sheila said with an infectious laugh that Gem immediately caught on.

Cream emerged from the toilet and herded everyone towards the lift, instructing them to make their way to the restaurant.

Potts & Crouch's office dinner was an eye-opening experience for Gem and Sheila. After five of the ten courses ordered, Sharon and Cream stood up and started toasting to each person around the table, starting with Joe. They were rowdy and aggressive, and insisted that Joe drain his glass of Pinot Noir. Joe, lapping up the attention, drained his glass to the cheering and clapping of his subordinates. There were almost twenty people at the dinner and all were astonished at Sharon

and Cream's drinking prowess as they drained their glasses of Pinot Noir time and again. Within two hours, they'd gone through fifteen 15 bottles of wine.

By the time they left the restaurant, everyone apart from Sheila and Bing, who were teetotalers for religious reasons, was either drunk or well on the way there. Joe and Cream walked off in the direction of the office, as Joe's driver was waiting for them in the car park. Sheila and Bing had left halfway through the dinner, saying goodbye only to Gem. Half of the colleagues had left after dinner to catch the metro home. Those remaining, including Gem, made their way to Cashbox in separate cabs. Gem found herself in a cab next to Francis, with Alien sitting next to the cab driver giving him directions.

Francis Wu was a pillar in the firm's translation team. Gem had spoken briefly to him once when she gave him some translation work. He was probably the thinnest Chinese guy she'd ever met. He wore cheap suits that were tailored to fit his wiry frame and walked around the office slouched like a slug. He sported a hairstyle made popular by a Taiwan boy band known as Flower 4, with half his face constantly covered by his fringe. He was constantly flipping his hair back with one hand, a habit Gem found quite irritating.

Francis's phone rang and his face lit up when he saw who was calling. "Hi Nathan! Where are you now?" It was the first time Gem heard Francis speak English, since they had only conversed in Mandarin. She couldn't tell if it was the alcohol or the way he spoke, but she seriously wondered how anyone could understand what he was saying when speaking on his mobile. He spoke English with a put-on American accent and an emphasis always on the first syllable, as if he was speaking German. She'd heard rumours that Francis was gay. Well his appearance and behaviour certainly helped cement that rumour. She wondered if it was his boyfriend on the other end of the line.

"... Heading to Cashbox now ...join us?" Francis's speech was becoming increasingly slurred. "Great, see you there!" Francis burped as he put his phone back into his pocket.

"So you have a friend joining us?" Gem asked.

"Yes! Nathan is coming! ... Partying ... fun ... yay ..." Francis mumbled before he passed out.

When they arrived at Cashbox, Alien and Gem's efforts to wake Francis from his stupor were in vain. They wrapped one of his arms around each of their shoulders and dragged him into the room where Desmond was singing 'My heart will go on'. Desmond was not pleased to see his audience distracted by the scene they caused.

As soon as they got into the room, Alien and Gem let go of Francis, who flopped face-down into a corner of the sofa and started to snore. His phone fell out of his pocket as he hit the

sofa. When Gem picked it up, she saw an incoming call from Nathan and decided to answer it. She shouted the room number into the phone three times before Nathan heard her, such was the volume of the sound system.

Nathan arrived about half an hour later. He caused a slight commotion among the females in the room. Gem could see he was probably mixed Indian and Caucasian, having had friends in Brisbane with a similar skin tone. He was tall and thin, but not wiry like Francis. He wore a black blazer, yellowing white tee and blue jeans torn strategically at the knees and thighs in a way that the Chinese men in the room envied. They knew they would look like peasants in the same outfit. He had a thick mop of curly, dark brown hair which ended just above his ears and bounced as he moved.

Nathan waved shyly at everyone in the room, oblivious to the attention he was getting, as he searched for Francis. His eyes finally landed on Francis's prostrate body in the corner of the sofa. He stepped over Gem and Alien, anxious to get to Francis.

"Francis, buddy, you there?" Nathan had his hands on Francis's shoulders and was shaking him. Francis's body jerked involuntarily but otherwise was limp as a leaf.

Gem tapped Nathan on the shoulder and gestured that he should take Francis home. Nathan nodded. He put one of Francis' arms around his shoulders. Gem draped Francis's other arm around her shoulders and helped Nathan carry him out of the lounge. Gem noticed Francis was quite evenly balanced between her and Nathan, which meant that Nathan was slightly taller than her. It was such a relief to meet someone she didn't have to bend down to speak to. Francis stirred slightly when his feet bumped into the marble steps outside the entrance, but was otherwise completely unconscious.

A taxi pulled up just as they were walking down the steps. The driver took one look at Francis, asked Gem if he was drunk and sped off without even waiting for answer. Nathan and Gem waved down another couple of taxis, which also sped off as soon as they saw Francis. After the third taxi sped off, Gem had an idea.

"Nathan, can you hold on to Francis and stay here for a bit? I'll go hail a cab from the main road, and ask the driver to drive in ..."

"... to pick us up. Then he won't have an excuse not to take us. That's a brilliant idea!" Nathan brightened at the prospect of finally getting into a taxi. Francis wasn't a big guy, but was pure 65 kilogrammes of dead weight when unconscious.

Gem was already walking towards the road and turned back to give Nathan a thumbs up.

Nathan was nursing feelings of disappointment that he wouldn't be partying that night after all. Due to his financial situation, he hadn't been clubbing much for the past two months.

He'd finally been paid the previous day and had been looking forward to a good night out with Francis, who was no more than a good friend. He'd met Francis at a lounge in the Opposite House a few months back, where he was having a complimentary drink after photographing a press conference about an upcoming Chinese movie. They went from a casual chat over a beer to a wild night of partying, ending at this techno club near the Workers' Stadium. Nathan smiled as he recalled waking up the next day face down on the grass patch outside his apartment compound, with a crowd of locals standing around having a loud discussion about what to do with him. He had no recollection of how he'd got there, until he read Francis's SMS which was sent at 6:09 am, "Got home ok? Couldn't take you to your apartment, sorry. We drank Guinness record of shots! Lets do it again! xoxo, Francis".

A taxi pulled up right then, with Gem sitting in the front passenger seat. She gestured to Nathan to get into the back seat with Francis, while she chatted with the driver to distract him from looking too closely at Francis. As soon as Nathan closed the door, Gem opened her door and hopped out.

"Can you tell the driver where to go?"

"That I can manage." Nathan smiled at Gem, then turned to the taxi driver and spoke in fluent but heavily accented Mandarin. The driver nodded his understanding. Taxi drivers' ability to understand the multitude of Mandarin accents never fail to amaze Gem.

"I didn't get your name. I'm Nathan."

"Gem. Pity about tonight. No singing for you and Francis." Gem grinned and waved goodbye as the taxi drove off.

Back in the karaoke lounge, Charlotte was on the verge of passing out after losing the twentieth round of a dice game, playing against Desmond, Kelly and Don. Alien was butchering an old Taiwanese girl band song, but no one seemed to be listening. They were too engrossed in playing dice games. Gem walked into the lounge just as Desmond put his right arm around Charlotte's shoulder while she was bent over. She was so out of it that she didn't notice when Desmond put his left arm across her chest and stroked her back with his right hand.

Twenty minutes outdoors had sobered Gem up somewhat. She knew Charlotte's deep dislike of Desmond and now had even more reason to regard him as scum. Gem pushed past Kelly, took Desmond's arms off Charlotte's back, grabbed her shoulders and shook her for what seemed like ages before Charlotte regained consciousness. Gem gave her a glass of water and insisted she drink it. Then Charlotte realised Desmond was leaning on her with his arm across

her chest. She stood straight up from her seat, causing Desmond to fall back into the sofa with a jerk.

“Ready to go?” Gem shouted at Charlotte. Charlotte nodded while she steadied herself and put on her coat. When they waved goodbye to the remaining colleagues, Desmond was sulking in a corner while Kelly delivered a beautiful rendition of Beyonce's ‘If I Were a Boy’.

“I can’t believe I let him do that,” Charlotte groaned as she stumbled down the steps, making no effort to keep up with Gem. “Did he do anything else? I blacked out. Burp.”

“You’re lucky I walked in just then. He almost had his hand inside your blouse. How much did you drink in there?” “Gem, don’t walk so fast ... burp ... I can’t keep up. We were playing dice, and I lost many rounds ...”

Gem recalled seeing at least fifteen empty Chivas bottles on the tables in the room. The Chinese liked to mix their Chivas with green tea in jugs, which Gem thought was a waste of whisky, regardless of its quality. In the dice games, losing players had to down a jug and, as the games continued, the players who lost most frequently also got drunk most quickly. Gem didn’t like the taste of Chivas and green tea, but pretended to enjoy it. She didn’t want to appear a spoilsport at the first office party but didn’t want to leave blind drunk either.

Gem looked at the digital clock on the wall when she entered the lobby of her service apartment building. It read ‘20 March 2009, Saturday 4:30am’.

13. Apartment hunting in Beijing

8am. Gem woke up to her alarm, which she turned off. She was about to go back to sleep when she remembered she was supposed to be apartment hunting today. With a groan, she dragged herself out of bed

While having breakfast, Gem thought of the advice from her colleagues about where she should rent in Beijing.

Desmond, with a tinge of jealousy: “With your salary, you should be able to afford a studio around here. It'll come handy after a long day at work, when you just want to walk through the door and slump into bed.”

Sharon: “You should move to Shuangjing, and become my neighbour! It's just a 20-minute walk to the office, a good workout on days when the pollution's manageable.” From what I've seen, that's like two days every month, thought Gem.

Cream: “All the rich expat men live in Central Park. I meet a lot of them at the gym there [wink].” Gem had a hard time visualising Cream at the gym.

Charlotte: “Avoid all apartments that require you to take a metro along Line One. We call Metro Line One during rush hour ‘hell on earth’. My ex once twisted his ankle when he was pushed out of the door, and got his feet wedged in the space between the platform and the carriage.” Oh my God! thought Gem. “I live near Chaoyang Park. It'd be so great if you could live nearby. We can share a cab on the way home from work!”

Kelly: “I live in a *hutong* apartment because my boyfriend likes it and he pays my rent. It's nice in spring and summer, but the place is impossible to heat during winter. I've tried to use two coil heaters at the same time, but the fuse blew.”

Joe: “Live close enough to the office so you don't have an excuse to be late coming into work.”

Armed with this advice, Gem walked to an agent's office near Chaoyang Park. She was immediately accosted by an agent who made her think of a vulture who had just spotted food.

“Which area are you interested in? How much rent can you afford? How many bedrooms in the apartment?” The agent lobbed questions at Gem even before she said hello.

Gem thought it best to see some apartments within her price range before deciding how big a place she'd want, and told the agent just that. The agent, who introduced himself as Little Bai, started shouting instructions at his colleagues in the office, who simultaneously began pushing keys on their PCs, speaking on their mobile phones and shouting names of buildings and unit numbers to Bai. Bai was already speaking to a landlord on his phone, “Liu Ayi, can I

take someone to see your apartment now? This tenant is a foreigner working in Mandarin Centre, nice lady.”

It took all of fifteen minutes for Bai to compile a list of five apartments which he took Gem to see straightaway. Gem was genuinely impressed by this bit of Chinese efficiency, though a little worried that Bai may have misheard her price range.

The first apartment Bai took Gem to see was in this area called Tuanjiehu. Gem liked the streets lined by willow trees, the myriad little Chinese shops selling everything from bed linen to fruits and the many local restaurants at every corner. She didn't know what to make of the hairdressing salons pumping loud music on every corner and the maternity hospital and its crowds. The apartment was located in an old-style Chinese walk-up building. They walked up four flights of stairs to the fourth floor. One of the apartment doors was open and a middle-aged Chinese lady stood in the doorway.

Bai called out, "Liu Ayi, it's me Little Bai. This is Ms Chu," and gestured towards Gem. Gem greeted Liu Ayi, put on a pair of shoe covers and walked into the apartment. The first room as she entered was the kitchen, with a small bathroom in one corner. She walked towards the bathroom, which was the size of her mother's larder back home. She noticed that the toilet bowl was directly under the shower head and there was no sink. She wondered what acrobatic stunt she'd need to perform to avoid wetting the toilet seat when showering.

Bai then ushered her through a door into the 'living room', which was bright and airy. The only problem Gem had with the living room was that there was a queen size bed right in the middle of it. She asked Bai if there was another room in this apartment.

"Ms Chu, this is one-bedroom apartment. With your budget, this is the only type of apartment you can rent in this area," Bai replied sheepishly.

Gem had already decided she didn't like that apartment, and told Bai so after leaving Liu Ayi's apartment. Bai took her to see two other similar apartments before Gem realised she wouldn't find anything she liked if she insisted on her price range. She told Bai she was willing to raise her price range by 30%, and described the apartment that would take her fancy: an apartment with bedrooms that were actually separate from the living room and toilets where it's possible to take a shower without wetting the toilet seat.

Bai nodded his understanding of Gem's requirements, made another flurry of calls and took Gem to see another six apartments before Gem found her home away from home. It was a two-bedroom apartment on the fifteenth floor, with beige furniture, white walls, an abundance of natural light and a view of the CCTV Tower in the distance. Her landlords were an elderly Beijinger couple, Mr and Mrs Jiang, who took a liking to her straightaway and specified a rental

amount that was within her budget. Gem was surprised that her new landlords believed everything she said and required no tenant references, like back in Australia. Even the lease contract was a form with blanks which Bai filled out in illegible Chinese characters.

Just as Bai was filling out the contract, Mr Jiang's mobile phone rang, and Gem overheard him speaking to someone who she assumed was another real estate agent, whose client wanted to come straight away with cash to sign the lease. She was concerned and took her time reading the contract while eavesdropping on the conversation. Mr Jiang was speaking forcefully, saying he'd already signed a contract with another tenant that his wife had taken a shine to and that he wasn't interested in the extra rental from this other potential tenant. This went on for another fifteen minutes, with the real estate agent apparently going on about a verbal agreement and Mr Jiang denying there was such an agreement. Mr Jiang forcefully repeated his view and finally turned off the phone.

"Sorry, Ms Chu, about this. We registered this apartment with the agent I was speaking to, who brought a Canadian Chinese man to see it yesterday," said Mr Jiang apologetically. "My wife questioned him about his profession and job in Beijing and he either gave vague answers or dodged the questions."

"He did let slip that he intended to leave Beijing in three months, which is why we told him we'd need to think about renting our apartment to him. He was offering a thousand five hundred renminbi more, but we don't care for the extra money. We just want peace of mind."

Mr Jiang pointed at Gem with a glance at his wife, "You're very lucky my wife took a shine to you." He examined the lease form, counted the stack of 100 renminbi notes, satisfied himself it was the correct amount for the bond and one month's rental, and signed the lease. He then fished out the keys to the apartment, and showed Gem which keys went where. Since the apartment was already furnished, empty and clean, Gem went back to her service apartment, packed up her belongings – which fit into two suitcases – and moved into the apartment the afternoon of that same day.

14. The Empress Strikes Back

From: Melanie Potts (LON)
To: Steven Cummings (LON); Ed Crouch (MAN); Michael Bouchard (BEI);
Jason Peabody (TOK); Louis Zeng (SHA); Patrick Poon (HKG)
Received: Friday 19 March 2010, 10:55am London time
Subject: Annual Managing Partners Meeting – Amsterdam

HIGHLY PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

Hi all,

As you've probably seen in your Outlook calendars, our annual MPM will be held in Amsterdam from 1-5 May 2010.

I'd like to welcome Louis Zeng, the new managing partner of our Shanghai office. He joined us in February. Welcome to the Potts & Crouch family, Louis!

As you may have noticed, I've deliberately excluded Joseph Chen from this email, as I'd like to commence a dialogue with all of you about the current state of the Beijing office, which gravely concerns our executive board. The Beijing office has expanded rapidly in size in the last six years Joe joined the firm, but billings remain the same as in 2005. When we spoke to Joe in early 2008 about his strategy to increase billings, he told us that he's started discussions with a few major state-owned enterprises who were looking to buy companies and assets in Europe, as this was fast becoming a lucrative source of income for Bower and Links.

Since then, he's signed on a couple of SOEs for whom the Beijing, Hong Kong and London offices did a lot of work. Unfortunately we've only been able to collect approximately a tenth of our invoiced amounts in the last two years, with hours of time from our own litigation team in Hong Kong, sending demand letters and following them up.

The executive board is inclined to give Joseph a verbal warning during the AMA, and give him 9 months to achieve his billing target, after hitting only 50% for the last 4 years.

The executive board has asked to hear your opinions on what should be done about the Beijing office, especially from Jason and Patrick who've worked with Joe on a number of projects in the past. Mike has kindly agreed to be based in Beijing this year and possibly next to do some onsite investigations, and possibly take over from Joe if and when he eventually leaves. Please do share any insights you've gained over the course of your time in Beijing, Mike.

I look forward to your speedy replies, gentlemen.

Best regards,

Melanie Potts

Executive Managing Partner
Executive Board Member

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15. Partners' talk

Mike, Louis and Patrick were leaving the Potts & Crouch Hong Kong office for the day when they received the email from the Empress, their affectionate term for Melanie Potts, whose great-great-grandfather founded the firm. Mike had been in Hong Kong since the beginning of the month, tying up the loose ends of a new investment made by a private equity client of his. Louis was on the Hong Kong stop of his tour of Potts & Crouch's international offices to make himself known among his new colleagues with the hope of receiving a steady stream of referral work in the future.

Patrick Poon, the managing partner of the Hong Kong office, was obliged to take Louis out for a fancy dinner. He'd known Mike for over a decade, both having read law at the same college in London and worked in the London office. Patrick and Mike were cut from the same cloth, both high achievers academically and in their respective sports, both hardworking and driven in their careers, both responsible and kind to their staff.

When Patrick was made managing partner of the Hong Kong office in 2005, Mike was still a junior partner in the London office. Mike had seen it coming as Patrick had provided him with almost daily updates of the deals he was working on and his billings, which ballooned in less than five years. Mike barely made salary partner, as the quota shrank the year he was due for consideration due to declining billings. Mike's direct rival collapsed in his office after shuttling between Hong Kong and London for two months, staying no more than three days in each city. He could have been based in Hong Kong for the entire two months, but didn't want to leave the home base for too long for fear of being overlooked for the promotion. The official story in the London office was that he died of a heart attack due to a pre-existing heart condition, but no one believed it for a second. His secretary had seen him popping four different types of pills about six weeks before he collapsed. When she asked him about it, he claimed headaches and insomnia caused by jet lag.

Back in September 2008, when the Empress asked him if he'd like to work in the Beijing office, Mike had been ready for a change. He and his wife had separated a month previously when she confessed that she'd met someone else. He couldn't, and didn't, blame her. After he'd made partner and started working eighteen-hour days, Tammy spent more and more nights alone at home watching telly and going to the pub with friends. They had planned and cancelled three holidays the year after he made partner – one of which had been to the Cotswolds for a bank holiday long weekend – because he'd had to go to the office for urgent client meetings. After a while, Mike had begun feeling relieved when he got home in the wee hours of the

morning to find Tammy sound asleep. It meant he didn't have to apologize to her for another late night at the office, although she'd no longer been interested by then.

Neither of them could put a finger on exactly when they had stopped loving each other. Just like many of their couple friends living in London, they had drifted apart as their careers had taken over their lives.

Mike insisted Tammy continue living in their house in Primrose Hill. He moved into a bed and breakfast within walking distance of the office with two suitcases of bare essentials. Finally free from the shackles of marriage, he was ready for an adventure, and Beijing turned out to be it.

Mike, Louis and Patrick were quiet on the way down in the lift, reading and digesting the Empress's email. They strode quickly into the Japanese restaurant across the road from the office building and were seated in a private room. Patrick ordered quickly for everyone since this was his regular haunt and he sensed the other two wanted to start talking about the email.

"What does that email from the Empress mean?" Louis couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. This was his first month with Potts & Crouch; everything was still new. Louis wasn't used to being the new guy on the block, having worked at his previous firm for eight years. He liked Patrick and wanted to know more about Mike since the Empress had mentioned him in the email.

"I spoke to the Empress last week and she mentioned she was going to send this email. She really wants to know what Joe is up to in Beijing." Mike paused to wipe his face with the hot towel the kimono-clad waitress handed him. This is heaven, he thought, as the steam from the towel opened the pores on his face and relaxed his tense facial muscles.

"I go up to the Beijing office every other month for business meetings, and I've probably spoken to Joe a maximum of three times in the last year. I've tried to organise a meeting with him through Cream, but she's never managed to get hold of him for me. That woman is useless." Patrick shook his head at the memory.

"He was working on Project Pheonix with his team, that's why." Mike explained between bites of sashimi. "The biggest project he's ever brought in during his time at Potts & Crouch, and the French walked away from the deal. At least they paid their bill, which was over a million renmibi." Despite his neutral expression, Mike was secretly glad that Project Pheonix hadn't succeeded. His French was fluent enough to converse with Pierre and his team. Yet Joe had insisted his involvement wasn't required.

“Louis brought in Bonjour,” Patrick said and turned to Louis. “Your wife or girlfriend’s the legal counsel there, right?”

“Yes, my wife,” Louis replied matter of factly. “The Empress said it’s too early for me to be named the partner in charge of such a large project, which I agree with. Sophie –my wife – and I discussed the project every night. She was pretty sure from the beginning that Bonjour wouldn’t get far in the negotiations. Their exec board is a group of cautious old men who only know about China from what they read in the papers. They’re not brave enough to take the same risks as the Americans.”

So it was a blessing in disguise I didn’t get this project, Mike thought.

The three partners then turned their attention to the sushi that arrived on a slab of stone the length of the table. Living in Beijing was tough for a seafood lover like Mike. He’d had enough friends who’d suffered food poisoning from eating stale sashimi that he’d stopped going to Japanese restaurants in Beijing. So he relished opportunities to travel to Hong Kong since Patrick always knew where to take him for the freshest seafood.

Mike wanted to steer the conversation back to the Empress’s email so he could send her an update after dinner. If he sent it at midnight, which was 4pm London time, she’d have a couple of hours to discuss its contents with the executive board.

“At least the two of you don’t have to work in the Beijing office. I haven’t been exactly given a warm welcome,” Mike said indignantly. “I’ve tried talking like a civilised human being to Joe, but he’s so guarded and suspicious of me. Is that a Chinese thing, Pat?”

“Yes and no. I’m not like that, am I?” Mike laughed with Patrick and agreed.

Patrick was the quintessential Hong Kong nice guy. He grew up in an upper middle class family and was sent to London in his teens for his education. He joined Potts & Crouch’s London office as a trainee and had never considered leaving, despite lucrative offers from other law firms in London and Hong Kong. He was well liked in the firm and by clients for his solid technical skills, honesty, dry sense of humour and strong work ethic. The Hong Kong office had the lowest staff turnover of all the Potts & Crouch’s international offices, even though staff wages were slightly below the market rate. Most of them were just grateful he didn’t lay them off during the height of the financial crisis in 2008, when other firms were laying off dozens of lawyers and support staff.

“How many years has Joe been with the firm?” Louis asked. He’d read everything he could find online about Patrick and Mike, but had found very little information about Joe apart from his firm bio. That was unusual since these days it seemed every lawyer and his dog was vying for some web fame.

“He joined us about six years ago. The Empress hired him when he was working at this boutique firm in Maryland and shipped him to Beijing,” Patrick said. “I agree with Mike, he’s guarded and suspicious of everyone who’s not in his inner circle. I’ve only been friendly and kind to him, but he’s still as wary of me as when he joined.”

“I once referred one of my old friends from London to Joe. Mike, do you remember Watson?”

Mike shook his head slowly, not sure whether he’d met this guy.

“We used to play rugby together,” Patrick said. “Anyway, Watson was in Hong Kong a while back and we met up. He complained to me about Joe for a full hour! Apparently Joe charged him \$100,000 for his \$300,000 investment in the start-up! We do the same work in Hong Kong for half the price, writing off half the time. That’s how we keep our VC clients. Watson tried challenging the bill with Joe, but Joe wouldn’t take his calls. I felt terribly embarrassed by it all.”

“So did Watson pay in the end?” Louis was pretty sure he knew the answer, but wanted to know the rest of the story.

“Well, he paid what he thought was fair, no idea how much. But he won’t be engaging the Beijing office in the future. Joe pretty much guaranteed that. His company invests over a million dollars in early to mid-level start-ups all over the world; a third in China every year. Joe’s just ensured we’ll be doing all the deals in Hong Kong for the indefinite future.”

It’s no surprise that Joe would try to squeeze money out of every client, regardless of the consequences, thought Mike. The Empress had briefed him about the financial situation of the Beijing office. They’ve only been able to collect a fifth of what they bill, and Joe’s been having difficulties meeting his annual budget since 2006. Earlier, the Empress had decided to be patient with Joe, because of the importance to the firm’s international reputation to maintain its offices in Shanghai and Beijing. But lately she’d been wondering whether that was worth the high cost to the firm as a whole.

The executive board had become increasingly impatient to see the firm’s China offices turn a profit, especially since the offices in England were barely surviving and the economic outlook in Europe continued to be dismal. Their decision to hire Louis, a Shanghainese partner from a local law firm with a book of well established local clients, to head the Shanghai office was partly to boost the performance of their China offices and partly to give Joe an incentive to get his act together. One month after Louis joined, he’d brought in Project Phoenix, which Joe had shamelessly called his own, claiming an existing relationship with Bonjour’s CEO. The

Empress was impressed by how well Louis had handled all this so soon after he joined the firm. She began to see why Louis's high-achieving French wife had married him.

"There's a rumour going around at the moment about Joe impregnating his secretary." The sake was going to Louis's head and loosening his tongue. "Do you think it's for real?" Louis loved gossip as much as the next Shanghainese man.

Mike was impressed with the new addition to the firm. "Well ... it's an open secret that the man is fucking his secretary. I hadn't heard about the pregnancy, but they've been fighting a lot lately, mostly in his office. If I understood any Mandarin, I'd be able to make out what they're saying to each other."

"Nothing good, from the looks of it." Patrick was shaking his head. "Joe took me, Ed and Steve out for dinner when we were in Beijing for a conference. He insisted on having Cream join the dinner, even after Ed expressly told him not to. That was the most awkward dinner I've been at, even though Cream only ordered food and served us drinks. I doubt she understood anything we were saying with her level of English. The Brits had a hard time taking Joe seriously after that."

11pm. Patrick and Louis were sporting the Asian glow after the third bottle of hot sake while they exchanged more stories about mutual friends in Shanghai and Hong Kong in Mandarin. Mike had gotten used to people around him speaking in Mandarin or some local dialect, excluding him from their conversations. He took it as an opportunity to practice his comprehension of Mandarin. He knew Patrick would be calling it a night within the hour, since he'd rather take his wife's midnight call in a cab home than with an old friend and a new colleague. Patrick would rather die than admit he was henpecked.

Midnight. Mike stood up from his desk in the hotel room after sending an email to the Empress. It was a matter-of-fact email, with some personal opinions thrown in. He didn't think his email could possibly do any further damage. Joe had brought most of it on himself.

16. Instant Messaging and Lunch Cliques

The partners of Potts & Crouch had been slow in adopting the new Microsoft Office Communicator. But they didn't have a choice once the latest version of Office was installed. Instant messaging was integrated into the latest update of the email software, so this time there was no escape.

Both Joe and Mike were out of the office the Monday morning after the Project Phoenix thank you dinner and karaoke session. Joe on holiday in Greece with his family. Mike was still in Hong Kong and was due back in the Beijing office on Tuesday.

Without the zookeepers, the office turned into a zoo. People came and went as they pleased and pretty much did whatever they fancied, as long as they didn't have a deadline to meet.

IM conversation between:

Desmond Pang, Senior Associate (available)

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

10:00 Desmond: hey Charlotte, how about dinner tonight?

10:05 Desmond: You there, Charlotte?

10:10 Desmond: Charlotte, did you get my last 2 messages?

10:15 Desmond: Hello

IM conversation between:

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

Gem Chu, Associate (available)

10:01 Charlotte: Morning Gem!

10:02 Gem: Morning Charlotte, how are you feeling today?

10:03 Charlotte: Barely alive. Thank you for saving me from that creep Desmond.

10:04 Gem: Don't mention it. You're lucky I got back just in time.

10:04 Charlotte: He's asking me out for dinner tonight. I'm ignoring him.

10:05 Gem: He doesn't give up, does he?

10:05 Charlotte: Looks like it. I've been out for lunch with him and Sharon before.

Sharon's quite fun to talk to, but Desmond is so full of himself!

10:06 Gem: LOL

10:06 Charlotte: He's always talking about his singing and his salsa moves and showing me pictures of all the awards he's won at competitions. Yet he can't find a girlfriend. Pathetic.

10:10 Gem: He told me his requirements for a girlfriend: between 20 and 25 years old, hair down to the waist, at least 160cm tall, preferably the Asian equivalent of Charlize Theron, has an office job, sings like Adele, compliant, worships him.

10:10 Charlotte: OMG! He wants to date Lin Chi-ling, that Taiwanese model!

10:11 Gem: She's too old! Desmond thinks models are all sluts who can be bought with money.

10:11 Charlotte: Then he's not gonna find anyone ...

10:12 Gem: Guess why he's still single. :)

10:20 Charlotte: Just received an email about some photocopying, chat later gal!

IM conversation between:

Francis Wu, Senior Translator (available)

Gem Chu, Associate (available)

10:05 Francis: Thanks so much for getting me into a cab on Friday night. If not for you, I'd still be sleeping in Cashbox!

10:05 Gem: Don't mention it! How are you feeling this morning?

10:06 Francis: Much better than Saturday, that's for sure. Woke up 4pm, totally hung over. Nathan came by to check up on me; we had some food then we went dancing at Lantern after. I took it easy on the drinks that night. ;-)

10:07 Gem: Nice ... I haven't seen much nightlife in Beijing yet. Might join you guys next time.

10:08 Francis: For sure! My friend has a party Thursday night. Late. Come along!

10:08 Gem: Oooo. I don't normally go out on a Thursday night.

10:09 Francis: Why the f*** not? You can go out every night if you want. Besides you can always take sick leave on Friday if you don't have much work on.

10:10 Gem: Ha! Hmm ... Let me get back to you on Thursday, ok? I'm waiting to hear from Joe about this project he wants me and Sharon to work on. Some outbound investment project by a subsidiary of China National Airlines.

10:11 Francis: Oh no, not CNA again!

10:12 Gem: Why do you say that? Are they bad news?

[Francis is idle.]

10:15 Francis: Was speaking to Mike on the phone just now. I've got to start on some new work for him.

10:15 Francis: CNA is for me to know and for you to find out. Ciao, bella!

Gem was in a stall in the washroom when she heard someone rush in, slam the stall door next to her and start puking into the toilet bowl. As she exited the stall, Gem could just make out quiet sobs. She was washing her hands when she heard flushing and Cream materialized next to her in the mirror above the sinks.

“Hi Cream, are you feeling okay?” Gem asked, noticing they were the only people in the washroom.

“I feel terrible, Gem.” Cream’s face was pale. “I don’t know what’s come over me recently, but I feel queasy every day around lunchtime. I haven’t been able to eat lunch for a month.”

“Oh no! Have you seen a doctor about this?” Gem turned to Cream with a look of sympathy, while she wiped her hands with hand towels. She didn’t know Cream very well and didn’t care much for her, even though they sat fairly close to each other in the office. But since she’d bumped into her in such a state, she felt the least she could do was show some concern and sympathy.

Cream abruptly turned and hurried away. Gem was left wondering what she’d said that caused Cream to react so strangely.

Lunch in the Beijing office was a daily ritual with myriad purposes. When Joe wasn’t having lunch with either a client or a visiting partner from another office, he defaulted to lunching with either Cream or Sharon, depending on his mood. He never allowed anyone else to tag along at his lunches with Cream. And he rarely let Sharon bring one of the associates to their lunch appointments. Naturally, this created a certain mystique around Joe’s lunch dates and eventually the others in the office emulated his example by starting their own lunch cliques. When Gem joined the firm, there were three or four lunch cliques, and each clique extended an invitation to Gem and waited to see which she would join.

Gem felt very welcomed and popular in her first two weeks at the firm because it seemed everyone (except Joe and the secretaries, who had their own clique) wanted a lunch date with her. She had to turn down a couple of invitations because she was swamped with work, but most of the time she obliged out of politeness. Having been the organiser of her own clique back home,

she worked out pretty quickly what was happening, and decided she wanted no part of it until she figured out which lunch clique would best serve her career advancement at the firm.

She decided that a good use of half of her lunchtime was attending a yoga class at a nearby studio. The other half of the time, she accepted lunch invitations on a first-come first-served basis, hoping that she would manage to please everyone.

Gem's lunch plan for the day was a welcome lunch for Sheila organised by Bing. Sheila had specifically asked that only Gem be invited since she liked her. Gem asked Charlotte to tag along so she wouldn't be the thousand-watt light bulb shining between the love birds.

Bing took the ladies out to a fancy restaurant in a nearby hotel. He quickly ordered dishes for them all, as he'd memorized the restaurant's popular dishes from reading reviews online. Charlotte teased him for doing everything for the ladies, making him blush.

Gem updated Sheila and Bing on what had transpired at Cashbox after they'd left, while Charlotte added in details Gem missed out.

"Did you notice Joe had his arm around Cream's waist when they left the restaurant?" Sheila asked out of the blue. The other three nodded. "I thought Joe was married with children?"

"And Cream has a rich boyfriend," Charlotte offered, without elaborating.

"I saw Cream in the toilet today; she was puking her guts out," Gem spoke softly so as to not be overheard by the other diners. "When I asked her if she'd been to see the doctor, she literally bolted."

"You're not the only one who's heard her in the toilet," Charlotte said after swallowing a bite of tofu. "Kelly, and one or two secretaries have heard her as well. It's been going on for a couple of weeks now. I think she's pregnant."

"Are you sure? She could just be very sick." Gem didn't sound convinced about that, even to herself.

"If she's really pregnant, whose baby is it if she's sleeping with her boss and her boyfriend at the same time?" Sheila leant forward and asked in a whisper, following Gem's cue.

"It's probably Joe's," Charlotte whispered back. All three looked at her with curiosity, wondering how she'd know that.

"Well, I know Cream's boyfriend was in Shanghai for the whole of Jan and Feb for some business deal he was negotiating. I heard her speaking to him on the phone quite a bit during that time. He came back to Beijing a couple of times to see Cream, but each time for a day or two. Cream complained about it all the time."

"The timing's about right," Sheila thought out loud. "My sister started getting sick when she was just over two months' pregnant."

“Maybe it’s not such a great idea to talk about this here.” Gem was anxious to end the conversation, just in case some colleagues walked into the restaurant suddenly and overheard them. “Sheila, what did you do on the weekend?”

Sheila got the hint and changed the topic, going on at length about her strange encounters with the staff at the serviced apartments and at Chinese restaurants.

Bing focused on eating and showed no interest in the story about Cream’s possible pregnancy. Gem noticed that Sheila didn’t show any surprise at Bing’s indifference. Bing was a tech geek through and through; his dream had been to work for either Google or Microsoft after graduation. Sadly, his grades hadn’t been good enough to qualify for the application phase for either company. Instead he got a job doing IT support for a local law firm and was later headhunted for his position at Potts & Crouch.

He cheered up and reverted to his talkative self when Gem asked him for smartphone recommendations, as she needed to buy one for her China mobile number.

When Bing asked for the bill, they realized they’d been away from the office for almost two hours. Bing and Charlotte told Sheila and Gem not to worry about taking a long lunch since they would more than make up the time at work. Gem thought back to the hours she’d put in on Project Phoenix, and decided it wasn’t too much for her to take a long lunch for a day. Little did she dream that this would be the first of many long lunches during her time with Potts & Crouch.

17. CNA & Latte

Joe's body was in Greece, but his mind and soul were definitely still in Beijing.

Every afternoon around 2pm, Gem received emails from Joe about the new outbound investment project (which the client called Project **Pine [called Project Heating later – see query]** as the wheat farm was located in Pine Mountain in Queensland).

“This was probably the chairman, Mr Ning's, idea,” Sharon told Gem when they were discussing the format of the pitch presentation. “He has a warped sense of humour, that old fart.” Gem couldn't help laughing at Sharon's stories of her previous dealings with Mr Ning.

Gem spent the next two days learning how to work with the people of CNA. She naively assumed CNA's staff would operate in a similar manner as her Chinese clients back in Brisbane, such as Li Yan. This couldn't have be farther from reality.

Sharon gave Gem the email address and phone number for a Mr Li, the manager in charge of the actual running of Project **Pine**. Gem was to ask him to send information about the deal so she could prepare a pitch which would include a fee proposal. It was normal for the newest member of the firm to be assigned the non-billable work.

The first thing Gem learnt about Mr Li was that he didn't read the emails she sent him, unless she called and told him she'd sent an email. She'd sent him three emails over the course of a day, with no response, before she decided to call him to ask if he'd received them. Having always been surrounded by Western-style professionals whose BlackBerries were pretty much glued to their palms, she couldn't understand how Mr Li got any work done without checking his emails.

The second thing she leant was that Mr Li responded only to text messages and phone calls. This meant that every time Gem had a question, she had to text or call him. He'd pick up her calls while driving, in the train or in a meeting with fifty people. Gem would have to repeat herself at least three times before Mr Li heard her and she either couldn't hear anything he said or the call was cut off mid-sentence. She would then text Mr Li, asking him to call her back when in an area with a stronger signal. He'd call immediately but she still couldn't hear him. He'd try another couple of times, before giving up. Then he'd forget to call back altogether. Gem spent two days like this.

Finally, Gem realized that Mr Li sent documents only over the Chinese chat program, QQ. Apparently, CNA's email system could only receive emails with attachments smaller than 50 megabytes. The Australian party, however, only sent out information in the form of colourful

powerpoint presentations, which exceeded CNA’s mailbox attachment limits. Gem insisted Bing install QQ on her computer, which he did very reluctantly.

“Do you know how many viruses are transmitted through QQ’s pop-up ads?” Bing complained.

“Viruses come through emails too, but we still receive them,” Gem argued. “Please stop moaning and just install QQ.”

On Thursday, Gem came to the office, turned on her computer and saw a black screen instead of the usual blue sign-on screen. She immediately summoned Bing to check her computer. He confirmed – with disproportionate I-told-you-so glee – that her computer had been hit by a yet-unnamed virus.

Gem completed the first draft of CNA’s pitch on the computer of a secretary who was on sick leave while Bing spent the rest of the day reformatting her computer’s hard disk and reinstalling software.

IM conversation between:

Desmond Pang, Senior Associate (available)

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

15:00 Desmond: hey Charlotte, how about dinner tonight?

15:01 Desmond: I just discovered this amazing Sichuan restaurant with great ambience. You’ll love it!

15:10 Desmond: Charlotte, you there?

15:15 Desmond: Hello ...

6:30pm. Gem did her usual round of the office, checking with Joe, Cream, Sharon, Charlotte and other colleagues whether there was anything she needed to attend to before leaving. It was her way of making sure her colleagues knew she cared about her job. She hadn’t done this in Brisbane, but began after seeing other colleagues do it. Some of the secretaries took it a step further and daily asked their bosses whether they wanted lunch brought back for them. Charlotte was the only secretary who didn’t do that as she worked for three foreign lawyers who preferred to get their own lunch.

Her last stop was at Francis’s cubicle, where he was working furiously on a contract.

Francis looked up and smiled when he saw it was Gem. “Hey Gem, how are you? I’m meeting Nathan for dinner at Sanlitun before the party. Wanna join us?”

“Oh ... are you sure I won't be interrupting?” Gem assumed it was a romantic dinner.

“Of course I'm sure! Let me finish off this piece of work, then I'll come get you at your desk.”

Gem logged on to Facebook while waiting for Francis. One of the greatest perks of working in a foreign law firm in Beijing was having access to all websites usually blocked in China, since the firm's internet access was via an overseas server. Before she moved to China, Gem had been worried about accessing her Facebook account and was relieved that at the office she could access Facebook, BBC, Twitter, Google+, blogs and other sites she couldn't access from her apartment. With the list of blocked sites increasing daily, it was nice not to have to worry about which of her favourite websites would become the next victim of the Great Firewall of China.

7:30pm. Francis and Gem had given up trying to hail a cab and were taking the metro to Sanlitun instead.

“When I'm not hailing a taxi, I see them everywhere. When I want to hail a taxi, there's not a single one in sight!” Gem complained loudly to Francis in the noisy metro.

Francis smiled, his head bowed and his fingers flying across the screen of his phone as he replied to text and chat messages. He'd heard similar complaints frequently during his five years in Beijing and had no interest in engaging in a debate about the state of Beijing's rush hour traffic. Despite the government's countless measures to relieve congestion and the increasing number of six-lane highways and flyovers in the ever-expanding city, during rush hour it still took drivers an average of fifteen minutes to drive ten kilometres. The same distance could be covered in five on a quiet weekend, but even quiet weekends were rare these days. From his point of view, the only way to solve this chronic problem was for the government to restrict the number of cars sold each year. But that was never going to happen given the auto industry's contribution to China's overall economy.

Francis and Gem arrived at the restaurant, and found Nathan already seated at a table, his back towards the entrance. They apologized to Nathan for being late.

“I've ordered the food, as per your request,” Nathan said.

“Thanks, dear. I'm starving!” Francis patted Nathan on his shoulder as he sat down. Gem sat between the two men.

The food arrived shortly after, and all three dove in as if they hadn't eaten anything the entire week. Nathan had ordered kungpo chicken, salt and pepper spare ribs, homestyle tofu and stir-fried string beans, the usual Chinese dishes favoured by foreigners living in China.

Between mouthfuls of food, Nathan told Francis and Gem about his day spent taking pictures for a newly opened American restaurant. “The food there was nothing to write home about and the décor looked tatty and cheap. I doubt that place will last past three months.”

“I read about new restaurants opening up in Beijing all the time in the expat magazines. Does the expat community really need another American restaurant when there’s already half a dozen all situated in expat haunts?” Gem wondered out loud.

“Who knows?” Nathan said, shrugging. “I just hope I get paid for the pictures before the restaurant goes bust.”

After dinner, the three walked to the Workers Stadium, where Latte was located. Francis and Nathan led the way; Gem followed slightly behind. She sensed something weird about these two supposedly gay guys, but couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. Why did Nathan check out Chinese girls along the way? All the gay guys she’d known noticed only cute guys, paying no attention to women.

Waiting for the lift, Gem could hear the loud pumping techno beats emanating from three floors up. When the lift door opened, Gem was stunned by the most over-the-top club décor she’d ever seen. Every inch of the walls was covered with bronze ornaments, clocks and other knickknacks. Through the pulsing lights, Gem could make out contraptions of every kind shaped out of bronze, steel and other metal. There were two bikini-clad women pole-dancing on the stage, urging their audience to join them on the stage. The few empty tables Gem saw had a dozen dice, plastic cups the size and shape of soft-drink cans and bottles of Absolut vodka laid out for the next group of customers. The megaspeakers were pumping out a deafening latest remix of Whitney Houston’s ‘I wanna dance with somebody’.

Francis finally found his friend’s table. There were six other Chinese guys sitting on the sofa who quickly made space for the newcomers. Francis sat next to his friend, who was the spitting image of Elvis Presley, except for being Chinese. Francis attempted to introduce everyone to one another but Gem couldn’t hear anything over the deafening music. She just shook every hand that was offered and sat wedged between Francis and Nathan.

Chivas and green tea again. Gem groaned silently at these gay guys’ drink of choice but politely drank when she was poured a glass.

The rest of the night was a blur of dice games, drinking and dancing (next to the table, because the dance floor was packed). Francis’s friends came and went over the course of the night. Gem enjoyed being the only girl in the party and flirted shamelessly with every one of Francis’s friends, secure in the thought that none of them would be remotely interested in her.

1am. Gem knew she was on the verge of blacking out, that's how much she'd drunk. She didn't realize she was swaying unsteadily, no longer dancing to the music.

She woke up six hours later with a parched throat. She got up to get a glass of water and realized she'd been sleeping on the living room sofa in her apartment. She had no recollection of how she'd got home.

She didn't remember Nathan picking her up and leaning her against his right shoulder. He and Francis found her address in her handbag, took her back to her apartment in a taxi and literally dropped her onto her sofa. When Francis had his back turned, Nathan had leant down and kissed Gem tenderly on the forehead

18. Project Pine

Joe was back from his holiday and in the office Monday morning, just in time to sign off on the pitch to CNA. Mr Li called Joe directly after receiving the pitch, asking if Joe and his team could come to CNA's office for a meeting with Mr Ning and Mr Qu to discuss the pitch. They scheduled a meeting for Wednesday.

Desmond had been waiting for Joe to return to speak to him about his exclusion from yet another CNA project.

"Desmond, CNA is looking at wheat farms in Australia," Joe explained. "It made more sense for Sharon and Gem, both of whom qualified in Australia, to work on Project Pine."

"I respect your decision, Joe. But I am still eager to help as much as I can," Desmond recited his rehearsed response. "You know I have your best interests at heart."

Joe smiled. "I'm very happy to hear that. I will remember to put you on an inbound investment project that's coming in later this week." He turned to his computer, signalling that the meeting was over. "I am expecting a client's call."

Desmond nodded, stood up and left Joe's room. Joe wasn't expecting a call. He just didn't enjoy conversations with Desmond because there Desmond always had an agenda. If it wasn't about a pay rise, then it was about a promotion. If it wasn't about work allocation, then it was backstabbing Sharon or Gem. Joe was even tired of Desmond's ass-licking lines. Joe had promoted Desmond to senior associate only because he'd brought in a huge client, a private equity fund, which had contributed to Joe's otherwise dismal billings.

Joe was feeling the heat from the Empress' spotlight on him. She was asking him to explain his twenty percent collection rate and his billings on a weekly basis. And to rub salt in the wound, she'd hired Louis Zeng as a partner in the Shanghai office. Louis, a local Chinese lawyer from a local law firm who hadn't studied in a prestigious law school or been admitted to the bar in a foreign jurisdiction. What was the Empress thinking?

What Joe hated more than anything was the first client Louis brought to the firm. Joe had called in every favour he was owed get hold of Pierre's number. If he hadn't done so, a significant portion of the billings on Project Phoenix would've gone to the Shanghai office.

He was the only person in the partnership who didn't see his actions for what they were – a desperate last-ditch effort to hold on to his job.

IM conversation between:

Desmond Pang, Senior Associate (available)

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

15:00 Desmond: hey Charlotte, you there?

15:01 Desmond: Why don't you reply to any of my messages?

15:10 Desmond: I really like you, Charlotte.

15:15 Desmond: It's just dinner. It's not like I'm asking you to sleep with me.

Wednesday.

Gem wasn't sure what to expect for her first meeting with CNA. She wore her trusted Giorgio Armani suit and put on just enough make-up to highlight her prominent cheekbones and shapely lips. She avoided eye make-up because she'd never learnt how to apply it properly.

Joe gave Gem a once-over when she walked into his office. Sharon was already there, dressed in a smart skirt-suit with foundation and pink lipstick her only make-up, as far as Gem could make out.

They proceeded downstairs to a Buick specifically ordered for this meeting. Cream had made the arrangements; she said it was important to impress new clients this way. It wouldn't do for the team to turn up at CNA Towers in an ordinary taxi.

4:30pm. Joe, Sharon and Gem walked into the lobby of CNA Towers and were directed to take the lift to Level 30. When they got out of the lift on Level 30, Joe looked for a reception desk. Sharon whipped out her BlackBerry and called Mr Li. Gem wasn't sure what to make of the reception area on Level 30. At the entrance, there was a screen with CNA's logo. The carpet was a dull grey that looked like it had seen better days. There was no reception desk or seating for visitors. When Mr Li himself walked out from behind the screen to greet them, Gem figured this state-owned enterprise hadn't bothered hiring a receptionist at all. If you were directed to this level, you'd better have the mobile number of the person you'd come to see.

"Ms Chu, I'm so glad to finally meet you!" Mr Li squeezed and shook Gem's hand with what felt to her like all his might. Gem felt all the blood drain out of her hand while Mr Li held it, but kept smiling.

Joe came to her rescue. "Mr Li, are Mr Ning and Mr Qu ready for us?" Mr Li replied in the affirmative and asked the team to follow him to the meeting room.

They walked down a corridor past half a dozen doors, finally stopping at the last door. Mr Li knocked and a man's voice ordered him to come in. Opening the door, Mr Li announced the arrival of the legal team from Potts & Crouch.

Joe was the first to enter the room. He made a beeline for Mr Ning, who stood up to greet the newcomers. Mr Ning was a white-haired, chubby Chinese man with stern eyes, a squarish face and fleshy cheeks. He was about the same height as Joe and had a jovial manner. He greeted Joe by shaking his hand and patting him on the back, asking after the ankle which Joe had injured during their last golf game.

Gem saw that Sharon held back until Joe moved on to Mr Qu. She then stepped up to shake Mr Ning's hand, and introduced Gem as 'Lawyer Chu'. This was Gem's cue to step

forward herself and shake Mr Ning's outstretched hand. Mr Ning politely asked Gem where she was from and when she'd started at Potts & Crouch.

Gem turned to her right and caught Mr Qu giving her a once-over. Mr Qu was slightly taller than Mr Ning and looked significantly younger, with a head of sparse dark brown hair. He had obviously styled his hair in an attempt to conceal the fact he was balding, yet it did exactly the opposite. Mr Qu's gold-rimmed glasses failed to hide his bulging eyes and did little to improve his features which consisted of protruding ears, a small nose, puffy cheeks and a thin-lipped mouth.

"I heard you're the new lawyer from Australia. No one told me you were so pretty," said Mr Qu as he took Gem's right hand in his own. Gem blushed with embarrassment. She pulled her hand away, walked quickly to her seat next to Sharon and sat down just as Joe starting talking about Project Pine.

"Thanks to you both for giving us the opportunity to work on this exciting project together," Joe began. "How would you like to proceed with our meeting today?"

"Qu and I haven't had a chance to read your presentation. We just returned to Beijing yesterday after spending a week at the wheat farms in Queensland," Mr Ning said. "Why don't you go through your presentation with us?"

Gem picked up the printed copies of the presentation and handed a copy each to Mr Ning, Mr Qu and Mr Li. Joe turned to the first page and quickly summarized the contents. The clients nodded their understanding as Joe went from one slide to the next. When Joe finished outlining the fees, Mr Ning spoke up.

"Is there any room for negotiation on your fees? This will be the third project we're hiring your firm for. We should be entitled to a discount."

Joe had expected this from CNA, having dealt with them for the last three years. "Of course our fee is negotiable. We will give CNA the usual discount; 25% off the entire bill."

Mr Ning was happy with this. He asked Joe and his team if they had any questions about Project Pine. Sharon had a list of questions Joe had approved and went through the list with the CNA team. From their answers, it was obvious to Gem that these men had read none of the materials that the Australian wheat farm owners had sent over. Everything they knew about the farms was what they heard and seen during their visit the week before. At one point, Mr Li had to remind the other two of the name of the farm's actual location and the percentage of equity CNA was planning to acquire. Mr Ning and Mr Qu spent a good ten minutes complaining about the lack of good Chinese food in Queensland and how high living costs were in Brisbane.

After Sharon declared she had no further questions, it was Mr Li's turn to speak. "We have been working closely with our financial advisors, D&V, who will also be calling you today, Joe." Joe said he would be waiting for their call.

By the time Joe, Sharon and Gem got into the Buick to return to the office, it was 5:30pm. There was a queue of vehicles waiting to get onto the third ring road going south, which

looked like a four-lane fully occupied car park. Ferraris, BMWs, Toyotas, Buicks and Santanas were moving at a snail's pace on the highway.

Joe took a call in the Buick and hung up after a ten-minute conversation. "That was Kenneth from D&V. He's asking whether we'll be free to do a conference call tomorrow at 4pm to kick off Project Pine," Joe informed Sharon and Gem.

"So we're not going to wait for the signed engagement letter from CNA before we start work?" Sharon asked.

"They didn't sign any of our previous engagement letters," Joe said with a sneer. "I doubt they will sign one for Project Pine. I'm more interested in them paying our invoices on time."

"They paid us some money for the last outbound project ..."

"That was just fifty thousand. The project was aborted even before it began," Joe said bitterly. "We need to get these old farts to pay up for Project Cotton. There's over ten million renmibi worth of WIP on that matter, and they've only paid us less than a tenth of that amount."

Gem kept quiet while Joe and Sharon discussed CNA's unpaid invoices, taking mental notes. This was the first time she heard anything about CNA's history with Potts & Crouch, and she was surprised that Joe would pitch for work so enthusiastically from a client with such an undesirable payment history. It made no sense to Gem. CNA sounded like clients her previous employer in Brisbane specifically avoided. She started wondering if it was smart to be working on this matter, especially after that strange chat with Francis about CNA. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't notice that Joe and Sharon's conversation had taken a turn.

"Gem, do you know what projects Sheila is working on right now?" Joe asked Gem, shaking her out of her thoughts.

"Oh ... she's been working on anti-trust filings for a couple of major British corporations, but I can't remember their names," Gem muttered, hoping this much information would be enough for Joe.

"That's not good enough, Gem," Joe's tone had turned cold. "I'll need the names of those British corporations ASAP. Don't send me an email with their names, just text me. Sharon and you should be doing those filings, not Sheila. I need to improve our team's billing." With that, Joe turned his attention back to Sharon, signalling that his conversation with Gem was over.

It took Gem a minute to recover from the shock of Joe's comments. She turned her attention back out the window, but inside, she was fuming. Joe had asked Gem indirectly for information about the deals Sheila worked on, and Gem had given vague answers each time, thinking that would be enough to satisfy her supervising partner's curiosity. She was aback by his sudden demand, since she thought she'd given him enough information. Mike and Sheila was making money for the firm too even though they were in a different team.

Joe wanted more, much more. He was not happy with this new associate who looked and sounded Chinese but knew so little about the Chinese way of doing things. Sharon was heads and shoulders better than Gem in this regard, as she fed Joe useful information regularly without being asked. He was now questioning Gem's loyalty since he'd seen her go out to lunch with Sheila on more than one occasion, behaving like the best of friends. Also, Gem hadn't been forthcoming with information when he asked her about Sheila's work matters and had this irritated look on her face, as if he'd asked her to do something disgusting. Unbeknown to Gem, Joe was starting to regret hiring her.

19. Confidences & Confessions

Charlotte was surfing the net on her work computer, looking for the perfect pair of heels to go with the handbag she'd just purchased. This was not uncommon in the Beijing office, especially when there wasn't much work. Mike had been on conference calls all day, and was due to leave the office in an hour for a meeting. Cream was in Joe's office, standing with her back to the glass wall so no one could see her talking to Joe, who was sitting in his chair as usual. Gem and Sharon were on a conference call with CNA and D&V.

Charlotte's work phone rang. She recognized the number flashing on her phone's display, and cleared her throat before picking up the handset.

"Hello Mrs Chen." Charlotte almost sang into the phone.

"How did you know it was me, dear?" Helen's tone betrayed her surprise.

"Well, of course, Mrs Chen! I know your mobile number by heart. He he."

"Then you're too good to work as a secretary for Mike, dear. I called Joe on his mobile but it's turned off. So I thought I'd try his work number, but was redirected to his voicemail. I'd like to ask if he's coming home for dinner tonight."

Then why didn't you call Cream, Charlotte thought.

"Joe is in a meeting right now, Mrs Chen. Do you want me to relay your message to him?"

"Actually, don't worry about it. I just wanted to check with you he's in the office."

"Yes he is, Mrs Chen. Don't you worry. How have you been?" Charlotte decided to change the topic before Helen started probing. She had no desire to be overheard by the other secretaries telling Helen that Joe was in a meeting with Cream. She wasn't sure whether Helen knew about their affair.

"I've been jetlagged since returning from Greece. I'm still a little queasy right now, but at least I'm not waking up at 2pm in the afternoon. Ha ha."

"Do take care of yourself, Mrs Chen. I heard it takes time to get over jet lag. Maybe go see a doctor and get some medication."

"My friends have been telling me that it's not good to take medication for jetlag. It's better for the body to recover naturally. Speaking of medication, I heard from Joe that Cream's been quite sick lately. Do you know what her condition is?"

There was a pause as Charlotte tried to figure out what to say to Helen.

"Charlotte, you there?"

“Yes Mrs Chen! I’m still here. Cream’s been taking quite a bit of sick leave lately, but she hasn’t told anyone what she’s down with. Why the sudden curiosity, Mrs Chen?”

“Oh, I was just asking out of concern,” Helen replied hurriedly. “Could you please just let Joe know I called about dinner tonight? Thanks, dear.”

“Of course Mrs Chen. Is there anything else you need me to do today?”

“You’ve done quite enough, dear. I best let you get back to work. Hanging up now.”

“Sure. Bye, Mrs Chen.”

That was some phone call, thought Charlotte. It’d been months since she’d last spoken with Helen. Their previous conversations had always been girl talk, revolving around the latest celebrity gossip and popular TV shows. Why her sudden interest in Cream? It was rare for Helen to comment on anyone in the office, apart from Sharon, with whom she’d been friends since Sharon joined the firm. It was interesting that she seemed to know about Cream’s recent ‘sickness’. How did she get that information?

IM conversation between:

Desmond Pang, Senior Associate (available)

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

10:30 Desmond: hey Charlotte, did you get the flowers I sent you?

10:31 Desmond: I have the best taste for flowers. My mother’s always told me that.

10:32 Charlotte: You idiot, you sent me red roses! I’m allergic to roses!

10:33 Desmond: Oh no, are you ok? I’ve never heard of girls being allergic to roses.
I’m so sorry, Charlotte.

10:45 Desmond: You still there Charlotte?

Charlotte stumbled into Mike’s office, her eyes red and tearing. He could see that she was hyperventilating. Mike stood up and held her, shouting at the receptionist to call an ambulance. Sheila came out when she heard Mike shouting and helped Mike take Charlotte down in the lift to the ground floor lobby. The ambulance arrived almost immediately and the medics took over from there.

“Which idiot sent Charlotte roses? She’s allergic to them,” Mike said to Sheila as they took the lift back up to the office.

“Probably Desmond. He’s been asking Charlotte out for dinner for weeks, but she refused to oblige,” Sheila said matter of factly.

“So he sent her red roses without doing his homework! Ha. He’s blown all his chances with her now.” Mike laughed as he walked into his office.

Desmond heard the commotion when Mike and Sheila took Charlotte down to the lobby, but decided to stay at his desk. He cared too much about his job to let Joe see him anywhere near Mike. Never in his life had he met a girl who was allergic to red roses. Unfortunately for him, the one girl who was allergic to them was the one he had fallen madly in love with.

Gem was walking out of Joe's office after listening in on Project Pine's all-parties conference call when she heard her mobile ring. She ran to her office to pick up her phone, almost knocking Sheila over.

"Hello, is this Lawyer Chu?" Gem recognized Qu's nasal voice.

"Yes, this is she," Gem said as she dumped her notebook and pen on her desk.

"Excellent! We didn't get to speak much yesterday at our meeting. I was wondering if you'd be free for dinner tonight so we can go over issues about Project Pine which we couldn't discuss during the conference call just now."

"Oh ... err ... sure. Should I ask Lawyer Chen and Lawyer Ding to join us?" That was how Gem referred to Joe and Sharon when speaking in Mandarin to clients.

"Oh, that won't be necessary. I prefer to just meet with you. That's if you have time tonight, of course." Qu sneezed loudly. Gem held her mobile phone away from her ear to prevent her eardrum from bursting. How disgusting, she thought.

"You know what, Mr Qu, I just remembered Joe gave me an important piece of client work I have to send out by tonight. I have no idea what time I'll leave the office. So I probably can't make dinner." Gem put on her most apologetic voice.

"Oh. In that case, how about tomorrow night?" Qu wasn't giving up so easily.

"Actually tomorrow night might work. Can I confirm with you tomorrow afternoon?" Gem said this with the full intention of cancelling at last minute.

"That's fine. I'll see you tomorrow night then," Qu said before he hung up. Gem detected a note of disappointment in his voice.

Skype conversation between:

Gem Choo-choo train

Nathan the Titan

20:00 Gem: Hey Nathan! How's things going?

20:01 Nathan: Gem! I'm good, thanks! How about you?

20:02 Gem: I'm surprised to say I feel ok, which wouldn't normally happen after the day I've just had. I'm still in the f***ing office.

20:03 Nathan: The new project keeping you busy?

20:04 Gem: Yes. ☹

20:05 Nathan: That's rough. I'm so glad I'm not doing a desk job.

20:06 Gem: Yeah you're lucky that way. How I wish I could be a pro photographer.

20:07 Nathan: Why can't you? Just go out, takes lots of pictures and get them published online. That's how I got started.

20:08 Gem: It's easy for you to say that. I don't have the requisite talent to be a pro photographer.

20:09 Nathan: You have a digital SLR camera, don't you?

20:10 Gem: So it was you who sent me home last Thursday night after Latte. How else would you know I had a digital SLR camera?

20:11 Nathan: Well I thought you'd figured it out by now. Who else would've sent your sorry ass back to your apartment that night? :-p

20:12 Gem: Well I guessed as much. Thank you so much for taking me home that night. Or else I'd have been sleeping on the streets.

20:13 Nathan: Haha ... Francis wouldn't have allowed that. We had to make sure you got home ok. Nice apartment you have there. You just moved in?

20:14 Gem: Yeah, half the boxes yet to be unpacked. I just sent off the email to the client. Time to go home.

20:15 Nathan: Cool ... btw, have you had dinner?

20:15 Gem: Wow ... it's already quarter past eight. No wonder my tummy's growling like a lion.

20:16 Nathan: Ha ... fancy coming over to Sanlitun for a quick bite?

20:17 Gem: Sounds good. I'll be there in a jiff.

20. Unwanted Attention

Gem Chu's personal blog

Private entry (to make it public, click [here](#).)

12 April 2010

Dinner with Qu – in one word: awful.

But did I have a choice? Of course not, after Joe gave me an earful about not meeting up with the client even after his multiple requests. Qu must have complained to Joe about me not returning his texts and messages. Sneaky bastard.

I was so bored at work today, I counted the number of text messages he sent me yesterday. 17 text messages in 24 hours. Wow. Guess he doesn't do much as a board member of CNA after all.

So I finally gave in after the tenth time he asked and we went out for dinner. He picked me up and was fondling my thigh the whole time with his right hand while steering with his left. It was a fruitless endeavour getting rid of his hand. I took his hand off, and it was right back on my thigh again. I doubt I can complain about client harassment in this country. Sigh ...

Qu was very happy with the sound of his own voice, so I focused on the food. He went on and on about CNA's other projects in Canada and Turkey, how CNA's the greatest company in the world, citing statistics left, right and centre. Then he went on about the properties he owned: where they were situated, how big they were and how much they were worth now. The most interesting thing he said all night was that he refused to invest in the Chinese stock market. He said the Chinese stock market was just a scam for the masses. The companies listed are not to be trusted with the funds raised, but the masses are gullible idiots.

He started talking about his wife and son, who live in Changsha, the house they all live in and how much money he spent on his wife. Her last birthday present was a Porsche, its interiors covered in fox fur. He rattled off a model number, but it didn't register. I just wanted the dinner to end so I could go home and chat with Nathan online ...

Then he got to the most interesting part of the evening. He started talking about his girlfriends in Sanya, Guizhou, Guangzhou and a host of other cities that he travels to regularly for work trips or golf. For each of his girlfriends, he's bought apartments, cars and other expensive gifts. And he also gives them all generous monetary allowances, more than enough for them to buy a different Louis Vuitton bag every day if they wanted. Now that he spent more time in Beijing, he was looking for someone here.

I was barely paying attention to what he said, but for some reason I did catch the bit of his monologue about his girlfriends. Was he propositioning me? Maybe I misunderstood his meaning. But if not, what audacity! I didn't go through law school for four years to become a kept woman. Besides, these things only happened to pretty, pubescent girls, not to a 32-year-old plain woman like me. I felt insulted, flattered, distressed, upset, all at the same time.

There was this protracted silence after he stopped speaking, as I tried to work out how to turn him down without hurting his feelings. Who was I kidding?

I decided to speak when his hand started fondling my thigh again.

"Mr Qu, I'm quite happy with being single right now," was my pathetic answer, as I took his hand off my thigh.

What happened next was not what I expected. Qu looked upset and abruptly asked for the bill. He decided my answer didn't warrant any further discussion on his part. I insisted on paying for the dinner, but he insisted harder, so I let him. I didn't want him to *insist* on sending me home, so he could continue molesting my thigh and find out where I lived to boot. So I said I had to go to the loo and left the restaurant instead, texting him ten minutes later to say thank you for the dinner and that I'd gotten into a taxi.

The sky was clear and the moon was bright. None of the muck I normally smell when I walk outside. I decided to walk home instead of hailing a taxi, which would've taken ages anyway. I've heard that spring in Beijing is lovely but oh so brief. I wonder what my first summer in Beijing will be like.

I thought back to my first meeting with Qu and our one or two phone conversations since then, and couldn't work out how Qu could've thought I'd be interested in being his girlfriend. But then his behaviour is not so different from the psychos I'd met back in Brisbane, who didn't seem to know what 'no' meant. I'm pretty sure this Chinese psycho will be calling my slimy boss pronto to complain about my 'performance' as a lawyer. Knowing Joe, I'll probably lose my job just because I won't sleep with the client. Wait and see, shall we?

I'm sensing some hostility these days from Joe. I've texted Joe the names of all the clients Sheila's working with. I think he asked me to work with Sheila more in the future, ingratiate myself into Mike's team and get access to their clients. So he's asking me to snatch clients from another partner in the same office. WTF????!!! If this is how he gets his clients, I can only imagine the number of enemies he's made in Potts & Crouch over the years.

Sharon doesn't chat with me as much as she used to, and even when we do chat it's about the latest western celebrity gossip. She keeps talking about this sapphire ring she's thinking of buying when she's next in Hong Kong. I have nothing

to contribute to that since I hardly wear any jewellery, so she's been talking to Cream and Shelly more these days, mostly behind closed doors.

Nathan wasn't online when I checked the computer a minute ago. He's not online, Gem. He's probably out with some hot chick or dude tonight (if he's not gay, he's probably bi). You can stew in your juices the same way Francis does for this guy, Gemmy. Remember the girls he was checking out the other night? All the skinny, cutesy Chinese girls with long hair, a tonne of make-up and skin-tight dresses. You look nothing like them!

It was a fun night with Nathan last Thursday. We have more in common than I originally thought. He's been to quite a few places in China to work, and has so many interesting stories to tell. My life sounded so boring after listening to his stories. Surprised he didn't fall asleep listening to me talk about the people in the office ...

Sigh. I've never crushed on someone so soon after meeting him. Maybe it's this big lonely city called Beijing, maybe it's the stress from working in that messed-up office, maybe I'm sad, hormonal and lonely.

14 April 2010

Read on the news about the 6.9 earthquake at Yushu. Some Beijingers are claiming on Weibo that they felt vibrations from the earthquake this morning. Is that even possible? Cream's been asking everyone in the office if they felt the earthquake when they woke up this morning. She was probably the only person who felt the tremors.

Sheila's sent round an email asking for donations of money and clothing for the victims of the earthquake. Bing will be doing the collection tomorrow. That's such a noble thing to do. They've mentioned in passing they're both devout Christians. I haven't met many Christians like them before.

Week 2 of Project Pine. Sharon's been in daily contact with the Queensland firm, AL Solicitors, who's handling the work for us in Australia. Joe wasn't happy when D&V requested we work with AL. He was adamant that Sharon and I could handle all the work from Beijing. But in the end Kenneth convinced Mr Li to hire a law firm in Queensland to do some of the work. P&C was relegated to a liaison role, which made Joe furious. Sharon and I thought it was a great idea. There was no way the two of us could do searches from Beijing! Joe was definitely out of his mind to even propose that in the first place.

CNA's been pushing for the due diligence report to be submitted by next Monday. This is not going to happen since the search results will take at least

another week. Sharon has been spending most of her time on the phone explaining to Mr Li why the due diligence report won't be ready next Monday, but Mr Li keeps calling back, saying it had to be done, no matter what. When Sharon's on another call, Mr Li calls me, hoping I'll give him a different answer. But of course I can't.

Qu hasn't called or texted me since the disastrous dinner on Monday. What is he up to now? Joe has been busy with other work, and hasn't been paying much attention to Pine. I've noticed Cream talking to him a lot more recently, and he's in a bad mood for hours afterwards. I wonder what's happening between them.

Cream's been leaving work on time every day for the last three weeks. Quite a departure from her usual behaviour. What is Cream going to do about her baby? Her belly's not showing yet, but it will start showing soon. What will she tell people then about the baby's father?

I went to see Charlotte at her home after work. She was discharged from the hospital after the doctor gave her some antihistamines and let her rest at the hospital until the symptoms subsided. Mike told her to take a few days off work since there could be residue pollen on her desk which could trigger another bout of allergies. So she's been 'working' from home these days. She looked radiant from sleeping eight hours a day and drinking soup for the last four days. Am envious.

Apparently Desmond's been pestering her every day to go out for dinner with him, and he thought red roses would change her mind. 'No way am I dating a Chinese guy, and definitely not a lawyer!' said Charlotte. While I was at her place, she took calls every 20 minutes or so from different guys. One of her admirers, an athletic blond German hottie, turned up at her flat with a thermos of chicken soup. Turns out they met last week when they were buying coffee in the Starbucks downstairs from our office. Wow. Why don't I ever meet men who move so fast?

I love Charlotte and her attitude. She's determined not to give in to parental or peer pressure to marry for the sake of marrying. She's a breath of fresh air compared to the other single girls in the office. They moan that there are no eligible men suitable for marriage, and how their parents nag them to get married, even though they are all in their mid-twenties. And when the male colleagues organise weekend badminton games, they don't turn up because they can't play badminton in their high heels and short skirts. WTF is wrong with these women?

21. Once Upon a Time

While Joe was on holiday in Greece, Cream took some time off from work, spending most of that time with her boyfriend, who'd been back in Beijing for the past few months. Harry Su was a boyish-looking man in his early thirties. When Cream first met him at the last company she was at, she thought he was in his early twenties and still a university student. He was sitting on the sofa in the reception area, wearing a red polo shirt, torn blue jeans and neon gold sneakers. He had a dark complexion, a prominent belly and wore thick black-rimmed glasses. He was holding his iPad2 as if it were a car's steering wheel, playing a racing car game; when he got excited, he'd made whooping sounds and pump his fist in the air. She watched Harry as she manned the reception desk, assuming he was there for a job interview. She didn't think he had a chance.

The phone on her desk rang, and she picked up the call to hear the CTO's voice. "Cream, can you please take Director Su to West Lake?" (The meetings rooms were named after famous landmarks of the cities where their largest customers were based.) The West Lake meeting room was the best equipped, technologically speaking, of all the meeting rooms and had a view of a man-made pond with brown water and an uneven landscape of green and brown grass patches. The company had bargained too hard with the supplier, who supplied only sufficient green grass to cover half the landscaped grounds. The in-house gardener was then asked to make do with what he had, which he did knowing full well the staff were so overworked they never had time to notice the grounds.

Since there was no one else waiting in the reception area, Cream figured the 'university student' engrossed in his iPad must be none other than Director Su. He didn't respond when she called out for 'Director Su', so she'd had to get up from her desk, walk up to him and tap him on his shoulder to get his attention.

"Director Su, our CTO is ready to see you. Please follow me to the meeting room," Cream spoke deliberately and clearly, as she'd been trained to do.

Harry removed his earphones and turned to face Cream. He had a round fleshy face, round bloodshot eyes and a nose so upturned she could see the insides of his nose when he raised his head. His only redeeming feature was his mouth, with its well-shaped lips which curled upwards on the edges. Harry looked up, saw Cream and turned away quickly out of shyness rather than embarrassment. "Ok thanks," Harry mumbled, tucking his iPad under his arm and standing up quickly. He was about the same height as Cream, who was in high heels, and his protruding belly filled out his supposedly loose-fitting polo shirt. His shirt was Ralph Lauren and his sneakers Dolce & Gabbana limited edition, but you wouldn't have been able to tell by looking. Cream was wearing a dress with 'Christian Dor' embroidered on the collar, which she'd bought for a song at the wholesale market near the zoo, but her female colleagues assumed she was wearing the real thing. Harry Su, however, looked like he bought his outfits from the Silk Market, no matter how much money he paid for his clothes.

Cream took Harry into the West Lake meeting room where the CTO was already waiting. She replenished the empty glass tea pot with fresh tea leaves and hot water from a huge thermos flask and brought them two clean tea cups before she left the men to their meeting.

Harry emerged from the meeting room after two hours. The CTO walked Harry to the lift, then said goodbye.

Harry took two days to muster up the courage to call Cream. Cream remembered him straightaway but pretended to take a while to recall who he was. They had a pleasant chat and arranged to have dinner that night. He picked her up after work in his silver Porsche, drawing envious stares from people in the office buildings and factory area.

Harry told Cream his life story within an hour of them sitting down at a table in a high-end Korean barbeque restaurant next to an exclusive tennis club located just off the northeastern side of the fourth ring road. He was an only son; his parents, originally from Suzhou, moved to Beijing after starting their own medical equipment business. He graduated from Tsinghua University with a bachelor's in information technology and immediately joined his parents' business as its CTO. He was in his early thirties and had only had one girlfriend in his life, the daughter of his parents' university friends. They broke up about two years ago when she left to pursue her MBA in the States.

Cream found Harry's candid, simple and gentlemanly manner a breath of fresh air after the scheming and suspicious middle-aged men she had dated. He was obviously inexperienced with women, sitting across the table from Cream with the barbeque pit billowing smoke the entire time. Cream even suspected he was still a virgin from the way he talked about his ex-girlfriend. His sheltered upbringing was definitely a contributing factor to his rose-tinted view of the world and life. He talked a lot about his love of all things tech, from the latest apps he was playing with on his iPad to the new medical equipment he was bringing in from Germany. An iPhone user herself (a gift from one of her ex-lovers), Cream asked Harry questions about the apps he used, had him install some on her phone and asked him to teach her how to use them. They were sitting side by side at the table by this time. Little by little, Cream moved her chair closer to his and turned so that her upper body was facing Harry. Cream caught this shy man stealing glances at her cleavage and knew her strategic manoeuvre had worked.

Harry was hooked after that first dinner and asked her out many times after. It wasn't every day he met a fair-skinned voluptuous beauty who was more interested in iPhone apps than his wealth. Cream couldn't believe her luck, meeting the heir of a lucrative medical equipment business who was still single and available. Finally a real opportunity to achieve her lifelong dream of marrying into a rich family, leading the privileged and comfortable life of mistress of a mansion, being able to buy all those beautiful things she coveted but could never afford on her pitifully small salary and, most importantly, never having to work for a living again.

They became inseparable quickly, even though sex came much later than Cream was used to. She enjoyed it much more when they did eventually sleep together. Not because the sex was mind-blowing or even vaguely close to it (which Cream never expected from her men anyway). She just wasn't used to having her men stay the night after sex. Her middle-aged lovers, after sex, got up, dressed and left, rushing home to their wives who they hoped were already asleep when they arrived home. Harry didn't have a wife to go home to, although his mother often called when they were together, demanding he come home for dinner. The nights he was not required to be home, he always stayed the night, cuddling Cream as he drifted off to sleep.

He was usually gone before she woke up in the morning, leaving behind a handwritten note, along with congee and deep-fried dough sticks on the table for her breakfast.

Cream and Harry had been together for just over six months when Cream was headhunted to work as Joe's secretary in Potts & Crouch. Harry was very happy for Cream because this was a step up the career ladder for her and further proof that she wasn't like the previous girl he dated, who had demanded he marry her two weeks after they met so she wouldn't have to work anymore. Why do I only meet women who are interested in my money but not me? he wondered after every date with a girl his parents or friends set him up with. He knew nothing about the crushing metro rides into the city, the skyrocketing real estate prices, daily increasing costs of living and the stagnant income levels of the majority who live in Beijing. Blinded by love, he failed to see Cream's true ambitions for their relationship or her true scheming nature.

Now that Cream had a more respectable job in a foreign law firm, Harry felt it was time to take her to see his parents. His mother, especially, had been asking to see her son's new girlfriend, more out of concern than curiosity. Mrs Su couldn't believe Harry could have met a girl more suitable than the ones she'd introduced him to. She'd called in every favour from her friends in her effort to find the woman who'd bear her grandchildren and didn't like being upstaged by her son.

When Harry mentioned casually that they were having dinner with his parents, Cream was careful not to look too excited or eager at the prospect of meeting her future in-laws. Finally she would meet Harry's mother, whose steady alto voice she'd heard when Harry spoke with his mother on the phone. She guessed (correctly, it turned out) that Mrs Su ran the family with an iron fist, not unlike the late Empress Cixi. Her husband and son let her run their lives, tell them what to do, who to see, where to go and when to do those things. Mrs Su often complained to her friends, mostly wives and mistresses of her husband's government and business friends, that she had a hard life running the Su household and the lives of the men in the family. But her friends from her university days knew her need for control and her drive to always do better than everyone else, and so took her complaints with the appropriate pinch of salt.

Harry's secretary arranged for the dinner to take place in a private room at Mr Su's private clubhouse on a Saturday. Mr and Mrs Su made their own way to the venue from their villa on the outskirts of Beijing. Harry picked Cream up.

Eschewing the glamorous sexy dresses she usually favoured, Cream wore a classy black dress similar to Audrey Hepburn's in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, with sensible white heels and clutch. She had bought all these specifically for this occasion, although she could ill afford them.

Harry and Cream were already seated in the private room when Harry's parents arrived. Mr Su was dressed not too differently from his son's daily attire, except that he wore loafers. Mrs Su was immaculately dressed in a white linen dress, patterned with the Chanel logo in black. Cream stood up to greet her potential in-laws.

Mrs Su looked Cream over slowly and deliberately, taking in her fair skin, curvy figure, face and attire, before she smiled and nodded her tentative approval. Mr Su was a kind and quiet man in his early fifties, who sported the same dark skin and jowly face as his son, but mapped with wrinkles. He was just happy to finally meet his son's girlfriend, who turned out to be pretty and well-mannered.

Mrs Su began her interrogation after Harry ordered the dishes. "What do your parents do, Cream?"

"My parents work at the local TV station in Changsha." Cream recited her prepared answer, a blatant lie to impress the potential in-laws.

"We are well acquainted with the Director of Changsha Broadcasting Bureau, Old Qin. What are your parents' names? Maybe Old Qin knows them." Mrs Su was excited at the prospect that she may have met Cream's parents. Guanxi was everything to Mrs Su.

Cream wasn't prepared for this question. "Oh ... uh ... my parents have both passed away. Anyway, they were just ordinary employees at the Bureau, I doubt the Director even knew they existed." She picked up her cup of tea and had a sip. She desperately hoped Mrs Su would stop pursuing this line of questioning.

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that," Mrs Su said with more amusement than sympathy. She had noticed Cream's discomfort.

Harry came to Cream's rescue, telling his mother to start eating before the food turned cold. His father was already helping himself to the food, oblivious to his wife's conversation with Cream. He'd seen and heard his wife interrogate other prospects many times, and he'd also seen these prospects walk away in tears. In the early days, he'd attempted to persuade his wife to stay out of their son's love life, to no avail. These days, he tagged along so he wouldn't have to eat dinner alone at home. With Harry around to rein in his mother, Mr Su was confident Cream wouldn't meet the same fate as the many girls who'd preceded her.

Mrs Su obliged her son by taking a few bites of the cold dishes, then she continued grilling Cream about her education, job and weekend activities. Cream answered Mrs Su's questions calmly with a mixture of truth, lies and obliging smiles. Harry was surprised at his mother's questions, since this was the first time he'd seen her in action. Harry put a stop to it when his mother began asking Cream about the regularity of her periods.

"It's late now, Mama. You should go home and rest." Harry put his foot firmly down.

Mrs Su had no choice but to do as her son said. She didn't understand why her son would stop the conversation at the most crucial point. She was just trying to learn more about Cream's biological clock, which was essential for ascertaining her ability to bear a healthy grandchild. This was the final bit of information she needed to decide if Cream was a pass or a fail, and her son had prevented her from obtaining it.

"Your parents are nice," Cream said, after a protracted silence while they walked to Harry's car.

“I’m surprised you think so after what my mother did,” Harry mumbled as he punched the button on his keyfob to unlock the car doors.

“I did feel intimidated by your mother,” Cream confessed after ascertaining Harry was on her side. “Is she always so ... err ... what’s the word – inquisitive?”

“Ma is aggressive and tough; doesn’t matter if she’s dealing with work or family,” Harry admitted as he started the engine. “I must admit, Pa and I both do her bidding all the time. It’s easier than trying to win an argument with Ma.”

Cream reflected on the dinner conversation with Mrs Su as Harry drove the car out of the car park and headed in the direction of Cream’s home. It was apparent to her that Mrs Su was a formidable lady, not easily impressed with those she considered of lower financial and social status as herself. Cream knew this was the typical mindset of those from Zhejiang province, which for the longest time had the largest population of middle-class Chinese. She looked at Harry, feeling like a hand was squeezing and twisting her heart. She was no longer sure that marrying Harry was a foregone conclusion, and this made her feel a mixture of gratitude, fear, apprehension, anxiety and other emotions which she could not define.

Harry broke into her train of thought, saying they’d arrived at her home. They both got out of the car. When Harry put her his arm around her shoulders, Cream felt relieved and comforted. I’ll worry about Mrs Su tomorrow, she thought as she opened the door to her flat.

Cream wasn’t surprised when Harry told her he’d been asked to be based at the Shanghai office from January to personally oversee the progress of a major research project. She was convinced this was Mrs Su’s doing, and it was her way of telling Cream to stay away from her son.

Harry broke the news to her in mid-December, when they were shopping at Shin Kong Place. The mall was decked out with elaborate (and expensive) Christmas decorations, complete with Christmas tree, tinsel, Santa and his sleigh. Cheerful Christmas music was blaring through the speakers, providing an ironic backdrop for the two lovebirds.

“You can come visit me in Shanghai. I’ll take you shopping at Plaza 66. They have all the international brands.”

“I’ve only been at the new firm for less than two months. I can’t take any annual leave to travel to Shanghai.” Cream was inconsolable.

“In that case, I’ll fly back to Beijing every weekend to see you,” Harry said with a big smile.

Cream was incapable of being objective just then, and saw everything Harry said and did in a negative light. He seemed so happy to be going off to Shanghai, leaving her alone here in Beijing. Didn’t he know his mother was scheming to separate them? These thoughts whirled incessantly in her mind.

She admitted to herself that she hadn't been completely clear in her mind when she permitted Joe to send her home after work the following day. She was still upset that Harry was leaving for Shanghai for a month, which she felt Harry didn't understand. She was bothered that he wasn't aware of his mother's scheme. She wasn't sure he loved her anymore. The saddest thing of all is that she never once asked herself if she loved Harry.

22. Wheat Farms for Sale

CHINA-AUSTRALIA CONFIDENTIAL

20 April 2012, 10:15am

Queensland wheat farms court overseas buyers

by Malcolm Warner

After months of speculation, XYZ Foods confirmed yesterday morning that it is currently in talks with overseas buyers to acquire a major stake in their wheat farms in northeast Queensland.

The spokesperson from XYZ, Mary Heller, announced they were currently in talks with buyers from South Korea, China and the Middle East. XYZ has appointed MQ Bank as their financial advisor for this transaction. When queried about the motivation behind the sale, Ms Heller said it had long been the intention of XYZ to expand its business overseas and diversify into other sectors through securing partnerships with the right partners.

There has been increasing concern over the sale of food-producing rural properties in Australia to overseas buyers, especially in light of the spike in food prices since the floods. A loaf of bread from Woolworths today costs \$2.50, a 30% increase from January this year. Even with Labour Party assurances that the majority of such properties remain in the hands of Australian owners, the Opposition viciously attacked XYZ Foods' decision to sell a stake in their wheat farms to overseas buyers. They've also demanded that the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) take a stronger stance when reviewing applications from overseas buyers looking to buy rural properties in Australia. FIRB couldn't be reached for comment.

23. Early May 2012

Joe was looking forward to his fifteen-hour flight to Amsterdam as he settled into his seat in the first-class cabin and turned off his mobile and BlackBerry. He was relieved no one was sitting next to him, since he was flying on the first day of the Labour Day holidays. As the screen before him played a clip about the plane's safety features, he closed his eyes and leaned his head on the headrest. His outer appearance of calm belied his inner turmoil.

First and foremost on his mind – Project Pine and the lack of progress. He'd known for a while that CNA had overextended itself, committing to more projects overseas than their sole financier was willing to lend money for. China Development Bank had made the mistake of lending liberally to CNA in the past for its overseas projects, asking only for the targets' most basic information and their fixed assets position in almost all cases. After share prices for Facebook started falling, bringing down the share prices of Chinese tech companies with it, CNA had had to pull the public listing plans for all of their overseas companies on hold. This, in turn, meant that the bank wouldn't be able to recover its previous loans to CNA in the near future. The bank had no intention of making any further loans to CNA until CNA provided a proposal on how it intend to repay the previous loans. That had been two months ago. Mr Li, Mr Qu and Mr Ning had all been extremely cagey when Joe asked them about this issue. Joe didn't have a good feeling about the prospects of Project Pine. If the project didn't proceed, this would be CNA's fifth aborted project in the past 12 months. Joe shuddered at the thought of explaining to the Empress if he again failed to collect fees from CNA.

Then there was Mr Qu's complaint about Gem's work performance. He had called Joe a few hours before his flight to ask that Gem to be taken off Project Pine. When Joe asked Mr Qu for his reasons, he said he wasn't happy with her attitude towards him. According to him, Gem had repeatedly ignored his calls, emails and text messages, and when he did get hold of her, she was rude and uncooperative. Even with his prejudices against Gem, Joe found it difficult to believe Mr Qu. Gem had been dealing exclusively with Mr Li at Mr Ning's request, so there was no reason for Mr Qu to communicate with Gem about the project. From his previous experiences working with CNA, Joe knew Mr Qu cared little about the projects or their success, but he did care a lot about being at the meetings and dinners and being given 'face' by the advisors and subordinates. Mr Qu also had a reputation for the number of mistresses he kept; Joe had seen at least five in the past. It crossed Joe's mind that this might be the basis of Mr Qu's complaint, but he quickly dismissed the thought. It just wasn't possible that Mr Qu could find Gem attractive enough to want her as his mistress. He decided that this was something that warranted an open discussion with Gem when he returned from Amsterdam.

As the lights dimmed for take-off, Joe's thoughts turned to Cream. She'd been cold and distant since the last offer he'd presented to her. They hadn't had sex since she told him that she suspected she was pregnant. Those suspicions had now been confirmed and, judging by how far along she was, he was pretty sure the baby was his. He thought his initial offer was generous enough to convince Cream to make the right decision, but he had grossly underestimated her stubbornness and tenacity. She'd been inconsolable when he first asked her to have an abortion

and took a week's sick leave immediately afterwards. When she returned, her manner towards him had changed dramatically. There were no more hugs, no more massages, no more kisses and definitely no more sex. She did the bare minimum required of her and left promptly at 6pm every evening, ignoring his requests for her to work overtime. She stopped replying to his text messages or taking his calls outside of office hours, which infuriated him. He'd had to resort to asking Sharon's secretary for help, which was fine with Sharon but not her secretary, who complained to the other secretaries about her double workload. He knew he couldn't keep Cream on any longer, since she would start showing in the next month or two, which would start tongues wagging, if they hadn't started already. His schedule had become a mess. Just last week, clients of competing companies turned up in reception at the same time, both with an appointment to see him. He managed to appease one client but lost the other, something he couldn't afford to happen, especially now.

The Empress had emailed him, asking for a meeting to discuss the questions listed in her email, which were:

- (1) How was Project Pine progressing and when can a bill be sent to CNA?
- (2) An explanation about the Beijing office's first quarter billings. Joe was well aware he only made 50% of his budget.
- (3) His thoughts about improving the Beijing office's billings and collection rate.

Joe was quite taken aback when he first read this email, how straightforward the Empress was this time. In fact, if he had paid more attention to the Empress' emails for the last three to four months, he would've detected that she'd started using more bullet points and reducing the number of pleasantries in her emails. One could almost detect her increasing impatience with Joe through the tone of her emails. Unfortunately the subtle changes in the Empress' email correspondence had escaped Joe's notice, which was probably why the Empress was now requesting a face-to-face meeting.

Joe knew Mike had flown to London two days earlier, citing a client meeting he'd been asked to attend but not divulging the client's name. Joe was feeling more and more uneasy about Mike's presence in the Beijing office. He suspected the Empress had sent Mike to replace him, but his ego refused to allow him to dwell on that suspicion. Who did the Empress think she was? What did she or Mike know about doing business in China? Joe thought, as he took a cup of Chinese tea from the air stewardess and sipped thoughtfully. Since I have a private audience with the Empress this time, I'm going to show her I'm no pushover. He'd already spoken with Ed Crouch on the phone a few times, to see if he could count on him if the Empress did try to pull a fast one. Ed had as much as authority as Melanie to decide if he stayed or left, or at least Joe thought he did.

Joe also thought about his family. It would be a gross understatement to say he was relieved his family life was uneventful, especially in the midst of all the drama around him. His children were focussing on their studies and neglecting physical exercise, which suited him and Helen well enough. He would much rather they did well in their exams than excel in sports any day, because that was the way to gain entry to the top universities in the States. He himself only went to the gym to stay trim, so he could continue to fit into his \$10,000 suits. Having his

immaculate suits altered in China was unthinkable, as he was certain the Chinese tailors would destroy the fabulous cut. His relationship with Helen continued to be amicable and distant, which suited him just fine. In fact, it was the most well-managed relationship in his life right now, he thought. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had intimate relations with his wife, but that was normal since they'd been married for almost two decades. He couldn't tell whether Helen knew about his infidelities and really didn't care if she did. He was certain Helen would not even mention the word 'divorce' while their youngest was still living at home with them. It would bring great shame to her parents if she divorced a good husband (at least on paper), despite his many infidelities. Of all the women who pursued him at university, he chose Helen because she had a steady, steadfast and rational personality, definitely not because of her looks. He was counting on Helen to take care of him in his old age. He knew he couldn't count on any of his young girlfriends for that.

The air stewardess interrupted Joe's thoughts, asking him which selection he'd like from the menu. Joe asked for the chicken dish, which he then shovelled gracelessly into his mouth, this being his first meal of the day. Food coma took over swiftly afterwards, and he was finally able to drift off into a fitful sleep.

The Potts & Crouch's annual managing partners meetings had always been casual affairs. The Empress and Ed Crouch didn't agree on many things, but the one thing they did agree on was that the partners were permitted to relax in luxury and to indulge in every whim during the MPMs. This was why all MPMs, including the upcoming meeting, were held in cities with five-star accommodation, close proximity to the best golf courses in the world and ready access to spas and happy endings of every kind.

By the time Joe arrived at the first partners' dinner at the Four Seasons, he noticed he was the only man wearing a jacket. The other male partners, including Ed and Patrick, both fussy dressers, were in polos and jeans. Joe searched the room for the Empress, and made a beeline for her, intending to take the empty seat to her right. He had prepared his answers to her questions and intended to tell her some of those answers tonight so she knew Potts & Crouch's Beijing office was his top priority.

The only woman in the room, the Empress was dressed in an Escada evening dress and three-inch Christian Louboutin heels, all in a different shade of the colour of the coming summer season – dusty rose. She was deep in conversation with Mike, who was sitting on her left, and didn't notice Joe when he sat down on her right. Joe decided not to interrupt their conversation, just in case there was useful information to be gleaned from it.

Mike noticed Joe take the seat next to the Empress and tapped her on the hand to alert her to this. Melanie turned slightly, saw that Joe had sat next to her, and patted Mike's hand as she turned to greet Joe.

"Hello Joe! Good to see you. How was your flight to Amsterdam?" "It was very enjoyable, Melanie. I slept pretty much throughout the flight, so fingers crossed no jet lag

tonight,” Joe replied with a wide smile, hiding his disappointment that she’d noticed him so quickly. It must’ve been that bloody Mike.

“I’m glad you enjoyed your flight. If you do find it hard to fall asleep tonight, you can always ask your butler to bring you some pills,” said the Empress matter of factly, a habit formed after decades of working in a male-dominated industry. Her shows of concern often came across as cold and uncaring to her junior female lawyers, something she couldn’t quite understand but had learnt to accept over the years.

The waiter came by to take Joe’s drink order and, seeing as everyone had started early with their respective poison, Joe ordered a Scotch on the rocks. He ordered this only when overseas because he thought it made him appear more masculine. Joe decided it was wise to broach the topic before he started drinking and while he still had the Empress’s attention. “So, Melanie, thanks for your email from last week. I was wondering if you’d like to discuss some of the points over dinner tonight?”

“Oh, *that* email.” Melanie seemed to recall sending it. “I’m already onto my third cocktail tonight, and I don’t think I’m in any state to discuss anything remotely connected to work!” She let out a peal of laughter, which seemed to be the cue for everyone else at the table to start laughing while looking at each other to try to discern the reason for the laughter. Joe joined in, of course, though inside he was kicking himself for not remembering the Empress’s reluctance to discuss work at the dinner table. Once when he had taken a client call while they had been having dinner together at a previous MPM, she had said to him, “I prefer to give my full attention to my food when I eat. The world won’t end in the hour or two I take to have my dinner, will it?”

Joe couldn’t remember what he ate or drank that night as he spent the rest of the evening attempting to work his way back into the Empress’s good books. It didn’t help that all the other partners were working their charms on her, especially Louis, the new managing partner of the Shanghai office. Louis had the Empress enthralled with stories of his father’s involvement in the Shanghai triads and their influence in the 1930s, after she mentioned watching *The White Countess*, a movie set in Shanghai starring Ralph Fiennes and Natasha Richardson. Patrick was seated on Joe’s right, but seemed to be actively avoiding talking to him despite his efforts to strike up a conversation, twice.

Joe began feeling the effects of the drinks when dessert was served. He watched the other two Asian partners at the table to see how they were handling their drinks. He had no intention of being the first man to leave the table. Louis’s speech was slurring as he downed what Joe thought was his fourth drink of the night. Patrick’s face and neck already had the famous Asian glow as he polished off his fifth glass of Pinot Noir. Or was it Merlot? Joe couldn’t quite make out the label on the bottle next to Patrick’s glass. The Brits were, as usual, loosening up as they downed their tenth drink. Joe hated that Mike still looked completely sober after two beers, two martinis and five tequila shots. He hated to lose at anything and, these days, especially to Mike in terms of drinking, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about his genetic make-up. None of the partners, except Melanie, touched the dessert, as everyone started talking about going to De Wallen, Amsterdam’s red light district, for another round of drinking and adult fun.

The Empress was smiling and nodding, giving the men tips on the hip bars in the area. Mike insisted that she come along and Joe knew that in the past she had joined the men at least for a few hours. Tonight, she graciously turned down Mike's invitation, saying she preferred the company of her husband on the phone.

Louis and Patrick decided to call it a night. Joe took the opportunity to get away as well, saying he had to attend to some work matters. Mike and the other partners bade the stayers good night and strode out of Four Seasons in the direction of De Wallen.

Just as Joe stepped into his room, his mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. He took out his BlackBerry and paused as he saw the caller ID display. He was still deciding whether to take the call when the vibrating stopped. He sighed with relief, put the phone down on his bed and took off his shoes. The BlackBerry began vibrating again as he took off his jacket. He picked it answered the call, feeling more prepared for what was to come.

"Hello, Joe speaking."

"Hi Joe, it's me. I wasn't sure you'd be still awake ..."

Cream's shaky voice came through the speaker.

"You didn't wake me up if that's what you're worried about," Joe said matter of factly.

"Ok then ..."

Cream cleared her throat and continued, "I've thought through what you said yesterday. What you said made a lot of sense. I understand you don't want to have anything to do with the baby, and having and supporting a baby on my own would be tough."

Finally she sees sense, this stupid girl, Joe thought.

"On the other hand," Cream continued with more confidence, "I'm turning thirty next year, and I heard it's very difficult for women to get pregnant in their thirties. If I abort the baby, I'm scared I won't be able to have another one."

"Cream, don't believe in that bullshit you hear from your aunt in Anhui. Many women have children in their thirties these days; it's totally possible. You'll definitely be able to have children in the future." Joe could hear exasperation in his voice.

"How do you know, Joe?" Cream stared shrieking. Joe had to hold his phone away from his ear. "I've heard of women who get an abortion and they keep having miscarriages in the future. It's retribution!"

Joe waited until Cream was done before he began speaking again. "There is no scientific basis for all these things you've been hearing from your aunt and friends. Trust me, Cream, have an abortion, take the 100,000 I'm giving you, go on a long holiday and come back to work whenever you feel like it." He thought he sounded convincing. He blamed it on jet lag.



He heard a click and the line went dead. Cream had hung up on him. He was so tired that he was relieved the conversation was over. She didn't call back and, even if she had, he wouldn't have picked up.



24. Still Early May 2012

The Empress left the ‘discussion about the email’ with Joe for another three days. Joe was in an escalating state of anxiety for the whole time, desperately worried he’d forget all his prepared answers before the crucial meeting. Mike was especially friendly to Joe throughout the MPM, and even praised him after he finished his presentation about the Beijing office’s performance for the last financial year, which even Joe had to admit was crap. The billings were impressive, especially with Mike’s clients and Project Phoenix, but the collections rate was still an abysmal twenty percent. When the Empress questioned this, Joe cited the huge discounts given to CNA for five of their projects the previous year. He again reiterated the rationale behind this – CNA had engaged the firm for a stream of high-profile projects, which had given the firm substantial media exposure, which in turn led to more work from other major state-owned enterprises. Joe knew he’d said the same thing at two previous MPMs, but this really was the story he had to tell.

Patrick spoke up after Joe finished answering the Empress’s questions. “I was having dinner with CDB last week, and they mentioned they’ve received official notification to tighten their lending this year after the disastrous performances of Chinese companies who listed on NASDAQ. CDB’s the largest lender to CNA. Has CNA mentioned how they intend to fund future projects if CDB stops funding their overseas investment projects?”

Joe hid his surprise behind a smile. He’d hoped this news would remain a secret from the other partners, but it was completely reasonable for Patrick to have this information and have his concerns.

“I’ve spoken to Mr Qu and Mr Ning of the executive board about this issue. They said CDB was just one of the many financial institutions they work with. Their facilities with the other financial institutions should be more than enough to cover their overseas projects for the next five years at least.”

“Aren’t they already mortgaged to the hilt? Smaller institutions won’t be so willing to lend without substantial security, regardless if they are lending to a state-owned enterprise or a private enterprise,” Louis said in a slightly accusatory tone – at least that’s what Joe heard.

“Well, according to CNA, they are not mortgaged to the hilt. They haven’t provided security on their assets for all of their loans from CDB, because CDB waived the requirement.”

Louis smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

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The Empress asked Joe to meet her after lunch in her executive suite on the top floor. Joe decided have lunch with the other partners. Joe avoided carbs and had a steak and greens so he wouldn’t be drowsy during the meeting with the Empress.

When Joe buzzed to be let in, the butler opened the door almost immediately, led him to the study and asked him to sit on one side of the table. The butler left the room and the Empress and Mike came in shortly after. Mike closed the door behind them and sat on the sofa near the window. Joe wasn’t sure what to make of Mike’s presence and felt immediately uncomfortable.

The Empress took the seat across the table from Joe and launched straight into the purpose of the meeting.

“Joe, as I promised, we are now sitting down to talk about the email I sent you last Thursday. Do you have any questions?”

“Melanie, thanks for this meeting and giving me time to talk about the email with you. I really appreciate you taking the time ...”

“Joe, there’s no need for small talk. Just get to the point.” When she wasn’t smiling, she really did look very much an empress.

“All right, then.” Joe felt rebuffed but persisted. “Project Pine is progressing well and I intend to send out a bill when I return to Beijing after this MPM.”

“I read an article on China-Australia Confidential that there has been some resistance to overseas buyers buying up food sources in Australia. With what Louis said about CDB, I seriously doubt Project Pine will progress any further. And we know what CNA’s like with paying bills for aborted projects.

Which brings us to the next question. Your billings are just shy of 50% of your target for the first quarter. I understand business has generally been slow over the Spring Festival, but you haven’t been hitting your billing targets for the last few years. And you’ve also been struggling with your collections. How do you propose to rectify this situation?”

Joe smiled and answered with a calm that belied his inner turmoil and anger, “Melanie, I think I’ve mentioned this many times before. I’m focussing on key Chinese clients who are investing heavily offshore. You know how price-sensitive Chinese clients are. I believe the discounts I’ve been giving them have been very reasonable and in return, they have been coming back to us with their high profile outbound projects. I thought you were with me on this, Melanie.”

“Joe, I’ve been with you on this for the last four years because you promised to turn over a profit *soon*. Four years have passed and the results remain the same. I don’t know how much longer I can convince the other offices to compensate for your office’s losses,” said the Empress in her usual matter-of-fact, no-bullshit manner.

“I’ve reiterated this point many times in the past, and all the partners,” gesturing towards Mike, “agreed with me. Why are you suddenly worried?”

“It’s because there are now partners who are based in China with SOEs as their clients and they don’t seem to have the same collection problems as you do.”

“Are you referring to Louis and Mike?” Joe was aghast at being compared to partners who he viewed as rookies in China. The Empress chose to just look at Joe instead of responding to his question.

“Louis has been at the Shanghai office for barely three months and Mike has only been in the Beijing office for a year. Their clients are of a different calibre from mine and they bill

much less than I do. I'm not surprised their collections are better than mine, because the sums are so small, ha ha ha." Joe laughed at his own joke; the Empress and Mike did not join in.

"Since you insist on naming them as examples, I might as well tell you that I hired Louis after looking into his billings *and* collections at his previous firm. I agree with you that Mike's clients are nowhere as high profile as your clients, but I seriously prefer paying clients to high-profile clients, Joe. Or else you'll be flying economy instead of first class next time." The Empress's voice rose in pitch, something she did when she was excited or angry.

She went on, looking at Joe sternly. "I have no intention of Potts & Crouch becoming the next Coudert Brothers. This is why I am telling you now you have six months to find a new job."

Joe had expected to be able to work his charm on the Empress. He hadn't expected her to deliver judgment and sentence within fifteen minutes of them sitting down in her suite. He coughed and took in a sharp breath, his mind scrambling for a response to such humiliation.

The Empress calmly sipped her white tea, waiting for Joe to speak so she could end this meeting and go for a swim.

Joe spoke after what felt like an eternity to all three in the room. "After serving Potts & Crouch loyally for the last six years, you are now giving me six months to find another job? If I had known this was how you were going to treat me, Melanie, I would've accepted the offer from Biggs two years ago." Joe's voice sounded like a growl from a cornered lion. The Empress and Mike braced for the impending roar.

Instead, when Joe spoke again, he was calm and poised. "Is this the unanimous decision of all partners, Melanie? I'm sure Ed wouldn't have agreed to this."

"Ed knows about the decision. His vote was overruled by the majority of the partners. Unfortunately you didn't have a similar relationship with the other partners as you did with Ed," the Empress smirked.

This was the last straw for Joe. He'd thought he had time on his side, Ed would make a difference, the other partners must like him. And now the Empress was saying the exact opposite of everything he'd thought. He felt like a boxer who'd been knocked out.

The Empress decided that the meeting had come to an end. She walked into her bedroom to get changed for her swim. Mike walked over to Joe and patted him on the shoulder before leaving the suite.

Joe didn't see the Empress leave her bedroom wrapped in a bathrobe. He didn't hear the butler asking him if he wanted a cup of coffee or if he wanted to go back to his own room. He didn't notice when the natural light faded and the butler turned on the lights. It was only when the Empress returned from her swim that she instructed the butler to escort Joe back to his own room. The butler had to haul Joe to his feet, put his arm around Joe's waist and physically drag Joe back to his room. He handed Joe over to his butler and closed the door behind them.

24. Mid May 2012

IM conversation between:

Francis Wu, Translator (available)

Gem Chu, Associate (available)

10:00 Francis: Hey girl, how's your week going?

10:01 Gem: I've been working on that new CNA deal. The financial advisors have been keeping us very busy, that's for sure!

10:02 Francis: You poor darling ... CNA is quite a handful to deal with. ;-)

10:02 Gem: Now you're scaring me ...

10:03 Francis: Change of topic ... my friends all thought you were good fun, and a great dancer! So disappointing you didn't come out with us on Saturday night.

10:03 Gem: Haha ... your friends are cool, mate! I spent Saturday setting up my apartment.

10:04 Francis: Let me know when you're throwing a housewarming party, sista! We'll be there!

10:05 Gem: Haha ... sure ...

10:06 Francis: Do you have plans for the Mid-Autumn Festival holidays?

10:06 Gem: Isn't that in September? That's like months away! Of course not!

10:07 Francis: Yes it's 22 Sept. Would you like to visit my hometown during Mid-Autumn Festival?

10:07 Gem: Wow you're planning ahead of time. Where are you from actually?

10:09 Francis: a little town in Hunan province. Have you heard of Fenghuang?

10:09 Gem: No, I haven't. Hmm ... I haven't been anywhere outside of Beijing yet. I'd love to see your hometown.

10:10 Gem: BTW, are you inviting anyone else?

10:10 Francis: Nope. Just you. I have a favour to ask of you.

10:10 Gem: What kind of favour? I'm a little worried now Francis ...

10:11 Francis: Oh it's nothing, don't worry. I'd just like you to pretend to be my girlfriend while we're in Fenghuang.

10:12 Gem: What? Francis, I didn't think you liked girls in the first place. You've told me that numerous times! Why do I have to pretend to be your girlfriend?

10:12 Francis: Sigh ... my parents don't know I'm gay.

10:15 Gem: Wow ... how can they not know? Your behaviour is a dead giveaway.

10:16 Francis: Gem, you are a foreigner. You don't understand Chinese mentality and attitudes towards gays. My father can never accept I am gay, no matter how I behave.

10:17 Gem: Your mother must surely know. Didn't you use to play dress-up at home with her dresses and make-up when you were a kid?

10:17 Francis: Hmmm ... actually you may be right. My mother probably suspects but she would never say anything about it. Chinese parents don't see anything wrong with boys playing with dolls, dresses and make-up when they are kids.

10:19 Gem: Wow ... that's a dead giveaway in the West. Are Chinese parents in denial?

10:20 Francis: Some are probably in denial. Others – who knows?

10:25 Francis: So will you be my pretend girlfriend for Mid Autumn Festival or not? If you won't, I need to hire a girl online.

10:26 Gem: Sorry, I was discussing something with Sharon.

10:27 Gem: You can hire a girlfriend to take home? Will she do anything you ask her to do?

10:28 Francis: Yes she will say anything I want her to say to my parents. I haven't brought a girl back to see my parents in the last three years, and they are asking about the last girl I hired. I can't afford to hire one this year, that's why I'm asking you ;-).

10:32 Gem: I need to think about this, Francis. I've never been asked by anyone to be their pretend girlfriend, ever.

10:33 Francis: That's fine, Gem. I just need to know by next Friday because there's this special offer for air tickets to Tongrentai on Ctrip.

10:34 Gem: Ok I will give you an answer by then. I'm curious. Why are you asking me and not some other lady in the office, Francis?

10:35 Francis: 1) you look Chinese but you think like a foreigner. You won't get the wrong idea like the local girls. 2) I like you, and I think you'd be fun to travel with. 3) my parents will definitely like your lively and talkative personality.

10:40 Gem: Wow, you've obviously thought this through. I don't know about your parents liking me. I'd love to see your hometown though. I love taking pictures and travelling to new places.

10:41 Francis: Why didn't you say so earlier? You could've joined me and my friends last weekend when we went to the wild Great Wall!

10:41 Gem: bummer, I missed out. You must tell me the next time you go hiking. I am definitely coming.

10:42 Francis: Of course! ok gotta go. I have a lunch appointment with Nathan today. ;-) xxoo

Gem was surprised by the prick of jealousy she felt when she read Francis' last message. She'd never thought she'd be jealous of a gay guy or that that same guy would ask her to pose as his 'girlfriend' for a week!

That night, Gem sent Francis a text message saying she'd pose as his girlfriend after doing some research on Fenghuang online. Then she fell asleep with a smile on her face and the images of the picturesque old town in her mind...

Since Joe had left for the MPM in Amsterdam, Gem had been working with Francis to get the preliminary due diligence report for Project Pine translated into Chinese for CNA. The report was more than 150 pages long, even without the results of more than half of the search requests from the various authorities in Queensland. Francis and the other translators kept dropping into Sharon and Gem's offices to ask them the meaning of this word or that. Gem had asked them to consolidate their questions and come to her once or twice a day, but this was ignored as the translators continued coming into her office ten times a day, asking her the meaning of words like 'tenants in common' and 'artesian water' meant. Neither Sharon nor Gem were experts in environmental law so they often had to Google for the meaning of the words or call up the environmental law partner in the Australian law firm who wasn't always at his desk. They would explain the meanings of these words to the translators, then work out what was the most appropriate Chinese translation.

Gem was calling Mr Li every day, asking him for documents required for submitting CNA's application to FIRB. Every conversation ended with Mr Li promising he would find the documents she asked for, but Gem had received nothing from him either by email or courier for the last week or so. Every evening, Sharon asked Gem if the documents from CNA had arrived, stressing Gem out even more.

So when Mr Li did not reply to her text messages, take her calls or reply to her emails for two days, Gem panicked. When Sharon asked her about the documents for the tenth day in a row, Gem decided to tell Sharon this.

"You're joking!" Sharon exclaimed in frustration. "Are you sure he didn't tell you where he went?"

Gem nodded.

“Positive?”

“Come on, why would I lie to you about this?” Gem almost screamed at Sharon, her blood pressure rising, her eyes reflecting her anger and frustration.

“Ok, calm down. I just had to make sure, that’s all. You’ve made enough mistakes for me to think you could’ve forgotten that Mr Li told you something.”

Gem knew what Sharon was referring to. At Joe’s instruction, she submitted memorandums and client emails to Sharon, so Sharon could look them over before they were sent out. She was cc’d in the final emails sent to the client, so she knew Sharon often made stylistic changes or added a line here or there as if to add Joe’s touch to the document. Of course, there were the occasional spelling and grammatical mistakes that escaped the spell checker, which she appreciated Sharon correcting. But it really bothered her that Sharon and Joe referred to them as her ‘mistakes’. At first, she had accepted their comments and worked harder on the next document. But when she noticed mistakes Sharon made and pointed them out to Joe, he waved her away as if she was an annoying fly, indicating that Sharon could do no wrong. Gem had never experienced such blatant unfair treatment at work until she came to Beijing.

“I’ll call Ning and Qu to see if they know where Li is. You should focus on reviewing the Chinese translation of the due diligence report.”

“I could call Mr Ning and Mr Qu if you’re busy.”

“I’ll speak to them, don’t worry about it. They’re not as easy to deal with as Mr Li,” Sharon said as she walked out of Gem’s office.

IM conversation between:

Desmond Pang, Senior Associate (available)

Charlotte Wang, Secretary (available)

9:40am Desmond: Hey Charlotte, you’re back at work?

9:42am Desmond: I heard that you picked up a nasty allergy two weeks back from the roses. Is that why you stayed home? I sent you the roses because I wanted to let you know how I felt ... That’s all

9:50am Desmond: Can I take you out for dinner after work to make it up to you? We could go to the new Nobu. You know Robert De Niro invested in that restaurant? I was just there with some clients last week and they were really impressed with the food, décor and service.

9:52am Desmond: Please reply to my message Charlotte darling. Please forgive me for sending you flowers, honest to God I didn't know you were allergic to roses. Who in the WORLD is allergic to roses anyway???!?

9:59am Desmond: I'm going to come over to your desk to talk to you now. I can't stand this silence anymore.

10:00am Charlotte: Don't bother coming over, Desmond. You didn't know I was allergic to roses, so there's nothing to forgive and there's no reason why you should take me out for dinner. I will never go out with you for dinner, lunch, concert, movie or anything your sick mind thinks up. Just give up.

Charlotte continued surfing Taobao and let the conversation window Desmond started roll on in the background. But she couldn't let him come over to talk to her. As if the tongues were not already wagging in the office ...

It'd been quiet in the office with the senior partners away at the MPM. Sheila was on holidays with Bing, destination unknown. She admired how this couple seemed to stand out from the crowd in every way, yet keep their relationship hidden. Gem told her over lunch yesterday she was stressing over Project Pine because Mr Li was MIA and Sharon was putting pressure on her to get documents from CNA for some investment application in Australia. She could see Gem hunching over her mobile in her room, most probably playing Sudoku. Gem said this was her only stress relief before coming to Beijing and discovering foot massage.

It was time for a smoke. She took the lift down to the lobby and walked out the revolving doors, breathing in whatever fresh air was available on a typically polluted Beijing day. She knew smoking added to the damage done by the pollution but she'd been smoking since first year at university and had never found a good enough reason to kick the habit.

Just as she was about to light her cigarette, she saw Joe's driver walking towards the building. She had to call out a couple of times before Old Xu heard her. She offered him one of her cigarettes which he declined, taking out a stick from his own packet of Red Wall.

"How're things going with you, little Wang?" Old Xu asked after taking a drag on his cigarette.

"It's going ok. Not too busy with the partners away in Europe," Charlotte replied matter of factly. "When is our boss coming back?"

Old Xu thought for about five seconds before saying, "Little Ding [Cream] texted me this morning to say I have to pick him up from the airport on Thursday around 10pm from Terminal 1."

"How is Little Ding these days? I haven't seen her in the office since Joe took off to Amsterdam," Charlotte asked, feigning innocence.

“I think she's unwell. The last time I took her to Chaoyang Hospital, she didn't come back out, had to be hospitalised,” Old Xu mumbled as his cigarette hung from his lips.

“That sounds serious. Do you know which ward she's staying at? I'd like to go visit her.”

“I dropped her off at the Maternity department,” Old Xu mumbled, a little unwillingly, thought Charlotte.

“I can call up the Maternity department to find out which ward she's in,” Charlotte said quickly, knowing it would be difficult to continue a conversation about female health issues with Old Xu. Men of his generation would sooner jump off a bridge than discuss female anatomy with a woman.

Old Xu remembered the reason he'd been heading in this direction, and asked Charlotte to sort out his invoices since she had time today. Even though this was Cream's job, Charlotte often agreed to help Old Xu out. Cream hadn't been paying much attention to work lately and Old Xu had often had to come into the office to ask her about his reimbursements. Road tolls could easily add up to Old Xu's monthly salary, so he couldn't afford for reimbursements to be delayed.

They put out their respective unfinished cigarettes and headed into the building.

26. Still mid May 2012

Joe was still upset when his plane touched down in Beijing. He'd spent the flight thinking about his conversation with the Empress and later with Ed. Especially the one with Ed.

He didn't remember how he'd got back to his own room after the meeting with the Empress, and assumed it was the butler who had undressed him and put him into bed. He woke up at 3am with a sore jaw from grinding his teeth while he slept, something he did only when he was under immense pressure. At least his head was clear. He decided to order breakfast in his room instead of dining with the other partners at the buffet, so that he could think about his next course of action.

He knew the Empress was beyond his charm and persuasion. This was a lady who never took no for an answer, whether from a client or a colleague. He resented the fact that Mike was present at their 'discussion' but the Empress had probably felt it was necessary to have a witness, preferably someone who sided with her.

He called Ed and asked to meet him soon as possible. Ed was his usual cheerful and friendly self on the phone and told Joe to meet him for lunch in a restaurant within walking distance from the hotel.

When Joe walked into the restaurant, he was surprised to find that it was decked out in Southeast Asian style furniture, lighting and paintings. Ed waved to him from a corner table and Joe squeezed past chairs to get there. It was only quarter past one but the restaurant was already packed with diners.

"I hope you like Indonesian food, mate." Ed shook Joe's hand.

"I love Southeast Asian food, as long as it's not too spicy," Joe responded as good-naturedly as he could.

"Well, this restaurant serves up excellent Indonesian food bastardised for the Dutch. I've eaten here before and their beef *rendang* is authentic in every way except the spices don't tear your tongue into shreds." Ed let out a dignified hoot of laughter.

Joe chuckled along with Ed in spite of himself. He'd always liked Ed's company. Ed was always in good spirits and saw the silver lining in every cloud. He had stopped practicing law five years ago, preferring to focus on his strength – courting and keeping clients. The Empress was in charge of running the firm, but Ed kept the firm alive. In addition to the clients he'd inherited from his father, he'd turned his university mates, rugby teammates and their spouses into the firm's clients. Men and women alike were drawn to him and he relished being around people. Joe often wished he had a personality more like Ed's – charismatic, jovial, fun to be around.

After they ordered their food and drinks, they caught each other up on their personal lives. Ed was onto his third marriage with a yoga instructor half his age who he'd met at a dinner party. He told Joe all the benefits of doing yoga, which included feeling younger, looking hotter and performing much better in bed. Joe complimented Ed's glowing skin and trim figure, which Ed was quick to brush away.

When they were both halfway through their meals, Joe thought it was the right time to raise his true agenda.

“I had a meeting with Mel yesterday.” Joe paused for effect. Ed’s expression changed almost instantly into a mixture of annoyance and discomfort.

“What was the meeting about then?” Ed asked when he realized Joe was not volunteering more information.

“She said you were present when the issue was discussed so you know what the meeting was about.”

Ed shifted uneasily in his seat, checked his mobile phone and cleared his throat. “So she’s said it, has it? I wouldn’t expect anything less from Mel. The firm’s treated you in a very shabby manner, old chap. Especially after all these years you’ve been with us.”

So he is on my side, Joe thought, his mood improved. “I’m so glad you appreciate what I’ve done for the firm. I built up Potts & Crouch in China from nothing. Nothing!” Joe’s face went red as if for emphasis.

“Mate, do you want the whole restaurant to know about this shabby business?” Ed said, gesturing to Joe to keep his voice down. Ed had always been mortified about scenes in a public place. This was also why he didn’t have children. “Joe, let’s calm down and talk about this like grown-ups.”

Joe could still feel the heat of his anger on his face as he took a deep breath and sipped his beer. He could see his outburst had taken Ed by surprise. Ed had only ever seen his confident and gregarious side in the six years they’d known each other. In fact, all the partners had only ever seen his confident and gregarious side and would’ve been as shocked as Ed at his outburst today.

Ed asked a waiter to bring them both glasses of cold water before turning back to Joe. “You should know I spoke up for you at the partners’ meeting. I was the only one to speak up for you but I did it anyway. I know that China is a tough market to crack, and the firm’s done well to have the standing and reputation it has in China. It’ll be difficult for Potts & Crouch to find someone else as qualified and dedicated to the firm as you are, Joe. But the other partners were fixated on the numbers and the withdrawal of five other big-name European firms from China. They couldn’t see past their fucking beaks, that’s what it is.”

Ed was interrupted by the waiter who brought their water. Joe took a sip of water. After what felt like an eternity, Joe said, “So after all this time of me slogging my guts out in Beijing, the firm has decided it’s time to take care of home ground. That’s it, isn’t it?” Ed nodded gravely.

“When China first opened up to foreign law firms, all the law firms wanted in. When Melanie approached me to head up P&C’s Beijing office, she was optimistic, farsighted and visionary. P&C wasn’t the first, but it definitely wasn’t the last, to establish a presence in China, and it’s taken me years to build up the firm’s reputation and client base. The money’s been difficult to come by, but we’re not the only foreign law firm not raking in millions in China. I just

need another two years to start turning in serious profits, but instead I'm being told to get lost. It doesn't make sense, Ed.

"I guess Mike was sent to Beijing to take over from me?" Joe asked. Ed looked Joe in the eye but neither acknowledged nor denied. Then his iPhone rang. He looked at the caller ID and told Joe he had to take this call outside. Joe nodded his understanding.

While Ed was on the phone, Joe replied to the twenty emails he'd received in the last hour and asked the waiter for the bill. He paid with the firm's Amex and left the restaurant. He gestured to Ed, who was still on the phone, that he'd paid the bill and that he was leaving. Ed mouthed thanks and waved goodbye.

Joe went to the office the day after he returned to Beijing, anxious to deal with Project Pine – or at least what remained of it. He'd received regular email updates from Sharon when he was in Amsterdam and knew about Mr Li's disappearance and Sharon's inability to reach Mr Qu and Mr Ning. Sharon had spoken to Kenneth and his colleagues at D&V; they were also having difficulties reaching anyone at CNA. Joe had to save this deal if he was going to secure his next position with better terms than at Potts & Crouch. He'd already made a list of friends he was going to invite to lunch over the next two weeks to discuss precisely this issue.

Sharon saw Joe walk past her office just as she was taking off her jacket. He gestured for her to come to his office. He had just taken off his suit jacket and put down his briefcase when Sharon walked into his office and sat down in front of his desk. She asked Joe about his trip while glancing at emails on her BlackBerry. Joe spoke when he finally sat down behind his desk. "Melanie told me I only have six months left with the firm."

Sharon stopped scrolling through her emails and paused for what seemed like a full five seconds before she looked at Joe. She saw lines across his forehead which hadn't been there before he flew to Amsterdam and bags under his eyes, betraying his lack of sleep. She wasn't sure how to reply to Joe's statement, something she wasn't used to. She coughed to fill the silence before speaking in Mandarin.

"Wow ... no one saw this coming ... did she give any reasons?"

"She said the Beijing office has been operating at a loss for long enough. She obviously thinks Mike taking over my role will turn this office around. That old bitch is just like all the foreigners who've never lived in China – ignorant and stupid." Joe's face was flushed and the veins at his temples were bulging.

"I thought they were perfectly fine with the office not making money as long as we kept a book of high-profile state-owned enterprises as clients. They of all people should know it takes time to build a profitable practice, especially in China!"

"Melanie and the other partners were more concerned with Charters and McMasters leaving China. They took that as a sign that things had to change in our office. I tried to plead with Melanie but she refused to listen. I asked Ed what happened. He spoke up for me before

the other partners but he was the only one. The others all sided with the Empress. I thought I had more friends in the partnership than just Ed!”

“Well we knew Mike was posted to our office for a reason.” Sharon was thinking aloud more than speaking to Joe. But it set Joe off.

“Six years, Sharon. I spent six years slogging and building up the office from nothing and this is how the bitch treats me. And the other partners. Haven’t I referred work to them in the past? Haven’t I been kind to them? And this is how they repay me? This is how they return my kindness and friendship?” Joe was shouting by this point. Sharon burrowed into the chair as if hiding from the force of his wrath.

Sharon knew her boss trusted none of the partners, including the Empress and Ed. He’d thought he could hide that behind a mask of friendliness. She’d known through the grapevine throughout the years that the other partners despised Joe and saw straight through his façade. But whenever she attempted to drop hints about this to Joe, he would either laugh it off or change topics. She knew his ego was too fragile to accept what she was trying to tell him. It was a pity that he had to find out through the Empress because Sharon knew the Empress wouldn’t have held back any punches.

Joe eventually stopped ranting and started taking deep breaths to calm himself down. Sharon thought this was a good time to ask him about his plans.

“I’m going to make a few calls to friends today after dealing with Project Pine. You’re coming with me wherever I end up going to next. You know my practice can’t function without you, Sharon.”

“Well that goes without saying, Joe. You’ve been a good boss to me. I have no intention of staying with P&C if you’re not here. It’d be pointless.” Sharon comforted Joe with as much sincerity as she could muster. I guess I won’t be escaping from the monster soon, she thought.

“So Sharon, our goal for the next few weeks is to make a copy of all client contact details and active client files. Is Bing in the office? I’ll need to talk to him about this project.”

“He’s not in the office. I heard he’s on holidays with Sheila.” Sharon thought it best that Joe know Bing was not entirely to be trusted with this confidential task.

As she expected, Joe said, “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier, Sharon? If he’s in bed with Mike’s right-hand girl, then he can’t be trusted. I’ll have to call in someone from outside. Damn! Why is everyone on Mike’s side these days?”

“I’m not,” Sharon said. She checked the time on her BlackBerry and decided it was time to change the topic. “We have to go into a telephone conference with the VC guys in less than ten minutes. That’s enough time to talk about Project Pine.”

“You won’t believe this, Sharon, but Mr Qu called me right before I boarded the flight to Amsterdam. He asked for Gem to be taken off Project Pine because he didn’t think she was qualified. Do you know what that’s about?”

“Mr Qu called Gem a lot a while back. I think Gem blocked his number on her mobile because he started calling her landline. Charlotte fielded a few of his calls. I think he was asking Gem out for dinner or something.” Sharon wasn't entirely sure about what she was telling Joe. Cream had heard snatches of Charlotte's conversations with Mr Qu and relayed her suspicions to Sharon.

“That sounds about right. He became besotted with this secretary after visiting our office last year and called her every day asking her out for dinner. He only stopped when her boyfriend turned up at his office. He he ... that dirty old man.” Joe sniggered. “He must be desperate if he's interested in Gem. She looks like a man compared to that secretary he was after last year! He must've lost his marbles. Ha ha ha!” Joe guffawed and Sharon found it difficult to stifle her giggles.

After he stopped laughing, Joe said, “I'll deal with Mr Qu. I heard through the grapevine CDB won't be funding any more of CNA's overseas acquisitions. This could be why Mr Li is now incommunicado.”

“So that's what it is! I called Mr Ning and Mr Qu last week to ask them about Mr Li. Mr Qu said he's seen Mr Li around in the office and he will speak to him. Mr Ning said Mr Li's been fired for messing up a previous project. I'm not sure who I should believe!”

Joe shook his head. “Leave this to me, Sharon. I have a bad feeling the project's dead and we won't be getting paid for the work we've done for it. How much WIP is on the clock now?”

“About one million renminbi.”

Joe was shocked. “How the hell did we accumulate that much WIP? We've only been working on it for a month!”

“CNA demanded that the Australian firm provide a preliminary due diligence report ASAP, which they then insisted had to be translated into Chinese. The draft report was over 200 pages long and all three translators have been working on it for the last two weeks. Gem and I have been working on this project pretty much full time since it began. CNA is not exactly a low-maintenance client.”

Joe's phone rang. Cream informed him that the VC guys were requesting his presence on the conference call that had started two minutes ago. Joe hung up without saying another word and pressed the speaker button. Sharon recited the number to dial and they were on the conference call in just under a minute.

Chapter 27 What's Going On?

Gem Chu's personal blog

Private entry (to make it public, click [here](#).)

15 May 2012

Joe is finally back and he didn't look like he was in a good mood. At all. Saw Sharon in his room. At one point I swear I could hear Joe screaming through the wall! What was that about? I hope I'm not in any further trouble. I'm so glad the work I did for J&J went well. I could only work on it after finishing what I had to do for Project Pine at 10 pm that night. I surprised myself at how coherent I was when I sent the email to Joe at 3 am. Most importantly, Joe was happy with my work, which didn't happen very often

Dinner with Charlotte was very interesting. Cream is finally going to marry her boyfriend and has asked Charlotte to be her bridesmaid. Charlotte said she agreed to it because she had no choice. Liar! She just wants pictures in a bridesmaid dress to post on her Kaixin page. Show-off!

Cream is getting married to give her baby a father. There's no other reason she's marrying her boyfriend after having dated for such a short time. Charlotte said Joe's driver told her he'd driven Cream to see the gynae a couple of times. Cream's bump is already showing, even though she tries to hide it under loose clothing.

Hard to believe Cream's fiancé doesn't have any suspicions about the baby's paternity. He wasn't even here when the baby was conceived!

Chatted with Nathan again tonight. Our chats are becoming a daily thing now. It's the only thing I look forward to these days. It was painful when we didn't chat last Friday because he was on a bus to some obscure village. My withdrawal symptoms were much worse than when I'm deprived of coffee. Still can't tell if he likes me back. This is really killing me. Maybe I should just stop chatting with him altogether, make a clean break ...

17 May 2012

Joe asked to talk to me today. It was a closed-door conversation. I was really worried when he asked me to close the door but relaxed after he asked me what happened between me and Qu. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked like he'd aged a few years after spending two weeks in Amsterdam. He must have had a lot of fun with the other partners.

I told him what transpired in the most objective way possible, assuring him my decision not to be Qu's mistress was really the best for P&C. Joe had this amused

and condescending smile on his face the whole time I was talking, which made me feel really uncomfortable.

After I finished telling him my side of the story, he said he understood and told me not to take calls from Qu in the future. He then told me Project Pine was very likely not going to proceed, but didn't go further than that. He gave me a new project to work on and said he'd forward the emails to me so I could start work on it. I was grateful to leave his office and get stuck into some real work. My billables haven't been great lately.

Got an email from Mike after getting back to my office, asking me to work on a project for a new client he'd just signed up because Sheila was away on holidays. I thought about it for a minute before deciding not to inform Joe. I've seen enough to know these two men didn't like each other. Sheila's hinted at the possibility of Mike running the Beijing office. That's not happening unless and until Joe either steps down or leaves the firm; both distant possibilities in my view.

Nathan not online today. Suffering withdrawal symptoms.

1 June 2012

Joe hasn't sent me a single email since our talk last week, not even about the project he said he wanted me to work on. What the hell is happening?

After working in P&C for a year, I am absolutely certain about this – I hate working for Joe. He is probably the most inconsistent and blatantly biased partner I've ever worked for. Project Arial, for example. One day he asked me to review the English translation of the lease. The next day he told me off for not sending him an email listing the issues I spotted from the lease. Kelly overheard him both days and thought he was insane to tell me off for something he hadn't asked me to do.

Then there's his blatant partiality. In his eyes, Sharon can do no wrong. I don't have anything against Sharon. In fact, I used to like her quite a lot. But the more time I spend with her, the more fake I think she is. She talks to everyone as if she genuinely cares for us, but she really doesn't give a fuck about any of us. She's definitely Joe's spy, gathering information that we'd be too afraid to tell him in person.

Anyway, I haven't heard much from Joe, Sharon or Desmond. Sharon hasn't been stopping by my office for a social chitchat lately. Desmond's treatment of me hasn't changed much but I've noticed a heightened level of hostility from him. Sometimes I swear he sees me as his competitor in the office. It's ludicrous, but it seems nothing I say or do can change his opinion of me. He's become increasingly cold towards me since Charlotte's allergic episode with red roses, which apparently he sent. Perhaps he's jealous of my friendship with Charlotte. ... Well whatever he's looking for, he won't be getting it from Charlotte, that's for sure.

Met up with Nathan tonight and told him my fears about my job. It's the fifth or sixth time we've met without Francis. I really enjoy talking to Nathan. He's so calm, collected and caring. Turned out he also knows a thing or two about corporate culture, having worked at the top advertising firm in London for a decade and a half. He said it was best for me to find out through the grapevine about the sudden change in Sharon's, Desmond's and Joe's attitudes towards me. He advised against confrontation because he didn't think they would be willing to be honest with me. They probably expect me to already know what I did wrong, so asking about it will just make them think even less of me. That was his experience with the Chinese, apparently. I'd never seen him so serious, so I knew he meant every word.

What he said today kept me awake. I thought writing it all down would help me get back to sleep, but unfortunately it hasn't. Time for insomnia remedy number 2: hot chocolate.

Chapter 28. Early June 2012

WeChat conversation on Gem Chu's mobile:

Charlotte -> hey Gem, whazzup?

Gem -> hey, am in the office on a concall. ☹

Charlotte -> oh no! I'm with Charlotte in Vienna bridal salon looking at bridal gowns.

2:01pm

Charlotte -> did you see the picture I just sent you? What do you think of the dress?

Gem -> err ... no comment. I wouldn't be seen dead in that.

Charlotte -> my thoughts precisely!! That was already the better out of the two she chose. The other dress looked like she was wearing an animal on her back.

Gem -> :-0

Charlotte -> she's talking to her fiancé on the phone now. She doesn't look happy.

Charlotte -> She's crying! WTF?

Gem -> oh ... what could possibly be happening?

Charlotte -> She's in the changing room but I can hear what they're saying. Harry's parents just had a *fengshui* master to look over the apartment his parents bought for them.

Charlotte -> Cream boasted to all the secretaries that she will be living in the top floor penthouse of Boya Gardens. It's a regular feature in the gossip rags, 'cos that's where rich men keep their girlfriends.

Gem -> Cream is sillier than I thought she was

Charlotte -> yeah she's second to none in the office. I can't believe she's repeating everything she's hearing from Harry so loudly. The salesgirls are all listening in!

Gem-> go tell her to keep it down ... quick

2:15pm

Charlotte -> that was a massive fail ...

Gem -> what was?

Charlotte -> I went over to Cream and gestured to her to keep it down. Her mascara was running down her face so I presumed she didn't see me. She's still at the same volume.

Gem-> oh well at least you tried, girl. Wonder what's making her so upset??

Charlotte -> *fengshui* master said according to Harry's date of birth and eight characters of his horoscope, it's not auspicious for him to marry anyone now. If Harry marries now and moves into the apartment, he will meet an early death.

Gem -> that's a load of bull. How can anyone believe that crap?!

2:30pm

Charlotte -> unluckily for Cream, Harry's parents are the typical superstitious southern Chinese. They are adamant that this *fengshui* master has never been wrong in the past and so they are inclined to believe him. Cream is f**ked.

Charlotte -> Cream just came out of the changing room. Chat with you later Gem!

Master Wu's words rang in Mrs Su's head as she lay on her bed trying to get to sleep. And arguing with Harry about it over the phone hadn't helped. She looked at her husband in disbelief as he snored, already deep in sleep. It's incredible how little you care for your son's marriage, Mrs Su thought, as she tossed and turned.

Master Wu had never been wrong. That was why she'd flown him in from Chengdu to look over the apartment intended for Harry and his wife to live in after marriage. Both Mrs Su and her husband were concerned about the insane rise in property prices and the government's increasing control over the property market in Beijing, which is why they had bought the apartment in Boya Garden near Chaoyang Park when Harry was still in Peking University. It was already very expensive when they bought the property off-the-plan, and yet the price had doubled by the time the developers were ready to hand them the keys. The apartment was on the fifteenth floor, with unhindered views of Chaoyang Park from the living room, kitchen and each of the four bedrooms. Only the best would do for their only son.

What could Master Wu possibly mean when he said Harry couldn't move into the apartment in the near future? He said there was no problem with the *fengshui* of the apartment but it just wasn't the right time for Harry to get married and move in. Master Wu only had the best interests of the Su family at heart, she was positive about that. Perhaps he was implying that Harry shouldn't marry Cream?

Mrs Su decided to get a cup of hot water. Her husband's intermittent loud snoring, which resembled the sound of a lawnmower, made it harder for her to fall asleep.

As she stood in the kitchen sipping hot water from a mug, her thoughts drifted to Cream. She'd discreetly asked her uni mates who worked in law firms about Cream's reputation. Most of them hadn't heard of Cream but knew of her boss. They did not have good things to say about

him. They said he had a reputation for being ruthless in business and a having voracious appetite for gorgeous young women. One of them told her it was an open secret he was having an affair with his secretary and that she was pregnant. I didn't like her before and I like her much less now, Mrs Su thought. If Cream is carrying her boss's child, then she's marrying my boy only over my dead body.

Instead of all the nice girls I've introduced to him, my boy chooses instead to go outside and fall in love with a woman he met on his own. Not just any woman either. He had to fall in love with a bombshell with a shady background and an even shadier lifestyle. Mrs Su had seen many women just like Cream hovering around Harry, some of them girls who were still studying at university. She was realistic about her son's looks and charms and knew it was not those qualities the women were attracted to. It was a pity none of them knew how to make Harry happy. They lacked what Cream had in abundance: experience with men. Mrs Su sighed as she put down her cup.

These thoughts finally took their toll on Mrs Su. She yawned loudly then checked the time. It was already 3:30am. Definitely time to go to bed. I'll figure out a way to make my son see Cream for who she is, Mrs Su thought as she padded towards her bedroom.

Chapter 29. The Public Secret

Ever since Joe came back from Amsterdam, Gem's been noticing clusters of lawyers, legal assistants and secretaries huddling together and whispering. She also noticed Sharon and Desmond were having more and more closed-door meetings with Joe and they looked increasingly serious as the days progressed. On quite a few occasions, Gem tried to get them to tell her what was going on, but they would change the topic or find an excuse to go back to their desks.

Then one day, Kelly came by her desk and casually asked if she'd like to come for lunch with her, Alien and Don. Gem noticed Kelly's invitation was only extended to her and not to Sheila. She also knew Kelly well enough now to know she normally ate a packed lunch in the office with the secretaries and it was rare to see her go out with any other colleagues for lunch. Gem told Kelly she'd love to, picked up her handbag and followed Kelly out of the office. Sheila went on working as if she didn't see Gem leave the room.

Gem, Kelly, Don and Alien left the office and walked for almost twenty minutes northwest to a hole-in-the-wall Hunan restaurant that Gem had never been to before. They sat down on stools around a wooden table in a room the size of Gem's kitchen. Gem could smell the chilli, garlic and oil wafting from the kitchen as Don ordered the food with some input from Alien. The fact that they didn't have to look at menu meant they came here regularly to eat.

Before the dishes arrived, they made some small talk and Gem caught up with the legal assistants about their work and plans for the upcoming Mid-Autumn and National Day holidays, which were about a week apart this year. Kelly was waiting for her US tourist visa to be issued so she could visit her boyfriend in Los Angeles. Alien was going to visit her family in Haerbin. Don was taking his latest girlfriend on a shopping holiday in Hong Kong. Gem mentioned her plan to visit Fenghuang but left out the part about visiting Francis' parents and pretending to be his girlfriend.

Ten minutes of silence ensued after the dishes arrived as they started eating. Even the spices were overpowering, Gem enjoyed the dishes. Her favourite dish was the stir-fried cured pork with chilli. She was still eating even after Kelly and Alien had stopped. Don had a healthy appetite that matched hers.

Kelly brought up the true purpose of this lunch after putting down her chopsticks. "Have you all decided whether you're going or staying?"

Alien was the first to respond after sipping tea. "Sharon's asked me to go with Joe to the new firm, but she didn't tell me which firm it was. I told her I'll make a decision after she tells me which firm Joe's moving to."

So this is why they've been having all those meetings, thought Gem as she picked up another slice of meat with her chopsticks. I mustn't let them know I didn't know about this beforehand, or else I'll lose face, she thought.

Don spoke after swallowing a mouthful of rice, "I've only been with P&C for a year so I'm going to stay, regardless of where Joe goes."

“Aren’t you worried Mike won’t give you any work in the future?” Kelly asked Don.

“I’m not worried. After Joe leaves, the firm will hire another partner. I can work for the new partner,” Don said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t think it’s that simple. Joe spoke to me last week about going with him to the new firm. He said I will get a better package at the new firm. I like working for Joe so I will go with him to the new firm,” Kelly said.

“You’re already decided? You don’t even know which firm he’s moving to yet!” Alien spoke with concern.

“I know, Alien, but what choice do I have? I don’t know Mike and Sheila very well, they don’t give me work and I doubt they will give me work in the future. My boyfriend is telling me to go with Joe because they are very good friends. So I don’t really have a choice.”

To divert attention away from herself, Kelly turned to Gem and said, “What about you, Gem? Are you going with Joe to the new firm?”

“Joe spoke to me last week too,” Gem lied. “I told him I needed time to consider.” She decided it’s best left at that.

“Kelly, you should learn from Gem and take time to think about your decision. Don’t be so rash!” said Alien.

“Alien’s right, you know? I doubt Joe is willingly leaving P&C. I think he was asked to resign,” said Don quietly just in case there were other P&C colleagues in the restaurant.

“I believe that,” Gem said. “Remember that CNA project I was working on? Joe sent a bill to CNA like a month ago and they haven’t paid even a cent. I heard from Sharon CNA’s always like that and they are our biggest client!”

“I worked on this project for another SOE client with Sharon last year,” said Don, “The finance lady told me Joe only managed to get them to pay 10% of our invoice! If the collections are so low, whoever’s financing our office can’t be too happy.”

“And I thought the firm was doing well,” Alien murmured. “Now I’m even more confused than before about staying or going.”

“I remember, my boyfriend mentioning to me a few times in the past that our office has the worst billing and collections amongst P&C global offices. If what you’re saying is true, I’m not surprised that Joe is being asked to go,” Kelly spoke without realising she was thinking aloud.

“Ladies, whether you choose to stay or go, I want you all to know I will miss working with three of the prettiest girls I’ve ever met,” Don said with sincerity.

Touched by his proclamation, Gem, Kelly and Alien told him they will miss him and one another too and they promised to meet for lunch at least once before Kelly left with Joe. When the bill came, Alien exclaimed it was already 2 pm, which meant they’ve been away from the

office for two hours and counting. They quickly settled the bill and hailed a cab to take them back to Mandarin Centre.

Chapter 30. Mid-Autumn Festival

It was finally time to travel with Francis to his hometown to ‘meet the parents’. Francis insisted on buying Gem’s ticket even though Gem offered to buy her own.

Francis’s parents were already at the arrival hall when she and Francis walked out. She saw immediately Francis’s resemblance to his mother, although her complexion was darker. Francis’s parents looked like they were in their early sixties, uncomfortable in their best clothes. Mrs Wu looked her over with approval and commented on her height, while Mr Wu ushered everyone to the parking lot where their car was parked.

The drive to Fenghuang village took about an hour, but it felt like an eternity to Gem. After the customary questions about the flight, whether they ate on the plane and whether they were still hungry, Mrs Wu began bombarding Gem with questions about her provenance, her family; basically her life history.

“How tall are you, Gem? Did you use to play basketball in school?”

“How old are you? You look like you just graduated from university!”

“Fan Fan (Francis’ Chinese nickname) said you are a lawyer. You are such a smart girl!”

“So ... how much money do you make?” Francis told Mrs Wu off before Gem could answer. Just as well. Gem had prepared an answer that was guaranteed to make Mrs Wu happy because the number would’ve been a third of her real salary. Charlotte had told her to do this to preserve face for Francis. Gem found it hard to understand why this was necessary, but now had an inkling of the reason.

Mr Wu then said, for Gem’s benefit, that they were almost home; they just needed to walk another ten minutes to get to their house in the old town. Gem had been expecting this after reading online that Fenghuang was a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But nothing she’d read or seen online could have prepared her for seeing Fenghuang for the first time.

The river was lined with ancient wooden buildings of different heights. The final rays of sunset fell gently on the water and illuminated the smoke billowing out of this chimney and that. The stone path they walked along to get to the Wu residence was worn and rugged and definitely reserved only for walking, as Gem could see. Mr and Mrs Wu conversed in the local dialect to friends they met along the way and introduced Gem to all of them. Gem smiled at everyone, curious about how Mr and Mrs Wu introduced her to their friends.

The enjoyable walk through the old town ended when they arrived at the front door of the Wu residence. Gem was delighted to see the front door faced steps that led to the river. Francis’s childhood home was one of the modern concrete additions at the periphery of the old town. After lowering her head to enter the quaint front door, Gem walked into the kitchen which was equipped with running water and electricity.

Mrs Wu showed Gem the way to her room, which was when Gem realized how big the Wu's terrace house actually was. Mrs Wu walked through the kitchen, crossed the living room and opened a door that led to a charming tiny courtyard. "This is where Fan Fan's father grows his vegetables and fruits," said Mrs Wu with pride. Gem praised the appearance of the tomatoes and green beans so enthusiastically she felt she sounded fake. Thank God Mrs Wu couldn't tell.

Mrs Wu walked to right side of the courtyard and opened a door to a bedroom, which she said was where Gem would be sleeping for the next few days. After Gem thanked Mrs Wu, she was left alone to have a shower and a rest. Gem was more grateful for the alone time than the rest Mrs Wu was convinced she needed.

Gem's mobile phone let out its usual alert for an incoming WeChat message. She dug her phone out of her handbag and swiped at it a couple of times before getting to Charlotte's message.

[formatted in chat balloons]

Charlotte: Gem, how's it going? Francis's parents like you? Xx ;-)

Gem: OMG, they asked me about everything! Francis stopped his mom when she started asking me the size of my underwear.

Charlotte: LOL

Gem: Fenghuang, on the other hand, is beautiful.
Let me send you a picture I took just now.

<picture sent>

Charlotte: Fenghuang's always been on my list of destinations to visit. I wish I had the time and money to go!

Gem: Just buy 2 pairs of shoes less a week,
you'll be all right *thumbs up emoticon* **[include emoticon]**

Charlotte: :-p

Charlotte: Can I call you, Gem? I want to ask you about something, and it's easier to talk on the phone.

Gem: Sure ... you're lucky Mr and Mrs Wu are busy cooking dinner right ...

Gem's phone rang even before she could finish typing the sentence.

"That was quick."

"I just bought a new phone, he he," Charlotte boasted.

"So what can't you message me about?"

“Oh yeah. Cream and Joe had a huge fight in Joe’s office a few nights ago. They probably didn’t know I was still in the office. I could make out ‘baby’, ‘200,000’ and ‘go’. Cream fled the office shortly afterwards, sobbing as she walked out of the office.”

“Hmm. I’ve seen them angry at each other before in the office, especially recently,” Gem mused. “They’re normally fine the next day.”

“Well, guess what?” Charlotte interjected. “Cream hasn’t been in the office since that night. I overheard Shelly telling Sharon in the toilet that Joe was on a firing spree, and Cream was the first to go.”

Gem shook her head at her colleagues’ choice of location when sharing juicy gossip.

“I called Cream straight after getting out of the toilet. Shelly and Sharon both looked at me strangely even after I put on my best ‘I didn’t hear anything’ expression.”

Gem broke out laughing, visualising the scene. Charlotte giggled when she heard Gem laughing.

“Did you hear them mention any other names?” Gem asked, sobering up.

“Hmm ... let me think. I don’t think I heard any other names. They began lowering their voices when they heard my feet shuffling. Are you worried you’re on the list?”

Gem nodded to herself, but said only, “I’m just curious, that’s all. Don’t worry about it.”

“So I called Cream straight after I got out of the toilet. When she didn’t pick up, I sent her an sms.” Charlotte paused for breath.

“And?”

“That was the first day. Today’s the third day. I still haven’t heard back from her. I’m getting worried, Gem.”

“Has she done something like this before?”

“For as long as I’ve known Cream, she’s been glued to her iPhone. She picks up calls on the second ring and is addicted to texting. It’s not like her not to pick up the phone or reply to messages.”

“Have you spoken to Cream’s fiancé? Maybe he knows what’s happened to her.”

“I met him once, but I never got his contact details. I never thought it was necessary since I had no need to contact him directly.” Charlotte’s tone was tinged with regret.

“Hmm ... in Australia, I would go to the police and file a missing person report. Can you report this to the police?”

“I hate dealing with the police. I doubt they can do anything.”

“Well at least give it a try. Don’t you want to find out what happened to her?”

Charlotte went silent momentarily and then let out a huge sigh. “All right. You’re right. I’ll go to the police today.”

“Hey, Francis is in my room now, waiting for me to go have dinner with his parents. I’ve got to hang up, Chazza.”

“Of course! Please say hello to Francis for me. Bye, girl!”

Dinner with the Wu family turned out to be more delightful than Gem had expected. Mrs Wu had made stir-fried homemade duck blood sausages, sour soup with fish from a local river, chestnut chicken, tofu and stir-fried local mushrooms. The love of food was something Gem did not have to pretend, and she showed it by taking pictures of every dish before anyone started eating and accepting a second helping of rice to go with the dishes. The dishes were either flavoured with chillies or in a thick tomato-based broth and tasted either sour or spicy or both. Gem thought the closest she’d ever had to Fenghuang cuisine would be Thai food without the sugar and coconut. Mrs Wu was delighted to see her ‘future daughter-in-law’ enjoying her cooking and encouraged her to eat more.

Francis was glad to see Gem enjoying herself, and ate as much of his mother’s cooking as his new diet allowed. Francis obliged his father by drinking shots of his homemade rice wine, since traditionally women did not drink.

After dinner, Mr and Mrs Wu insisted that the youngsters need not help with the cleaning up. Francis took Gem out for a walk to show her the evening sights of his hometown.

They were barely out of Mr and Mrs Wu’s earshot when Francis began whining to Gem.

“I’m so sorry about my parents, Gem! Oh my God, they were so rude!”

Gem gestured to Francis to lower his voice. “Your parents may hear you. Don’t worry about it, Fan Fan. It wasn’t so bad.” Gem used Francis’s pet name, hoping that would pacify him.

“The last girl I brought back, they didn’t ask her so many questions. I didn’t like her very much. She was someone I paid to come back to Fenghuang with me over the Spring Festival holidays.”

“Oh my goodness, I didn’t know they give you so much pressure, Francis. Have you ever tried to tell your parents about your orientation?”

“Never. They won’t believe me anyway. Their only son, a homosexual! No grandchildren! They wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“Well if you don’t try, how would you know, Francis?” Gem asked, convinced she was right.

“Gem, I know my parents. They only went to primary school in the village. They’ve spent their whole life in this village. All they know is in this village. And Fenghuang is not Australia.”

Gem knew what Francis meant, but persisted. “If you don’t tell them, they’ll just keep asking you when you’re getting married and giving them a grandchild.”

“Not if I bring a different girl to see them every other year,” said Francis without missing a beat.

Gem suddenly felt sorry for Francis as she saw what lay ahead for him. Getting a different girl back here to see his parents every other year. Constantly telling lies and putting up an act. It’s tragic his parents may never know the truth about their son.

Francis broke the silence by asking, “How are things going with you and Nathan?” Gem was slightly take aback by the question but remained calm.

“Why do you ask, Francis? Nathan and I are just friends. I thought you and him are seeing each other?”

“Nathan is not gay.”

“Really? Are you sure?” Gem felt sad for Francis but also happy for herself.

“Yes, he told me a few weeks back. One night when I tried to seduce him, he played along with me until I began unbuttoning his jeans. He pushed me away, firmly but gently, and said he wasn’t interested in me that way.” Francis said in a resigned tone.

Gem struggled for the right words to comfort Francis, but before she said anything, he continued. “Nathan’s not the first guy I mistook for a gay. Can you tell whether or not a foreigner’s gay, Gem? My gaydar’s pretty good on Chinese men, but not so accurate with foreigners. I wonder why that is...”

“My gaydar is hopeless too, Francis. I worked with this guy in Brisbane for two years and I only found out he was gay when he brought his boyfriend to my farewell party!” Gem laughed at the memory.

Francis turned to Gem with a broad smile, then took her hand in his. His parents would have no doubt that they were in a relationship if they saw their silhouette at that time. But Francis had other ideas.

“I think Nathan likes you, Gem.”

“Look, just because he’s not gay doesn’t mean he’s interested in me. You watch way too many Korean TV serials.”

“How can you be so thick? I know you chat with him everyday online. Every time we go partying and you’re not with us, he looks a little sad. After a few shots, he starts talking about you like a lovesick puppy.”

Gem was surprised by this revelation, but her lawyer’s instincts were still very much alert. “Yes I do chat with Nathan everyday, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

Francis was about to continue arguing his point when he was greeted by someone who turned out to be his high school mate. He introduced Gem to this high school mate and they continued their walk along the river. Francis and his friend pointed out the interesting sights in Fenghuang to Gem which Gem photographed religiously. Her favourite was a boat laden with different coloured lanterns floating down the river towards them. The boat created soft ripples of red, orange and green, illuminated by the lanterns hanging on the boat and on the poles along the elevated shore.

Chapter 31 Bad News

CHINA CELEBRITY GOSSIP WEEKLY, page 5

Fiancee of Harry Su Commits Suicide for Love?

Ding Yanyan, also known as 'Cream', leapt from the window of her apartment on the tenth floor of Tiandiyuan in Xizhimen on Tuesday. She was rushed to the hospital within half an hour of the security guard calling the ambulance, but died on the operating table due to a severe loss of blood. Ding was eight months pregnant at the time of her death.

Ding was reportedly engaged to Harry Su, the only son of the Su family which owns the third-largest medical equipment producer in China, Kangning MedEq. Reliable sources from MedEq confirmed the engagement was the result of Ding's pregnancy and that Mr and Mrs Su did not agree with the match, preferring their son to marry a girl with a less dubious reputation.

From our investigations, it appeared Ding had quite the reputation as an escort of rich and powerful men. An employee of Potts & Crouch, the British law firm Ding was working at right before she committed suicide, confirmed that she was recently fired from her job after announcing to her boss she was getting married. A reliable source told China Celebrity Gossip Weekly that Ding was, in fact, having an affair with her boss, who became extremely upset when she announced her engagement to Harry Su.

In light of Ding's unsavoury personal history, it is no wonder Mr and Mrs Su had their reservations about her becoming a member of their family. Harry previously dated Yu Na, the only daughter of the owners of WHH Group, China's largest and most reputable pharmaceutical manufacturer. The relationship ended when Yu Na went to Harvard Business School to pursue her MBA studies. Mr and Mrs Su must have wished their son had chosen to marry a woman of Yu Na's calibre, instead of Ding.

The members of the Su family and the managing partner of Potts & Crouch refused interviews with Celebrity Gossip Weekly to discuss Ding's suicide.

Whatever the reason for Ding's suicide, we at Celebrity Gossip Weekly mourn the loss of such a young and beautiful woman.

Chapter 32. Ripples

Harry got on the first flight to Beijing when he couldn't get through to Cream after having called and texted her for a day. He had been in Frankfurt negotiating the terms of a joint venture with a German manufacturer.

Mrs Su read about Cream's suicide in *Celebrity Gossip Weekly*. She felt a mixture of sadness and relief, sadness at Cream's decision to take her life but relieved that her only son wouldn't be marrying this woman.

She called her husband immediately, thinking he'd be happy to hear the news.

"So it really was Cream. I heard people talking about a heavily pregnant woman committing suicide but I didn't realise it was her," Mr Su mumbled. Mrs Su could barely make out his words and thought he sounded like he wasn't happy with the news.

"How do we tell Harry? He's on the plane right now."

It felt like an eternity to Mrs Su before her husband replied. "Best tell him the truth immediately. No point keeping this from him."

Harry was pleasantly surprised to see his parents at the Beijing airport arrival hall. The company kept the whole family so busy that it was rare for Harry to see his parents together other than over dinner together. If he hadn't been so tired after the flight, he probably would have thought his parents were up to something.

Mr Su patted Harry on the shoulder and asked him about his flight. Mrs Su stood on Harry's other side, looking him over as if checking he was all there. Harry smiled obligingly at both his parents and told them he had come back to see Cream because she wasn't picking up his calls. Mr and Mrs Su let him ramble all the way to the car.

Mr Su slid into the driver's seat. Instead of sitting next to him, Mrs Su got into the back seat with Harry, which Harry thought was strange. Mrs Su didn't wait long after Mr Su pulled out of the car park before breaking the news to Harry.

Initially, Harry laughed and told his mother to stop pulling his leg. When he realised his mother was serious, he stared at her, incredulous. He put his face in his hands and began to sob.

It pained Mrs Su to see her son so devastated and she wished she hadn't had to tell him. She put her arm around his shoulders and tried to comfort him. Mr Su heard everything and his heart ached as he listened to his son's sobs. He'd never had such strong feelings for any woman in his life, including his wife, so he couldn't understand why his son, his own flesh and blood, could love a woman so deeply. Perversely, he envied his son for experiencing love in a way he never had and probably never would.

"It's all my fault," Harry mumbled through his sobs. "I wasn't there when she needed me most." Choke. "If I had been here, I wouldn't have let her do this. Argghh ..."

“Oh Harry, what’s done cannot be undone. Don’t torture yourself over it.” Mrs Su tried to comfort him.

“I shouldn’t have told her what the *fengshui* master said,” Harry said to his mother. “She must have thought we wouldn’t be getting married because of what the *fengshui* master said!” Harry wailed.

“Don’t be silly, Harry. You were just being honest.”

Mr Su couldn’t bear it any longer. “Son, it wasn’t your child she was carrying.” He couldn’t believe how easily it came out of his mouth.

Harry didn’t hear it at first, but Mrs Su heard her husband loud and clear. The car was completely silent except for Harry’s sobs.

“Dear, how do you know?” Mrs Su asked, trying to try to look into her husband’s eyes via the rear-view mirror, to see if he was earnest. Mr Su kept his eyes on the road as he spoke. “I’ve met Cream quite a few times before, often over banquets with a lot of people. I’m not surprised she didn’t recognise me when we met. Remember Uncle Ma and Uncle Li?” They were officials from the Ministry of Health, old friends of Mr Su’s who often came to their house for dinner. Harry nodded dully, half-heartedly listening to his father.

“She has been with quite a few of Uncle Ma and Uncle Li’s friends. She moved in a circle of men a generation or two older than you, Harry, which is why you didn’t know about her background. Anyway, when you told me she was pregnant, I decided to find out once and for all if it was your baby. Uncle Li’s son married a girl who claimed she was pregnant with his baby. After the kid grew up, he was once taken to the hospital and diagnosed with some obscure genetic illness, which wasn’t passed down from Uncle Li’s family nor his son’s in-laws. Uncle Li went behind his son’s back and tested his grandson’s DNA. That’s how he worked out his grandson wasn’t his after all.”

Harry had stopped crying, although he was still full of anguish. He was listening attentively to his father, not sure what to think.

“I called up a few old friends from medical school, one of whom suggested I contact this clinic in LA who conducted DNA tests on unborn foetuses. They only needed the mother’s blood sample and your DNA. I paid Cream’s gynae who got her blood sample and got on a plane to LA to deliver the sample personally to the DNA testing clinic. He was worth every cent I paid.” Mr Su paused as he took the exit to Shunyi.

“Did you tell her?” Harry asked his father in a flat voice.

Mr Su took his time answering his son’s question, pretending to concentrate on driving. They were about twenty minutes from their home.

Harry repeated his question before Mr Su replied. “That’s not important. What’s more important was how I saved you from becoming a laughing stock in Beijing. Imagine bringing up another man’s child? Over my dead body!”

Mr Su's raised voice provoked Harry into shouting. Mrs Su, who had been too shocked to say anything during this exchange, tried to stop the increasingly heated argument between father and son. This man she'd been married to for more than thirty years had surprised her with this master stroke. And all this time, she'd thought he didn't care about their son. She was embarrassed at how little she'd thought of her husband.

The next thing she heard was the wheels screeching, then a crash. Her head jerked violently forwards. The car had come to a complete halt and there was complete silence. Then Harry broke the silence, groaning when he realised his spectacles had fallen off his face and he couldn't see. Mr Su made some noises indicating his discomfort, then unbuckled his seatbelt to check out the damage to the car.

Mr Su got back into the car shortly after and reported that he had hit a road sign, but luckily while driving at a low speed. There was a dent in the front bumper and the right headlight would have to be replaced. Mrs Su and Harry sat quietly in the backseat, this time with their seatbelts on. The next time they might not be so lucky.

When she returned to the office after the holidays, Charlotte saw a letter addressed to her on her desk. She couldn't remember the last time someone sent her a hard copy letter since she discovered email, so she was a little suspicious.

After sniffing and making sure the envelope did not contain anything untoward, she tore the envelope, took out the letter and read.

Dear Charlotte,

By the time you read this, I will have left this painful place called Earth.

I thought for a long time before deciding that my last letter on earth would be sent to you. I have no family and my boyfriend has forsaken me. You are all that I have.

Two very bad things happened to me today.

Number 1. Joe fired me from my job after I told him I was getting married to Harry.

Number 2. Harry's father sms me and said I was carrying another man's son. What a terrible accusation! I asked him for proof and he said the DNA test results were already delivered to my apartment.

I saw the envelope when I got home. But I was so angry and upset, I left it unopened. I didn't need to read the results to know who the father of my baby was.

So within a day, I lost my job and my boyfriend. I have nothing now. Nothing at all. My baby will be born a bastard, despised by everyone, including his own father. I have no money to buy milk powder and toys for the baby. Why bring this baby into this world to suffer? Might as well take it with me to heaven.

My baby and I have gone to a better place now. Goodbye, dear Charlotte.

Your dear friend,

Cream

Charlotte was stunned. After a few moments, she checked the date on the envelope and began searching for suicide reports around that date. It didn't take her long to find Cream's suicide reported on a number of the gossip blogs in Beijing. As she read the reports and blogs, tears started falling down her cheeks.

Joe was in his car, checking his emails on his BlackBerry when Sharon called.

"Have you heard?" Joe could hear Sharon's anxiety over the phone.

"Heard what?" Joe had no idea what Sharon was talking about. He'd been focused on negotiations with other foreign law firms. He didn't have much time left at Potts & Crouch. Mike now had access to his emails in an effort to siphon off Joe's last few clients before he left.

"Cream had committed suicide by jumping out of her apartment building the day after you fired her."

"WHAT! That's not possible. That woman loved her life more than anything in the world."

"I read a report in a gossip rag this morning. It mentioned your name and the firm's name." Sharon knew this was the final nail in Joe's coffin. There was no way P&C would keep him on after a scandal like this.

"Send me that report. I'll read it on my BlackBerry. I still think the reporters got it wrong." Denial, the best medicine.

"Sure, I'll scan and send it to you. Are you coming into the office today?"

“I’m going to meet Elliott later to discuss the details of our contracts. No idea how long that will take. I’ll try my best to negotiate the terms you want for your contract, but Elliott is a lot tougher than I thought he was.”

“So you’ve decided to go with S&M after all?”

“Well, they were the first to send me written contracts. The other firms were all talk but took their time sending the contracts. Besides we don’t have much time left, especially if what you told me about that article is true.”

Within minutes after the call, Sharon’s email arrived with the article attached. It was a pain reading attachments on his BlackBerry but he managed to make out the paragraph where the writer said Cream had been having an affair with her boss, mentioning the firm’s name. Joe wondered how long it would be before Mike and the Empress found out about this.

Chapter 33 The Descent

Gem's personal blog

10 October 2012

Was so unwilling to be back in Beijing after a lovely time in Fenghuang. If I stayed on, I probably would've gained another 5kg eating Francis's mother's cooking. If she would stop asking me when Francis and I are getting married, I would enjoy her company more. Oh well.

First day at work sucked. Joe wasn't in the office, but I thought I was in the Arctic by the way Desmond and Sharon treated me. I had to pinch myself to remember that I existed. What is it with these people?

Had dinner with Charlotte. She showed me the suicide letter Cream sent her and the magazine article reporting Cream's death. Even though I hardly spoke to Cream during the time I've been with P&C, I felt a profound sense of despair and sadness. Charlotte was beside herself with grief, which surprised even her. The circumstances of Cream's death plagued her daily. She's begun thinking about her future, about her job security, about the possibility of getting married and the meaning of life itself. She's alternating between fear and hope on a daily basis and she has had to take sleeping pills to help her sleep some nights. Nothing I said helped much but at least I tried. I even suggested she go on an extended holiday, go somewhere she's never been before. Just get away from Beijing. I really hope Charlotte will figure out a way out of her misery.

11 October 2012

It hurts like hell to write this down but Nathan told me to do it so I have a record of the conversation.

Joe called me into his office in the morning. I was expecting new work since I haven't had much to do since September, and I was getting worried about my billable hours.

He told me to close the door, which I did. I knew this was going to be a serious chat not necessarily to do with work. After I sat down, he proceeded to tell me I wasn't performing, there were glaring mistakes in every email and memorandum I wrote and he just didn't trust anything I did any more. He said I wasn't even as good as the trainee from the Melbourne office. I was outraged by his accusations but before I could gather my thoughts together, he told me to go as he had to attend to some important emails. He was plaintiff, judge and jury rolled into one.

I still found it hard to believe that the managing partner of an international law firm had just said all those things to me. Especially after all the hours I've put in and all the 'good work' he'd said I'd done over the past two years. How could someone change his mind so quickly, so randomly? I could be wrong for thinking it was random. Perhaps he'd wanted me to go for a while but I hadn't noticed because I've been so trusting and gullible.

I was so distraught I couldn't do anything in the afternoon, and decided to call Nathan. There was no way I was telling anyone in the office. It was just too embarrassing.

15 October 2012

The last few days have been a combination of torment and bliss. Torment in the office; bliss at home.

Nathan's been staying over at my place since that first night. I think he slept with me because he felt sorry about what's happening to me. I still find it difficult to believe that we finally had sex. I didn't even realise how sex-starved I was until I kissed Nathan that night. I read this article in Marie Claire which said that a woman's chances of contracting cervical cancer was inversely proportional to how frequently she had sexual intercourse. I guess I have been drastically reducing my chances of contracting cervical cancer in the last 5 days. Heh.

16 October 2012

Shelly from HR came by my office this morning, even before I had a chance to turn on my computer. She closed the door behind her and sat down, looking very serious. She said Joe had spoken to her about me and asked how I was going with my job search. I was so outraged by what she said, I told her I haven't even started looking yet, since he had spoken to me less than a week ago about not performing well, nothing about being let go. Shelly looked embarrassed for an instant before resuming her fake sympathetic expression. She said she would send my CV to a number of headhunters to see if they had any opportunities suitable for me. I told her that would be very nice and thanked her, meaning nothing I said.

When she left my office, I sat heavily in my chair, my mind a complete blank. Joe's already delegated the job of getting rid of me to HR. He couldn't do it himself. I'm convinced more than ever that my boss had no balls and isn't really a man. Nathan agrees wholeheartedly with me.

Sheila made me tell her what was happening after seeing Shelly leave our room. She's now the only person apart from Joe and Shelly who knows what's happening. She was very angry for me and said she would tell Mike, since he'll be taking over the office. When I asked her to explain herself, she hinted that Joe's days

at P&C were over and at Mike's superpower abilities to kick Joe's ass. I found this all quite surprising but wasn't sure how much of it would be relevant to me, especially since Joe fired me before Mike's taken over the office.

17 October 2012

I'm still not used to seeing Nathan's clothing in my wardrobe. Sometimes I get a shiver down my back. Other times I feel a heat rising from my gut to my heart. I can't explain what any of these emotions mean, but after being single for the last five years, it's just nice having a warm body in bed with me. In this case, a warm, long and chiselled body. Nathan looks so much better topless. Perhaps that will change after I buy him shirts that fit his long torso better. Hmmm.

20 October 2012

Nathan just accepted a commission from Geo to take pictures of Tibet over the seasons. This is something he'd been dreaming off since he was a teenager. I'm so proud of him, even though I still have no idea if I am his girlfriend. Charlotte told me foreigners in China prefer to sleep around with different girls rather than commit to one girl too quickly. He could be keeping another girl in his own apartment and having sex with her during the day. It was impossible for me to know what he thought of me and him.

Unless I confront him.

21 October 2012

Shelly came by my office, definitely less friendly than before. She said she'd asked around for me, and there was the possibility of working at Quentin's under this partner with a reputation of throwing his phone at his employees when he was angry or stressed. I turned her down with a forced smile and told her I haven't found any other openings on my own. The truth is, I haven't been looking at all.

Shelly said Joe couldn't have me around and would not fire me, preferring that I tender my resignation. I told her I had no intention of resigning voluntarily unless the firm paid me a decent severance package. Shelly looked shocked at my request and blurted out that Joe had no intention of paying me anything to let me go. I was furious when I heard this but said as calmly as I could that I was not resigning until I got my severance and it would cost the firm more if I just sat around for as long as I liked. I also told her I had half a mind to make enquiries with the Risk Management department in London about the proper procedure when letting an employee go.

Shelly was visibly upset at my threat and mumbled that she would go back to Joe with my request before leaving my office.

22 October 2012

Sheila asked me to lunch today, but said we could not be seen leaving together due to the sensitive situation in the office. I met her at Honey Cafe two blocks from the Kerry Centre.

Sheila asked me for an update about my situation, and was appropriately indignant when I told her Joe's refusal to pay me severance. Over sandwiches and warm Buddha green tea, she fleshed out what she said me the other day about the latest developments in the leadership struggle. Apparently, the Empress had already given Joe his marching orders after Mike sent her an English translation of the article in this gossip mag, which insinuated that he was having an affair with the now deceased Cream and mentioned the firm's name.

So Joe is hanging around the office against the Empress' orders, working with an external IT guy to hack into the office computer system and download his emails. Apparently Bing's been working 'til midnight every night upgrading the firm's firewall, so Sheila's been staying late to keep him company.

Sheila then said that Mike wanted to keep on all the staff in the office, but Sharon and Desmond were likely to leave with Joe. If Sharon and Desmond decided to leave, Mike would definitely want me to stay on at the firm, to try and keep some of Joe's clients with the firm.

Am still not sure what to think of all this. I like Sheila. She wouldn't have said any of this to me if she didn't mean it. But if Joe knew Mike wanted me to stay on with P&C, there was no way he'd let me hang around any longer.

I hate office politics.

24 October 2012

Today was bliss. Nathan surprised me with breakfast in bed. Apart from the sausages, which were burnt, it was a pretty tasty breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast and orange juice.

Then he surprised me by saying that if I quit my job, I could accompany him on his trip to Tibet. I asked him if I had to pay my way, and he said no, Geo would pay him enough to take an assistant on the trip. I wasn't sure what to think but was happy enough that I would be going with him to Tibet instead of an 'assistant'. At least now I have something to look forward to after I lose my job.

25 October 2012

The man with no balls agreed to give me two months' salary to make me go away. I insisted on three months. Shelly wasn't sure he'd agree to that but she said she'd go ask.

Mike sent me some work today which I happily did. Today was the first day I didn't worry about making up my billable hours. Maybe Sheila was right about Mike wanting to keep me on at the firm. But going to Tibet with Nathan is so enticing...

26 October 2012

Shelly came into my office, saw Sheila was already there, and asked that I come out for a "quick chat that would only take two minutes max" I followed her into one of the meeting rooms, and she didn't even sit down to tell me that Joe had agreed to my terms on the basis that I resigned today and I left the firm at the end of this month. I told her I was glad to hear this, and promptly sent off my resignation letter to Joe and Shelly.

I told Sheila what happened as I began packing up my things. She tried to persuade me to leave the packing for later since it's not like I'm really leaving P&C. Against my better judgment I listened to her and stopped packing. I did leave the office immediately after lunch, heading straight to the outdoor equipment store to buy stuff for my imminent trip to Tibet.

Chapter 34 Tibet and Beyond

Gem & Nathan's Tibet Adventures blog (private entries)

5 November 2012

My first day in Lhasa did not go well. It's so much colder here than in Beijing and I feel out of breath after taking just a few steps. Nathan isn't faring much better than me. We both took meds for weeks before we boarded the plane to Tibet. I don't feel like the meds helped me adapt to Tibet any faster.

I passed out walking up the steps to our hotel room, even though the bellboy was carrying my overstuffed backpack. I tried to nap but couldn't sleep for more than 2 hours without waking up gasping for breath. Nathan's been complaining of a splitting headache and even puked once or twice.

Charlotte called me when I was at the Beijing airport. She told me Desmond had tendered his resignation. He's joining another firm in the same building which is giving him partnership and the six-figure monthly salary he'd been wanting for the last five years but didn't get at P&C. Even though I don't like the guy, I'm happy that things worked out better for him than for me.

He thought he'd impress Charlotte with this move and – instead of sending her flowers – he got down on one knee in the office and asked her to be his secretary at the new firm he was joining. She cupped her hands around Desmond's face and moved her face so close to his that Desmond could feel her breath on his face. She then told him to go fuck himself. Well said, I told her, when I finally stopped laughing.

6 November 2012

Second day in Lhasa. Slept fitfully last night. Was woken up once by Nathan's puking. This acclimatization business is awful, just awful. The kind hotel staff sent up some yak tea and insisted we drink it to alleviate our altitude sickness. Read somewhere it was made from yak milk. It's salty and oily and gross. And I didn't feel any better afterwards. Nathan did stop puking. Finally.

Sheila called today to ask me how I was coping. I told her the truth and she was very sympathetic. She said she'll get Bing to send me the names of some medicine to take to alleviate my symptoms. Then she updated me on the latest developments at P&C. An email from the Empress had gone around the whole office announcing that Joe had left the firm and Mike was now the managing partner of the Beijing Office. Joe's keycard was deactivated so he could no longer get back into the office. Mike's been busy moving into Joe's old office and giving press interviews about his role as the new managing partner of P&C. Sharon was still hanging around the office, even though she's told Mike she's leaving the firm soon.

I listened politely to Sheila, making appropriate sounds to assure her I was still listening and feigning interest. I'd stopped going into the office 10 days ago, but I felt it was months and months ago. It was almost surreal. I was quite enjoying being like a kite flying free after its string's been cut. So I can be forgiven for not giving a damn about what happens at P&C.

7 November 2012

Acclimatized to the thin air. Got out of my hotel room and went to the Potala Palace with Nathan. Even managed to carry one of his bags of equipment walking up the seemingly never-ending flight of steps to the palace. Stopped at least 5 times feeling like I was going to pass out, but eventually made it. Took in the amazing view of Lhasa from the palace then toured the interior on my own while Loverboy worked. I caught my first glimpse of the Himalayas today. Am very excited about going to Mt Everest Base Camp. Hopefully when it is warmer.

I helped Nathan with his work after lunch, mostly because I got sick of being alone. I understood today why Nathan wanted to come to Tibet during winter. The tourists stayed away deterred by the cold, leaving the Palace relatively deserted and hence great for taking pictures.

I now know how the masters take their photographic masterpieces. Loverboy spends more time waiting for the perfect light, looking for the perfect angle and having the right everything than he does snapping pictures. He took a few thousand pictures today at the Palace and said we might have to return tomorrow if he wasn't happy with the pictures. He's reviewing the pictures on his laptop as I'm updating this blog. I really hope I won't be assisting him if he returns to the Palace for pictures tomorrow.

10 November 2012

We ended up spending another 2 days at the Palace. Loverboy made it up to me by letting me have the afternoon off today so I could go "do what girls enjoy doing". He's probably thinking shopping, mani, pedi. I was really more interested in finding a café that served decent coffee and a quiet corner where I could sit down and indulge in my Sudoku addiction. I haven't done any Sudoku puzzles since we arrived in Lhasa.

I gave myself permission to wander aimlessly in Lhasa's city centre while hunting down the perfect café. I particularly enjoyed looking at the Tibetan women walking past temples, either swinging their own prayer wheels or spinning the many colourful prayer wheels on the side of the temple walls. They looked like Chinese women except with tanned skin, no make-up and better fashion sense. Tibetan women love jewellery and wore red and turquoise coloured earrings, necklaces and rings. I love watching them sashaying in their ankle-length skirts adorned with intricate embroidery. Some Han Chinese told me the Tibetans don't wear underwear, so they can pee or defecate anywhere easily. I wanted to ask how they wiped themselves afterwards but thought it too rude to ask.

I found a café, but wasn't too impressed with the coffee, although the owner claimed it was made with Italian espresso beans. I am 99% sure it was those Nestle instant 3-in-1 coffee sachets. Reminder to self: must ask a European tourist for café recommendations. This café was recommending by a random American tourist at the Sheraton. Big mistake.

Just when I was about to solve my first hardest-level Sudoku puzzle, a Han Chinese guy asked if he could share my table. I looked around the café which had filled with customers while I was engrossed with my puzzles. I said yes to the guy, who promptly sat down and ordered a set lunch. Realizing I was hungry, I ordered a set lunch of lamb, rice and soup while the waiter was still there, then turned back to my puzzle.

Annoyingly, the guy who shared my table was so bored, he decided to look at my puzzle and give me unwanted and wrong advice about how to solve it. When my food arrived, I put my puzzle away and the guy decided to make conversation, asking me where I was from and what I was doing in Tibet. It turned out he was born in Lhasa to a Han Chinese father and a Tibetan mother, and managed a fleet of four-wheel drives that were regularly rented out to tourists.

After reading countless news reports in Western and Chinese press about the racial disputes between the Han Chinese and the Tibetan, I was genuinely surprised to meet someone who was of mixed Han and Tibetan descent. I asked him about his parents, how they met and how they got married, hoping he would tell me about the struggles they went through in order to be married to each other. He said they met in high school in Lhasa and got married immediately after they finished high school. His mother's parents were happy when she married a Han Chinese because that meant their daughter would enjoy a life of financial security, which to them was the key to a happy marriage. The Tibetan men just weren't such good catches when compared to Han Chinese in this regard.

I wanted so much to ask him about his views on Dalai Lama but feared that it was inappropriate to do so in a packed café. Right after he paid the bill, he gave me his business card, saying I could call him Little Guo, and asked me to call if I needed to hire a four-wheel drive for my trip. I waved goodbye to him and went back to finishing my puzzle. It was only when I asked for my bill that I realised he'd paid for my coffee and lunch.

12 November 2013

Nathan was finally happy to move on to the next subject today – Jokhang Temple. We'd walked past Jokhang on our way to restaurants but we hadn't gone inside.

Just as on the days we'd walked past, the grand entrance to Jokhang was crowded with devout worshippers standing up and then prostrating themselves repeatedly on their mats. I was touched by their expression of faith in the bitter cold, even though I had no understanding of the significance of their actions. From dusk until dawn, Nathan took pictures of the worshippers who seemed completely oblivious to his presence. We had a big breakfast, skipped lunch and had a big dinner at a Sichuan restaurant. There were equal numbers of Han Chinese and Tibetans in the restaurant, which I found surprising.

I received an email from Mike today. Feel surprised and suspicious in equal measure about this email. I've decided to cut and paste it here so I can refer to it when I finally decide what my reply to Mike will be.

Hi Gem,

Sheila gave me your personal email address. I apologise for not saying goodbye when you left the firm. I wasn't expecting you to actually leave!

Sheila told me what happened between you and Joe. I should've intervened sooner, but dealing with Joe and Desmond's departure took up most of my time and energy. As you may already know, they weren't forthcoming or helpful about the projects they were working on, and I've been in meetings every day to wheedle what information I can get from them.

Sheila has been a great help to me with the anti-trust matters, but since she doesn't speak Mandarin, it's been tough for her to take over Joe and Desmond's matters. Even though Sharon hasn't said much about her future plans, I am almost 100% sure she'll be going where Joe goes sooner than later. This brings me to the real purpose of this email.

Please consider rejoining P&C Beijing office. I've enjoyed working with you on the last few projects. I've spoken to the clients on the projects you worked on with Joe, and they've been very pleased with your work. I have reason to believe Joe bullied you into resigning because he didn't want our clients to have the choice of staying with P&C.

After what you've been through, I understand if you don't ever talk to anyone from the firm, let alone rejoin the firm. However, the firm is a very different place now that I'm running it. To sweeten the deal, if you choose to return, you will be rejoining the firm as a senior associate, and be well and truly on the partnership track.

If you have any questions about anything I've written in this email, you are welcome to call me any time.

I heard you are travelling in Tibet with your boyfriend at the moment. Did you suffer from altitude sickness? I've been dreaming of visiting Tibet ever since moving to China, but am put off after hearing stories of severe altitude sickness.

I very much look forward to hearing good news from you, Gem. In the meantime, have a blast!

Mike

THE END