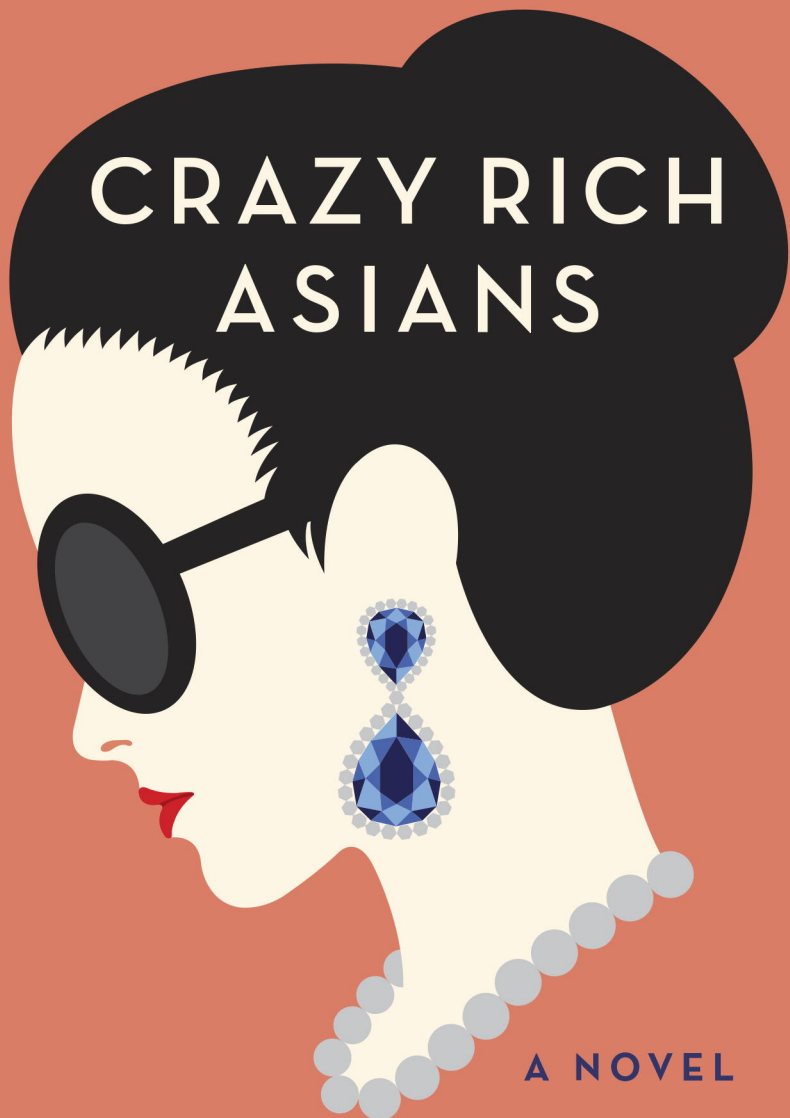


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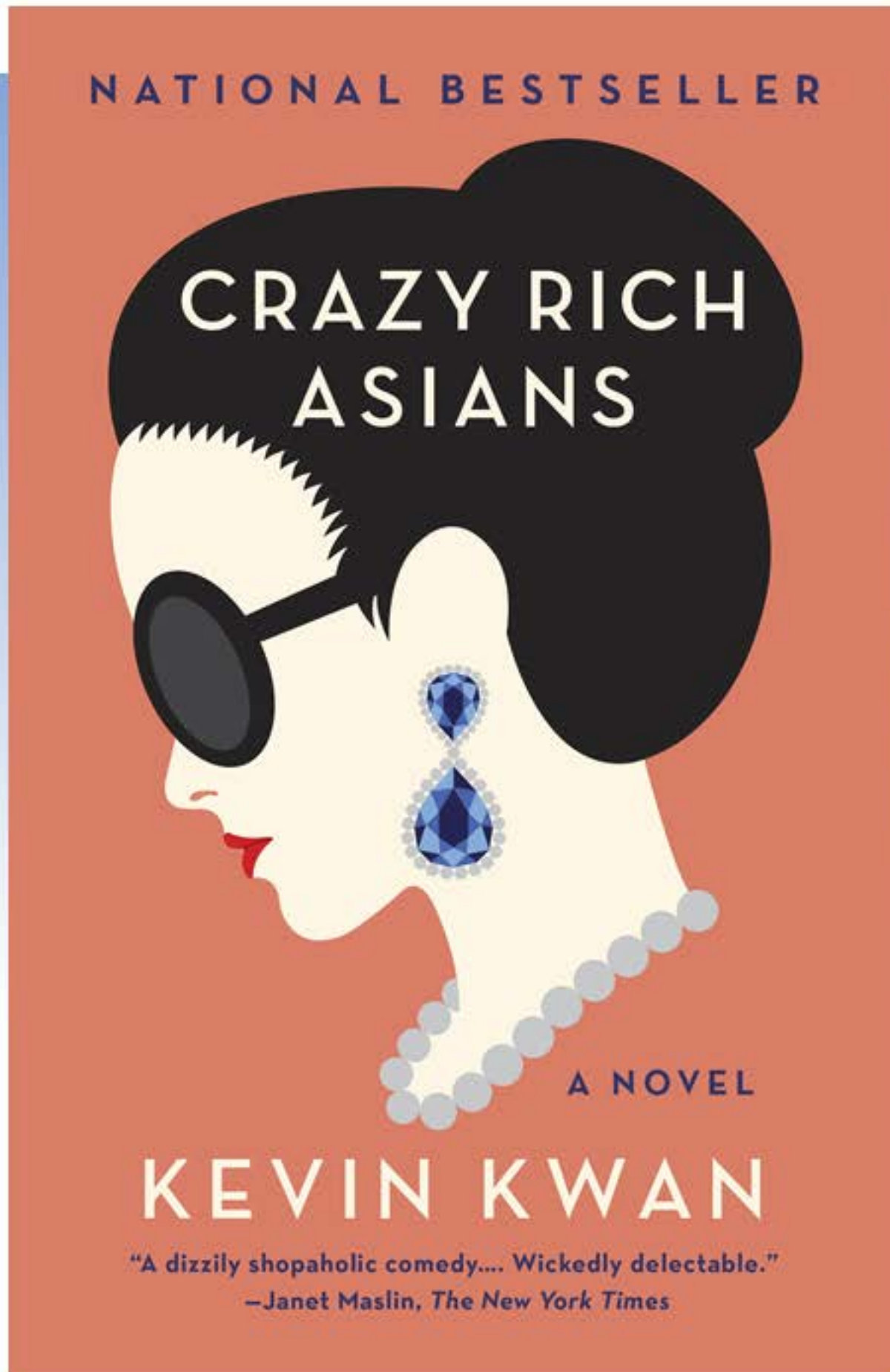
A NOVEL

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Random House of Canada

Prologue: The Cousins

•

LONDON, 1986

Nicholas Young slumped into the nearest seat in the hotel lobby, drained from the sixteen-hour flight from Singapore, the train ride from Heathrow Airport, and trudging through the rain-soaked streets. His cousin Astrid Leong shivered stoically next to him, all because her mother, Felicity, his *dai gu cheh*—or “big aunt” in Cantonese—said it was a sin to take a taxi nine blocks and forced everyone to walk all the way from Piccadilly Tube Station.

Anyone else happening upon the scene might have noticed an unusually composed eight-year-old boy and an ethereal wisp of a girl sitting quietly in a corner, but all Reginald Ormsby saw from his desk overlooking the lobby were two little Chinese children staining the damask settee with their sodden coats. And it only got worse from there. Three Chinese women stood nearby, frantically blotting themselves dry with tissues, while a teenager slid wildly across the lobby, his sneakers leaving muddy tracks on the black-and-white checkerboard marble.

Ormsby rushed downstairs from the mezzanine, knowing he could more efficiently dispatch these foreigners than his front-desk clerks. “Good evening, I am the general manager. Can I help you?” he said slowly, over-enunciating every word.

“Yes, good evening, we have a reservation,” the woman replied in perfect English.

Ormsby peered at her in surprise. “What name is it under?”

“Eleanor Young and family.”

Ormsby froze—he recognized the name, especially since the Young party had booked the Lancaster Suite. But who could have imagined that “Eleanor Young” would turn out to be *Chinese*, and how on earth did she end up here? The Dorchester or the Ritz might let this kind in, but this *was* the Calthorpe, owned by the Calthorpe-Cavendish-Gores since the reign of George IV and run for all intents and purposes like a private club for the sort of families that appeared in *Debrett’s* or the *Almanach de Gotha*. Ormsby considered the bedraggled women and the dripping children. The Dowager Marchioness of Uckfield was staying through the weekend, and he could scarcely imagine what she would make of *these folk* appearing at breakfast tomorrow. He made a swift decision. “I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t seem to find a booking under that name.”

“Are you sure?” Eleanor asked in surprise.

“Quite sure.” Ormsby grinned tightly.

Felicity Leong joined her sister-in-law at the front desk. “Is there a problem?” she asked impatiently, eager to get to the room to dry her hair.

“*Alamak*,* they can’t find our reservation,” Eleanor sighed.

“How come? Maybe you booked it under another name?” Felicity inquired.

“No, *lah*. Why would I do that? It was always booked under my name,” Eleanor replied irritably. Why did Felicity always assume she was incompetent? She turned back to the manager. “Sir, can you please check again? I reconfirmed our reservation just two days ago. We’re supposed to be in your largest suite.”

“Yes, I know you booked the Lancaster Suite, but I can’t find your name anywhere,” Ormsby insisted.

“Excuse me, but if you know we booked the Lancaster Suite, why don’t we have the room?” Felicity asked, confused.

Bloody hell. Ormsby cursed at his own slip-up. “No, no, you mis-

* Malay slang used to express shock or exasperation like “oh dear” or “oh my God.” *Alamak* and *lah* are the two most commonly used slang words in Singapore. (*Lab* is a suffix that can be used at the end of any phrase for emphasis, but there’s no good explanation for why people use it, *lah*.)

understood. What I meant was that *you might think* you booked the Lancaster Suite, but I certainly can't find any record of it." He turned away for a moment, pretending to rummage through some other paperwork.

Felicity leaned over the polished oak counter and pulled the leather-bound reservations book toward her, flipping through pages. "Look! It says right here 'Mrs. Eleanor Young—Lancaster Suite for four nights.' Do you not see this?"

"Madam! That is PRIVATE!" Ormsby snapped in fury, startling his two junior clerks, who glanced uncomfortably at their manager.

Felicity peered at the balding, red-faced man, the situation suddenly becoming abundantly clear. She hadn't seen this particular brand of superior sneer since she was a child growing up in the waning days of colonial Singapore, and she thought this kind of overt racism had ceased to exist. "Sir," she said politely but firmly, "this hotel came highly recommended to us by Mrs. Mince, the wife of the Anglican Bishop of Singapore, and I *clearly* saw our name in your registry book. I don't know what sort of funny business is going on, but we have traveled a very long way and our children are tired and cold. I *insist* that you honor our reservation."

Ormsby was indignant. How *dare* this Chinese woman with the Thatcher-esque perm and preposterous "English" accent speak to him in such a manner? "I'm afraid we simply do not have anything available," he declared.

"Are you telling me that there are no rooms left in this entire hotel?" Eleanor said incredulously.

"Yes," he replied curtly.

"Where are we supposed to go at this hour?" Eleanor asked.

"Perhaps someplace in Chinatown?" Ormsby sniffed. These foreigners had wasted enough of his time.

Felicity went back to where her younger sister Alexandra Cheng stood guarding the luggage. "Finally! I can't wait to take a hot bath," Alexandra said eagerly.

"Actually, this odious man is refusing to give us our room!" Felicity said, making no attempt to hide her fury.

"What? Why?" Alexandra asked, completely confused.

"I think it has something to do with us being Chinese," Felicity said, as if she didn't quite believe her own words.

“*Gum suey ab!*”^{*} Alexandra exclaimed. “Let me talk to him. Living in Hong Kong, I have more experience dealing with these types.”

“Alix, don’t bother. He’s a typical *ang mor gau sai!*”[†] Eleanor exclaimed.

“Even so, isn’t this supposed to be one of London’s top hotels? How can they get away with that sort of behavior?” Alexandra asked.

“Exactly!” Felicity raged on. “The English are normally so lovely, I have never been treated like this in all my years coming here.”

Eleanor nodded in agreement, even though privately she felt that Felicity was partly to blame for this fiasco. If Felicity wasn’t so *giam siap*[‡] and had let them take a taxi from Heathrow, they would have arrived looking far less disheveled. (Of course, it didn’t help that her sisters-in-law always looked so dowdy, she had to dress down whenever she traveled with them, ever since that trip to Thailand when everyone mistook them for her maids.)

Edison Cheng, Alexandra’s twelve-year-old son, approached the ladies nonchalantly, sipping soda from a tall glass.

“Aiyah, Eddie! Where did you get that?” Alexandra exclaimed.

“From the bartender, of course.”

“How did you pay for it?”

“I didn’t—I told him to charge it to our suite,” Eddie replied breezily. “Can we go up now? I’m starving and I want to order from room service.”

Felicity shook her head in disapproval—Hong Kong boys were notoriously pampered, but this nephew of hers was incorrigible. Good thing they were here to put him in boarding school, where he would have some sense knocked into him—cold morning showers and stale toast with Bovril was what he needed. “No, no, we’re not staying here anymore. Go and watch Nicky and Astrid while we decide what to do,” Felicity instructed.

Eddie walked over to his younger cousins, resuming the game

* Cantonese for “How rotten!”

† A charming Hokkien colloquialism that translates to “red-haired” (*ang mor*) “dog shit” (*gau sai*). Used in reference to all Westerners, it’s usually shortened to a simple “*ang mor*.”

‡ Hokkien for “stingy,” “miserly.” (The vast majority of Singaporeans speak English, but it is a common practice to mash up words in Malay, Indian, and various Chinese dialects to form a local patois known as “Singlish.”)

they had begun on the plane. “Off the sofa! Remember, I’m the *chairman*, so I’m the one who gets to sit,” he commanded. “Here, Nicky, hold my glass while I sip from the straw. Astrid, you’re my executive secretary, so you need to massage my shoulders.”

“I don’t know why you get to be the chairman, while Nicky is the vice president and I have to be the secretary,” Astrid protested.

“Didn’t I explain this already? I’m the chairman, because I am four years older than the both of you. You’re the executive secretary, because you’re the girl. I need a girl to massage my shoulders and to help choose jewelry for all my mistresses. My best friend Leo’s father, Ming Kah-Ching, is the third-richest man in Hong Kong, and that’s what his executive secretary does.”

“Eddie, if you want me to be your vice president, I should be doing something more important than holding your glass,” Nick argued. “We still haven’t decided what our company makes.”

“I’ve decided—we make custom limousines, like Rolls-Royces and Jags,” Eddie declared.

“Can’t we make something cooler, like a time machine?” Nick asked.

“Well, these are ultra-special limousines with features like Jacuzzis, secret compartments, and James Bond ejector seats,” Eddie said, bouncing up from the settee so suddenly that he knocked the glass out of Nick’s hand. Coca-Cola spilled everywhere, and the sound of smashing glass pierced the lobby. The bell captain, concierge, and front-desk clerks glared at the children. Alexandra rushed over, shaking a finger in dismay.

“Eddie! Look what you’ve done!”

“It wasn’t my fault—Nicky was the one who dropped it,” Eddie began.

“But it’s *your* glass, and you hit it out of my hand!” Nick defended himself.

Ormsby approached Felicity and Eleanor. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave the premises.”

“Can we just use your telephone?” Eleanor pleaded.

“I *do* think the children have done quite enough damage for one night, don’t you?” he hissed.

It was still drizzling, and the group huddled under a green-and-white-striped awning on Brook Street while Felicity stood inside a phone booth frantically calling other hotels.

“*Dai gu cheb* looks like a soldier in a sentry box in that red booth,” Nick observed, rather thrilled by the strange turn of events. “Mummy, what are we going to do if we can’t find a place to stay tonight? Maybe we can sleep in Hyde Park. There’s an amazing weeping beech in Hyde Park called the upside-down tree, and its branches hang down so low that it’s almost like a cave. We can all sleep underneath and be protected—”

“Don’t talk nonsense! No one is sleeping in the park. *Dai gu cheb* is calling other hotels right now,” Eleanor said, thinking that her son was getting far too precocious for his own good.

“Oooh, I want to sleep in the park!” Astrid squealed in delight. “Nicky, remember how we moved that big iron bed at Ah Ma’s house into the garden and slept under the stars one night?”

“Well, you two can sleep in the *loong kau** for all I care, but I’ll take the big royal suite, where I can order club sandwiches with champagne and caviar,” Eddie said.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Eddie. When have you ever had caviar?” his mother asked.

“At Leo’s house. Their butler always serves us caviar with little triangles of toasted bread. And it’s always Iranian beluga, because Leo’s mum says Iranian caviar is the *best*,” Eddie declared.

“Connie Ming *would* say something like that,” Alexandra muttered under her breath, glad her son was finally away from that family’s influence.

Inside the telephone booth, Felicity was trying to explain the predicament to her husband over a crackly connection to Singapore.

“What nonsense, *lah*! You should have *demand*ed the room!” Harry Leong fumed. “You are always too polite—these service people need to be put in their place. Did you tell them who we are? I’m going to call up the minister of trade and investment right now!”

“Come on, Harry, you’re not helping. I’ve called more than ten hotels already. Who knew that today was Commonwealth Day? Every VIP is in town and everyone is booked solid. Poor Astrid is soaked through. We need to find someplace for tonight before your daughter catches her death of cold.”

“Did you try calling your cousin Leonard? Maybe you could take a train straight to Surrey,” Harry suggested.

* Cantonese for “gutter.”

“I did. He’s not in—he’s grouse hunting in Scotland all weekend.”

“What a bloody mess!” Harry sighed. “Let me call Tommy Toh over at the Singapore embassy. I’m sure they can sort things out. What is the name of this bloody racist hotel?”

“The Calthorpe,” Felicity answered.

“*Alamak*, is this the place owned by Rupert Calthorpe-something-something?” Harry asked, suddenly perking up.

“I have no idea.”

“Where is it located?”

“It’s in Mayfair, close to Bond Street. It’s actually a rather beautiful hotel, if it wasn’t for this horrible manager.”

“Yes, I think that’s it! I played golf with Rupert what’s his name and a few other Brits last month in California, and I remember him telling me all about his place. Felicity, I have an idea. I’m going to call this Rupert fellow. Just stay put and I’ll call you back.”

Ormsby stared in disbelief when the three Chinese children burst through the front door again, barely an hour after he had evicted the whole lot of them.

“Eddie, I’m getting *myself* a drink. If you want one, go get it yourself,” Nick said firmly to his cousin as he walked toward the lounge.

“Remember what your mummy said. It’s too late for us to drink Cokes,” Astrid warned as she skipped through the lobby, trying to catch up with the boys.

“Well then, I’ll get a rum and coke,” Eddie said brazenly.

“What on God’s green earth . . .” Ormsby bellowed, storming across the lobby to intercept the children. Before he could reach them, he suddenly caught sight of Lord Rupert Calthorpe-Cavendish-Gore ushering the Chinese women into the lobby, seemingly in the midst of conducting a tour. “And my grandfather brought over René Lalique in 1918 to do the glass murals you see here in the great hall. Needless to say, Lutyens, who supervised the restoration, did not approve of these art nouveau flourishes.” The women laughed politely.

The staff quickly snapped to attention, surprised to see the old lord, who hadn’t set foot inside the hotel in years. Lord Rupert turned toward the hotel manager. “Ah, Wormsby, isn’t it?”

“Yes, m’lord,” he said, too dazed to correct his boss.

“Would you kindly have some rooms readied for the lovely Mrs. Young, Mrs. Leong, and Mrs. Cheng?”

“But sir, I just—” Ormsby tried to protest.

“And Wormsby,” Lord Rupert continued dismissively, “I am entrusting you to inform the staff of a very important announcement: as of this evening, my family’s long history as custodians of the Calthorpe has come to an end.”

Ormsby stared at him in utter disbelief. “M’lord, surely there’s some mistake—”

“No, no mistake at all. I sold the Calthorpe a short while ago, lock, stock, and barrel. May I present the new mistress, Mrs. Felicity Leong.”

“WHAT?”

“Yes, Mrs. Leong’s husband, Harry Leong—a wonderful chap with a lethal right-arm swing, whom I met at Pebble Beach—called me up and made me a marvelous offer. I can now devote all my time to bonefishing in Eleuthera without having to worry about this Gothic pile.”

Ormsby stared at the women, his mouth agape.

“Ladies, why don’t we join your adorable children at the Long Bar for a toast?” Lord Rupert said merrily.

“That would be wonderful,” Eleanor replied. “But first, Felicity, isn’t there something you wanted to tell this man?”

Felicity turned to Ormsby, now looking as if he was about to faint. “Oh yes, I almost forgot,” she began with a smile, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave the premises.”



Part One

*Nowhere in the world are there to be found
people richer than the Chinese.*

IBN BATUTA (FOURTEENTH CENTURY)

1

Nicholas Young and Rachel Chu

•

NEW YORK, 2010

“You sure about this?” Rachel asked again, blowing softly on the surface of her steaming cup of tea. They were sitting at their usual window table at Tea & Sympathy, and Nick had just invited her to spend the summer with him in Asia.

“Rachel, I’d love it if you came,” Nick reassured her. “You weren’t planning on teaching this summer, so what’s your worry? Think you won’t be able to handle the heat and humidity?”

“No, that’s not it. I know you’re going to be so busy with all your best-man duties, and I wouldn’t want to distract you,” Rachel said.

“What distraction? Colin’s wedding is only going to take up the first week in Singapore, and then we can spend the rest of the summer just bumming around Asia. Come on, let me show you where I grew up. I want to take you to all my favorite haunts.”

“Will you show me the sacred cave where you lost your virginity?” Rachel teased, arching an eyebrow playfully.

“Definitely! We can even stage a reenactment!” Nick laughed, slathering jam and clotted cream onto a scone still warm from the oven. “And doesn’t a good friend of yours live in Singapore?”

“Yes, Peik Lin, my best friend from college,” Rachel said. “She’s been trying to get me to come visit for years.”

“All the more reason. Rachel, you’re going to love it, and I just

know you're going to flip out over the food! You do realize Singapore is the most food-obsessed country on the planet?"

"Well, just watching the way you fawn over everything you eat, I figured it's pretty much the national sport."

"Remember Calvin Trillin's *New Yorker* piece on Singapore street foods? I'll take you to all the local dives even *he* doesn't know about." Nick took another bite of his fluffy scone and continued with his mouth full. "I know how much you love these scones. Just wait till you taste my Ah Ma's—"

"Your Ah Ma bakes scones?" Rachel tried to imagine a traditional Chinese grandmother preparing this quintessentially English confection.

"Well, she doesn't exactly bake them herself, but she has the best scones in the world—you'll see," Nick said, turning around reflexively to make sure no one in the cozy little spot had overheard him. He didn't want to become persona non grata at his favorite café for carelessly pledging allegiance to another scone, even if it was his grandmother's.

At a neighboring table, the girl huddled behind a three-tiered stand piled high with finger sandwiches was getting increasingly excited by the conversation she was overhearing. She suspected it might be him, but now she had absolute confirmation. It *was* Nicholas Young. Even though she was only fifteen at the time, Celine Lim never forgot the day Nicholas strolled past their table at Pulau Club* and flashed that devastating grin of his at her sister Charlotte.

"Is that one of the Leong brothers?" their mother had asked.

"No, that's Nicholas Young, a cousin of the Leongs," Charlotte replied.

"Philip Young's boy? Aiyah, when did he shoot up like that? He's so handsome now!" Mrs. Lim exclaimed.

"He's just back from Oxford. Double-majored in history and law," Charlotte added, anticipating her mother's next question.

"Why didn't you get up and talk to him?" Mrs. Lim said excitedly.

"Why should I bother, when you swat away every guy who dares come near," Charlotte answered curtly.

* Singapore's most prestigious country club (with membership practically harder to obtain than a knighthood).

“*Alamak*, stupid girl! I’m only trying to protect you from fortune hunters. This one you’d be lucky to have. This one you can *cheong!*”

Celine couldn’t believe her mother was actually encouraging her big sister to *snatch* this boy. She stared curiously at Nicholas, now laughing animatedly with his friends at a table under a blue-and-white umbrella by the pool. Even from afar, he stood out in high relief. Unlike the other fellows with their regulation Indian barber-shop haircuts, Nicholas had perfectly tousled black hair, chiseled Cantonese pop-idol features, and impossibly thick eyelashes. He was the cutest, dreamiest guy she’d ever seen.

“Charlotte, why don’t you go over and invite him to your fund-raiser on Saturday?” their mother kept on.

“Stop it, Mum.” Charlotte smiled through gritted teeth. “I know what I’m doing.”

As it turned out, Charlotte did not know what she was doing, since Nicholas never showed up at her fund-raiser, much to their mother’s eternal disappointment. But that afternoon at Pulau Club left such an indelible mark on Celine’s adolescent memory that six years later and on the other side of the planet, she still recognized him.

“Hannah, let me get a picture of you with that delicious sticky toffee pudding,” Celine said, taking out her camera phone. She pointed it in the direction of her friend, but surreptitiously trained the lens on Nicholas. She snapped the photo and immediately e-mailed it to her sister, who now lived in Atherton, California. Her phone pinged minutes later.

BigSis: OMFG! THAT’S NICK YOUNG! WHERE ARE U?

Celine Lim: T&S.

BigSis: Who’s the girl he’s with?

Celine Lim: GF, I think. Looks ABC.*

BigSis: Hmm . . . do you see a ring?

Celine Lim: No ring.

BigSis: PLS spy for me!!!

Celine Lim: You owe me big-time!!!

Nick gazed out the café window, marveling at the people with tiny dogs parading along this stretch of Greenwich Avenue as if it

* American-born Chinese.

were a catwalk for the city's most fashionable breeds. A year ago, French bulldogs were all the rage, but now it looked like Italian greyhounds were giving the Frenchies a run for their money. He faced Rachel again, resuming his campaign. "The great thing about starting out in Singapore is that it's the perfect base. Malaysia is just across a bridge, and it's a quick hop to Hong Kong, Cambodia, Thailand. We can even go island-hopping off Indonesia—"

"It all sounds amazing, but *ten weeks* . . . I don't know if I want to be away that long," Rachel mused. She could sense Nick's eagerness, and the idea of visiting Asia again filled her with excitement. She had spent a year teaching in Chengdu between college and grad school but couldn't afford to travel anywhere beyond China's borders back then. As an economist, she certainly knew enough about Singapore—this tiny, intriguing island at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, which had transformed within a few short decades from a British colonial backwater into the country with the world's highest concentration of millionaires. It would be fascinating to see the place up close, especially with Nick as her guide.

Yet something about this trip made Rachel a little apprehensive, and she couldn't help but ponder the deeper implications. Nick made it seem so spontaneous, but knowing him, she was sure he had put far more thought into it than he let on. They had been together for almost two years, and now he was inviting her on an extended trip to visit his hometown, to attend his best friend's wedding, no less. Did this mean what she thought it did?

Rachel peered into her teacup, wishing she could divine something from the stray leaves pooled at the bottom of the deep golden Assam. She had never been the sort of girl who longed for fairy-tale endings. Being twenty-nine, she was by Chinese standards well into old-maid territory, and even though her busybody relatives were perpetually trying to set her up, she had spent the better part of her twenties focused on getting through grad school, finishing her dissertation, and jump-starting her career in academia. This surprise invitation, however, sparked some vestigial instinct within her. *He wants to take me home. He wants me to meet his family.* The long-dormant romantic in her was awakening, and she knew there was only one answer to give.

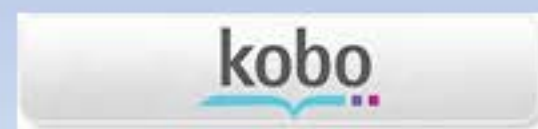
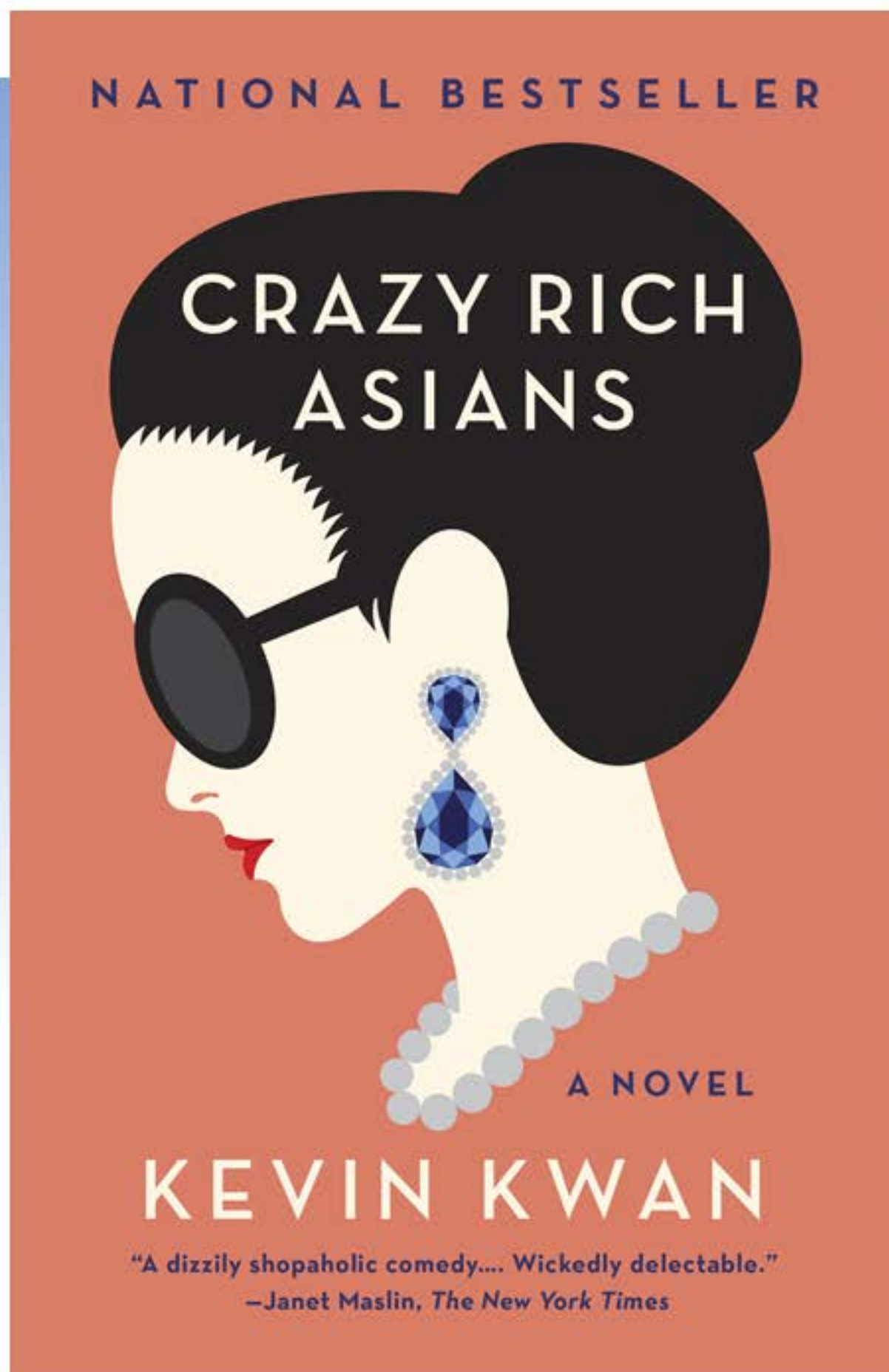
"I'll have to check with my dean to see when I'm needed back,

but you know what? Let's do this!" Rachel declared. Nick leaned across the table, kissing her jubilantly.

Minutes later, before Rachel herself knew for certain her summer plans, the details of her conversation had already begun to spread far and wide, circling the globe like a virus set loose. After Celine Lim (Parsons School of Design fashion major) e-mailed her sister Charlotte Lim (recently engaged to venture capitalist Henry Chiu) in California, Charlotte called her best friend Daphne Ma (Sir Benedict Ma's youngest daughter) in Singapore and breathlessly filled her in. Daphne texted eight friends, including Carmen Kwek (granddaughter of Robert "Sugar King" Kwek) in Shanghai, whose cousin Amelia Kwek had gone to Oxford with Nicholas Young. Amelia simply *had* to IM her friend Justina Wei (the Instant Noodle heiress) in Hong Kong, and Justina, whose office at Hutchison Whampoa was right across the hall from Roderick Liang's (of the Liang Finance Group Liangs), simply *had* to interrupt his conference call to share this juicy tidbit. Roderick in turn Skyped his girlfriend Lauren Lee, who was holidaying at the Royal Mansour in Marrakech with her grandmother Mrs. Lee Yong Chien (no introductions necessary) and her aunt Patsy Teoh (Miss Taiwan 1979, now the ex-wife of telecom mogul Dickson Teoh). Patsy made a poolside call to Jacqueline Ling (granddaughter of philanthropist Ling Yin Chao) in London, knowing full well that Jacqueline would have a direct line to Cassandra Shang (Nicholas Young's second cousin), who spent every spring at her family's vast estate in Surrey. And so this exotic strain of gossip spread rapidly through the levantine networks of the Asian jet set, and within a few hours, almost everyone in this exclusive circle knew that Nicholas Young was bringing a girl home to Singapore.

And, *alamak!* This was big news.

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