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Family Trust
Impostor Syndrome

THE
SATISFACTION
CAFÉ

A Novel

KATHY WANG

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for Vivienne and Daniel

THE
SATISFACTION
CAFÉ

I

THE TRICK TO A GOOD MARRIAGE

CHAPTER ONE

Joan Liang's life in America began in Palo Alto, where she lived in the attic of a two-story home on Azalea Street. Joan did chores for the widow who owned the house in exchange for reduced rent; she never could have afforded such a nice neighborhood otherwise. She lived in that attic until she was married, and she was married for only six weeks before she stabbed her husband. Joan was twenty-five and had lived in the United States for two years. The year was 1977.

Joan had not thought she would stab her husband. It had been an accident (sort of). Afterward she was disappointed that marriage had not turned out as she'd imagined. She had thought it would be wonderful. It had been, actually. Until it wasn't.

Though later, Joan would wonder why she'd ever thought marriage would be so special. As a child in Taiwan, most of the married women Joan encountered were melancholy, if not outright miserable; throughout her childhood, Joan's own mother had on occasion risen from the kitchen table without warning to cry with showy force into her hands.

"You've ruined everything!" Mei would shriek if any of the children

came near, and so they soon learned to keep away, which only worsened Mei's despondency. At least every other Saturday, Joan's father, Wen-Bao, spent the night across town in Shilin, where he kept a two-bedroom apartment for his mistress. Joan's mother was haunted by the two bedrooms; it drove her nuts, Mei said, to think of so much empty space.

"Can you imagine," Mei would remark, legs crossed as she sat before her vanity, "how much *lust* a man must carry inside, to furnish such a large place for one woman? When all six of us are crowded in the same square footage? Do you understand the scope of his betrayal?" At this point Joan's brothers usually wandered off; they were bored by this conversation, which repeated itself every few months. Only Joan would remain at her mother's feet, where she watched Mei sit with perfect posture before her mirror and pluck white strands from her hairline.

After moving to California, Joan established the routine of calling her parents every Sunday evening Taipei time, during which Wen-Bao, if he'd visited his mistress that weekend, would have already returned home. On these calls, Joan's parents performed the same interrogation: how her studies at Stanford were proceeding, if there was any chance to graduate early from her master's program so that she might begin to earn money. Money was key. Joan had three brothers, each of whom by various rights (older, male) should have been sent abroad before her. Two had been disqualified by their academics, whereas the top candidate, Alfred, had been surprised by "issues" (his girlfriend was pregnant), and so at the last minute Joan was sent instead.

Through her father's job at the electric utility, Joan's parents had saved three thousand dollars for Alfred to begin his life in America. Out of this three thousand they spent five hundred on a plane ticket for Joan and repocketed the remainder. For this Joan was grateful, as she was a girl and thus not entitled to anything. At dinner her father took the first cut of meat; he also ate all the yellows from eggs. After her father, the meat went to Joan's brothers, and then to her mother, and

then to Joan, by which time there was usually nothing. So just because Alfred was supposed to have gone to America didn't mean Joan would. Mei and Wen-Bao, however, had been *nervous*—having already fled the Communists once, they preferred to settle a child abroad, an international insurance policy drawing Western wages.

On their calls, Joan's parents never inquired about her romantic life. If she were to, say, divulge that she'd kissed a man, or even dined alone with one, such news would have been met with recriminations followed by punishing silence. A husband, naturally, must be found at a certain point. A husband was part of the scaffolding upon which all the family's dreams—money, safety, education—would be constructed. But Joan's parents did not want to know anything of the process; the eventual union with the man you slept with each night should be accomplished without sex or romance, at least if you were a good, responsible girl. And for her entire life thus far, Joan had been a very good girl.

The man Joan married was named Milton Liu. He was, of course, Chinese—aside from her landlord, Joan socialized only with Chinese people. Milton, who was studying architecture, was tall and well built, with elegant long fingers. He played piano, which Joan liked; she possessed no musical ability, but one of her first splurges in America had been a record player and a few LPs of Bach and Chopin. Milton had an easy way of speaking and excellent cheekbones and a gentle, sleepy expression, which was what had attracted Joan in the first place: besides being handsome, he also looked *nice*. Because her parents were mean, Joan was drawn to this sort of appearance.

When she had an open afternoon between classes and her job as a hostess at Lotus Garden, Joan liked to sit and daydream on one of the benches within Stanford's campus. That such splendor was free for the general public to enjoy seemed to her a uniquely American miracle. After

she met Milton, she asked him about the school's architecture. He told her the style was Mission Revival.

"It's incredible that one man could create such a majestic place, all in the name of learning," Joan had remarked. It was their first real date. Their previous encounters had all been group outings: weekend hikes or evening potlucks, since no one had enough money to host a real dinner party.

Milton informed Joan that Leland Stanford had used Chinese labor to build his railroad fortune, millions of which he spent constructing the school. "Many Chinese died," he added. "The men were blown up tunneling through caves." They were at Harbor Place in Chinatown, where the specialty was shrimp noodle soup. Around them sat slouched men wearing padded jackets, sipping tea, and slurping broth; outside, knots of similarly attired men were huddled on the sidewalk, smoking and arguing in Cantonese.

"Did he go to jail?" Joan asked.

"What? Of course not."

Joan ate some more noodles as she considered this. She usually vowed not to drink the soup due to its sodium but couldn't help it—and Harbor Place had such *good* soup, the bits of roasted duck and chopped scallion and fried onion all melding into a layered broth. It was always served near scalding; on the off chance that a white person came upon the restaurant, the waiters would shout, "Careful! Very hot!" as they set down the bowls. She swirled the noodles into an oval on her spoon. In the middle of the spoon, she placed a shrimp dumpling, soggy enough now that its skin was beginning to disintegrate.

Joan tipped the spoon into her mouth and closed her eyes. The bite went down smoothly, the heat and texture and salt playing together in pleasant symphony. Due to the expense, she didn't often eat at restaurants. Joan liked to believe she could make the same food at home for less money, but the reality was the meals she made herself, well—for

some reason there wasn't any soul. She assembled another spoonful, and by the time the bowl was empty, she'd decided she wouldn't think of Leland Stanford any longer. Weren't vicious men a given in this world? Ultimately it was pointless to try to keep track of them all. Stanford may not have built his splendid university with its towering eucalyptus groves for people like Joan, but the fact was that she was indeed here, and he was long dead, and thus she needn't think of him any longer.

CHAPTER TWO

The wedding was simple: the courthouse followed by sheet cake and fruit punch in a community room at the YMCA. Being an adult was delightful, Joan thought. Each new milestone was remarkable and thrilling.

Shortly after they were married, Milton took Joan to a video store. The store, which specialized in Chinese titles, was near downtown. Milton was excited, exclaiming he couldn't wait to show her someplace new, though the store had not, in truth, been new to Joan. She'd first visited on her own a month earlier, in search of a historical miniseries she'd watched in Taiwan, *The Supreme Kingdoms*. The shop owner, a Beijing native with tobacco-blotched teeth, had an arcane filing system he refused to explain to customers, which meant Joan had to ask for the series (all episodes but the pilot had been out on loan).

Weeks later, the same owner watched Milton escort Joan into the store, raising a few fingers in tepid greeting before returning to his newspaper. Once inside, Milton wrapped his arms around her from behind, resting his chin on top of her head. Joan blushed; she was not

used to public displays of affection. She liked the feeling elicited by Milton holding her, a contented pleasure which spread from the center of her body—but that she did enjoy it so made her feel as if she were showing off.

Joan was only just learning how to manage a husband. Her best friend, Kailie Chan, whose wedding dress Joan had borrowed for the ceremony with Milton, had told Joan the trick to a good marriage was to award your spouse a victory each day. A man's ego was like a baby, Kailie said. It required constant feeding.

"Isn't it incredible," Joan said upon Milton ushering her farther in, "that there's a shop right here in California just for Chinese videos? I wonder what Americans think when they walk past."

Milton beamed, and Joan felt the brief thrill of checking an item off her to-do list. She had already delivered to her husband his victory today.

It was midday, the sky cloudless. The light streamed milky yellow through the window, settling into rainbows on the ground. Joan wandered to the shaded half of the store. She examined a series that looked to be about the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Did she want a sad story? She didn't think so, but most of the historical dramas she favored seemed to have tragic endings, and even if they didn't, you couldn't help but recall what had really happened in the end.

"What're you looking at?" Milton asked.

"Hmm? Something on the war, I think."

"Come here," Milton said. He stood by a dark curtain that separated two shelves from the rest of the store. He smiled impishly, motioning to the area beyond.

Joan didn't move. She knew what could be found behind the curtain. She had glimpsed the space on prior visits, though always with her face in motion, as if performing a greater scan of the area. As if what lay beyond held no interest.

Pornography! Joan had no experience with such material, although at least to herself she could admit she was intrigued—yes, she was interested, she wanted to know! The human body, so mysterious, soft and malleable and sticky—she was both intensely curious about its abilities and squeamish over the possibilities. As a child, Joan had occasionally spotted photographs of nude women: a scattering of magazines at the newsstand in Taipei, carelessly stowed behind the candies and cigarettes. The covers were always large—too large, it seemed, for the gray plastic sleeves they were to be contained within—the oversize font running across the women's permed hair; inches of milky cleavage, shoulders exposed.

As Milton beckoned, Joan could feel the owner's gaze on her. Were she to look back, she was certain she would find his face set in the same dour cast that to certain Caucasians might sound a warning, a signal to brace for rocky service ahead: definitely no speaky English, a laggy response time, perhaps a mentally slow second uncle who slept in a back room? But Joan knew such a man must contain multitudes: English lessons on the weekends; revenue figures scrolling past expenses in a ceaseless ticker inside his brain; the cash he secreted from the wasteful hands of the IRS; a few failed business deals already under his belt; relatives who'd starved back in China and a disappointed wife and unappreciative children at home. Such a man might believe Joan decent, but the moment she went through that curtain he would recategorize her as that *other* kind of Asian, the wanton sort, uneducated and shameless.

It was Joan's first real experience choosing between embarrassment and preference. She did not turn away but instead straightened her back and followed Milton.

They were the only customers in the aisle. The videos were crammed in the same random fashion as in the rest of the store, but here there were only two rows of shelves facing each other, extending nearly to the ceiling. Milton had recently detailed to Joan each of California's major

fault lines, and she could not help but imagine an earthquake now, the tapes falling onto her and Milton, all the naked men and women crashing to the ground.

Milton perused a display at eye level. Something in his manner, a hint of sly familiarity, prompted her: "Have you been here before?"

"All men do it," he answered naughtily. "What do you think?"

Joan forced herself to look at the videos. Alone with Milton, her embarrassment was quickly overrun, and she greedily took in her surroundings. She was surprised by the number of titles, which appeared to offer settings of greater diversity than the imperial dramas that ruled the rest of the store. There was also *racial* diversity: white people, and what looked to be a Mexican man on one cover, a woman in a red dress beside him, shoe straps dangling from her fingers. And here was a Black man and an Asian woman, actually, *two* Asian women and *four* Black men, and several Japanese titles, one of which she dared wedge out with her finger—the translated copy promised a story of betrayal and gangsters, of steamy encounters and possible blackmail.

Blackmail!

A man pushed aside the curtain and, upon seeing Joan, spun around and left.

"Have you found one?" Milton whispered.

Joan hadn't known she was expected to pick something. Conscious of the possibility of another customer entering, she hastened to choose. She reached for the video directly facing her, which had on its cover an Asian woman with her face cupped in her hands. Joan liked the woman's expression, which looked serious, as if she were about to review a grocery list or discuss an unfair medical bill. This particular actress had her long straight hair swept behind her back rather than in the usual tight curls.

Once Joan held the video, however, she regretted her choice. She wished the male actor were on the cover as well—the man should really

bear some of the pressure of expectation, she thought. The back also bore frustratingly limited copy: it described only a sexy “high-stakes” situation. But what *was* the situation? And what about it was high-stakes? There came at that moment the chime of the bell—another customer—and so Joan quickly dropped the video into Milton’s outstretched hand and went outside, where she waited for her husband.

They returned to the store two weeks later. Joan had spent the morning packing the rest of her belongings to move to Milton’s apartment. For nearly two years Joan had woken up at five to prepare a fiber-rich breakfast as well as a lunch to be reheated by her seventy-four-year-old landlord, Iris Mahoney; Joan also was responsible for changing the litter box of Felix, Iris’s bad-tempered tabby, and cleaning the house. The Craftsman bungalow was technically three bedrooms, though Joan didn’t live in one of the three. She was instead allowed use of the non-permitted attic. The space was narrow, asymmetrical, with unpainted walls; when she lifted her arms, her fingers grazed the ceiling.

There were some books left to pack, as well as her favorite green wool coat. Joan had left the coat for last, as she knew she wouldn’t forget it. On the desk were some items she had purchased when she’d accompanied Milton to the university art shop earlier that week. She’d been entranced by the supplies, their breadth and specificity, and thus had allowed herself a rare splurge: a stainless-steel protractor and calipers set *and* a matching mechanical pencil *and* a Staedtler eraser and two pads of gridded paper.

Joan dropped the pads into her tote and the rest of the supplies into its large pocket. She then packed the books and green coat in her duffel. After she finished, the room was empty of her possessions. As was her daily custom, she went to the chest at the foot of the entrance and removed from it a rag and wiped the dust from the furniture.

"I wish you weren't leaving," Iris said when Joan came downstairs.

"Me too," Joan said, but this was only to be polite. Iris had been nice enough, but she'd also been unfair. The attic had been advertised as a stand-alone unit with bathroom attached, and the cleaning characterized as "light straightening"—all false claims. Joan thought she understood why, as Iris lived on a fixed income and didn't seem to have family nearby, but at the very least her rent should have been lower.

"Was it because you had too much work? I should have had you manage less. You do get used to the assistance." Iris coughed helplessly.

"No, no. It's just I'll be moving in with my husband."

"Keep in touch, *please*." To Joan's surprise, Iris grabbed her hand. Joan couldn't recall Iris touching her before.

"I will, Mrs. Mahoney." As she waited out front for Milton, Joan waved to Iris, who stood in the window; she wore her red velvet robe and looked especially diminutive from the street.

She's not so bad, Joan thought. She met me, and reckoned she could get more from the situation, and so she did. I suppose it's human nature.

Milton drove up in his yellow Volkswagen, and together they placed her suitcase in the trunk. There was a celebratory feeling between them; they had spent nights together, but now she would truly be moving in. To mark the occasion, they drove to a Chinese deli downtown and bought takeaway boxes of fried pork cutlet and shredded pickles and rice dotted with black sesame seeds. They ate at a table outside, with sodas Milton had brought from home. After they finished, Milton checked his watch.

"Let's go to the video store again," he said. "We can walk."

This time Joan studied over a dozen options before deciding. Her final selection was titled *Swedish Hostilities*, though this might have been a mistranslation—the font was light pink, and the cover reflected a distinct Victorian air, the men in morning suits and women in pastel gowns. The film promised an intricate plot: the woman's father owned a steel

company, and she had recently started working at the factory as well. There, the woman discovered that her father was actually a gangster, with debts to powerful mafia men.

An unexpected liaison . . .

A man as charming as he is dangerous . . .

A woman as innocent as she is sensual . . .

Joan would have read on, but she and Milton were no longer alone; another customer had slipped behind the curtain. She could see in her periphery that the man was nearing, and she was moving away when Milton laughed.

“Joan,” Milton said. “Joan! This is Kenny. He’s a friend.”

Joan stopped and turned. Kenny smiled at her. He had slick black eyes and a long, anemic mustache.

“Come say hi.”

“Hi,” Joan said. Kenny took her hand. His fingernails had dark half-moons of dirt and Joan thought she could discern a hot, oily scent from either his clothes or his skin.

Kenny commented to Milton how attractive she was. “So fair-skinned. And she’s taller too, not one of those who disappear if you stand straight.”

“Oh, she has a presence,” Milton agreed, laughing.

“Are you from Stanford?” Joan was prepared to force herself to like Kenny if so. She was a snob about Stanford, which she wholly adored (her ardor had survived her learning of the moral transgressions of Leland Stanford, whom she’d now forgotten about). There was just too much to admire about the institution (the buildings, sculptures, and gardens), and by extension she loved the people who learned and taught there too.

“No, we met at work.” While Milton studied for his architecture

license, he worked at a lab, where he did something with mainframe computers.

“Oh.”

“Kenny,” Milton said, “is single.”

“Do you want me to introduce you to someone?” Joan silently went through her list of contacts. For the best chance of success, it would have to be a person not so beautiful and not so smart—either one and the woman likely would not enjoy Kenny, and would possibly be upset with Joan for the match.

“Sure,” Kenny said. He seemed to be waiting for something.

“Well,” Joan said lightly, “it was nice—”

“I told him,” Milton interjected, “how we like to watch videos.”

Only a second passed before Joan understood Milton’s meaning. Once she did understand, she was so stunned by the casualness of his disclosure that her mind could only return a numb blankness. Appalled and dazed, she exhaled and took a step back.

After all: it had only been little over a month since Joan had sex for the first time. She’d lost her virginity on the wedding night and judged the initial experience between neutral and unpleasant. On Milton’s double bed, examining the goose bumps on her arms as her new husband loomed from above, she had bled, and afterward suppressed her impulse to immediately soak the sheets, as Milton was already snoring. With more iterations, however, more nights and some weekend afternoons, Joan began to enjoy lovemaking. When Milton started to play the videos, she watched with an out-of-body detachment, though once he’d turned them off (they didn’t always watch to the end), she found herself left with a vague discomfort, this tension slowly giving way to a searing, urgent internal focus that had been missing in prior encounters with Milton.

So this is why people go crazy over sleeping together, she’d thought. This is why they make reckless decisions and ruin perfectly good plans.

Back in Taiwan, it was because Alfred had impregnated his girlfriend that Joan was allowed to emigrate. Thus, sex had even brought her to America.

Though things weren't perfect. Days earlier, Joan had edged painfully close to a UTI; there were also certain aspects of Milton's performance, even with the videos, that had left her with the distinct impression that *more*—though she was not clear what *more* entailed—was possible. But who was to say Joan wasn't lacking herself? She knew nothing of sex; her education matched that of the other students of Taipei First Girls' High School, in that they were merely informed sex was a tawdry act conducted by the base and uneducated, a group certainly not to include graduates of the number one girls' school in Taiwan. She'd never had a class on sex education, never seen a man's private areas, until their wedding night.

Kenny released a fake-sounding cough. "Kenny said he can watch with us," Milton said. He was gazing upon Joan frankly—lovingly, she thought. "And stay for whatever happens after."

Joan looked at Kenny again. He had dark raised moles on the side of his neck, and his eyes were like little black marbles. These features, combined with his mustache, lent him the appearance of one of the unhealthier catfish in the tanks at Lotus Garden.

"I don't think so," Joan said faintly.

"Don't be a tease," Kenny moaned. He moved toward her, and she shuffled back. There'd been a ding-ding of the bells earlier, of the owner going outside to smoke, and from Joan's prior visits she knew he would be at least ten minutes.

She crossed her arms. "I don't think this is appropriate."

Kenny sighed in Milton's direction. Between them there passed a silent exchange Joan couldn't decipher. Milton turned to Joan. "Sweetie," he said.

"I don't like this," Joan blurted. Out of instinct she hit Milton, on

the side of his shoulder. Joan had never hit anyone before. Though as recently as a few years earlier, Joan had been smacked, quite often, by her mother. Mei had a habit of silently stewing and then, without warning, suddenly losing her temper and striking.

When Milton didn't respond, Joan prepared to slap him again. He caught her by the wrist. "I love when you fight back. You always fight. That is, at first."

Joan gasped. These were private matters! Activities between a husband and wife, ones not to be shared! Her indignation broke her fugue, and she righted herself and pointed at Kenny. "I don't want him here." Kenny wet his lips and leered.

"Now, come on. Kenny is my friend."

"He makes me uncomfortable. I don't *like* it." To her surprise—as Joan wasn't normally a crier—her eyes began to water. Kenny at least had the decency at this point to look ashamed. He went to the end of the aisle and began to examine a stack of videos.

"Won't you at least consider it?" Milton said gently. He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "You might like it. Isn't everything worth trying at least once?" Joan shook her head.

"I know you are nervous. You *are* nervous, aren't you?" It was only once Milton began whispering that she realized how loudly he'd been speaking before. "Sometimes I forget how inexperienced you are. I will tell Kenny to leave."

Relief swept through her. "Thank you."

"But in the future you'll have to listen to me, eh? I'm your husband. I understand things you don't—I know about the world."

Joan tilted her head up at Milton. He was so elegant and handsome, even in that harsh fluorescent light; though Joan wore heeled sandals, he was still nearly a head taller. His shirts, even his T-shirts, were always pressed. His eyes, his mouth, his soft colors, all reminded Joan of the husband of her favorite aunt in Taipei. The aunt who, with her heart-shaped

face and full lips, was the sort of beautiful to regularly have her looks remarked upon by strangers, and smart to boot (she too had gone to Taipei First Girls' High School), had married well, her husband a naval officer from a well-to-do family. The man went abroad to work and died shortly thereafter, and for the rest of her life Joan's gorgeous aunt had remained a widow.

Joan had not thought this unusual at the time. You married, and then there was no more. Sometimes the outcome was lucky and sometimes unlucky, but either way, once married you were done.

There were many women who'd been interested in Milton, Joan reminded herself. She recalled her triumph the first time they'd held hands in public. The thrill of his touch as he tugged her, gently, toward him for her first kiss.

And now here, in the dim light of the narrow aisle, her future unspooled before her—the larger apartment to which they'd eventually move, which Milton would select; the jobs Joan would work, the paychecks she'd earn, to be deposited straight into Milton's outstretched palm. The house they might buy, the midlife crisis she would tolerate (a new car, a girlfriend) once Milton reached a certain age and was disappointed in his imprint so far on the world. Everything in her life would come from Milton. There would be more Kennys, and here finally Joan forced herself to acknowledge that sex was indeed part of it, that Milton would shape its form and frequency to his desires, and it wasn't so bad, because so far she did enjoy it, but now there was a rotting part of her she would have to endure, and slowly it would gnaw at her pleasure until there was none. This was the choice she had made, and surely there were worse.

There were absolutely worse outcomes.

"No," she said.

Milton blinked at her. His eyes were not so unlike Kenny's, although they were larger, and Milton had smooth skin, which made all the

difference. What if Kenny had been born with big eyes and a few extra inches of height, Joan wondered—would he still be lurking in dark corners of video stores, waiting to watch other people have sex?

Kenny was observing them with open interest. Milton held her and pressed his mouth to her neck. “It’s okay,” he whispered. His breath hot against her skin.

There was none of the earlier pleasure of being held. Now in Milton’s arms she felt suffocated, as if he were draining something vital. But when Joan tried to pull loose, Milton only tightened his grip, until finally she yanked free. She then shoved him hard, with both hands. He stumbled backward, knocking into a shelf. He righted himself and came toward her.

Milton’s slap was lazy, easy. Afterward he let his hand dangle in the air with his thumb to his mouth. Joan felt the area of her cheek he’d struck. It was warm, and she pressed the tips of her fingers to it.

The two of them stared at each other. Joan thought she could discern in Milton’s round eyes an apology being assembled, and had the urge to impede him from actually saying sorry. It was fine, she’d likely reply if he did. She’d been trained her whole life to forgive a man like him.

She put up a hand. “I don’t want you to touch me.”

“Of course I can touch you.” Milton laughed. “I’m your husband!”

“You disgust me. Looking at you right now makes me sick.”

There was a sharp intake of breath. This time, when Milton hit her, it was harder—much harder. Her head made a harsh sound as it bounced against the wall. The pain followed a second later. Her ears rang, and in the distance Joan thought she could hear Kenny speak, but she wasn’t paying attention to Kenny any longer, she was directing all her faculties to her bag. She could not see well—her vision was still a blur, her head filled with tiny stars—but she shoved her hand in her tote and grabbed the first item she touched, the protractor. It was only after she’d swung that Joan realized what she held were actually the calipers, which had fallen out of their rubber casing.

The calipers, with two adjustable legs to measure area, were a precision product, made from carbon steel. Given their height difference, Joan managed only to make contact with Milton's chin and the bottom third of his cheek. On the downward arc, the sharpened tips sliced through his shirt and into flesh, where they left a ribbon of crimson. While the greatest damage was to his shoulder, it was Milton's cheek that bled most.

Milton touched a hand to his face. His fingers came away slick with red. He screamed.

Joan wiped the calipers against her pants and dropped them into her bag. She then strode out of the store. She had nearly reached the parking lot by the deli before she realized she didn't have the car keys—well, of course she didn't, the Volkswagen was Milton's.

Flummoxed, she stopped and set down her tote. She'd happened to stop at a row of parking meters and pondered her next move as she stared at the printed warnings of expiring time. Should she turn back? Or flee? Would the police arrest her? And *then* what would she do?

All her life, Joan would be one to face a difficult problem fully and plainly—this was a characteristic those close to her would by turns admire and loathe. And so after another minute she picked up her tote and reversed her path; as she rounded the corner, she saw Milton outside the store with its owner.

Milton held a cloth to his cheek. Joan identified the makeshift bandage as Kenny's windbreaker, though she didn't see Kenny anywhere.

When Milton spotted her, he backed away. "Call the police!" he shouted.

The shop owner was still smoking. "Did you do this?" he asked Joan.

"Why are you asking her?" Milton hollered. "Of course she did! You think I would do this to myself?"

"I don't get involved in domestic affairs," the owner said.

"This isn't a domestic affair, for God's sake. She *attacked* me!"

Milton's chin had begun to drip; he pressed the other sleeve of the jacket to it.

"I only believe what I happen to see with my own eyes."

Milton moaned and clutched his shoulder. "You don't happen to be blind, do you? Because there's blood all over!"

"I did attack him," Joan said. She thought it only fair to be truthful; she was beginning to feel a little sorry for Milton.

The owner glared at the two of them, his eyes darting back and forth. He went to Milton and examined his chin, evaluating the injury from multiple angles. The owner, named Terrence, had once imagined he'd be a doctor—his uncle was a dentist in Sacramento and lived in a beautiful brick house. Occasionally, as Terrence reshelfed videos, he pretended he was a surgeon in a major hospital. This patient will die unless his heart's fixed, the nurses screamed. Someone, hurry, call Dr. Terrence! He had not been pleased when Milton came rushing out of the store, interrupting his smoke break—in real life, his day-to-day life, in which he was the owner of a video store and a half acre of undeveloped land in North San Jose—Terrence did not like the sight of blood.

Terrence puffed his cigarette and then let it drop to the ground, stamping it under his foot. "I don't want either of you to come back here," he said angrily. "I have too much stress already." He returned to the store, leaving Milton and Joan on the sidewalk.

Milton pointed at her. "You're a crazy person."

"No," Joan said slowly.

"Of course you are. Who stabs someone over a video? What kind of civilized person conducts themselves this way?"

"I didn't want Kenny there. I didn't think the situation was appropriate."

"You crazy bitch, you could have done a better job of telling me that. Civilized people use their words! Do you think any normal marriage functions like this?"

He was panting now, and as Joan regarded her new husband, she held her breath. She tried to pretend the afternoon had never happened, that she still found him the most exciting, the most gentle, the most desirable person in the world. But it didn't work, not even a little; all she saw was the beige windbreaker splattered with blood. On impulse, Joan bent and retrieved the owner's discarded cigarette from the ground. It lay flaccid in her fingers, its warmth already gone. "I want a divorce," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

As far back as she could recall, Joan had suspected her parents did not like her. This feeling had been more puzzling to young Joan than upsetting—she couldn't figure out *why*. She was female, always a liability, but she'd come after three boys, so it wasn't as if she'd compounded some great disappointment. Joan believed she did most things well or at least serviceably; she was certainly better at school than her brothers. Alfred had been closest to her academically, but then Alfred had impregnated his girlfriend. The girl's father had sworn he'd kill Alfred if he refused his responsibility, and it was rumored the family had connections with Triad gangs in Hong Kong and California.

Had someone threatened to kill Joan, she knew Wen-Bao and Mei would not have reacted with sympathy. They would have said it was a problem she'd brought upon herself, and then slammed the door to keep her from infecting the rest of them. Growing up, Joan had never regarded herself as in need of careful handling; she was not like her brothers, who were treated as a precious resource, investments to nurture and grow. She had not been sent to any form of schooling until she was nine. Her

clothes were shabby, castoffs from older relatives, while Mei visited the tailor each season for new coats and dresses.

The day after Joan stabbed Milton was Sunday. As per routine, Joan called her parents. She informed them of the dissolution of her marriage. Following this, there was such a long stretch of quiet she thought they might have been disconnected. "Hello?" Joan asked.

There came on the line the sound of heavy breathing. "You can't get divorced," Mei said.

"I am."

"That's impossible. No one gets divorced. What does your husband say?"

"He wants it too."

"You can take these things back."

"Milton *hit* me," Joan said plaintively. She omitted that she had stabbed him; while compulsively drawn to honesty, she felt this detail would not accurately reflect their circumstances.

"We have a wedding banquet planned for November," Mei said. Joan and Milton had already had their wedding, but that was the American one; the "real" celebration was to take place in Taiwan. Joan knew her parents were anticipating the red envelopes filled with cash, gifted by relatives and friends, which would go toward a new car for Wen-Bao.

Joan wiped her palms, which were beginning to sweat, against her jeans. "The banquet won't happen."

"Yes, it will. We've already told our friends."

"Well, I'm sure Milton's already told *his* parents. So I'm telling you, it's off."

This was not only the most direct but also the most disobedient Joan had been with her parents. Joan could not recall having ever said no to Mei and Wen-Bao—she must have done it at some point, but not in recent memory. Joan suspected that no matter how much Milton might smack her around, her parents still would have proceeded with

the banquet; it was only the idea of Milton's parents not playing along, and inflicting upon Mei and Wen-Bao an even greater face loss, that gave them pause.

Mei's voice returned on the line. "So much trouble you've caused. You should feel such shame. I want you to say it. That you are ashamed. That you are a disappointment."

"I am a disappointment," Joan murmured. This was something she'd done since a child: whenever Mei was unhappy, Joan apologized and atoned. Mei's approval had always mattered greatly to Joan; at night she would lie awake and consider how she might please her mother, conjuring up elaborate fantasies of discovering valuable jewels on her walk home from school.

As an adult in California, however, Joan found the psychic force of Mei's rage blunted by distance; as she evaluated her situation an ocean away from Taiwan, Joan realized she was *not* disappointed. She had extricated herself from an unsatisfactory marriage; she had taken charge and left a mean-spirited man who likely would have only become meaner. When she thought about things this way, why—Joan was quite pleased!

"I don't understand what we could have done. To deserve such a bad daughter. When you called, I thought you might be saying you were pregnant."

"I certainly *hope* not," Joan blurted. Mei gasped and hung up.

Joan stared at the receiver and waited for the harsh clang of a broken connection. As was her routine when her mother hung up on her, she called the house again. She did this even though Mei never answered, and indeed the phone rang and rang. The following Sunday, Joan called her parents at the usual hour, to no response. She tried again the next weekend, and the weekend after that. She didn't yet know it, but Joan would not speak to her parents for another two years.