

# COUNTERFEIT

A  
N  
O  
V  
E  
L



# KIRSTIN CHEN

# COUNTERFEIT

A NOVEL

KIRSTIN CHEN



WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# **Dedication**

*For my grandmother*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

Part I

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

Part II

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

Epilogue

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*  
*Also by Kirstin Chen*  
*Copyright*  
*About the Publisher*

# Part I

# 1

The first thing I noticed was the eyes. They were anime-character huge, with thick double-eyelid folds, expertly contoured in coppery tones, framed by premium lash extensions, soft and full as a fur pelt. Then there was the hair—sleek yet voluminous, nipple-length barrel curls—and the skin, poreless and very white. And the clothes—sumptuous silk blouse, patent Louboutins. And, finally, the bag—an enormous Birkin 40 in classic orange. Back then, I wouldn't have known all these details, although, like most people, I knew those bags were absurdly expensive and impossible to obtain. All of this is just to say, the woman standing in the doorway of my neighborhood coffee shop looked rich. Asian-tourist rich. Mainland-Chinese rich. Rich-rich.

Of course I was surprised. Almost twenty years had passed since I'd last seen her, and she looked nothing like my freshman-year roommate. In fact, she didn't even sound like her. Back at Stanford she'd had a thick singsong accent. Each word she spoke curled in around the edges like a lettuce leaf. She struggled with the "th" sound, so *mother* came out *mo-zer*; *other*, *o-zer*. Now, though, it would have taken me a few lines to figure out that she was from China. On the phone, when she'd identified herself, she'd pronounced her last name like the tooth. Ava? Is that you? It's Winnie *Faaang*.

Why on earth did she want to catch up? How did she even get my number? In hindsight, she must have had her private investigator track me down, but when I asked her then, she answered breezily, Oh, I looked you up in the alumni listserv.

I didn't think to question her further. I agreed to meet for coffee, a part of me curious to see what had become of her. She'd dropped out of school so



suddenly, midway through our first year. None of my college friends were in touch with her, and she didn't use social media, at least not under her real name. Still, rumors drifted in from time to time: we heard she'd gone back to her hometown of Xiamen and graduated college there, that she moved to Virginia to care for an ailing aunt, that she married an American and quickly divorced. A friend of a friend had run into Winnie while touring one of those pricey Chinese immersion private schools in L.A., where she'd apparently taught for a spell.

The woman in the doorway caught sight of me. Ava, she cried. She hurried over holding out one arm for a hug, her other weighted down by the duffel-size Birkin. The coffee shop patrons looked up with idle curiosity, probably pegged her for another one of those influencers, and returned to their screens.

I'd dressed carefully, changing out of my usual leggings for pants that zipped, stippling concealer under my eyes. Now, however, I felt as plain as a brown paper bag.

Winnie ordered a double espresso at the counter and toted the doll-size cup and saucer back to the table.

I asked what had brought her to San Francisco, and she said she was here on business—handbag manufacturing, boring stuff. She waved a hand laden with emerald and sapphire eternity bands. To think I'd left my engagement ring at home for fear of appearing too flashy.

Now I know you're wondering why I called, she said. She explained that a dear friend in China needed a liver transplant and wanted the procedure done in the US. She'd done some research; she knew my husband was a successful transplant surgeon. Might I put her in touch with him? She understood that he was highly regarded in the field.

Again, I hadn't heard from her in twenty years! Misreading my disbelief, she said, I know, I know, since the election they've cracked down on transplants for foreigners, but if your husband could just talk to my friend.

I agreed to speak to Oli. She thanked me profusely and said, Now, Ava, how are you? Tell me everything. It's been too long.

I ran through the checklist (while she pretended her private investigator hadn't already filled her in): Olivier, with whom she appeared to be already acquainted, husband of four years, half French, half American; Baby Henri, two years old—did she want to see a picture? Here he was in our backyard, yes, we lived right up the street.

And work?

I gave the stock answer: I'd left my law firm when Henri was born and was now considering going in-house, better work-life balance and all that. As I talked, I parsed her transformation. Eyelid surgery, of course, cutting-edge facials involving lasers and microcurrents, quality hair extensions, designer clothes. But it was more than that. Sitting across from me, sipping from that miniature ceramic cup, Winnie looked comfortable, relaxed; she looked like someone who belonged.

What had she done with the plump, earnest girl who'd entered our dorm room lugging a pair of scuffed hot-pink suitcases, filled, I would learn, with acrylic cardigans and ill-fitting polyester cuffed trousers? Right away, it'd been clear that we could not be friends.

Why, you ask? For all the usual superficial reasons that matter to teenagers. She was awkward, needy, fobby. No, f-o-b-b-y. Fresh off the boat.

Look, I wasn't cool then, either, but I wasn't a lost cause. I knew the right friends could buoy me and the wrong kind would sink me, and there was only a small window of time in that first year of college to get it right.

You see, Detective, it felt like I'd waited my whole life to get to Stanford. Growing up outside of Boston—Newton, to be exact, if you know the area—I was one of those quiet, nerdy kids everyone ignored. I mean, the teachers knew me because I had excellent grades, although they constantly confused me with Rosa Chee. She was my friend, along with all the other quiet nerds, but to the rest of the school, to the normal kids, I was invisible.

You want an example? One time my brother was home from college, and we went out for ice cream and ran into Mitch Paulson, his former tennis doubles partner. Gabe and Mitch slap palms, thump shoulders, and I kind of wave. I swear, Mitch's face goes completely blank. Gabe says, That's my sister, Ava, she's a junior, and Mitch says, perfectly pleasantly, Nice to meet you.

Nice to meet you! I'd watched at least a dozen of their matches. I knew who Mitch had dated all through his senior year, and who he'd dated before her. He had no clue who I was.

Stanford was full of kids like me. I had new contact lenses. I'd grown my hair long enough to braid. I was ready to be seen, and if I couldn't have a blond ponytailed jock roommate, I wasn't going to let the one I did have get in my way.

In my defense, I tried to be civil to Winnie. I squelched my impatience and answered her countless questions. Mostly basic things, like where to get a student ID and how to figure out her mailbox combination. But she also had this annoying habit of treating me like her pocket dictionary, asking me to define words she didn't know, and complicated ones, too: *doppelgänger*, *verisimilitude*, *conceit*.

Come to think of it, given that the vast majority of our interactions in college involved her asking for my help, perhaps I shouldn't have been so taken aback by this, her most recent request, to aid in arranging her friend's medical care.

Through the course of the afternoon, she disarmed me by commending my life choices, saying things like, It doesn't surprise me at all that you married someone both brilliant and handsome. And, I've always thought that half white, half Asian babies are the absolute cutest. And, Of all the girls at school, you're the one I envied most. Basking in her flattery, I failed to notice that she'd had me pegged from the start, while I'd completely misjudged her.

Winnie was feigning interest in the story of how Oli and I had met when an unmistakable cry pierced the air. I turned, along with Winnie and the other patrons. There, lying flat on his back on the sidewalk outside, his face a red ball of rage, was my Henri. Crouched beside him was Maria, bless her heart, talking quietly, a look of calm determination in her eyes.

For a split second, I considered claiming ignorance. (And before you accuse me of being heartless, Detective, you must understand that back then, the tantrums were never-ending.) At the next table over, two men in stylish glasses exchanged smirks, and I snapped out of it, explained to Winnie that the shrieking child was my son, and rushed out the door.

What happened? I asked Maria. I bent down to still my son's wildly kicking legs. He cracked open one eye, saw it was me, and went right on wailing.

Maria sighed. Nothing, the usual, poor thing.

I stroked Henri's sweat-matted hair. Oh, Cookie, what's wrong? Tell Mama what's wrong.

But he couldn't tell me, and that was the root of the problem. Even at the age of two, he was deeply thoughtful, profoundly empathetic. More than anything he yearned to convey the feelings he had no language to describe, and who among us wouldn't find that frustrating? And so he erupted for the

most innocuous reasons: being put in his stroller, being taken out of his stroller, having his hand grabbed before crossing the street, being toweled off after his bath. Anything could set him off. Those first few years, he cried so much, his voice was perpetually hoarse. Oh, but listen to me, going on and on about my happy, healthy kid. He's doing so much better now, even if he still sounds like a mini Rod Stewart. It's rather endearing, really.

That afternoon, however, my son went right on shrieking as Maria and I cycled through our repertoire of tricks, stroking his tummy, rubbing his scalp, tickling his forearms, pinning his ankles together. A woman walking a golden retriever clucked sympathetically at us. A nanny ordered a pair of twin boys to stop staring.

The only thing to do was to hunker down and wait it out, Maria and I making loud soothing sounds like a couple of white-noise machines. After a long while, Henri tired. His kicking grew less frantic; the muscles in his face slackened. I reached out and tickled his belly, which was sometimes enough to get him to relinquish the last of his rage. Not this time. The instant my finger poked his soft tummy, his jaw dropped, releasing a neck-pinching scream. The crying started up again at full force. I fell back on my haunches, exhausted, ready to tell Maria to peel him off the sidewalk and drag him home.

From behind me, a low, warm voice sang a Chinese children's song. Liang zhi lao hu, liang zhi lao hu, pao de kuai, pao de kuai.

I whirled around to find Winnie standing there bent over with her hands on her knees, singing intently about a pair of tigers, one without eyes and one without a tail. Zhen qi guai, zhen qi guai. I recognized the tune from the after-school Chinese classes of my youth.

Abruptly the crying stopped. Without breaking song, Winnie unclipped a gray fur charm dangling from the handle of her Birkin.

I blurted, Don't give it to him, you'll never get it back.

But she held the furry ball out to Henri in the palm of her hand.

I hope that's not real mink, I warned.

Henri seized the ball and squealed with delight. A thick rope of drool landed on the soft fur.

Oh dear, I said.

Winnie laughed and patted Henri's head, and he purred sweetly.

This is Auntie Winnie, I told him. Can you say thank you?

He rubbed the mink across his saliva-soaked lips.

I explained to Winnie that although he understood everything, he didn't yet speak, and Oli attributed the slight delay to his being bilingual.

Smart boy, said Winnie.

I was too embarrassed to go back inside the coffee shop, so when Maria managed to strap Henri into his stroller without incident, I suggested we head home.

There, Winnie settled at the grand piano and played "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," singing to Henri in Mandarin—*yi shan yi shan liang jing jing*—teaching him to make blinking stars with his plump little paws.

The backs of my eyes began to smart. At that point my mom had only been gone six months. She was the one who was supposed to teach Henri Chinese. She was supposed to rub my back and tell me it was normal to be so tired I nodded off while brushing my teeth. She was supposed to talk me out of putting Henri on a strict diet of elk and venison because I was convinced the hormones and antibiotics were to blame.

Winnie saw the tear winding down my cheek and lifted her hands from the keyboard.

What's wrong, Ava?

Henri tugged on his earlobe, signaling growing agitation.

Nothing. Keep playing.

She dropped her hands to her lap. Henri's wail started as a low, chesty rumble and then gained force, rising through the scale to full police siren.

Maria, I called.

She darted out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on the seat of her jeans, scooped up Henri, and hefted him to his bedroom.

I grabbed a tissue and dabbed my cheeks. Oli says it's a phase.

Sure, Winnie said. All babies are like that.

I didn't want her to think I was despairing over my son, so I told her about my mom's passing.

She clamped a hand over her mouth. She remembered my mom from when she'd visited Stanford all those years ago.

Oh, Ava, I'm so sorry. She must have been such a good grandma to Henri.

I told her that for the first three months, she, Henri, and I had shared a room. She woke for every feeding, changed countless diapers, promised me that someday he'd stop crying. She'd dropped dead—there was no other way to describe it—while jogging on her basement treadmill. Sudden

cardiac arrest. Sixty-nine years old, thin as a whippet, rarely ever so much as caught a cold.

From the back of the house, my son's wails softened into jagged sobs. Winnie's mink charm lay gray and soggy on the carpet like an offering from a housecat. When I bent over to retrieve it, I caught the word *FENDI* embossed on the metal clip.

Oh, shit, I said.

Don't worry about it. Keep it as a toy for Henri.

Once she was gone, I searched for the bag charm online so I could buy her a replacement. Guess how much it cost? Six hundred bucks. Obviously I didn't go through with it. The next time Henri had an episode, I whipped out the mangled mink ball and dangled it in his face. He grew incensed, flung it away, and went right on screaming.

**A**fter that, Winnie would let me know whenever she came to San Francisco from L.A. Her work, she said, regularly brought her here, so she often stayed at the St. Regis downtown. I was impressed. The last time I'd checked, rooms there went for seven hundred a night.

Given all I've said so far, you must be wondering why I so willingly befriended her this time around. I'll admit that at first, I was dazzled by her wealth and beauty, her extreme confidence. I suppose a part of me was still stuck in freshman year, clinging to friends like life rafts.

But there was a deeper reason, too. The truth is, no one else, besides my mother, could calm Henri, and I was desperate. My son was still waking up every three or so hours, which meant it'd been two years and counting since I'd had a full night's sleep. Days I spent staring at my laptop screen, researching special diets to quell tantrums, while stalwart Maria wheeled Henri from story time to music class to the park. In fact, the week that Winnie called, I'd had eight pounds of bison shipped from Wisconsin, all of it hidden in a secret freezer in the garage storage room because Oli held a particular contempt for nutrition pseudoscience. And rightly so! I think we can all agree my behavior was unhinged.

Oh, and speaking of Oli, did I mention that this was right when he'd left UCSF for Stanford? A stellar career move, to be sure, but one that involved a nightmare commute on top of an already endless workday, which meant he never made it home in time to put Henri to bed.

So, like any overwhelmed new mom, I was grateful for Winnie's help.

Oli was glad to hear that Henri had taken to my old roommate, but was, like you, surprised at the extent to which I'd welcomed her into our lives. After all, the only thing I'd told him about Winnie was the infamous SAT scandal. I assume you've already been briefed?

No? Not at all? I see. I suppose that makes sense. I don't believe Stanford was officially implicated that time around.

This was back in the year 2000, and the whole thing was not unlike the recent incident with all those Hollywood bigwigs falsifying credentials and test results to get their kids into top schools, except, in this case, the perpetrators were Chinese nationals. According to the press, US law enforcement had uncovered a Beijing company that hired expert US-based test-taking proxies—Chinese grad students, mostly—armed them with fake passports, and sent them to sit for the SATs in place of wealthy, connected Chinese college applicants. Law enforcement seized company records and released their findings, and universities responded swiftly. Three Chinese students were expelled from Harvard, one from Yale, two from MIT, a handful of others from Penn and Columbia and Cornell. And you can bet that no one was writing op-eds in defense of these kids, portraying them as innocent victims who shouldn't be held responsible for their parents' crimes. No, when it came to foreign students, the universal rallying cry was to get those no-good Chinese cheaters out of our schools!

I remember standing by the fountain in White Plaza with kids from my humanities seminar, poring over fresh copies of the *Stanford Daily*. I returned to my room to find Winnie in tears, haphazardly chucking sweaters and T-shirts into her pink suitcases. She told me her father had a stroke. She was boarding a plane that night, never mind that finals started next week. I told her how sorry I was and folded my copy of the *Daily* into a tight square.

Did you tell your adviser? I asked. I was sure they'd let her make up exams.

She gathered an armload of socks and said, I really can't think about that right now.

I offered to notify her professors, and she smiled through her tears and thanked me.

The day of my last final, I received an email from Winnie. Her aunt was flying in from Virginia to pack the rest of her stuff. She was withdrawing from school. She didn't explain why.

Needless to say, everyone in the dorm speculated that Winnie had left just in time. Joanne Tran and Carla Cohen, who remain some of my closest friends, fixated on Winnie's less-than-perfect grammar. She mixed up *he* and *she*, forgot to add s's to the ends of plural nouns, used present tense where it should have been past. Obviously, she couldn't have aced the verbal section of the SATs, much less written a personal statement that was up to snuff. They seemed to view Winnie's alleged cheating as a personal insult. Joanne pounded her fist against the flimsy dorm-room wall as she lamented having to take the test three times to raise her score, while those rich kids plunked down money for theirs.

I, too, was quite certain Winnie had cheated, and that she'd invented her father's stroke. But I wasn't angry. If anything, I felt sorry for her. Maybe because I'd seen how hard she worked; maybe because I knew she didn't come from wealth. Her parents weren't high-ranking officials like the parents of those Harvard kids. Her dad was a middle-school principal. Her mom, a secretary. She'd been able to enroll here only because she'd won a national government scholarship, plus her aunt in Virginia sent monthly checks. Even then, she worked the late-night shift at the coffee kiosk across from the library. She babysat and tutored. She chose her classes based on the number of required books. Whenever possible, she enrolled in the same classes I did so she could borrow mine. She'd set her alarm for the crack of dawn and finish her homework before I even awoke, never giving me reason to get annoyed and rescind the use of my books.

The day after I received Winnie's email, while Carla and Joanne and the rest of our floor chugged box wine to celebrate the end of the quarter, I hauled back boxes from the recycling bin behind the bookstore and packed the rest of Winnie's things. When her aunt and uncle showed up at our door, they were stunned by all I'd done. They took me out to dinner to thank me. But Winnie never thanked me. No doubt she had too much other stuff to worry about.

Did I ever confront her about the SATs? No, I didn't see the point. Why bring it up after all this time? She'd paid for her crime by leaving school, which is more than can be said for those Hollywood brats.



## 2

**B**efore long Winnie was a fixture in our home. I must say her timing was uncanny. Somehow, she'd managed to resurface during the single most turbulent period of my life, and whenever something threatened to spiral out of control, there she was with a comforting word, a warm hug, a little present for Henri.

Once she brought over a beautifully illustrated children's book of Chinese folktales (tucked into another striking Birkin in peacock blue). I can honestly say I didn't recognize the little boy who climbed right into her lap to listen to the story of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid. It was one that my mother had told me when I was a child, about a pair of star-crossed lovers who were tragically separated by the celestial river (that's the Milky Way, in case you were wondering).

The story was long and complex, much too mature for a child of Henri's age. After following along for a good while, he grew bored and seized a corner of the page. Winnie, though, had quick reflexes, and before he could rip the paper, she caught his wrist and said firmly in Mandarin, No.

I sprang up, ready to soothe my son, but, miraculously, no wails followed. Instead, he broke into a cheeky grin, squirmed down from Winnie's lap, and ran to the piano. He mashed his little fists into the quilted leather bench and gave her a beseeching look, making us roar with laughter. Maria murmured that perhaps he'd grow up to be a concert pianist, and I squeezed her hand, genuinely moved. It wasn't entirely far-fetched; Oli had exhibited real talent in his youth.

We spent the rest of the afternoon singing children's songs (while Henri stamped his feet and swayed with feeling), first in English and then in

Mandarin, and then Maria taught us a few in Spanish, too. I was in the thick of the dreaded preschool application process—you know how it is, right, Detective? More competitive than the Ivy League? When Henri sidled right up to Winnie, laid his cheek on her lap, and sighed serenely, I could, for the first time, imagine him trooping off without us.

This Hallmark scene was what Oli walked into, a full hour before he was expected. He'd wrapped up early for once and rushed home to surprise me and take us out to dinner.

I introduced Winnie to my husband. She took his hand in both of hers and thanked him for fitting her ailing friend into his busy schedule. He patted her shoulder in an avuncular fashion and said, I'm happy to help.

Swiftly gathering her things, she made for the door, not wanting to intrude on our family time. As soon as she slipped on her shoes, however, Henri burst into tears. He lumbered over and fused himself to her leg.

I tried to pry him loose, saying, Auntie Winnie needs to get back to her hotel. She has to work. She'll visit again soon. To which Henri released a howl so anguished that Oli cut in with, Winnie, won't you join us? We're just grabbing pizza down the street.

She hesitated. I knew she was waiting for me to confirm Oli's invitation, but it had been so long since the three of us had gone out for a meal that I was torn.

Henri's howl climbed up a key; Oli pressed her again.

All right, she said. As long as I'm not intruding.

Of course not, I said at last.

Dinner proceeded as smoothly as it could have with a toddler at the table. Henri insisted on sitting next to Winnie and expressed his contentment by enthusiastically defacing his paper menu with green and purple crayons and then bestowing his masterpiece upon her. We scarfed down the pizza, scalding the roofs of our mouths with bubbling mozzarella. When Henri grew restless, I whipped out the iPad and headphones.

It was only after the plates had been cleared, the water glasses refilled one last time, and the check deposited beside Oli's elbow that he dabbed his napkin to his lips, cleared his throat, and delivered a piece of information so reprehensible, I'd wonder if *he'd* in fact plotted to invite Winnie to dinner, knowing I'd be forced to temper my reaction.

Our conversation up to this point had been innocuous, veering from rising housing prices to worsening traffic, which had naturally led Oli to

bemoan his terrible commute.

You know, he said. I may have found a solution.

Oh? said Winnie.

Oh? I said.

Apparently, one of Oli's colleagues had offered to rent him a small apartment on California Ave., ten minutes from the hospital. The place had been empty for months, so they'd given him a deal.

My smile strained the corners of my mouth. You're going to live in Palo Alto?

California Ave., that's a nice street, said Winnie.

Oli avoided my eyes. I thought we could give this a try. Only during the week. And when I have to work weekends.

Makes sense, Winnie said. What's that great brunch place with the very long queue?

Joanie's, said Oli, though I've heard the quality has deteriorated.

Does it make sense? I asked, still grinning like a buffoon. To leave your wife all alone with your active and fussy two-year-old?

Oli spoke slowly and calmly, like he did when he reprimanded said two-year-old. Come now, Ava. We discussed this before I took the job.

We discussed eventually moving *as a family*.

Yes, and what am I supposed to do in the meantime?

In the meantime, you make sacrifices because that's what's best *for the family*.

His expression grew plaintive. Why did you push me to say yes?

I swiveled to face him squarely so he could absorb my look of incredulity. Because it's your dream job. Because that's what good spouses do—support each other, help each other excel.

I said I was perfectly happy where I was.

I jerked my napkin from my lap and slammed it on the table. Winnie sucked in a breath. Even Henri glanced up from the iPad. The too-large headphones hung down to his jaw like Snoopy ears.

All right, I said. We can talk about this at home. I pushed back my chair, intentionally dragging its legs across the floor, savoring the deafening screech.

Oli tossed a bunch of twenties on the table, deftly pushing Winnie's hand away when she tried to add to the pile. Without warning he yanked Henri out of his high chair, and he promptly began to cry.

Outside the restaurant, Winnie stroked Henri's cheek, eliciting a despondent moan. She flagged down a cab idling nearby, and when she hugged me, she squeezed my shoulders and whispered, right in my ear, Call me.

Heat blazed across my face. I couldn't believe I'd let her witness this entire scene. Once she'd vanished, I raged at Oli. Why did he have to get into this in front of my friend? How could he humiliate me like that?

He sputtered, I really didn't think you'd get so mad.

I whirled around and marched back to the house, leaving him to corral Henri and the stroller and the tote bag of toys.

**I** know what you're about to say, Detective. What was keeping me from packing up and moving down to the Peninsula with my husband? After all, I'm so eager to do so now.

One big reason was Maria. We'd gone through three other nannies before we'd found her, and I know it's cliché, but she really was part of the family. In the entire time she was with us, she only called in sick once—a vicious case of food poisoning—and I will never forget how Henri broke down when I told him she wasn't coming. He cried so hard, he started hyperventilating, his little chest pumping like the bellows of an accordion. I couldn't calm him down. I screamed into the phone at Oli that our son wouldn't stop, his lips were turning blue, he'd passed out. Infuriatingly composed, Oli told me not to panic and to call 911 if he didn't come to in another minute. Henri woke up right after that, but the terror's still fresh enough to send my pulse skyrocketing.

I thought of Maria as a true coparent. She was with me the afternoon my dad called to tell me about my mom. I couldn't comprehend what he was saying through the sobs. He repeated that she was dead and then abruptly hung up the phone to call my brother. When Maria entered the kitchen, she found me standing at the sink, the tap still running at full blast, bruising the sieve of strawberries. I asked her if it was possible that I'd misheard my dad. She bundled me in her strong sinewy arms and put me to bed and told me firmly that the only thing I had to do right then was grieve; she'd take care of everything else. Hours later, I gazed out the window into the backyard to see her kneeling beside Henri, their heads touching, and together they released a yellow balloon into the sky.