

CHAPTER 1: THE REUNION

"你看到了吗？陈总今晚会演讲。"

Zhang Mei's voice cut through the champagne haze, breathless with the kind of excitement that made Weilin tired. Did you see? CEO Chen is speaking tonight.

Weilin didn't look up from her phone, fingers scrolling through emails she'd already read twice. The Park Hyatt's eighty-seventh floor ballroom glittered around them—chandeliers casting prismatic light across marble, executives in designer black-tie clustering like well-dressed predators. She'd perfected the art of looking engaged while being completely elsewhere.

"哪个陈总？" Which CEO Chen?

Common as rain in Shanghai, that surname. You couldn't network for five minutes without meeting three of them.

"Marcus Chen. Chénxī Technologies." Zhang Mei grabbed her arm, manicured nails digging in. "天啊, Weilin, you really don't know him?"

Weilin finally glanced at her colleague, raising one carefully shaped eyebrow. Zhang Mei was twenty-six, still young enough to get starstruck by keynote speakers. Still climbing the Huarong Consulting ladder with naked ambition instead of the calculated indifference Weilin had learned to project.

"Should I?"

"He's only worth like a billion dollars. Self-made. From Anhui, no connections, nothing. Built everything in six years."

Self-made. In China. Weilin nearly laughed.

"There's always family money somewhere," she said, turning back to her phone. "Or Party connections nobody mentions."

"Not this time." Zhang Mei thrust the event program at her.

"Look."

Marcus Chen, Founder & CEO, Chénxī Technologies

"Innovation from Adversity"

Weilin scanned the brief bio. Born rural Anhui. Parents: construction worker, seamstress. Scholarship to Tongji. First major contract with a state-backed shipping company.

Company valuation: \$2.1 billion.

Something flickered in her chest. Respect, maybe. Or the professional instinct that smelled a potential client.

"Worth researching," she admitted, handing back the program. Around them, the crowd thickened—venture capitalists, government officials with deliberately vague titles, CEOs whose companies moved billions. The air smelled like expensive perfume and ambition, that sharp metallic scent like ozone before a storm.

Her world. She'd been born for rooms like this.

So why did it feel like suffocating?

The lights dimmed.

Weilin set down her champagne, pulled out her phone for notes. Professional mode. This was what she did—absorbed information, identified opportunities, translated power into contracts. Third row, perfect sight line to the stage.

The MC's voice rolled through the ballroom in Mandarin, then English: "Please welcome Marcus Chen."

Applause rippled. Weilin's thumbs hovered over her phone screen.

Then he walked on stage, and the world tilted.

Tall—six-one, maybe. Broad shoulders in a charcoal suit she recognized as custom Zegna, probably fifty thousand yuan. But it wasn't the suit. It was the way he moved. Economical.

Purposeful. Like someone who didn't waste a single motion.
"天啊，他好帅，" Zhang Mei whispered. My God, he's handsome.

Weilin told herself this was professional assessment. Strong jawline. High cheekbones. Dark eyes that swept the audience with cool assessment. Long fingers, no wedding ring. The kind of power that didn't need to announce itself.

Something about the way he held himself made her breath catch.

He spoke in flawless English, slight American accent: "Good evening. Six years ago, I stood in a room not unlike this one—though considerably cheaper—and tried to convince investors to believe in an algorithm no one understood, built by someone no one had heard of."

Polite laughter. Weilin typed: Standard underdog narrative. Self-deprecating humor for rapport.

She'd heard this speech a thousand times.

Then he switched to Mandarin.

Her fingers froze.

His Mandarin was perfect—Beijing standard, the kind taught in elite schools. But underneath, barely perceptible, there was something else. A regional accent almost completely erased. Anhui? Jiangsu?

Her heart did something strange.

She looked up. Really looked.

The stage lights caught his face fully. The line of his jaw. The way his eyes narrowed before making a point. The gesture of his left hand—thumb and forefinger forming a circle.

The scar.

Left eyebrow, barely visible.

No.

不可能。

Impossible.

The phone slipped in her hand. She caught it, knuckles white.

Seven years ago. Their apartment in Yangpu, boxes everywhere because he never organized anything the way she asked. He'd turned too fast, hit the corner of the shelf.

Blood on his face. Her panic, hands shaking as she pressed tissue to his eyebrow.

"没事，没事。只是小伤。" His laugh. It's fine, just a small wound.

"对不起。" Her voice breaking. Sorry.

He'd kissed her palm. "Silly. It was my fault."

The scar had healed. Barely visible.

But she knew exactly where to look.

"你还好吗？" Zhang Mei's voice seemed to come from underwater. "You look pale."

"Fine." The word scraped out. "I'm fine."

But she wasn't.

On stage, this man—this Marcus Chen—bore no resemblance to the person she'd left six years ago in a cramped legal aid office.

That divorce mediation. Him in an H&M suit too big in the shoulders, frayed collar, scuffed market shoes. He'd looked diminished. Smaller.

"我只是想知道为什么。" His voice so quiet. I just want to know why.

Her answer, cold because cold was easier: "Because you're dead weight, Moxuan. My family was right. You'll never be enough."

She'd said it in Mandarin. Wanted him to feel every syllable.
His face had shuttered. Lights going out floor by floor until
only darkness remained.

She'd walked out.

Never looked back.

This man on stage wore power like a second skin. Swiss
watch catching light—Patek Philippe. Photographs behind
him: government ministers, international CEOs, buildings
bearing his company logo.

This man was untouchable.

This man was 陈墨轩.

Her ex-husband.

"很多人问我成功的秘诀。" His voice pulled her back. Many
people ask me the secret to success.

The audience leaned forward.

"我告诉他们：有时候，最好的动力是有人告诉你，你永远不够
好。" I tell them: Sometimes, the best motivation is someone
telling you you'll never be good enough.

Laughter rippled through the ballroom. Inspirational. The
classic underdog makes good.

Weilin thought she might vomit.

"六年前，我失去了一切。婚姻。积蓄。信心。" His voice
softened, intimate despite the hundreds listening. Six years
ago, I lost everything. Marriage. Savings. Confidence.
Silence now. Personal vulnerability from a billionaire was rare.
"但我学到了最重要的一课：你的价值不在别人的评价里。在你自
己的努力里。" But I learned the most important lesson: Your
worth isn't in others' opinions. It's in your own effort.

Thunderous applause.

He was talking about her.

About what she'd done to him.

The realization came in waves. He'd built this empire from the ashes of their marriage. From the moment she'd called him dead weight, watched the light die in his eyes—he'd taken that pain and forged it into billions.

Year two of marriage. Her parents' dinner table, all dark wood and judgment.

Father: "你丈夫还在做那个...什么startup? " Your husband is still doing that... what, startup?

Mother: "微琳，你还年轻。可以重新开始。" Weilin, you're still young. You can start over.

Moxuan beside her, silent. Using the correct fork after she'd coached him. Hand shaking slightly.

She'd said nothing. Hadn't defended him.

That night: "你后悔吗？嫁给我？" Do you regret marrying me? She should have said no immediately.

Her pause had been too long.

His startup—the one she'd mocked. Now worth \$2.1 billion.

His algorithm—the one she'd called useless. Now industry standard.

His dreams—the ones she'd dismissed. Now reality.

"So my advice?" Marcus Chen concluded. "When someone tells you you're not enough—prove them wrong. Not for them. For yourself."

He smiled. It didn't reach his eyes.

Standing ovation.

Weilin stood automatically, clapping while dying inside.

The crowd surged forward the moment applause faded.

Business cards emerged like weapons. Everyone wanted a piece of Marcus Chen.

"我们应该去打招呼，" Zhang Mei was already moving. "He could be a huge client."

I can't, Weilin's mind screamed. I need to leave.

But her feet moved forward anyway.

Masochistic impulse. Or hope—desperate, impossible hope that he'd see her and remember. That something in his eyes would soften.

She pushed through executives. Marcus Chen stood surrounded, security detail forming subtle barriers. Her ex-husband needed bodyguards now.

He was taller than she remembered.

Or maybe she was shrinking.

"墨轩？"

His name left her mouth before she could stop it. The name she'd whispered in darkness, laughed with over cheap dumplings, moaned when he—

He turned.

Their eyes met.

Nothing.

No recognition. No anger. No pain.

Just polite confusion.

"I'm sorry," he said in English, smooth and professional. "Do we know each other?"

The words were a knife.

"你认识陈总？" Zhang Mei whispered. You know CEO Chen? Other executives staring now. Curious. Judgmental.

"我...我以为..." I... I thought...

Marcus Chen's expression remained patient. The way you'd look at a stranger who'd confused you for someone else.

"是我。" Her voice stronger now. "微琳。沈微琳。" It's me.

Weilin. Shen Weilin.

Full name. Formal. Like introducing herself for the first time. Because maybe she was.

His frown deepened slightly. "I'm afraid I don't... Perhaps you're thinking of someone else?"

Then, switching to Mandarin, impossibly kind: "抱歉，沈小姐。可能您认错人了。很高兴见到您。" My apologies, Miss Shen. Perhaps you've mistaken me for someone else. Lovely to meet you.

Miss Shen.

Not 微琳.

Not 沈太太—Mrs. Chen, what he'd called her when teasing. Miss Shen.

Stranger.

He turned back to the executives. "About the Singapore expansion—"

His security detail guided her away with professional hands that never quite touched.

She stood surrounded by hundreds, utterly alone.

Does he really not recognize me?

Is this performance?

Revenge?

Or have I become so insignificant that six years erased me completely?

"你怎么了？" Zhang Mei pulled her aside, eyes wide. "You know him? Why did he—"

"No." The lie tasted like ash. "I mistook him for someone else."

"你确定吗？ You look—"

"I'm sure. I need the restroom."

The bathroom stall door locked behind her. Weilin sat on the

closed toilet lid, trying to remember how to breathe.

Her hands shook pulling out her phone.

Google: "Marcus Chen Chenxi Technologies"

Results flooded the screen.

Forbes: "Self-Made Billionaire Chen Moxuan: From Nothing to Everything"

Bloomberg: "Chénxī Technologies Valued at \$2.1 Billion"

Photos loaded. Charity galas. Government dinners.

International conferences.

All after her.

She found one from six months post-divorce. His first product launch. Small venue. He was still thin then, still uncertain.

But his eyes had that light. That fierce determination.

The light she'd tried to extinguish.

It had survived anyway.

Despite her.

Weilin stared at her reflection. Perfect makeup. Perfect hair.

Perfect Armani blazer.

She looked exactly like the woman she'd been raised to be.

And she hated her.

Her phone buzzed.

Zhang Mei: 陈总刚刚问起你。问你是不是okay。要我给你他的名片吗? 😊

CEO Chen just asked about you. Asked if you're okay. Want me to give you his business card?

Weilin's heart stopped.

He'd asked about her.

Which meant he'd recognized her after all.

Which meant this was a game she didn't understand.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

是的。给我。 Yes. Give it to me.

Delete.

不用了。谢谢。 No need. Thank you.

Delete.

She stared at the blank message box.

Outside, the forum continued. Networking. Deals. Ambition churning.

Inside this stall, Weilin sat with the wreckage of her past and one devastating question:

Who was Marcus Chen?

And did 陈墨轩—her Moxuan—still exist underneath?

END CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2: WEILIN'S RESEARCH

Weilin hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, and the internet knew more about her ex-husband than she ever had.

The laptop screen glowed blue in the darkness, seventeen browser tabs open like wounds. Her reflection stared back from the black window—ghost-pale, hollow-eyed, barely recognizable. The French Concession apartment around her was all designer furniture and sterile surfaces, expensive and empty as a showroom. No photographs. No mess. No life.

3:47 AM.

Cold coffee sat forgotten beside her laptop—third cup, gone cold hours ago. The cashmere throw draped over her shoulders did nothing for the chill that came from inside. She

was still wearing yesterday's blouse, Armani and wrinkled now, makeup smudged beneath her eyes like bruises. Her hair hung in a messy bun. She hadn't showered since the forum.

Hadn't eaten either. Her stomach had stopped asking. On the screen in front of her: a Forbes article from three years ago.

Self-Made Billionaire Chen Moxuan: From Nothing to Everything

How a scholarship student from rural Anhui built a logistics empire—and why he'll never forget where he came from.

Rural Anhui. That's what they called it in articles now. Professional. Respectable.

When she'd known him, her mother had called it "那个穷地方." That poor place. Her father had called it "nowhere that matters."

She'd called him dead weight.

Her hands shook as she opened a new document, typed the title: "陈墨轩 – Timeline."

She had to understand. Had to map how the man she'd thrown away had become this.

She started with the divorce records—accessed them through her firm's legal database, told herself it was professional curiosity.

Year 0: Six Years Ago

- Divorce finalized: March 15th
- Assets divided: None
- His forwarding address: Yangpu District, shared apartment
- Occupation: Unemployed (Recent Layoff)

She remembered that day too clearly. Him sitting across

from her in the cramped legal aid office, signing papers with hands steadier than hers. She'd hidden her tremor by gripping the pen too tightly.

She'd expected tears. Begging. Fighting.

Instead, he'd just asked: "我只是想知道为什么。" I just want to know why.

So she'd told him. Made it clean and brutal because brutal felt safer than honest.

"Because you're dead weight, Moxuan. My family was right. You'll never be enough."

She'd watched his face shutter. Lights going out floor by floor. Then she'd walked out.

Now she scrolled to the next entry in her timeline.

Year 0.5: Six Months Post-Divorce

Shanghai Business Registry showed:

- Company registered: 晨曦科技有限公司 (Chénxī Technologies, Ltd.)
- Registered capital: ¥100,000 (borrowed, according to an obscure tech blog)
- Address: Yangpu Innovation Park (subsidized startup space)
- Employees: 1

She found the blog post on page eight of her search results.

An interview from six months after their divorce.

Interviewer: "What inspired you to start Chénxī Technologies?"

Chen Moxuan: "我失去了一切。所以我没什么可再失去的了。这种自由很可怕，但也很解放。"

I lost everything. So I had nothing left to lose. That kind of freedom is terrifying, but also liberating.

Weilin read the line fifteen times.

While she'd been blocking his WeChat and deleting his number and erasing him from her life, he'd been building something from nothing.

Year 1: The First Contract

A tech industry newsletter mentioned:

- Chénxī secures mid-sized shipping contract
- Algorithm reduces logistics costs by 23%
- Valuation: ¥5 million
- Employees: 4

"Chen Moxuan is a name to watch," the blogger had written. One year after she'd told him he'd never amount to anything, industry insiders were already watching him.

And she'd had no idea.

Year 2: The Breakthrough

South China Morning Post, business section:

- Chénxī wins Shanghai port logistics contract
- Deal worth ¥50 million
- Algorithm outperforms three multinational competitors
- Chen Moxuan (29) becomes youngest CEO to secure government contract at this level

The accompanying photo showed him at the signing ceremony. Still thin. Suit still slightly too big—off-the-rack, she could tell. But his eyes were different. Focused.

Determined.

No mention of personal life. No mention of divorce.

She'd erased herself from his story before it even began.

Year 3-4: The Explosion

The articles multiplied:

- Series B funding: \$20 million from SoftBank
- Expansion to Shenzhen, Beijing, Guangzhou

- Employee count: 200+
- Partnerships with Alibaba, JD.com
- Featured in "30 Under 30" lists
- First English-language interviews

She clicked on a Bloomberg profile, read it three times.

"Chen Moxuan credits his success to a specific moment of clarity. 'Someone I loved told me I wasn't enough,' he says carefully. 'I realized she was right—I wasn't enough for her vision of success. But I could be enough for my own.' He pauses. 'I'm grateful to her, actually. She freed me to become who I needed to be.'"

Weilin physically recoiled from the screen.

Grateful. He was grateful to her for destroying him.

Year 5: The Billionaire

Forbes cover story: "China's Newest Billionaire: The Quiet Rise of Marcus Chen"

- Company valuation: \$1.2 billion
- Personal net worth: \$800 million
- Real estate: Lujiazui penthouse (¥500 million), Singapore property, Palo Alto apartment
- Lifestyle: "Surprisingly modest for his wealth"

The philanthropy section made her chest tight:

- Scholarship fund for rural students, specifically Anhui province
- Donations to programs for migrant workers' children
- Foundation name: 晨曦基金 (Chénxī Foundation—Dawn Foundation)

He was giving back to people like him. People her family wouldn't look at twice.

People she'd been raised to consider lesser.

Year 6: Present Day

- Company valuation: \$2.1 billion
- Employees: 2,000+
- Global offices: Shanghai, Beijing, Singapore, San Francisco, London
- Government advisory positions
- International speaking circuit

Recent photo from the G20 business summit showed him shaking hands with the Premier. Custom suit. Perfect posture. Controlled smile.

The man she'd divorced couldn't afford a decent suit.

This man advised governments.

Weilin opened another document. Titled it: "My Timeline."

Year 0-6: Her "Success"

- Same consulting firm (father's connections)
- Promoted twice (competent, not exceptional)
- Salary: ¥800,000/year
- Apartment: ¥8 million (family money)
- Relationships: Three failed attempts
- Achievements: Respectable. Forgettable.

She'd been standing still while he'd built an empire.

She typed one final line: "I was the one who wasn't enough. I just couldn't see it."

At 4:15 AM, she started watching his speeches on YouTube.

Stanford Business School, Two Years Ago

He spoke in English—perfect, barely-accented English. When had he learned to speak like this?

She remembered his English when they'd met. Functional but heavily accented. He'd been self-conscious about it. She'd corrected him constantly. In front of her friends.

On screen, he was confident. Articulate. Made the Stanford audience laugh with a self-deprecating story about his first investor pitch.

"I showed up with slides in Chinese. They didn't speak Chinese. It was... educational."

The audience loved him.

Weilin felt sick.

TechCrunch Shanghai, Last Year

He switched fluidly between Mandarin and English.

"很多人问我：没有关系，没有背景，怎么成功？" Many people ask: without connections, without background, how do you succeed?

"我的答案很简单：你让你的工作成为你的关系。你让你的价值成为你的背景。" My answer is simple: You make your work your connections. You make your value your background.

"有人会看不起你。会低估你。会告诉你，你永远不够好。"

People will look down on you. Underestimate you. Tell you you'll never be good enough.

He paused. The camera zoomed on his face.

"信他们。" Believe them.

Confused laughter.

"然后证明他们是错的。不是为了他们。为了你自己。" Then prove them wrong. Not for them. For yourself.

Standing ovation.

Weilin slammed the laptop shut.

Opened it again thirty seconds later.

Fortune Global Forum, Six Months Ago

Panel on "The Future of Leadership." He sat between a German CEO and an American venture capitalist.

"What's the hardest lesson you've learned in business?" the

moderator asked.

Chen's answer came in English: "The hardest lesson was learning that love and business operate on different logics. In business, value is objective—you create value or you don't. In love..." He paused. "In love, value is subjective. Someone can fail to see your worth, and there's nothing you can do to change their vision. You can only change yourself."

"I spent years trying to be valuable to someone who couldn't see it. When I stopped... when I started building value for myself... everything changed."

"Sounds like there's a personal story there," the moderator said.

Chen's smile was polite. Impenetrable. "Perhaps. But that's ancient history."

Ancient history.

Six years wasn't ancient history. It was yesterday. It was this morning. It was right now, 4:32 AM, as she sat realizing she was the villain in his origin story.

She searched for photos next. Found her old cloud storage—the backup she'd told herself she'd deleted.

Their wedding, seven years ago: City Hall ceremony. Him in a borrowed suit, sleeves too short. Her in a simple dress. Both smiling, but she could see it now—his smile hopeful, hers performative. They were holding hands. His grip tight. Hers loose.

He'd been holding on. She'd already been letting go.

Their apartment, year one: Forty square meters in Yangpu. IKEA furniture, mismatched dishes. Him at the tiny kitchen table, laptop open, working on the algorithm. Wearing his old university hoodie, glasses sliding down his nose. That light in

his eyes. The dream.

She'd hated that apartment. Hated that he was content there. Dinner with her parents, year two: Him in the H&M suit, trying so hard. Using the wrong fork. Her mother's pitying smile. Her father not even looking at him. Moxuan's hand trembling as he reached for water.

She'd been embarrassed. Had spent the whole dinner wishing he was someone else.

Someone who belonged.

Now she opened Google Images. Searched: "Marcus Chen 陈墨轩"

Fortune Magazine cover, last year: Custom Tom Ford suit. Standing on the Bund, Pudong skyline behind him. Arms crossed. Confident. Headline: "The Algorithm King."

Same face. Completely different man.

Charity gala, eight months ago: Black tie at Shanghai Exhibition Center. Him with actress Fan Bingbing. Rolex Daytona on his wrist—¥300,000 at least. Perfect posture. Easy smile. Surrounded by China's elite.

Completely comfortable.

She remembered him at her parents' parties, hovering near walls, trying to disappear.

Now he was the center of every room.

Government meeting, three months ago: Standing with the Vice Premier. Presenting on digital infrastructure. Everyone listening with respect.

Her father would kill for a photo like this.

Her ex-husband lived it.

At 5:15 AM, she searched his social media.

LinkedIn: 500+ connections, endorsements from CEOs and

officials, no personal information.

Weibo: 2.3 million followers, only company announcements and inspirational quotes, no personal photos.

Instagram (@marcuschen_official): 500K followers. Books he was reading. Shanghai skyline from his office. His hometown in Anhui with the caption "Never forget where you came from." His foundation's scholarship ceremony.

No friends. No restaurants. No romantic partners.

Nothing suggesting a life outside work.

He was as alone as she was.

No—more alone.

She searched: "Marcus Chen girlfriend"

Results: speculation, gossip blogs, tabloid rumors. Rumored relationships with an actress (denied), a tech entrepreneur (probably professional), a literature professor (unclear).

No confirmed relationships. No engagement. No remarriage.

A fashion blog from two years ago: "Eligible bachelor Marcus Chen spotted at the opera with Dr. Zhang Yiyi, Fudan literature professor. Sources say they left separately. Chen was seen checking his phone throughout. Romance? Or networking? Chen remains Shanghai's most mysterious billionaire."

Opera. He went to the opera now.

But checking his phone throughout—that was still him. Still unable to sit still when his mind was working.

Then the horrible thought: Am I the reason he can't sustain relationships? Did I break something that can't be fixed?

She found a GQ China interview from eighteen months ago.

Interviewer: "你现在单身吗？" Are you single now?

Chen: "是的。" Yes.

Interviewer: "By choice?"

Chen (in English): "Is it ever really by choice? We make decisions that lead us where we are. I'm... content with where I am."

Interviewer: "你相信第二次机会吗？在感情上？" Do you believe in second chances? In relationships?

Long pause.

Chen: "我相信人会变。但有些东西破了就是破了。" I believe people can change. But some things, when they break, stay broken.

Interviewer: "That sounds like experience talking."

Chen: "Perhaps."

Interviewer: "Your ex-wife—"

Chen (interrupting): "是很久以前的事了。下一个问题。" That was a long time ago. Next question.

Weilin read the exchange twenty times.

Some things, when they break, stay broken.

Did he mean them? Did he mean himself?

She found a Financial Times interview from six months ago.

Interviewer: "What drives you?"

Chen: "Honestly? For a long time, it was spite."

Interviewer: "Spite?"

Chen: "I wanted to prove someone wrong. Someone who'd told me I'd never be enough. I built my first three years on that spite. It's... remarkably effective fuel."

Interviewer: "And now?"

Chen: "Now it's exhausting. Spite only carries you so far. Eventually you have to find something else. Purpose. Legacy. I'm... still figuring that out."

Interviewer: "Do you regret the spite phase?"

Chen: "No. It got me here. But I'm trying to let it go. Carrying anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."

Interviewer: "Have you forgiven whoever told you weren't enough?"

Chen: "I'm working on it. Some days are easier than others."
Her hands shook.

He'd built his empire on spite. On proving her wrong.

And now he was trying to forgive her.

Or he was lying. Performing forgiveness the way he performed everything else.

She had no idea which was worse.

The sun rose over Shanghai at 6:23 AM.

Weilin stood at her windows, looking out at Fuxing Road, at a city where her ex-husband was now more powerful than her entire family.

Her phone buzzed.

WeChat from Zhang Mei:

"早！昨晚忘了告诉你—陈总的助理问了我你的联系方式。我没给（不确定你想不想要他联系你）。但是他留了这个。说如果你想联系他关于potential consulting work，可以用这个email。"

Morning! Forgot to tell you—CEO Chen's assistant asked for your contact info. I didn't give it (wasn't sure if you wanted him contacting you). But he left this. Said if you want to contact him about potential consulting work, you can use this email.

Attached: photo of a business card.

MARCUS CHEN

CEO & Founder, Chénxī Technologies

m.chen@chenxitech.com

Below: "你确定你们不认识？他特别问起你。🤔" You sure you don't know him? He specifically asked about you.

Weilin stared at the email address.

His assistant had asked about her. After he'd pretended not to know her.

Which meant he'd recognized her perfectly.

Which meant this was a game.

Her cursor hovered. She could email him. Could explain.

Apologize. Beg.

Or preserve what dignity she had left.

She opened a new draft. Typed his email address.

Subject: [blank]

Body: [blank]

What did you say to someone you'd destroyed?

Her phone buzzed again. Unknown number.

Text in English:

"Miss Shen, This is Lin Rui, CFO of Chénxī Technologies. Mr. Chen would like to schedule a meeting regarding potential consulting collaboration. Are you available Thursday, 2 PM, at our Lujiazui office? Please confirm. —LR"

Her heart stopped.

He wanted to meet.

She typed back before she could think: "I'll be there."

Then searched: "Chénxī Technologies Lujiazui office address"
Shanghai Tower, 118th Floor

The tallest building in China.

Of course.

The man she'd divorced in a legal aid office now worked on the 118th floor of the tallest building in China.

Thursday. Two days away.

Weilin looked at her reflection in the laptop screen.
Forty-eight hours to figure out: What did Marcus Chen want from her?
And what was she willing to give?

END CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 3: CHEN'S POV – THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIFFERENCE

Chen Moxuan had perfected the art of not feeling, but tonight, his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

He stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse—118th floor, Lujiazui, the kind of apartment that appeared in architecture magazines—and stared at his reflection superimposed over the glittering Pudong skyline. Still in his forum suit, charcoal Zegna with the tie yanked loose and hanging like a noose. His hair was disheveled from running his hands through it. Seventeen times. He'd counted.

11:47 PM. The city sprawled below him, unreachable as stars. A glass of whiskey sat untouched on the marble counter behind him. Macallan 25, the bottle a gift from a government minister. He'd poured it twenty minutes ago. Hadn't moved since.

The penthouse was silent except for the climate control's mechanical hum and his own breathing—too fast, he needed to slow it down, needed to control it. His hands gripped the window frame, knuckles white against black glass.

The apartment smelled like expensive nothing. Tom Ford cologne that cost ¥8,000 a bottle. Leather furniture. The

whiskey he couldn't drink. Everything curated, perfect, empty. He closed his eyes and heard her voice again.

"墨轩?"

Just his name. The way only one person had ever said it—half question, half prayer, wholly familiar.

Not Marcus. Not CEO Chen. Moxuan.

The name he'd spent six years trying to kill.

His reflection stared back at him. He opened his eyes and spoke aloud in Mandarin, voice rough:

"我认出她了。当然我他妈的认出她了。"

I recognized her. Of course I fucking recognized her.

The words cracked on the last syllable.

He'd known she would be there. Of course he'd known.

The attendee list had arrived two weeks ago. His assistant had flagged it routinely:

"沈微琳，华荣咨询。注意：与您同姓。"

Shen Weilin, Huarong Consulting. Note: Same surname as you.

Same surname. Nothing else. His assistant didn't know.

Nobody knew. He'd scrubbed that part of his life from every public record—divorce papers sealed, marriage certificate buried in a box he kept in his closet and opened once a year just to make sure he still felt nothing.

He always felt something.

Two weeks to prepare. Two weeks to build the armor. Two weeks to practice looking at her name without his chest constricting.

Chen walked to the bar—custom-built walnut, stocked with bottles he never opened. Picked up the whiskey glass. Put it down. Picked it up again.

He'd been sober for six years. Not from addiction. From control. Alcohol made you vulnerable, and vulnerable got you destroyed.

But tonight—

His phone buzzed against the marble. WeChat from Lin Rui.

Lin Rui: 你还好吗？我看到她了。看到你的脸。你需要谈谈吗？

Are you okay? I saw her. Saw your face. Need to talk?

Chen stared at the message.

Typed: 我很好。 I'm fine.

Deleted it.

Typed: 见她之前，我以为我已经放下了。 Before seeing her, I thought I'd moved on.

Deleted it.

Typed: 不需要。 Don't need to.

Sent.

Lin Rui: 骗子。我二十分钟后到。

Liar. I'll be there in twenty minutes.

Chen didn't argue. Didn't say don't come.

Because the truth was he was afraid of being alone with what he was feeling.

He walked to the bathroom. Marble everywhere, heated floors, a rainfall shower he never used because showers meant too much time thinking. Stared at himself in the mirror.

Saw Marcus Chen: custom suit, Patek Philippe watch worth ¥600,000, perfect hair styled by a professional he saw

monthly. The face that had been on Forbes covers. The face that commanded boardrooms. The face that had looked at Shen Weilin three hours ago and said with perfect calm:

"对不起，我们认识吗？"

Sorry, do we know each other?

Perfect performance.

But if he looked closer—and he always looked closer in the dark, when the armor cracked—he saw 陈墨轩.

The scar on his left eyebrow, faint but there. From the shelf in their Yangpu apartment. Her panicked face. Her hands pressing tissue to the wound, shaking.

"对不起，对不起。" Her voice breaking. Sorry, sorry.

The tension in his jaw from six years of clenching his teeth to keep from screaming.

The darkness under his eyes that no amount of sleep fixed because sleep meant dreams, and dreams meant her.

The tan line on his ring finger. Faded after six years but still visible if you knew where to look.

He touched it now, the phantom band of gold he'd sold the day after the divorce. Had gotten ¥800 for it. Had used the money to buy server space for his algorithm.

Best investment he'd ever made.

Worst loss he'd ever taken.

He whispered to his reflection: "她记得我的名字。"

She remembered my name.

Two weeks earlier. His apartment, late night.

Lin Rui had sat across from him, drinking the whiskey Chen wouldn't touch, looking at him with the expression that meant you're making a mistake but I'll let you make it.

"你确定要这样做？" Lin Rui asked. You sure you want to do this?

"Do what?"

"装作不认识她。这就是你的计划？" Pretend you don't know her. That's your plan?

Chen switched to English, the language that created

distance. "It's not pretending. 陈墨轩 knew Shen Weilin.

Marcus Chen doesn't."

"那只是名字。你还是你。" Those are just names. You're still you.

"No," Chen said quietly. "I'm not."

Silence filled the space between them.

"你想让她痛苦。" Lin Rui's voice was flat. You want her to suffer.

"我想让她知道那是什么感觉。" Chen's hands tightened around his glass. I want her to know what it feels like. To be looked at but not seen.

"然后呢？她痛苦了，然后呢？你会感觉好一点吗？" And then? She suffers, and then? Will you feel better?

Chen hadn't answered.

Still didn't have an answer.

The forum. Three hours ago.

He'd been backstage when she arrived. The security monitor showed the entrance—executives in evening wear, champagne already flowing, the machinery of networking already churning.

Then her.

Armani blazer, confident stride, head held at that angle that said this room should be grateful I'm here. The same way she'd walked into her parents' dinner parties while he hovered by the walls, trying to disappear.

His heart had stopped.

Six years, and she looked the same. Different. Older. More polished. Hollow in a way he recognized because he'd invented that particular emptiness.

His hands started shaking then.

The assistant had noticed. "陈总？您还好吗？五分钟后上台。"

CEO Chen? Are you alright? You're on in five minutes.

"Fine." He'd forced his voice steady. "I'm fine."

He'd gone to the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, gripped the sink until his knuckles went white.

Said to his reflection: "她什么都不是。她是陌生人。你不认识她。"

She's nothing. She's a stranger. You don't know her.

Repeated it like a mantra until he almost believed it.

On stage, he'd given the speech perfectly. Talked about innovation, adversity, the immigrant-to-billionaire narrative everyone loved. Didn't look at her section of the audience.

Looked three times anyway. Couldn't help it.

Saw her face: professional, attentive, no recognition.

Good. She didn't know Marcus Chen was 陈墨轩.

Then he'd said the line he'd written specifically for this moment, if she happened to be listening:

"有时候，最好的动力是有人告诉你，你永远不够好。"

Sometimes, the best motivation is someone telling you you'll never be good enough.

The audience laughed appreciatively. Inspirational. Relatable. He'd seen her face change. Saw the exact moment suspicion crept in.

Felt satisfaction.

Felt sick.

Felt nothing.

Lied to himself that he felt nothing.

After the speech, surrounded by executives wanting his attention, his card, his approval—

Her voice.

"墨轩?"

Every cell in his body recognized her before conscious thought caught up. Six years of carefully constructed indifference shattered by two syllables.

He'd turned slowly. Looked into her eyes.

Saw shock. Horror. Recognition. The beginning of regret.

Everything he'd wanted to see for six years.

It felt like drowning.

In that split second, he'd had choices:

Acknowledge her. Let the past become present.

Walk away without responding.

Pretend not to know her.

He chose cruelty.

"I'm sorry," he said in English—the language she'd mocked his accent in. "Do we know each other?"

Watched her face crumble.

Felt triumph that tasted like ashes.

She tried again. "是我。微琳。沈微琳。" It's me. Weilin. Shen Weilin. Her voice broke on her own name.

Something in him broke with it.

He'd wanted to— what? Forgive her? Scream at her? Pull her close and ask why, why did you throw us away when I would have given you everything?

Instead, he smiled politely. "抱歉，沈小姐。可能您认错人了。很高兴见到您。"

My apologies, Miss Shen. Perhaps you've mistaken me for someone else. Lovely to meet you.

Turned away.

Felt her eyes on his back.

Didn't turn around.

Wanted to turn around.

Made it to the private hallway before his knees gave out. Lin Rui found him sitting on the floor, head in his hands, shaking.

"我他妈就知道。" I fucking knew it.

"我做到了。" Chen's voice was hollow. "我没认出她。" I did it. I didn't recognize her.

"你在骗谁？" Who are you lying to?

Chen had no answer.

The doorbell rang now, pulling him from memory.

Chen didn't move from the window.

Lin Rui had a key. Let himself in, found Chen still standing there, still holding the untouched whiskey.

"你站在这儿多久了？" How long have you been standing here?

"不知道。" Don't know.

Lin Rui took the glass from his hand, drank it himself. "好了。说吧。" Okay. Talk.

"没什么好说的。" Nothing to say.

"你装作不认识你的前妻。她显然很震惊。你看起来像要吐。这他妈一定有什么好说的。"

You pretended not to recognize your ex-wife. She was clearly devastated. You look like you're about to throw up. There's definitely something to say.

Chen turned from the window finally. Looked at his best friend, the only person who knew the whole story.

Said quietly: "我想我会感觉好一点。"

I thought I'd feel better.

"And?"

"我感觉更糟。" I feel worse.

They sat. Chen on the Italian leather sofa that cost more than

their entire Yangpu apartment had. Lin Rui in the chair across, waiting with the patience of someone who'd known him for fifteen years.

Chen spoke, switching between Mandarin and English the way he did when emotions overwhelmed vocabulary:

"I built this. All of this. The company, the money, this fucking penthouse. I built it so that one day she'd see me and regret. 对吗? " Right?

Lin Rui nodded.

"And tonight she saw me. And she regretted. I could see it. 我看到她的脸。" I saw her face. "She was destroyed. Exactly what I wanted."

Pause.

"So why do I feel like I'm the one who lost?"

"因为报复是空的。" Because revenge is hollow.

Chen laughed—bitter, broken sound. "Six years. Six years I told myself: when I see her again, I'll feel nothing. 她会是陌生人。" She'll be a stranger.

"And?"

"And she said my name. Just my name. 墨轩. And I—" He stopped. Couldn't continue.

"You still love her."

"No."

"骗子。" Liar.

"我恨她。" I hate her.

"你可以同时恨她和爱她。" You can hate her and love her at the same time.

Chen stood abruptly, paced, hands raking through his hair again. "She told me I was dead weight. Looked at me like I was embarrassing. Like loving me was a mistake. 她让我觉得

自己一文不值。" She made me feel worthless.

"I know."

"I became this. Marcus Chen. Billionaire. Success story. The man she said I'd never be. 为了什么？" For what? "So she could see me and know she was wrong. 对吗？"

"That's what you told yourself."

"What do you mean?"

Lin Rui leaned forward. "你成为Marcus Chen不是为了她。是为了你自己。因为陈墨轩已经死了。她杀了他。而你无法忍受作为一个死人活着。"

You became Marcus Chen not for her. For yourself. Because Chen Moxuan died. She killed him. And you couldn't stand living as a dead man.

The words hit like physical blows.

Chen sat slowly. Whispered: "那现在怎么办？" So what now?

"现在你决定：你想继续当Marcus Chen，还是想看看陈墨轩是不是还活着。"

Now you decide: do you want to keep being Marcus Chen, or see if Chen Moxuan is still alive somewhere?

After Lin Rui left at 2:30 AM, Chen walked to his bedroom. Opened the closet. Behind the custom suits and Italian shoes, there was a cardboard box. Taped shut. Label in his own handwriting: "2019."

The year of the divorce.

He opened it once a year. Always on their wedding anniversary, March 3rd.

Tonight he opened it.

Inside: their marriage certificate, folded and worn. Wedding photo from City Hall—both smiling, his suit too big, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. He could see it now. Had always

been able to see it.

A movie ticket stub from their first date. Her handwriting on a napkin: 微琳 + her number + a small heart.

And at the bottom, her goodbye note. Left on their kitchen table the day she moved out.

"墨轩，我不能继续这样了。你很好。但'好'不够。我需要更多。我的家人需要更多。我对不起你，但我更对不起我自己，因为我嫁给了一个永远不会够的人。不要联系我。微琳"

Moxuan, I can't keep doing this. You're good. But 'good' isn't enough. I need more. My family needs more. I'm sorry to you, but I'm more sorry to myself for marrying someone who will never be enough. Don't contact me. Weilin

He'd memorized every character. Still read it every time.

Felt the same rage, grief, shame.

Folded it carefully. Put everything back. Taped the box shut.

Returned it to the darkness.

At 3:00 AM, his phone lit up with an email from his assistant.

Subject: Forum Follow-up: Shen Weilin

He should delete it. Should go to bed. Should let this end.

Opened it instead.

The report was thorough: her education, career trajectory, current position. Single. No significant relationships on record.

She'd been alone too.

Good.

No—not good. Why did he care?

At the bottom: "Her colleague mentioned she seemed very upset after seeing you. Asked if you knew her. I said no, per your instructions. Anything else you need?"

Chen stared at the screen.

Typed back:

"安排一个会议。周四下午2点。我的办公室。主题：潜在咨询合作。通过她的同事联系。不要直接联系她。—MC"

Schedule a meeting. Thursday, 2 PM. My office. Topic: Potential consulting collaboration. Contact through her colleague. Don't contact her directly.

Sent it before he could reconsider.

His phone rang immediately. Lin Rui.

"你在做什么？" What are you doing?

"Business. We might need consulting on Singapore expansion."

"Bullshit. There are a thousand consultants. Why her?"

Chen looked at his reflection in the dark window. "我想看看她会怎么做。她会来吗？还是会拒绝？她会道歉吗？还是会装作什么都没发生过？"

I want to see what she'll do. Will she come? Or refuse? Will she apologize? Or pretend nothing happened?

"这还是报复。" This is still revenge.

"也许。但也许我需要知道..." Maybe. But maybe I need to know...

"知道什么？"

"她是不是真的后悔了。还是她只是后悔失去了现在的我。"

If she actually regrets it. Or if she just regrets losing who I am now.

"这很重要吗？" Does it matter?

Chen's voice was barely a whisper. "是的。它很重要。" Yes. It matters.

At 4:00 AM, unable to sleep, Chen opened WeChat.

Scrolled to blocked contacts.

Her name was still there. Had been blocked for six years.

His thumb hovered over "unblock."

Pressed it.

Her profile loaded. Profile picture: professional headshot, that same controlled smile. Moments feed set to private.

Last active: 3 minutes ago.

She was awake too.

Was she thinking about him?

Was she searching for him the way he'd just searched for her?

Chen typed a message:

"你记得我。" You remember me.

Stared at it for five minutes.

Deleted it.

Typed: "周四见。" See you Thursday.

Deleted that too.

Blocked her again.

Set his phone face-down on the nightstand.

Lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Thursday. Two days away.

Two days to decide what he really wanted from Shen Weilin.

Revenge?

Apology?

Closure?

Or something more terrifying—the possibility that 陈墨轩 wasn't as dead as he'd convinced himself.

His hands were still shaking.

END CHAPTER 3

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CHAPTER 4: FLASHBACKS – THEIR MARRIAGE VS. HIS RISE

There were two versions of their love story: the one where they built everything together, and the one where she watched him build everything without her.

Weilin sat in her French Concession apartment Wednesday morning—one day before the meeting—staring at her laptop screen. Architectural Digest feature from three months ago: "Inside Marcus Chen's Lujiazui Penthouse." Marble counters stretching for miles. Floor-to-ceiling windows. A kitchen bigger than their entire first apartment.

She zoomed in on the kitchen photo.

Remembered mornings seven years ago. Moxuan at their chipped Formica counter, cooking congee in a pot he'd bought at the market for twenty yuan. Her voice calling from bed: "墨轩！粥好了吗？我要迟到了！"

Moxuan! Is the congee ready? I'm going to be late!

His laugh drifting through their forty square meters: "三分钟！"

Three minutes!

Now: silence. Just her breathing. Her phone alarm. No one cooking for her. No one saying her name with anything resembling affection.

She clicked to the next photo. His bathroom—all heated marble and rainfall shower.

"We used to share a bathroom so small we couldn't both brush our teeth at the same time," she whispered to the empty room. "Now he has a bathroom bigger than our whole apartment."

Her reflection stared back from the laptop screen.

Successful. Polished. Alone in rooms she couldn't fill.

She closed the Architectural Digest tab.

Opened a folder she'd promised herself she'd deleted.

SEVEN YEARS AGO

AUTUMN. A COFFEE SHOP NEAR FUDAN.

"不好意思，这是我的位子。"

Excuse me, that's my seat.

Weilin stood over the table she sat at every afternoon—her table, by the window, perfect light for studying—now occupied by a stranger with a laptop covered in coding stickers.

He looked up. Distracted. Glasses sliding down his nose. "什么？图书馆吗？这是咖啡馆。"

What? The library? This is a café.

"我每天都坐这里。" She tried to sound authoritative, not petulant. Failed.

I sit here every day.

His smile was amused, not mocking. "那我很抱歉打断了你的传统。要不要坐下来？桌子够大。"

Well, I'm sorry to interrupt your tradition. Want to sit? Table's big enough.

She'd meant to say no. To find another table. To maintain her routine undisturbed.

She sat down.

Set her expensive latte and designer bag on the table. Pulled out her LSE entrance exam prep materials. Tried to ignore him.

Lasted fifteen minutes.

"你在学什么？" His voice broke her concentration.

What are you studying?

She looked up, annoyed at the interruption, ready to be

dismissive. Saw genuine curiosity in his eyes.

"伦敦政经的入学考试。你呢？" LSE entrance exam. You?

"物流算法。很无聊。" Logistics algorithm. Very boring.

"听起来不无聊。" The words came out before she could stop them.

Doesn't sound boring.

He blinked, surprised. "大多数人觉得无聊。"

Most people think it is.

"我不是大多数人。" She met his eyes directly.

I'm not most people.

He smiled then—unselfconscious, genuine, like someone who'd just discovered something unexpected and wonderful. Everything started with that smile.

PRESENT DAY

Weilin stood at her window now, phone in hand, scrolling through the photos she'd kept. Their first date on the Bund. Him buying jianbing from a street vendor because he couldn't afford a restaurant.

"最好的煎饼，我保证。" Best jianbing, I promise.

Her laugh in the photo was real. The jianbing had been the best she'd ever tasted.

Or maybe it was just that everything tasted better when you were falling in love.

SIX AND A HALF YEARS AGO

CITY HALL. THEIR WEDDING.

The government official droned through the civil ceremony script. No flowers. No guests. Her parents had refused to attend.

Moxuan stood beside her in Lin Rui's borrowed suit, sleeves too short, but his eyes—his eyes were full of certainty. Of

hope. Of unshakeable belief that love was enough.
Weilin wore a simple Zara dress. Her mother had refused to buy a wedding dress for "this mistake."

They signed the papers.

"沈微琳现在是陈微琳了。" Moxuan's voice was tender.

Shen Weilin is now Chen Weilin.

"听起来很奇怪。" Sounds strange.

"好的奇怪还是坏的奇怪？" Good strange or bad strange?

She'd kissed him instead of answering. Tasted hope and doubt in equal measure.

"好的。我想。" Good. I think.

The "I think" should have been a warning.

YEAR ONE. THEIR APARTMENT.

Forty square meters in Yangpu District. IKEA furniture assembled incorrectly because neither of them was good with instructions. Morning light through dusty windows. The smell of congee and possibility.

6 AM: His alarm. He worked part-time while finishing his thesis.

6:30 AM: Him in their cramped kitchen, cooking breakfast they couldn't afford to buy elsewhere.

7 AM: Her waking to his voice. "早安，陈太太。"

Good morning, Mrs. Chen.

Her heart had warmed despite the cold tile under her feet. Despite the cheap blankets. Despite everything her mother had predicted.

Evenings: Both at their small kitchen table. Her MBA applications. His algorithm code. His hand finding hers across the laptops.

"我们会成功的。" We'll make it.

And she'd believed him.

For a while.

Until Saturday mornings at the market. Him negotiating vegetable prices, making the vendors laugh. Her looking around nervously, hoping no one from her world would see her here, in this place, with this man who belonged to a life she'd been raised to escape.

His obliviousness to her shame had made it worse.

Or maybe it had made it better, and that was the problem.

PRESENT DAY

Weilin's phone rang. Zhang Mei.

"喂？ " Hello?

"你真的要去吗？ 明天？ 和陈总的会议？ " Zhang Mei's voice was equal parts concern and curiosity.

Are you really going? Tomorrow? The meeting with CEO Chen?

"我必须去。 " Weilin's voice was flat.

I have to go.

"为什么？ 你可以说你生病了。 可以派别人去。 微琳， 你看起来..... 自从那个论坛以后你看起来像鬼一样。 "

Why? You could say you're sick. Could send someone else.

Weilin, you look... you've looked like a ghost since that forum.

Because I am a ghost, Weilin thought. Haunting the life I could have had.

"我很好。 明天见。 " She hung up before Zhang Mei could argue.

I'm fine. See you tomorrow.

Returned to her photos.

YEAR TWO. THE DETERIORATION.

Her parents' French Concession house. Five stories of

judgment and imported furniture. Monthly dinners that felt like executions.

Her mother speaking Shanghainese, knowing Moxuan's Mandarin was better than his Shanghainese: "她看起来累了。这个男人不能让她好好生活。"

She looks tired. This man can't give her a good life.

Moxuan understanding enough. Saying nothing. Jaw tight.

Her father to Moxuan, condescension dripping: "还在做那个.....startup?"

Still doing that... startup?

"是的。我们刚刚得到了第一个客户。" Moxuan's voice stayed even.

Yes. We just got our first client.

Her father's laugh. "第一个客户。我的朋友的公司，二十年了，有一千个客户。你有一个。"

First client. My friend's company, twenty years old, has a thousand clients. You have one.

"每个人都要从某个地方开始。" Everyone has to start somewhere.

"你开始得太晚了。你已经二十八岁了。" You're starting too late. You're already twenty-eight.

Silence.

Weilin had said nothing. Should have defended him. Didn't.

Her mother: "还不晚。你还年轻。你可以重新开始。"

It's not too late. You're still young. You can start over.

Meaning: Divorce him.

They'd both heard it.

That night in their apartment, Moxuan had asked: "你后悔吗?"

Do you regret it?

"后悔什么？" Regret what?

"嫁给我。" Marrying me.

The pause had been too long. Fatal.

"没有。我没有后悔。" No. I don't regret it.

But her voice had carried no conviction.

He'd turned away. She'd reached for him. He'd let her hold him.

But something had broken that couldn't be fixed.

PRESENT DAY

A memory surfaced unbidden. Summer, year one. Their broken air conditioner. Heat making their tiny bedroom unbearable.

"对不起，我下个月拿到奖学金就买新的。" Sorry, I'll buy a new one when I get my scholarship next month.

"没关系。" It's okay.

They'd lain on top of the sheets, electric fan barely moving the humid air. His hand tracing patterns on her arm.

"给我五年。五年后，我给你大房子，好车，你想要的一切。"

Give me five years. Five years, I'll give you big house, nice car, everything you want.

"我不需要那些。" She'd said it. Had even meant it in that moment.

I don't need those things.

But it was a lie. She had needed them. Or thought she did.

"但我想给你。你值得最好的。" But I want to give them to you. You deserve the best.

"你就是最好的。" You are the best.

They'd made love that night. Slow and certain and sweet.

She'd fallen asleep in his arms, believing they'd make it.

That was the last time.

After that, her family's poison had seeped into everything.
FIVE YEARS AGO. THE PROFESSIONAL HUMILIATION.
Her company party. Fancy restaurant in Xintiandi. Her colleagues in their expensive clothes, talking about promotions and bonuses and people who mattered. Moxuan had come in his H&M suit. She'd begged him not to wear it. He'd worn it anyway—it was his only suit.
Her colleague, loud enough for everyone to hear: "这是你丈夫？我以为你嫁给了那个.....什么，程序员？"
This is your husband? I thought you married that... what, programmer?
"算法设计师。" Weilin had corrected, cheeks burning.
Algorithm designer.
"哦。" Polite disinterest. The conversation had moved on.
Oh.
Moxuan had stood there holding cheap wine, invisible in his wrong suit.
She'd watched him shrink.
Hated herself for being embarrassed.
Hated him for embarrassing her.
In the taxi home: "我不应该去。" I shouldn't have gone.
"没关系。" It's fine.
"你很尴尬。" You were embarrassed.
"我没有——" I wasn't——
"别撒谎。我看得见。" His voice had been quiet. Wounded.
Don't lie. I could see it.
Then she'd said the unforgivable thing: "也许.....也许如果你有真正的工作....."
Maybe... maybe if you had a real job...
"真正的工作？" He'd turned to her, eyes devastated.

A real job?

"我是说.....稳定的。有薪水的。" I mean... stable. With a salary.

"我的startup就快成功了——" My startup is about to take off——

"你说了两年了。" You've been saying that for two years.

The taxi had stopped. They hadn't spoken the rest of the night.

FOUR AND A HALF YEARS AGO. THE END.

Late night. Their apartment. Moxuan at the kitchen table, head in his hands. His startup had just lost its only client.

Weilin coming home from work, seeing bills scattered across the table. Rent overdue. Utilities overdue. Her salary barely covering both of them.

"我不能再这样了。" The words had ripped out of her.

I can't do this anymore.

"我知道。我会找份工作。真正的工作。" I know. I'll get a job. A real job.

"然后呢？我们就这样生活？在这个小公寓里，永远？"

And then? We just live like this? In this tiny apartment, forever?

"我保证过你——" I promised you——

Something in her had snapped. "你的保证不值钱！你的梦想不付账单！你不是.....你永远不会是....."

Your promises are worthless! Your dreams don't pay bills!

You're not... you'll never be...

He'd stood slowly. Voice quiet and dangerous. "说出来。我永远不会是什么？"

Say it. I'll never be what?

And she'd said it. The thing that couldn't be unsaid.

"足够！你永远不够！"

Enough! You'll never be enough!

The silence had been absolute.

Moxuan's face had shut down floor by floor, lights extinguishing one by one until only darkness remained.

"那我们结束吧。" Then we're done.

He'd walked to their bedroom. Packed a bag. Left that night.

She hadn't stopped him.

PRESENT DAY

Weilin pressed her palms to her eyes, but the tears came anyway.

"我杀了他，" she whispered to her empty apartment. "我杀了那个相信自己的男人。然后他变成了一个不需要相信任何人的男人。"

I killed him. I killed the man who believed in himself. And he became a man who didn't need to believe in anyone.

Her phone buzzed. Email notification.

Subject: Tomorrow's Meeting - Materials Needed

From: Lin Rui, CFO, Chénxī Technologies

She opened it with shaking hands.

Ms. Shen,

Attached please find background materials for tomorrow's consultation meeting regarding our Singapore expansion. Mr. Chen has requested you review these prior to the meeting.

Time: 2:00 PM

Location: Chénxī Technologies HQ, Shanghai Tower, 118th Floor

Duration: Estimated 90 minutes

Please bring preliminary analysis and recommendations.

Regards,

Lin Rui

Weilin downloaded the attachment. Opened it.

Froze.

The document wasn't about Singapore expansion.

It was a timeline.

Chénxī Technologies: Growth Analysis 2019-2025

2019 (Year 0 - Post-Divorce):

- Company founded with ¥100,000 borrowed capital
- Founder: Chen Moxuan, age 28
- Initial focus: Logistics optimization algorithms
- Personal note: Started three weeks after divorce finalization

2020 (Year 1):

- First major client secured
- Revenue: ¥5 million
- Employees: 4
- Personal note: Moved from shared apartment to studio. Still taking subway.

2021 (Year 2):

- Government contract secured
- Revenue: ¥50 million
- Employees: 45
- Personal note: First English-language interview. Started therapy.

2022 (Year 3):

- Series B funding: \$20 million
- Valuation: \$100 million
- Employees: 200
- Personal note: Legally changed name to Marcus Chen. Stopped answering to Moxuan except from family.

2023 (Year 4):

- International expansion begins
- Valuation: \$500 million

- Employees: 800
- Personal note: Bought first property. Lujiazui penthouse. Has never invited anyone except Lin Rui.

2024 (Year 5):

- Company reaches unicorn status
- Valuation: \$1.2 billion
- Employees: 1,500
- Personal note: Forbes cover. Mother asked if he was happy. He didn't know how to answer.

2025 (Year 6 - Present):

- Current valuation: \$2.1 billion
- Employees: 2,000+
- Personal note: Saw ex-wife at forum. Pretended not to recognize her. Hasn't slept since.

Weilin read the last line three times.

Hasn't slept since.

At the bottom of the document, one more line in different formatting:

Question for consultant: Was it worth it?

Her hands shook so hard she nearly dropped her laptop.

This wasn't a business meeting.

This was something else entirely.

Her phone rang. Unknown number. She answered without thinking.

"喂? " Hello?

Silence. Then breathing.

Then his voice, rough like he'd been awake as long as she had:

"你收到文件了吗? " Did you get the document?

"墨轩——" Moxuan——

"Don't." English now. Sharp. "Don't call me that."

"对不起——" I'm sorry——

"我不想听对不起。我想要答案。" I don't want sorry. I want answers.

"什么答案？" Her voice cracked. What answers?

"明天。2点。不要迟到。" Tomorrow. 2 PM. Don't be late.

He hung up.

Weilin sat in the silence of her apartment, staring at the timeline on her screen.

Six years. He'd built an empire in six years.

While she'd built nothing but regret.

Tomorrow she'd face him. In his tower. In his world. In the kingdom she'd told him he'd never have.

She opened her laptop calendar. Stared at Thursday's entry:
2:00 PM - Meeting with Marcus Chen

Location: The 118th floor

Note to self: Bring dignity you don't have. Prepare for questions you can't answer.

She added one more line:

Try not to break completely when he looks at you like a stranger.

Outside her window, Shanghai glittered with a million lights. Somewhere in that glitter, on the 118th floor of the tallest building in China, Chen Moxuan—Marcus Chen—was awake too.

Preparing his own questions.

Building his own armor.

Sharpening his own knives.

And she had less than twenty-four hours to figure out what she'd say when he asked the only question that mattered:

Why wasn't I enough?

END CHAPTER 4

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CHAPTER 5: THE FIRST APOLOGY ATTEMPT (EMAIL)

Weilin had written seventeen drafts of the email that would either save her or destroy her, and she still had no idea which words could undo six years of regret.

4:17 AM. Thursday morning. Nine hours and forty-three minutes until the meeting.

Her laptop glowed in the darkness of her apartment, seventeen Word documents open like wounds. Coffee cups scattered across her desk—cold, untouched, multiplying like her failed attempts at redemption. Wadded tissues overflowed the trash can. Her hands shook over the keyboard.

Document title: "Draft 17—FINAL (really this time)"

Thunder rumbled outside. Rain coming. She'd cracked the window an hour ago when the apartment felt like it was suffocating her, and now the smell of approaching storm mixed with stale coffee and her own fear-sweat.

On screen, two words: "墨轩—"

She stopped. Stared at his name. Deleted it.

Typed: "Marcus—"

Stopped again.

She didn't know what to call him anymore. The man she'd married? The stranger who'd become a billionaire? Both? Neither?

She put her head in her hands, whispered to the empty room:

"我怎么向一个我毁掉的人道歉？"

How do I apologize to someone I destroyed?

The laptop screen dimmed from inactivity.

She jolted back, fingers finding the keyboard.

Started typing.

11:00 PM WEDNESDAY. DRAFT 1: THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH.

Subject: Re: Tomorrow's Meeting

Mr. Chen,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss consulting collaboration. I look forward to presenting my portfolio at 2 PM.

However, I feel I should address—

She'd stopped there.

What should she address? The fact that she'd destroyed him? That she'd thrown away the best thing in her life? That she'd spent six years drowning in regret?

You couldn't put that in a professional email.

Delete.

MIDNIGHT. DRAFT 2: THE HONEST APPROACH.

Subject: I Know Who You Are

Moxuan,

I know you recognized me at the forum. I know you pretended not to. I deserve that. I deserve worse than that. I don't know what you want from this meeting tomorrow, but before I come, I need to say: I was wrong. About everything. You weren't dead weight. You were never 'not enough.' I was the one who wasn't enough—not enough to see your value, not enough to stand up to my family, not enough to deserve you.

I'm sorry. I know sorry doesn't fix anything. But I need you to know.

微琳

She'd stared at it for twenty minutes. Cursor hovering over Send.

Then imagined him reading it. Imagined his cold eyes.

Imagined him showing it to his assistant, his CFO, all of them laughing at her desperation.

Delete.

1:00 AM. DRAFT 3: THE ANGRY APPROACH.

Three coffees in, hands shaking, something bitter rising in her throat.

Subject: (no subject)

You want me to grovel? Fine. I'm groveling. You want me to admit I was a shallow, classist bitch who threw away the best man I ever knew because he didn't fit my family's definition of success? Done. I admit it.

But don't pretend you're so much better now. You built an empire on spite. On proving me wrong. You made yourself into Marcus Chen because Chen Moxuan wasn't enough—not for me, not for yourself.

So congratulations. You won. You're a billionaire. You're everything I said you'd never be. You proved me wrong.

Are you happy?

She'd read it back.

Realized she sounded insane.

Realized she was lashing out because she was terrified.

Delete.

1:30 AM - 4:00 AM. DRAFTS 4-16: THE SPIRAL.

She'd tried everything:

Apologetic: "I know I have no right to ask for forgiveness..."
Too weak.

Explanatory: "My family's pressure made me..." Too defensive.

Casual: "Hey, weird seeing you the other night!" Deleted immediately. Insane.

Poetic: Comparing their love to seasons, to architecture, to fucking celestial bodies. Delete, delete, delete. Too pretentious.

Brutal honesty: "I destroyed you and I can't live with myself." Too much.

Business proposition: "Let's use this meeting to clear the air professionally." Too cold.

Begging: "Please give me a chance to explain." Too pathetic. None of them were right.

None could capture six years of regret, the depth of her betrayal, the impossibility of forgiveness, the desperate hope that maybe—somehow—he'd understand.

How did you fit the destruction of a love into an email?

4:47 AM. DRAFT 17.

Weilin stared at the blank document.

Outside, thunder cracked closer. Rain started, soft against the window.

She took a breath.

Typed:

From: weilin.shen@huarong.com.cn

To: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Subject: 在我们见面之前 (Before We Meet)

Time: 4:52 AM

墨轩，

I don't know what to call you. Marcus feels like talking to a

stranger. But maybe that's what we are now—strangers.
Maybe that's what I turned us into.

我不会假装这封邮件是关于明天的会议。我们都知道不是。
I won't pretend this email is about tomorrow's meeting. We
both know it isn't. I'll come. I'll bring my portfolio. I'll be
professional. But before I walk into the empire you built,
before I stand on the 118th floor of the city you conquered, I
need to say something you probably don't want to hear.
我错了。

I was wrong.

Not just wrong. Cruel. Short-sighted. Cowardly. I let my
family convince me that your value was in what you could
provide, not who you were. I watched you struggle at my
parents' table and felt ashamed instead of proud that you
were trying. I listened to their contempt and stayed silent
instead of defending you.

I told you that you'd never be enough. But the truth is: I was
never enough. Not brave enough to believe in you. Not strong
enough to fight my family. Not smart enough to see that the
man I had—in that tiny apartment, with cheap jianbing and
big dreams—was already more than I deserved.

我看到你现在的成就了。当然看到了。整个上海都看到了。
I see what you've become. Of course I do. All of Shanghai
sees it. The company you built. The people you've helped.
The man you became. I won't pretend I don't know what—who
—you built this for.

You proved me wrong. You proved you were enough. You
proved you were more than enough.

But here's what I need you to know, even if you don't believe
it, even if it changes nothing:

你一直都是够的。

You were always enough. Even in our tiny apartment. Even in that borrowed suit from Lin Rui. Even when your startup was failing. You were always enough. I just couldn't see it.

I don't expect forgiveness. I haven't earned forgiveness. I don't expect you to acknowledge you know me at tomorrow's meeting. Maybe Marcus Chen doesn't know Shen Weilin. Maybe that's easier.

But Chen Moxuan knew her. Loved her once. And she destroyed that love because she was too afraid she didn't deserve it.

我只是需要你知道：我后悔了。

I just need you to know: I regret it. Not regretting losing what you have now—the money, the success, the power. I regret losing the man who made me burned toast on Sunday mornings. The man who read to me during blackouts. The man who looked at me like I was his entire world.

I lost you. It's what I deserved.

But you deserved to know: You were never "not enough." I wasn't enough. I'll never be enough.

明天见，陈总。我会专业的。我会保持距离。我不会让这变得尴尬。

See you tomorrow, CEO Chen. I'll be professional. I'll keep my distance. I won't make this awkward.

But tonight, in this email you probably won't read, might delete, might laugh at, I needed to say:

对不起。我很抱歉。我永远都会抱歉。

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll always be sorry.

微琳

She read it back.

Once. Twice. Twelve times.

By the end, tears blurred the screen.

5:03 AM. The clock ticked. Rain fell harder.

Her cursor hovered over Send.

She closed her eyes. Whispered: "求你了。让他理解。"

Please. Let him understand.

Clicked.

The whoosh sound.

Gone.

She stared at the screen, at the "Sent" confirmation, and realized what she'd done.

She'd just poured her heart out to a man who'd pretended not to know her. To a billionaire who might show this to his entire company. To her ex-husband who had every right to destroy her.

Weilin put her head on the desk.

Sobbed.

5:04 AM. CHEN'S PENTHOUSE.

Chen stood in his foyer, briefcase still in hand, shoes still on.

He'd worked all night at the office, had just arrived home.

His phone buzzed.

Email notification.

From: weilin.shen@huarong.com.cn

His heart stopped.

Subject: 在我们见面之前 (Before We Meet)

His hand shook opening it.

He read.

Read it again.

By the fourth time, he was sitting on his Italian leather sofa, phone clutched so hard his knuckles had gone white.

FIRST READ: ANGER.

How dare she. How dare she think words can fix this.

SECOND READ: PAIN.

She remembers. The burned toast. The blackouts. She remembers who I was.

THIRD READ: CONFUSION.

Is this real? Or performance? Is she sorry she hurt me, or sorry she lost what I became?

FOURTH READ: BREAKING.

He stopped at one line, read it twenty times:

"你一直都是够的。是我看不见。"

You were always enough. I just couldn't see it.

His breath caught.

Because this—this was what he'd needed to hear for six years. That he wasn't the problem. That he was enough. That she was the one who'd been blind.

He stood. Paced. Opened his laptop to see it on a bigger screen, needed to see every character.

Stopped at another line:

"我后悔失去了那个在周日早上给我做烧焦的吐司的男人。"

I regret losing the man who made me burned toast on Sunday mornings.

He closed his eyes.

Saw that morning. Her laughing at his terrible cooking. Him pretending the toast was supposed to be that dark. Making love afterward while the burned toast sat forgotten on the counter.

He'd thought: This is enough. She is enough. We are enough. He'd been wrong.

Read the final lines:

"对不起。我很抱歉。我永远都会抱歉。"

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll always be sorry.

The apology he'd built an empire waiting to hear.

And it felt... hollow.

No. Not hollow.

Too late.

An internal war raged.

The 陈墨轩 part of him—the part that had loved her, that remembered everything, that had never quite died despite his best efforts:

"她后悔了。她理解了。她看到我了。这就是你想要的。原谅她。"

She regrets it. She understands. She sees you. This is what you wanted. Forgive her.

The Marcus Chen part—the part that had survived, that had built an empire on spite, that knew how to protect itself:

"话很便宜。她六年前毁了你。现在你成功了，她就道歉了？方便的时机。"

Words are cheap. She destroyed you six years ago. Now that you're successful, she apologizes? Convenient timing.

He walked to his window. Looked down at Shanghai—the city that belonged to him now.

Whispered the question that destroyed everything:

"如果我还在那个小公寓里，她会发这封邮件吗？"

If I was still in that tiny apartment, would she have sent this email?

He knew the answer.

And it broke something in him that he'd thought was already broken beyond repair.

6:23 AM. THE RESPONSE.

Chen sat at his home office. Opened a reply. Stared at the

blank email.

Typed:

From: m.chen@chenxitech.com

To: weilin.shen@huarong.com.cn

Subject: Re: 在我们见面之前

Time: 6:47 AM

Miss Shen,

Thank you for your email. I appreciate your honesty.

However, I think there's been some confusion. You seem to be under the impression that I'm someone you used to know—a Chen Moxuan, I believe you mentioned? I'm afraid you're mistaken.

My name is Marcus Chen. I'm the CEO of Chénxī Technologies. We've never met before the forum earlier this week.

I understand that I may resemble someone from your past. Shanghai is a large city, but coincidences happen. However, I can assure you: I am not whoever you think I am.

I don't know the stories you referenced in your email—the burned toast, the blackouts, the borrowed suit. These aren't my memories. They belong to someone else. Someone who, based on your email, you treated quite poorly.

I'm sorry for whatever guilt you're experiencing. Truly. But it's misdirected. You're apologizing to the wrong person.

That said, I'm still interested in your professional capabilities. Our 2 PM meeting remains scheduled. Please bring your portfolio as requested. Let's keep this business-focused and professional.

I hope we can move past this confusion and have a productive conversation about potential consulting

collaboration.

Best regards,

Marcus Chen

CEO, Chénxī Technologies

He read it back.

Perfect. Cold. Professional. Devastating.

Complete denial.

The ultimate revenge: pretending she meant so little that he didn't even remember.

His cursor hovered over Send.

But his hand shook.

Because this email was a lie.

He remembered everything. The burned toast. The blackouts. The borrowed suit. Her laugh. Her face when she'd said "I love you" for the first time. Her face when she'd said "You'll never be enough" for the last time.

He remembered all of it.

And this email erased all of it. Erased 陈墨轩 completely.

Lin Rui's voice echoed: "报复是空的。" Revenge is hollow.

His therapist: "你在用Marcus Chen逃避陈墨轩的痛苦。" You're using Marcus Chen to avoid Chen Moxuan's pain.

His own voice, small and buried: "她说对不起了。你花了六年等她说不起。现在她说了。"

She said sorry. You spent six years waiting for her to say sorry. Now she did.

But another voice, louder: "如果你还穷，她会道歉吗？"

If you were still poor, would she apologize?

That question destroyed everything.

He clicked Send.

The email went.

He sat back. Felt nothing.

Lied to himself that he felt nothing.

Walked to the bathroom. Looked at himself in the mirror.

Said aloud: "陈墨轩死了。"

Chen Moxuan is dead.

His reflection called him a liar.

He ignored it.

7:15 AM. WEILIN'S APARTMENT.

She'd finally fallen asleep on the couch, exhausted from crying, from writing, from hoping.

Her phone buzzed.

Email notification.

She jolted awake. Saw: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Her heart raced.

Opened it with shaking hands.

Read.

Read again.

Read a third time, hoping the words would change.

They didn't.

"Miss Shen" —a slap.

"You're mistaken" —a knife.

"I am not whoever you think I am" —a bullet.

"These aren't my memories" —total annihilation.

She read the cruelest line again:

"I don't know the stories you referenced in your email—the burned toast, the blackouts, the borrowed suit. These aren't my memories."

Her hands shook so violently she dropped the phone.

He was denying everything. Not just pretending not to know her. Actively denying their entire history. Saying those

memories—their memories, sacred and painful and real—weren't his.

She picked up the phone. Read the final paragraph:
"Let's keep this business-focused and professional."

Business-focused. Professional.

As if she hadn't just poured her heart out. As if she hadn't just apologized for destroying him. As if their marriage had never existed.

She sat on her couch. Stared at the email.

Started laughing.

The laugh turned into a sob.

The sob turned into a scream.

She threw her phone across the room. It hit the wall. Screen cracked.

Collapsed on the floor. Cried.

Cried for the marriage she'd destroyed. For the apology that meant nothing. For the man who was so good at revenge he'd erased her completely.

After an hour, she stopped.

Stood. Walked to the bathroom. Looked at her reflection—red eyes, swollen face, broken.

Said aloud: "他赢了。"

He won.

Washed her face. Put on makeup. Got dressed. Professional Armani blazer. Perfect hair.

Looked at herself again. The mask was back.

11:47 AM. Meeting in two hours and thirteen minutes.

She'd go. She'd be professional. She'd pretend his email hadn't destroyed her.

She'd play his game.

Because what else could she do?

1:52 PM. SHANGHAI TOWER.

Weilin stood at the base of the building, staring up at 632 meters of glass and steel piercing the sky.

从法律援助办公室到118层。我把他推得有多远？

From legal aid office to 118th floor. How far did I push him?

She entered the lobby. Took the elevator. Watched the floor numbers climb.

98... 105... 112... 118.

The doors opened.

Minimalist reception. Everything expensive, everything perfect. Floor-to-ceiling windows with all of Shanghai spread below like a conquest.

"沈小姐?" The receptionist smiled. "陈总在等你。"

Miss Shen? CEO Chen is expecting you.

Weilin sat. Hands shaking. Watched the clock.

1:58 PM.

我可以走。我可以说我感觉不舒服。我可以逃跑。

I can leave. I can say I feel sick. I can run.

但他会知道。他会知道他赢了。

But he'll know. He'll know he won.

She stayed.

CHEN'S OFFICE.

He stood at his window, back to the door. Could see her reflection in the glass through the security camera feed on his phone.

Watched her sit there. Nervous. Beautiful. Destroyed.

Felt triumph.

Felt sick.

Felt nothing.

Lied.

His assistant knocked. "陈总？可以让沈小姐进来了吗？"
CEO Chen? Should I send Miss Shen in?

Long pause.

Last chance to cancel. To be merciful. To be human.

He said: "送她进来。"

Send her in.

The door opened.

Weilin stood. Took a breath.

Walked toward his office. Toward the man she'd destroyed.

Toward the stranger who used to be her husband.

Toward Marcus Chen, who used to be 陈墨轩. Who used to love her. Who now felt nothing.

Or so he claimed.

The door loomed ahead. Her hand reached for the handle.

On the other side: her past, her regret, her reckoning.

She opened the door.

END CHAPTER 5

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CHAPTER 6: CHEN'S INTERNAL CONFLICT (THERAPY SESSION)

Chen had been lying to his therapist for twenty minutes, and Dr. Song's patient silence told him she knew it.

He sat in the leather armchair—¥50,000, he'd priced it once to avoid thinking about why he was there—hands gripping the armrests so tightly his knuckles had gone white. Dr. Song sat across from him, notepad untouched, watching him with the calm expression that meant she was waiting for him to stop

performing.

11:00 AM. Thursday. Three hours until the meeting.

Rain streaked the floor-to-ceiling windows of her Xintiandi office. The white noise machine hummed. Lavender diffuser releasing scent that was supposed to calm but never did. His cologne—Tom Ford, expensive armor—mixed with the smell of rain and his own cold sweat.

He never sweated.

But today his palms were damp, his jaw clenched so hard a migraine was forming, and he hadn't blinked in two minutes because blinking meant his eyes might close and if they closed he might see her face again.

He'd been talking about the Singapore expansion for twenty minutes. Market analysis. Revenue projections. Strategic partnerships. All bullshit.

Dr. Song's pen tapped against her notebook. She only did that when he was deflecting.

"陈先生，" she said finally, voice gentle but firm. "你已经谈了二十分钟关于新加坡扩张的事。我们都知道你不是来这里讨论物流的。"

Mr. Chen, you've been talking about the Singapore expansion for twenty minutes. We both know you're not here to discuss logistics.

Chen switched to English, the language that created distance. "It's a significant business decision. Requires strategic thinking. I value your perspective on—"

"Marcus." She interrupted. "Stop."

The use of his English name instead of 墨轩—their signal. Performance over. Time for truth.

His hands tightened on the armrests.

"什么发生了？" What happened?

Long silence. Rain against glass. His breathing too controlled.

Finally: "她发邮件给我了。"

She emailed me.

Dr. Song didn't ask who. She'd known about Weilin for six years.

Dr. Song Meilin was fifty-three, Columbia-trained, had returned to Shanghai to work with high-achieving professionals who paid extraordinary amounts to fall apart in private. She was one of the few people who called him both Marcus and 墨轩, who'd watched him build the former from the ruins of the latter.

He'd started therapy five and a half years ago. Six months post-divorce. Lin Rui had given him an ultimatum: "Get help or I'm resigning. I can't watch you destroy yourself anymore." For six years, this office had been the only place Chen let his armor crack.

Lately—the past year—the cracks had sealed. Sessions had become surface-level. Work discussions. Success metrics. Dr. Song had been letting him, waiting for something to break. Today was the break.

"告诉我这封邮件。" Tell me about the email.

"There's nothing to tell." His voice was controlled. Too controlled. "A professional email. She's coming to my office this afternoon for a consulting meeting. Standard business."

"At 2 PM."

He looked up, surprised. "How did you—"

"You moved our usual 2 PM Thursday session to 11 AM. You never change our sessions." She set down her pen. "So I

knew: something at 2 PM you're afraid of."

Chen said nothing.

"Is it a consulting meeting?"

"Yes."

"Is it only a consulting meeting?"

Silence.

"No."

"When did you last see her? Before this week?"

"六年。离婚调解。" Six years. Divorce mediation.

"And now she's coming to your office."

"Yes."

"How do you feel about that?"

The question he'd been avoiding for three days.

"I don't feel anything."

Dr. Song wrote something. He knew what: Deflection.

Avoidance. Denial. She'd written it a hundred times.

She looked up. "Marcus. 墨轩. We've been working together for almost six years. In that time, you've built a billion-dollar company, helped thousands of people through your foundation, become one of Shanghai's most successful entrepreneurs." She paused. "Do you know what you haven't done?"

Chen's jaw tightened. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"你从来没有放下她。"

You've never let her go.

The words landed like a physical blow.

Chen stood abruptly, walked to the window, stared out at rain-soaked Shanghai.

"What did she say in the email?"

His back was to Dr. Song. Voice tight. "She apologized."

"For?"

A broken laugh. "Everything. For telling me I wasn't enough. For choosing her family over me. For destroying our marriage. For being 'cruel, short-sighted, and cowardly.' Her words."

"And how did that make you feel?"

He turned, anger flashing. "How do you think it made me feel? I spent six years waiting for that apology! Six years building this—" he gestured at himself "—so that one day she'd see me and regret! And now she does! Now she's sorry!"

"So you feel vindicated."

"Yes!"

"Do you?"

Silence.

Quieter: "No."

"Why not?"

Chen walked back to the chair. Sat. Put his head in his hands.

"Because I don't know if she's sorry she hurt me, or sorry she lost what I became."

There it was. The core wound. The question poisoning everything.

"What did she specifically apologize for?"

Chen pulled out his phone with shaking hands. Opened the email he'd read forty-seven times since receiving it.

"她说.....她说我一直都是够的。" His voice cracked. "即使在我们的小公寓里。即使穿着借来的西装。即使在我的startup失败的时候。她说她看不见。"

She said... she said I was always enough. Even in our tiny apartment. Even in the borrowed suit. Even when my startup was failing. She said she just couldn't see it.

"That's what you needed to hear."

"Yes."

"So why are you still angry?"

Chen exploded out of the chair. "Because it's too late!

Because those words would have meant everything six years ago and now they mean nothing! Because she destroyed 陈墨轩 and now she wants to apologize to Marcus Chen!"

He paced. "她想要哪一个？她爱过的那个男人？还是我变成的这个？"

Which one does she want? The man she loved? Or the one I became?

"Which one do you want to be?"

Chen stopped. Stared at her. "What?"

"For six years, you've been telling me that Marcus Chen is stronger than 陈墨轩. That the man she destroyed needed to die so you could become successful. But I'll ask you again, like I've asked for six years: which man do you want to be?"

"Marcus Chen is—"

"Lonely." Dr. Song's voice was gentle but firm. "Marcus Chen is lonely. He's successful, powerful, wealthy, and completely alone."

"陈墨轩 was destroyed."

"Was he? Or did you bury him because feeling what he felt—loving her, losing her—was too painful to survive?"

The room fell silent except for rain and Chen's ragged breathing.

"如果我让他回来....." His voice was barely a whisper. "如果我让陈墨轩回来....."

If I let him come back... if I let Chen Moxuan come back...

"You're afraid you'll get hurt again."

"我怕我会原谅她。"

I'm afraid I'll forgive her.

The truth. Finally.

"Let's talk about what you really feel." Dr. Song leaned forward. "Not Marcus Chen's strategic response. Not the revenge fantasy. What do you, 陈墨轩, feel when you think about seeing her in three hours?"

Chen struggled. "I don't... I can't..."

"Try."

He closed his eyes. Forced the words out.

"Terrified."

"Of what?"

"That I'll see her and still love her."

The admission cost him everything. His eyes opened, wet.

"Six years. Six years I've told myself I hate her. That she's nothing to me. That I built all of this to prove her wrong and then move on. But then I saw her at the forum and—" He stopped.

"And?"

"And she said my name. Just my name. 墨轩. And it was like no time had passed. Like I was still that man in the borrowed suit who loved her so much it physically hurt."

He wiped his eyes roughly.

"You told me you pretended not to recognize her."

"Yes."

"How did that feel?"

A bitter laugh. "Powerful. Like I'd finally won. She looked devastated and I felt... triumphant."

"For how long?"

"About thirty seconds. Then I felt sick."

"What did you do after the forum?"

"Went home. Looked at her email. Read it twenty times. Then sent her a response."

"What did you say?"

Shame flooded his voice. "I denied everything. Told her she was mistaken. That I wasn't the man she used to know. That her memories weren't mine."

Dr. Song's face remained neutral, but Chen saw the judgment anyway.

"Why?"

"Because—" He struggled. "Because if I admitted I was 陈墨轩, then I'd have to admit that Marcus Chen is just armor. Just performance. That underneath the billions and the success and the perfect life, I'm still just... him. The man who wasn't enough."

"You were always enough."

"She didn't think so."

"She was wrong. You know that now."

"Do I? Because she's apologizing now that I'm successful. Would she apologize if I was still in that apartment, still struggling, still the man she divorced?"

The unanswerable question hung between them.

"Have you considered asking her?"

"What?"

"At this meeting. Instead of playing games, instead of pretending, instead of revenge—have you considered just asking her: '为什么现在？为什么不是六年前？'"

Why now? Why not six years ago?

"And if she says it's because I'm rich now?"

"Then you'll know. And you can truly move on."

"And if she says it's not? If she says she regretted it six years ago but was too proud to reach out?"

"Then you'll have to decide if you can forgive her."

Chen stood again. The room felt too small, the air too thin.

"Tell me about a good memory. From the marriage."

"Why?"

"Because you've spent six years remembering the pain.

Remember the love. Just once."

Chen sat back down slowly. Closed his eyes.

"There was this night. Year one of marriage. Summer. Our air conditioner broke. We couldn't afford to fix it right away."

"Go on."

"It was... god, it was so hot. Forty-something degrees. We opened all the windows but there was no breeze. We were lying on the bed in our underwear, electric fan barely doing anything."

A small smile crossed his face.

"她在抱怨。'太热了，太热了，我们应该去你父母家。他们有空调。'"

She was complaining. 'Too hot, too hot, we should go to your parents. They have AC.'

"I said, '我父母的家只有一个房间。我们睡在哪里？'"

My parents' place only has one room. Where would we sleep?

"She said, '我妈妈家。' My mother's house."

"I said, '你妈妈恨我。' Your mother hates me."

"She laughed. Said, '她不恨你。她只是...不理解你。'"

She doesn't hate you. She just... doesn't understand you.

Chen's voice grew softer, lost in memory.

"Then she turned to me. Put her hand on my chest. Said, '但我理解你。这就够了，对吗？'"

But I understand you. That's enough, right?

Long pause.

"And I said, '你就是一切。'"

You're everything.

"We made love that night. Slow and sweet and we were both sweating and it was disgusting and perfect and I thought... I thought we'd have a thousand more nights like that."

He opened his eyes. They were full of tears.

"I don't know when she stopped understanding me. Or when I stopped being enough. But somewhere between that night and the divorce, I lost her. Or she lost me. Or we lost each other."

"Do you want to find each other again?"

"I don't know if that's possible."

"That's not what I asked."

Long silence.

A whisper: "Yes."

"Then tell her that. Not as Marcus Chen. As 墨轩. The man who loved her. The man who still does."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I open that door, if I let myself be him again, and she rejects me... I don't survive that twice."

"Marcus. 墨轩. Listen to me."

He looked at her.

"You didn't survive the first time because you ran. You built Marcus Chen as a fortress. You became powerful, rich, successful. You proved her wrong. But you know what you didn't do?"

"What?"

"Heal."

The word settled into the room like a stone.

"陈墨轩 is still inside you, still bleeding from what she said. You've just covered him in expensive suits and billion-dollar deals and pretended the wound doesn't exist. But it does. And every day you don't address it, it gets worse."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Feel it. Finally. Stop running. Stop performing. Stop hiding behind Marcus Chen and feel what 陈墨轩 felt."

Anger flashed. "I know what he felt! He felt worthless! He felt small! He felt like the woman he loved looked at him and saw nothing!"

"And you're still feeling that."

Chen stopped.

"That's why her apology doesn't feel like enough. Because you still believe, somewhere deep down, that you weren't enough. That Marcus Chen is proof you became enough. But that's the lie."

"What lie?"

"That your worth is in what you achieve. She believed that lie. You believed it too. That's why you're both here."

Silence. Chen's hands were shaking.

"The question isn't whether she deserves forgiveness. The question is: can you forgive yourself?"

"For what?"

"For believing her. For letting her words define you. For spending six years trying to prove your worth instead of knowing it."

Chen broke.

Put his head in his hands and sobbed. For the first time in six

years, he let himself sob.

Dr. Song's voice was gentle. "That's 陈墨轩. He's still there. He's been waiting for you to let him grieve."

"I don't know how to be him anymore."

"Yes, you do. He's the one who made her burned toast. Who read to her during blackouts. Who loved her completely. He's not dead. You just locked him away because loving her hurt."

"It still hurts."

"I know. But pain means you're still alive. Marcus Chen doesn't feel pain. But he doesn't feel love either."

Chen wiped his face. Took a shaking breath.

"What do I do?"

"At the meeting?"

"Yes."

"Tell her the truth."

"Which truth?"

"All of it. That you recognized her. That her words destroyed you. That you built this empire on spite and pain. That you're still angry. That you're still hurt. That you read her email twenty times. That you don't know if you can forgive her."

"And if she—"

"And that despite everything, you still love her."

The words hit like lightning.

"I can't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because it gives her power."

"No. It gives you freedom."

The clock read 11:52 AM. Two hours and eight minutes until the meeting.

"You have a choice to make." Dr. Song's voice was calm. "Go

into that meeting as Marcus Chen—powerful, cold, untouchable. Keep your armor on. Maintain the performance. Get your revenge."

Pause.

"Or go in as 陈墨轩. Vulnerable, honest, hurt. Risk everything. Risk being rejected again. But also risk... healing. Maybe even love."

"You make it sound simple."

"It's not simple. It's terrifying. But it's the only way forward."

Chen stood. Walked to the window. Looked out at Shanghai—the city he'd conquered, the empire he'd built, the fortress that protected nothing.

"If I let him come back—if I let myself be 陈墨轩 again—and she rejects me..."

"You'll survive. Because this time, you'll know your worth isn't in her acceptance. Or her love. Or anyone's opinion. It's in you. Always has been."

"I don't feel that."

"Not yet. But you will."

Chen turned. "How do I start?"

"When she walks into your office, don't let Marcus Chen speak first. Let 墨轩 speak. Even if it's just her name. Say it like you used to."

"微琳。" The name felt foreign and familiar on his tongue.

"Yes. Like that."

11:58 AM. Two hours.

"I'm terrified."

"Good. That means you're being real."

"What if I can't do it? What if I see her and the armor comes back?"

"Then you try again. But promise me: don't lie to her. And don't lie to yourself. Whatever happens in that meeting, be honest. Not strategic. Honest."

"She might hate me. For the email I sent. For pretending not to know her."

"She might. Can you live with that?"

"I don't know."

"Can you live with never trying?"

Silence.

"No."

Chen walked to the door. Stopped. Turned back.

"What if she's only sorry because I'm successful now?"

"Then you'll know she didn't deserve 陈墨轩. And you can finally let him rest."

"And if she's genuinely sorry? If she regretted it six years ago?"

"Then you get to decide if love is worth the risk."

Chen nodded. Opened the door.

"墨轩。"

He turned.

"You were always enough. Don't forget that."

His eyes filled. He nodded again.

Left.

Chen sat in his car, driver waiting. He'd told him not to move yet.

Pulled out his phone. Opened Weilin's email. Read it one more time.

Stopped at the line: "你一直都是够的。是我看不见。"

You were always enough. I just couldn't see it.

His hands shook.

He opened a new email.

To: weilin.shen@huarong.com.cn

Subject: (no subject)

微琳，

我撒谎了。我认识你。我记得一切。

I lied. I know you. I remember everything.

我们需要谈谈。

We need to talk.

墨轩

Cursor hovering over Send.

Dr. Song's voice in his head: Be honest. Not strategic. Honest.

He pressed Send.

The whoosh sound. Email gone.

12:47 PM. One hour, thirteen minutes.

"上海中心。" Shanghai Tower.

The car moved.

His phone buzzed. Unknown number. Text message:

"我知道。我一直都知道。我也在路上。—W"

I know. I always knew. I'm on my way too. —W

Chen stared at the message.

She knew. She'd always known he recognized her. The email denying everything—she'd seen through it.

And she was coming anyway.

His heart pounded. The armor cracked wider.

陈墨轩 surfaced.

And for the first time in six years, Chen let him.

The car drove toward Shanghai Tower. Toward the 118th floor. Toward the meeting that would either destroy them both or save them.

He didn't know which.

But for the first time, he was willing to find out.

END CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER 7: WEILIN'S FAMILY PRESSURE (FATHER'S EXPECTATIONS)

Weilin's mother had been talking about "suitable men" for twenty minutes, and Weilin's hands were bleeding under the table from clenching her chopsticks.

12:15 PM. Thursday. One hour and forty-five minutes until the meeting with Chen.

The formal dining room of her parents' French Concession mansion pressed down on her like a tomb—mahogany table that seated twelve with only three occupants, her mother's pearl necklace catching the light (real pearls, old Shanghai money), her father's Patek Philippe watch visible as he checked it for the third time. She was wasting his time.

The food laid out before them—红烧肉, steamed bass, soup dumplings from the best restaurant—might as well have been sawdust. Her stomach churned.

"张家的儿子下周从伦敦回来。" Her mother's voice was sharp, cutting. Shanghainese dialect when she was being cruel. "投资银行家。三十五岁。合适的家庭。我已经安排你们见面。"

The Zhang family's son is returning from London next week. Investment banker. Thirty-five. Suitable family. I've already arranged for you to meet.

Weilin's response came in Mandarin, a passive-aggressive language choice. "我很忙。"

I'm busy.

Her mother switched to Mandarin, annoyed. "Too busy for

your future? You're thirty-two. Time is running out."

The grandfather clock ticked. Rain lashed the windows. The silk qipao her mother had insisted she wear was too tight, restricting her breathing, a beautiful cage.

Her father spoke for the first time, voice cold as winter. "你还在为那个咨询公司工作？"

You're still working at that consulting firm?

Not how is work? Just dismissal.

"是的，爸爸。" Yes, Father.

"浪费。以你的背景，你应该在更好的地方。"

Waste. With your background, you should be somewhere better.

Translation: You're a disappointment.

Weilin's phone buzzed in her purse. Once. Twice. Three times.

"关掉那个。吃饭时候不许用手机。" Her mother's command was absolute.

Turn that off. No phones at the table.

But Weilin had seen the notification.

From: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Her heart stopped.

He'd written back.

SEVEN HOURS EARLIER. 7:30 AM.

The summons had come when Weilin was staring at Chen's devastating email—the one denying he knew her, erasing their entire history.

Her mother's voice on the phone: "今天中午回家吃饭。你父亲要见你。"

Come home for lunch today. Your father wants to see you.

Not a request. A command.

"我今天有重要的会议—" I have an important meeting today—

"推迟。家庭优先。" Postpone it. Family comes first.

Weilin should have said no. Should have chosen herself for once.

Instead: "几点?" What time?

"十二点。别迟到。" Noon. Don't be late.

Click.

Thirty-two years of conditioning. Family comes first. Always. Even when family destroys you.

PRESENT. 12:20 PM.

"你看起来很糟糕。你有好好照顾自己吗?"

You look terrible. Are you taking care of yourself?

Translation: You look like a failure.

"我很好。工作有点忙。" I'm fine. Work is a bit busy.

Her father set down his chopsticks with deliberate precision.

"忙于什么? 咨询工作?"

Busy with what? Consulting work?

The disdain dripped from every syllable. Consulting wasn't real work. Not like law—his profession. Not like banking or government or anything that mattered.

"我的朋友李先生—你记得他吗? 他的女儿现在在政府工作。外交部。二十九岁。"

My friend Mr. Li—you remember him? His daughter now works in government. Foreign Affairs. Twenty-nine years old.

Translation: Why aren't you like her?

"很好。" Good for her.

"是的。很好。她结婚了。嫁给了一个副部长。去年生了儿子。"

Yes. Good for her. She's married. To a vice minister. Had a son last year.

Translation: You're unmarried, childless, and a disgrace.

Weilin's phone buzzed again.

She couldn't help herself—glanced at her purse.

"我说了关掉那个！" Her mother's voice cracked like a whip.

"对不起。" Sorry.

But she didn't turn it off.

Her mother's tone shifted, becoming careful. Approaching a landmine.

"你知道，已经六年了。"

You know, it's been six years.

Weilin knew exactly what she meant. Six years since the divorce.

"我们从来没有怪你。对于那个.....错误。"

We never blamed you. For that... mistake.

Mistake. Her marriage was a "mistake."

Weilin's hands tightened on the chopsticks until her palms bled.

"你很年轻。他很.....有说服力。我们理解。"

You were young. He was... persuasive. We understand.

Persuasive. As if Moxuan had tricked her. Manipulated her.

Not that she'd loved him. Not that she'd chosen him.

Weilin's voice came out quiet. Dangerous. "他没有说服我。我爱他。"

He didn't persuade me. I loved him.

Present tense. A slip.

Her mother caught it immediately.

"爱？那不是爱。那是.....迷恋。你被他的梦想迷住了。我们试图警告你。"

Love? That wasn't love. That was... infatuation. You were dazzled by his dreams. We tried to warn you.

A memory surfaced, unwanted but undeniable.

SIX YEARS AGO. THIS SAME DINING ROOM.

"我想让你们见见他。他叫陈墨轩。我们在谈恋爱。"

I want you to meet him. His name is Chen Moxuan. We're in love.

Her father: "陈? 从哪里来?" Chen? From where?

"安徽。" Anhui.

Her mother's face—immediate disgust, poorly concealed.

"背景?" Background?

"他父母是.....他父亲做建筑工作。他母亲是裁缝。但他很聪明——"

His parents are... his father does construction work. His mother is a seamstress. But he's brilliant—

"不行。" Her father's voice was absolute.

No.

"什么?" What?

"我说不行。你不会嫁给建筑工人的儿子。"

I said no. You won't marry a construction worker's son.

She'd married him anyway. They'd boycotted the wedding.

Refused to help financially. Made sure everyone in their social circle knew their daughter had married beneath her.

And for two years, they'd worked systematically to destroy her marriage.

Weilin remembered every dinner. Every test designed to humiliate Moxuan.

The wrong utensils placed in front of him. Questions calculated to expose his poverty.

"还在读研究生? 什么时候毕业? 什么时候找真正的工作?"

Still in graduate school? When do you graduate? When do you get a real job?

"你们住在哪里? 杨浦区? 那个.....地方很远, 对吗?"

Where do you live? Yangpu District? That... place is very far, isn't it?

Translation: Poor area. Shameful.

The constant phone calls.

"他还在做那个.....什么startup? 没有成功, 对吗? "

He's still doing that... what, startup? Not successful, right?

"你看起来很累。他没有照顾好你。"

You look tired. He's not taking care of you.

And the final blow—when Weilin had needed money for an unexpected medical bill.

Her father: "我可以帮你。但有条件。"

I can help you. But there's a condition.

"什么条件? " What condition?

"离开他。"

Leave him.

She'd borrowed from coworkers instead. Hated herself.

Hated Moxuan for putting her in that position.

Only later did she realize: she should have hated her father.

At the final dinner before the divorce, her mother had spoken in Shanghainese, knowing Moxuan couldn't follow completely:

"你还年轻。你可以重新开始。他.....他很好。但'好'不够。你应该有更多。你值得有人能给你你应得的生活。"

You're still young. You can start over. He... he's good. But 'good' isn't enough. You should have more. You deserve someone who can give you the life you deserve.

Those words. Those exact words.

That Weilin had later repeated to Moxuan, poisoning him with her mother's venom.

PRESENT. 12:25 PM.

Weilin stared at her mother across the mahogany table.

Realized with devastating clarity: She programmed me. Like

code. Input: peasant husband. Output: divorce.

And I let her.

"但现在你自由了。" Her mother continued, oblivious. "你可以找到真正合适的人。像张家的儿子。或者王律师—他最近离婚了，他一直在问你—"

But now you're free. You can find someone truly suitable. Like the Zhang family's son. Or Lawyer Wang—he recently divorced, he's been asking about you—

Something inside Weilin snapped.

"我不想见张家的儿子。"

I don't want to meet the Zhang family's son.

"为什么不？他—" Why not? He—

"因为我还爱着我的前夫。"

Because I'm still in love with my ex-husband.

Silence descended like a guillotine.

Her father's chopsticks clattered onto his plate. Her mother's face went white, then red.

"你说什么？" What did you say?

Weilin stood. Voice louder, clearer. "我说我还爱着陈墨轩。我一直都爱着他。我离开他是我这辈子最大的错误。"

I said I'm still in love with Chen Moxuan. I've always loved him. Leaving him was the biggest mistake of my life.

Her father stood, voice like ice. "坐下。我们需要谈谈。"

Sit down. We need to talk.

Weilin remained standing. "不。我们已经谈了三十二年了。我听够了。"

No. We've been talking for thirty-two years. I've heard enough.

"微琳！你怎么敢—" Weilin! How dare you—

"我怎么敢什么？" Weilin interrupted. "爱一个你们认为不够好的人？选择我的幸福而不是你们的面子？"

How dare I what? Love someone you didn't think was good enough? Choose my happiness over your face?

Her father's voice was cold. "那个男人毁了你。让你变得.....普通。"

That man ruined you. Made you... ordinary.

Weilin laughed—bitter, broken, free. "不。你们毁了我。你们让我相信爱不如地位重要。你们让我相信他的价值在于他能提供什么，而不是他是谁。"

No. You ruined me. You made me believe love was less important than status. You made me believe his value was in what he could provide, not who he was.

"我们只是想要对你最好的—" We only wanted what's best for you—

"对我最好的？还是对你们最好的？对你们的面子最好的？"

What's best for me? Or what's best for you? What's best for your face?

She pulled out her phone with shaking hands. Opened Chen's latest email.

Read it.

"微琳，我撒谎了。我认识你。我记得一切。我们需要谈谈。—墨轩"

Weilin, I lied. I know you. I remember everything. We need to talk. —Moxuan

Tears filled her eyes.

He remembered. He'd signed it 墨轩, not Marcus. He wanted to talk.

She looked up at her parents.

"你们知道他现在是什么人吗？"

Do you know who he is now?

"我不在乎—" I don't care—

"Marcus Chen. 晨曦科技的CEO。身价十亿美元。"

Marcus Chen. CEO of Chénxī Technologies. Net worth one billion dollars.

Her parents' faces transformed. Recognition. Shock.

"那个Marcus Chen? " Her mother's voice was faint.

"是的。那个Marcus Chen。你们赶走的建筑工人的儿子。"

Yes. That Marcus Chen. The construction worker's son you drove away.

Her father sat down slowly. "不可能。" Impossible.

"非常可能。他建立了一个帝国。没有你们。没有你们的关系。没有你们的钱。因为他够了。他一直都够了。是你们—是我—看不见。"

Very possible. He built an empire. Without you. Without your connections. Without your money. Because he was enough. He always was enough. It was you—it was me—who couldn't see it.

Her mother's expression shifted. Calculating. Weilin could see the wheels turning.

"那.....也许你们可以.....重新连接? 如果他—"

Then... perhaps you two could... reconnect? If he—

Disgust rose in Weilin's throat. "现在你感兴趣了? 现在他富有了, 他突然够好了? "

Now you're interested? Now that he's rich, he's suddenly good enough?

"我不是那个意思—" That's not what I meant—

"正是你的意思。这一直都是你的意思。他的价值在于他的银行账户, 不是他的心。"

That's exactly what you meant. That's always what you meant. His value is in his bank account, not his heart.

Weilin walked toward the door.

"你要去哪里？" Where are you going?

"见他。向他道歉。乞求他的原谅。可能会失败。但至少我会诚实。这是你们从来没教过我的东西。"

To see him. To apologize. To beg his forgiveness. I'll probably fail. But at least I'll be honest. Something you never taught me.

"如果你走出那扇门—如果你去见他—" If you walk out that door—if you go see him—

"什么？你会怎么样？剥夺我的继承权？把我逐出家族？"

What? What will you do? Disinherit me? Disown me?

Weilin paused. "去做吧。我不在乎。我宁愿一无所有也不愿意成为你们想要我成为的人。"

Do it. I don't care. I'd rather have nothing than be what you want me to be.

Her father stood, voice shaking with rage. "你这个忘恩负义的—"

You ungrateful—

"忘恩负义？我应该感激什么？感激你让我觉得爱不够？感激你毁了我的婚姻？感激你让我相信我的价值在于我嫁给谁？"

Ungrateful? Grateful for what? Grateful that you made me feel love wasn't enough? Grateful that you destroyed my marriage? Grateful that you made me believe my value was in who I married?

Her mother was crying now. Manipulative tears. "我们只是想保护你—"

We just wanted to protect you—

"保护我？你想控制我。有区别。"

Protect me? You wanted to control me. There's a difference.

Weilin opened her purse. Took out a small box.

Inside: the jade bracelet. Family heirloom, passed from

mother to daughter for generations, given to her on her eighteenth birthday.

She placed it on the table.

"这个是你的。我不想要它。我不想要任何提醒我应该成为什么样的人的东西。"

This is yours. I don't want it. I don't want anything that reminds me of what I was supposed to be.

Her mother gasped. "那是家族传家宝—" That's a family heirloom—

"那就留在家族里。我不想要你的历史。我想要我自己的未来。"

Then keep it in the family. I don't want your history. I want my own future.

Her father's voice was final. "如果你走，别想着回来。"

If you leave, don't think about coming back.

Weilin smiled—sad, broken, free. "好。"

Good.

She walked to the door. Hand on the handle. Turned back one last time.

"你们知道最可悲的是什么呢？"

You want to know the saddest part?

Her parents stared.

"他爱我。即使我一文不名，即使我的家人恨他，即使我们住在那个公寓里吃廉价的煎饼，他爱我。不是因为我能给他什么。不是因为我的姓氏。不是因为我的背景。就是因为我。"

He loved me. Even when I had nothing, even when my family hated him, even when we lived in that tiny apartment eating cheap jianbing, he loved me. Not for what I could give him. Not for my surname. Not for my background. Just for me. Tears streamed down her face.

"而你们教会我认为那不够。你们教会我认为爱不如地位重要。你

们教会我毁了我生命中最好的东西。"

And you taught me to think that wasn't enough. You taught me that love was less important than status. You taught me to destroy the best thing in my life.

"微琳，求你了—" Weilin, please—

"我不知道他会不会原谅我。我不知道我们还能不能挽救什么。但我要去尝试。而你们不能阻止我。"

I don't know if he'll forgive me. I don't know if we can save anything. But I'm going to try. And you can't stop me.

She opened the door. Rain poured outside.

Her father made one final attempt. "他现在是亿万富翁。他不需要你。他可以拥有任何人。"

He's a billionaire now. He doesn't need you. He can have anyone.

Weilin turned back, smiling through tears. "我知道。这就是为什么如果他选择我，会意味着一切。因为他会选择我，不是因为我给他什么。而是因为他爱我。像他以前那样。"

I know. That's why if he chooses me, it will mean everything. Because he'll choose me not for what I can give him. But because he loves me. Like he used to.

Pause.

"像我应该一直爱他的那样。"

Like I should have loved him all along.

Weilin walked into the rain. No umbrella. She didn't care.

Her phone rang. Her mother's number. She declined. Blocked it. Then blocked her father's.

Stood on the sidewalk, rain soaking through her silk qipao, makeup running, hair ruined. The perfect daughter persona washing away with the storm.

She pulled out her phone. Typed a response to Chen's email:

To: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Subject: Re: (no subject)

墨轩，

我也撒谎了。我知道你认识我。我知道你在装。我知道你记得。

I lied too. I knew you recognized me. I knew you were pretending. I knew you remembered.

我刚刚离开了我父母的家。我可能永远不会回去。我放弃了他们的钱、他们的名字、他们的世界。

I just left my parents' house. I might never go back. I gave up their money, their name, their world.

我不知道这改变了什么。也许什么都没有。也许为时已晚。

I don't know if this changes anything. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's too late.

但我需要你知道：我选择你。六年太晚了，但我选择你。不是因为你现在是谁。而是因为你一直是谁。

But I need you to know: I choose you. Six years too late, but I choose you. Not because of who you are now. Because of who you've always been.

我正在路上去你的办公室。我浑身湿透，我的妆花了，我可能看起来很疯狂。

I'm on my way to your office. I'm soaking wet, my makeup is running, I probably look insane.

但我来了。如果你还想见我的话。

But I'm coming. If you still want to see me.

微琳

She hit send. No hesitation.

A taxi pulled over. She climbed in, dripping.

"上海中心。" Shanghai Tower.

The driver looked concerned. "你还好吗，小姐？"

Are you okay, Miss?

Weilin laughed through tears. "我不知道。问我一个小时后。"
I don't know. Ask me in an hour.

1:15 PM. Forty-five minutes until the meeting.

Her phone buzzed. Chen's response, instant:

"我还想见你。我一直都想见你。118层。前台有你的通行证。来吧。—墨轩"

I still want to see you. I've always wanted to see you. 118th floor. Reception has your pass. Come. —Moxuan

She clutched the phone. Sobbed.

"小姐? " The driver was worried.

"我很好。我很好。继续开。"

I'm fine. I'm fine. Keep driving.

The taxi pulled up to Shanghai Tower at 1:47 PM. Thirteen minutes early.

Weilin paid with the last cash in her wallet. Stepped out into the rain. Looked up at 632 meters of steel and glass.

He was up there. Waiting.

Her phone rang. Unknown number.

She almost didn't answer.

But did.

"微琳? " Her mother's voice, calling from the house phone.

"求你了。不要这样做。回家。我们可以谈谈。你父亲——他很生气，但他会原谅你。只要回来。"

Please. Don't do this. Come home. We can talk. Your father—he's angry, but he'll forgive you. Just come back.

Weilin looked up at the tower. At the 118th floor she couldn't see through the clouds.

Said quietly: "不。"

No.

Hung up.

Blocked the house number.
Walked through the doors.
Toward the elevator.
Toward the 118th floor.
Toward Chen.
Toward the truth.
Toward whatever came next.

END CHAPTER 7

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CHAPTER 8: ACT I CLIMAX – FORCED PROXIMITY BEGINS (FIRST BUSINESS MEETING)

They were three meters apart—Chen behind his mahogany desk, Weilin in the designer chair across from him—and the distance felt like both an ocean and a knife's edge.

2:00 PM. Thursday. The meeting had started on time because Chen Moxuan—Marcus Chen—was nothing if not precise.

His office on the 118th floor was a glass cage in the sky. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed Shanghai sprawling below, the city they'd both conquered and lost. Storm clouds pressed against the glass. Thunder rumbled. Rain hammered the windows like it was trying to break through.

Weilin sat perfectly still, portfolio in her lap like a shield. Her silk qipao was still damp from the rain, clinging to her skin in ways that made Chen's jaw clench. Her makeup was destroyed—mascara tracks on her cheeks, lipstick gone. Hair disheveled. She looked wrecked.

She looked beautiful.

Chen gripped the edge of his desk, knuckles white. Charcoal Tom Ford suit, perfect Windsor knot, Patek Philippe watch catching the light. Every inch the billionaire CEO.

Except his hands were shaking.

CHEN'S POV:

She's here. Actually here. Sitting across from me like we're strangers meeting for the first time.

Like I didn't spend six years memorizing the curve of her neck. Like she isn't wearing the same jasmine perfume that used to be on my pillow every morning. Like my hands don't remember the exact shape of her waist.

Professional. I need to be professional.

"Miss Shen." My voice is Marcus Chen's voice—cold, controlled, CEO. "Thank you for coming."

But my heart is screaming 微琳, 微琳, 微琳.

WEILIN'S POV:

He looks like a stranger.

No—worse. He looks like Moxuan wearing a stranger's face. Same scar on his eyebrow from the shelf in our apartment. Same way his left hand taps against the desk when he's nervous.

He's nervous. He's nervous and trying to hide it and I can still read him.

But everything else—the suit that probably costs more than our first year's rent, the watch, the office that touches the clouds, the way he holds himself like he owns the sky—This is the man I created by destroying him.

"Mr. Chen." It tastes like ashes in my mouth.

I want to say 墨轩. Want to scream it. Want to fall to my

knees and beg.

But his eyes are ice.

So I stay in my chair and pretend my heart isn't breaking.

Chen gestured to her portfolio. "I understand you brought examples of your work."

Weilin opened it with shaking hands. "Yes. I've prepared an overview of my strategic consulting experience, particularly in market expansion and—"

"Your email this morning mentioned you'd left your parents' house."

Not a question. A statement that shattered the professional facade immediately.

Weilin froze. "That's... personal. I thought this was a business meeting."

"It is." Chen's voice was level. "But if I'm considering you for consulting work, I need to understand your stability. Family conflicts can affect professional performance."

Translation: Why did you leave? What does it mean? Are you using me?

But delivered in Marcus Chen's cold business voice.

"My family and I had a disagreement about my professional choices." Weilin's voice was careful. "It won't affect my work."

"What kind of disagreement?"

"The kind where they told me not to come to this meeting."

Silence. Thunder cracked outside.

CHEN'S POV:

She chose this meeting over her family. The family that destroyed us. The mother who poisoned her against me. The father who looked at me like I was dirt on his shoe.

She chose... me?

No. She chose the potential client. The billionaire. Marcus Chen.

Not 陈墨轩.

Right?

Chen stood, walked to the window. Back to her because looking at her was unbearable.

"Why did you come? Really."

"Because you asked me to."

He turned, and for just a second, his eyes were 墨轩's eyes—vulnerable, hurt, desperate. "I asked Miss Shen, consultant, to come discuss business. Not—"

He stopped. Couldn't finish.

Weilin stood too, unable to help herself. "Not what? Not 陈太太?"

Mrs. Chen.

Her married name. The name she'd given up.

Chen flinched like she'd struck him. "You're not 陈太太 anymore. You're Shen Weilin. We established that six years ago in a legal aid office."

The cruelty was intentional. The pain in his voice was not.

Weilin took a step toward him. "墨轩—"

Chen stepped back, hand up like a barrier. "Don't. Don't call me that."

"It's your name."

"No." His voice cracked. "It was his name. 陈墨轩 died six years ago when his wife told him he'd never be enough. I'm Marcus Chen."

WEILIN'S POV:

Tears burn my eyes. I can't stop them.

"I was wrong. I was so wrong. I know 'sorry' doesn't fix it. I

know it's too late. But I need you to know—"

"Know what?" He's not yelling but his voice is rising, control slipping. "That you regret it? I read your email, Weilin. All of them. The apology. The explanation. The beautiful words about how I was 'always enough.'"

My first name. He's using my first name. The armor is cracking.

He's pacing now, can't stand still. "But here's what I need to know: Would you have sent those emails if I was still in that apartment? Still struggling? Still the man you divorced?"

The question that's been destroying him.

I meet his eyes. "Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me. It's true."

Chen turned on her, and now he was angry—really angry—six years of rage finally breaking free.

"When did you realize? When did you start regretting?"

"Three months after the divorce."

Chen stopped. "What?"

Weilin's voice shook. "Three months. I was living with my parents. Dating men they approved of. Doing everything 'right.' And I was miserable. I'd wake up and reach for you and you weren't there and I'd remember: I chose this. I destroyed us."

CHEN'S POV:

Three months. Three months after she left me, she knew. While I was sleeping on Lin Rui's couch, building my company on spite and pain, she was regretting it.

While I was working eighteen-hour days to become someone she'd regret losing, she already regretted it.

Why didn't she—

"Why didn't you come back?"

Simple question. Devastating.

"Pride. Fear. Shame." Weilin's voice was barely audible. "My parents said you'd never take me back. That I'd humiliated you. That I should move on."

"You listened to them."

"I always listened to them. That was the problem."

Silence. Rain against windows. Two broken people three meters apart.

Chen's voice, when it came, was 墨轩's voice—quiet, honest, destroying them both. "I would have taken you back."

Weilin's breath caught.

"Three months after the divorce, I would have taken you back in a heartbeat. Six months. A year. Two years. If you'd come back and said you were wrong, I would have forgiven you."

Past tense. Would have. Not would.

"And now?" Weilin whispered.

Chen turned away, voice Marcus Chen's again—cold, controlled. "Now we're strangers. Now I'm a potential client and you're a consultant and this is a business meeting."

Building the wall again. Brick by brick.

WEILIN'S POV:

He's shutting down. I can see it happening. The warmth bleeding out, replaced by ice. Marcus Chen consuming 陈墨轩.

I'm losing him.

I already lost him.

But I have to try.

"Then let's talk business." Weilin's voice was firm now,

strategist voice.

Chen turned, surprised. "What?"

"You said this is a business meeting. So let's have it. What do you need from me, Mr. Chen?"

If he wanted professional, she'd give him professional. Even if it killed her.

Chen walked back to his desk. Sat. Became CEO again.

"Chénxī Technologies is expanding into Southeast Asia.

Singapore, primarily, but also Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam."

Weilin sat too, opened her portfolio. "I have experience with ASEAN market entry. I worked on—"

"I know. I read your professional profile."

Translation: I researched you. I know everything about you.

I've been watching from a distance.

"The expansion requires local partnerships, regulatory navigation, cultural adaptation of our logistics algorithm. It's a six-month project. Minimum."

"Six months?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No. I just... what exactly would the engagement look like?"

Chen slid a folder across the desk. "Contract details. You'd be embedded with our team. Three days a week in our Shanghai office, two days a week on-site in Singapore. Reporting directly to me."

WEILIN'S POV:

Six months. Three days a week in his office. Reporting to him. Six months of proximity. Of seeing him. Of wanting him. Of dying slowly.

This is revenge. He's punishing me.

Or...

Or he can't let go either.

Weilin opened the folder, scanned the contract. "This is... generous."

Understatement. The compensation was triple her current salary.

"You'd be worth it. If you're as good as your reputation suggests."

Professional. But his eyes said something else. They said: I want you close. I need you close. Even if it destroys me.

"Why me? There are hundreds of consultants in Shanghai with better credentials."

"Are you trying to talk me out of hiring you?"

"I'm trying to understand your motives."

Chen leaned back, smile dangerous. "My motives are simple, Miss Shen. You have expertise I need. Your background in European business culture, your language skills, your strategic thinking. This is purely professional."

Lies. They both knew it.

"And it has nothing to do with our... history?"

"What history? According to my last email, we're strangers. You mistook me for someone else."

Cruel. Deliberate. But his hands were shaking.

WEILIN'S POV:

He's playing games. Fine. I'll play too.

If he wants to pretend we're strangers, I'll be the best stranger he's ever met.

And maybe, over six months, I'll find the man underneath the armor.

Or maybe I'll just torture myself watching him be someone else.

But I'll be close to him.

That's worth anything.

Weilin closed the folder. "I accept."

Chen looked surprised. "You haven't even read the full contract."

"I don't need to. When do I start?"

Chen stood, pulled the full contract from a drawer. "Read it first. I insist."

Weilin stood, walked around the desk—invading his space—took the contract from his hands.

Their fingers touched.

Both froze.

CHEN'S POV:

Her skin. I forgot how soft—

No. I didn't forget. I remember everything. The texture of her fingers, the way her hand fits in mine, the—

Stop. Professional. This is professional.

But she's standing so close I can smell her perfume and it's destroying me.

WEILIN'S POV:

His hands are different. Softer. Manicured. Rich man's hands.

I miss the calluses. From coding. From building our cheap furniture himself. From working too hard.

But his eyes—his eyes are the same. Dark. Deep. Haunted.

I did this. I put that haunting there.

They stood inches apart. Contract between them. Thunder outside.

"What page?" Weilin's voice was hoarse.

"What?" Chen couldn't look away from her face.

"What page should I read? You said you insist."

Chen forced himself to step back. "Page seven. Section four. Termination clause."

Weilin read, and her voice shook. "'Either party may terminate this agreement with cause. Cause is defined as: professional misconduct, conflict of interest, or—'"

She stopped. Read the last line again.

"—or personal relationship that compromises professional objectivity."

She looked up. "You put in a clause about personal relationships?"

"Standard practice. Employees and consultants can't have romantic involvement. Creates complications."

"I'm not your employee."

"You will be. If you sign."

"And if we... if there's..."

She couldn't finish.

Chen stepped closer, voice dangerous. "If there's what, Weilin? If we what?"

First name again. Armor cracking.

"If we can't maintain professional objectivity."

"Can you?"

"Can you?"

Standoff.

CHEN'S POV:

No. I can't. I'm standing here pretending to care about logistics algorithms when all I want is to pull her into my arms and ask why. Why she left. Why she came back. Why she's looking at me like her heart is breaking when she's the one who broke mine.

But I won't give her that power again.

So I lie.

"I'm a professional. I can separate business from personal."

"Then so can I."

Another lie. They were both lying.

Weilin took the pen from his desk. "Where do I sign?"

"Page twelve. Initial pages three, seven, and nine."

She signed. Her handwriting—he recognized it. From love notes she used to leave in his laptop bag. From grocery lists in their tiny kitchen. From the divorce papers.

His hands curled into fists.

Weilin slid the contract back. Their fingers brushed again.

"Done."

Chen took it. "I'll have my assistant send the onboarding materials. You start Monday."

"Monday. That's three days."

"Is that a problem?"

"No. I'll need to give notice at my current firm."

"I'll handle it. Your contract includes a buyout clause."

WEILIN'S POV:

He's buying out my contract. Taking control. Making sure I can't escape.

This is either revenge or obsession.

Maybe both.

Maybe I don't care.

Weilin turned to leave. Couldn't stay. Would break if she stayed. "I should go. Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Chen."

"Weilin."

Not Miss Shen. Weilin.

She stopped. Hand on the door handle. Didn't turn.

"Why did you really come here today?"

"You asked me to."

"That's not an answer."

Long silence. Rain hammering. Hearts hammering.

Weilin turned, and her destroyed makeup and damp dress made her look both wrecked and beautiful. "Because I spent six years wondering 'what if.' What if I'd been braver. What if I'd believed in you. What if I'd chosen love over status."

Chen stepped toward her, unable to help it. "And now?"

"Now I know. What if I'd chosen you, I'd have had everything. Instead, I have designer apartments and professional success and emptiness."

Another step closer. "You think I'm not empty? You think this—" he gestured at the office, at himself—"fills the space you left?"

Tears streamed down her face. "I don't know what you feel. You won't tell me. You hide behind Marcus Chen and billion-dollar deals and cold emails."

"You want to know what I feel?"

Another step. They were inches apart now.

"I feel angry. I feel betrayed. I feel like the woman I loved looked at me and saw garbage."

"I'm sorry—"

"But you know what I feel most?" His voice broke. "I feel like I'd forgive you if you asked. And that terrifies me."

The truth. Finally.

Weilin whispered, "I'm asking."

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know if I'm strong enough to say yes. Or strong enough to say no."

They stared at each other. His hand lifted—unconscious movement—reached for her face.

Stopped an inch from her cheek.

Trembling.

CHEN'S POV:

One touch. One touch and six years of armor crumbles. One touch and I'm 陈墨轩 again, the man who loved her more than breathing.

I can't. I can't do this.

But I can't walk away either.

His phone rang.

Both jumped. The spell broke.

Chen answered, voice cold again. "陈总。" CEO Chen.

His assistant: "Mr. Chen, the Singapore partners are on line two. The conference call?"

"Give me two minutes."

He hung up. Looked at Weilin, and he was Marcus Chen again—controlled, cold.

"I have a call. My assistant will send the onboarding materials to your email. Monday, 9 AM. Don't be late."

"墨轩—"

"Mr. Chen. In this office, I'm Mr. Chen."

Brutal. Necessary. Destroying them both.

Weilin opened the door. Paused. "I meant what I said in my email. I choose you. Not Marcus Chen. Not the billionaire.

You. 陈墨轩. The man who made me burned toast."

Chen stared out the window, back to her. "That man is dead."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want. I'll see you Monday."

Dismissal.

Weilin left. The door closed.

Chen stood alone, forehead pressed against the glass.

"她在这里。她选择了我。她离开了她的家人。"

She's here. She chose me. She left her family.

"为什么我还这么害怕？"

Why am I still so scared?

Lin Rui entered without knocking. "我看到她离开了。"

I saw her leave.

"你怎么知道—" How did you—

"我一直在等着。看看你是杀了她还是吻了她。"

I was waiting. To see if you'd kill her or kiss her.

Chen sat heavily. "我签了她。六个月的合同。"

I signed her. Six-month contract.

"你疯了吗？" Are you insane?

"可能。" Possibly.

"你要怎么办？每周三天看着她？想要她？恨她？爱她？"

What are you going to do? Watch her three days a week?

Want her? Hate her? Love her?

"我不知道。" I don't know.

"你还爱她。" You still love her.

"我知道。" I know.

"那为什么—" Then why—

"因为爱她会杀了我。不爱她也会杀了我。至少这样，她在附近。"

Because loving her will kill me. Not loving her will kill me too.

At least this way, she's close.

THAT NIGHT. 11 PM.

Weilin's apartment. Email from Chen's assistant with
onboarding materials.

Work hours: Monday-Wednesday 9AM-6PM, Shanghai office

Travel: One week monthly, Singapore

Direct report: CEO Chen

Office: Next to CEO Chen's office

Office next to his. Six months. Every day.

She pulled out her phone. Texted Chen:

我读了合同。我理解规则。但我需要你知道：我不会放弃。六个月。每天。我会让你记得你是谁。—W

I read the contract. I understand the rules. But I need you to know: I'm not giving up. Six months. Every day. I'll make you remember who you are. —W

Chen's penthouse. Same time. Standing at the window again, always seeking escape.

Phone buzzed. Read her text. Stared at it for five minutes.

Typed back:

我已经记得了。这就是问题所在。—M

I already remember. That's the problem. —M

Signed M. Not Marcus. Not 墨轩. The man in between.

Her response came immediately:

那就别逃了。让我们都记得。—W

Then stop running. Let's both remember. —W

He didn't respond. But he saved the text.

And he didn't sleep.

Three days until Monday. Three days until forced proximity.

Three days until heaven or hell.

The contract was signed. Six months. Starting now.

Neither could escape. Neither wanted to. Both were terrified.

END CHAPTER 8 / END ACT I

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CHAPTER 9: THE FIRST DAY (MONDAY MORNING)

Weilin had changed outfits seven times, and each version of herself in the mirror looked like a woman preparing for her own execution.

6:47 AM. Monday morning. Her new studio apartment in Yangpu District—sparse, cold, the apartment of someone starting over from nothing—felt like a holding cell.

Rejected clothes scattered across her bed: the navy dress (too sexy), the cream blouse and slacks (too casual), the burgundy suit (too desperate), the grey ensemble (too funeral). She'd finally settled on charcoal Armani—armor. White silk blouse underneath—professional. Low heels instead of the stilettos she used to wear to tower over him. Not anymore.

She stood in front of her bathroom mirror—cracked in the corner from when she'd dropped her makeup bag last week—and practiced.

"Good morning, Mr. Chen."

Her voice shook.

She tried again. "Good morning, Mr. Chen. Thank you for this opportunity."

Better. Steadier. The voice of a professional consultant, not a woman whose husband—ex-husband—once knew every sound she made in the dark.

Rain drummed against the single window. Through the thin walls, a neighbor's baby cried. Her phone showed 6:47 AM—alarm set for 6:30, but she'd been awake since five.

Two hours and thirteen minutes until she walked into Chénxī Technologies.

Two hours and thirteen minutes until she saw him.

She picked up her instant coffee—bitter, nothing like the

congee he used to make every morning. The memory hit without warning: him at their tiny stove, stirring the pot, humming off-key, turning to smile at her when she shuffled out in his old t-shirt.

Stop.

She shook her head. Professional. She needed to be professional.

Her phone buzzed. Unknown number, but she knew it by heart.

会议室A，9点整。不要迟到。—M

Conference Room A, 9:00 sharp. Don't be late. —M

Not "good morning." Not "looking forward to working with you." Just a command.

She typed back: 明白。—W Understood.

Professional. Curt. Killing her.

She finished her coffee, grabbed her portfolio—prepared, re-prepared, obsessively perfect—and took one last look in the mirror.

Whispered: "你可以做到。六个月。你可以假装六个月。"

You can do this. Six months. You can pretend for six months.

The woman in the mirror didn't look convinced.

7:32 AM. LINE 3 SUBWAY PLATFORM, YANGPU DISTRICT.

Weilin stood among the morning commuters, portfolio clutched to her chest. The irony wasn't lost on her—she was back where she'd started. Full circle. Near where their old apartment used to be.

Except this time, she was alone.

The subway arrived, packed. She squeezed in, a businessman's elbow digging into her ribs. In her old life, she would have taken a taxi. Now the subway was all she could

afford.

She didn't mind. The discomfort felt like penance.

Her reflection ghosted in the dark window as the train lurched forward: perfect suit, perfect makeup, perfect mask.

Underneath, a woman coming apart.

She'd taken this line seven years ago. Going to meet Moxuan at that café near Fudan. The day everything started.

Now she was taking it to see Marcus Chen. The day everything—what? Ended? Began again? Destroyed them both?

Transfer at People's Square. Line 3 to Line 2. Toward Lujiazui. Toward the skyscrapers. Toward him.

8:47 AM. SHANGHAI TOWER LOBBY.

The lobby was cathedral-like: marble floors, soaring ceiling, the hush of expensive air conditioning.

Security desk: "Name and company, please."

"沈微琳。晨曦科技。" Shen Weilin. Chénxī Technologies.

The guard scanned his list. "Ah, yes. Miss Shen. First day?"

She nodded.

"Welcome. Elevator bank C, 118th floor. Enjoy your first day." Enjoy. If only.

Weilin clipped the temporary badge to her lapel—her photo hollow-eyed, the face of a woman walking toward her doom. She pressed the elevator button. Waited. Her heart a trapped bird.

The elevator arrived empty. She stepped in, pressed 118, and watched the doors close.

Alone in a metal box, ascending toward heaven or hell.

10... 20... 30... Her ears popped.

50... 60... 70... Her hands were sweating.

80... 90... 100...

She closed her eyes. Breathed.

专业。冷静。你只是个顾问。他只是个客户。

Professional. Calm. You're just a consultant. He's just a client.

Lies. All lies.

110... 115... 118.

A soft chime. The doors opened.

WEILIN'S POV:

The 118th floor is nothing like I expected.

It's quiet. Eerily so. Pale wood floors, floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides, Shanghai sprawling below like a toy city.

Everything white, grey, glass. Minimalist. Cold. Beautiful.

Marcus Chen's aesthetic.

Not Moxuan's.

Moxuan liked color. Warmth. Our apartment was chaotic—books everywhere, his coding notes on sticky notes covering the walls, life bursting from every corner.

This is a mausoleum.

The receptionist stood—early twenties, flawless. "沈小姐？"

"是的。"

"欢迎来到晨曦科技。我是小王，前台接待。李秘书在等你。请跟我来。"

Welcome to Chénxī Technologies. I'm Xiao Wang. Secretary Li is expecting you. Please follow me.

Weilin followed her down a long hallway. Glass walls everywhere. She could see inside the offices:

Engineers at standing desks with multiple monitors.

Conference rooms with sleek furniture. A break room with espresso machines worth more than her monthly rent.

Everyone looked young. Driven. Brilliant.

This was his world now.

She didn't belong here.

They stopped at a door: 李若琳 - 执行秘书 Li Ruolin - Executive Secretary

Xiao Wang knocked. "李秘书，沈小姐到了。"

Inside sat a woman in her early thirties, sharp blazer, severe bun, eyes that missed nothing.

"沈小姐，很高兴见到你。我是李若琳，陈总的执行秘书。"

Miss Shen, pleased to meet you. I'm Li Ruolin, CEO Chen's executive secretary.

Weilin shook her hand—firm grip, assessing.

"陈总在会议中。他让我先带你熟悉办公室。请坐。"

CEO Chen is in a meeting. He asked me to show you the office first. Please sit.

Secretary Li slid a folder across her desk. "你的入职材料。门禁卡，员工手册，项目概述。"

Inside: a permanent access card with her photo. Employee handbook. Project brief: 东南亚扩张计划 Southeast Asia Expansion Plan.

"你的办公室在陈总办公室旁边。我现在带你去看。"

Your office is next to CEO Chen's. I'll show you now.

Weilin's heart stopped.

Next to his office. Six months. Next door.

This was torture.

At the end of the hallway: two doors, side by side.

Left door: 陈墨轩 - 首席执行官 Chen Moxuan - CEO

Weilin stared at the nameplate.

陈墨轩. Not Marcus Chen. His Chinese name. The name she used to whisper in the dark.

Right door: 沈微琳 - 战略顾问 Shen Weilin - Strategic

Consultant

Her name next to his. Like they were partners.

They were partners once. In everything.

Secretary Li opened Weilin's office door.

Glass walls. Minimalist white desk. Ergonomic chair. Dual monitors. Floor-to-ceiling window with Shanghai sprawling below.

Nothing personal. Sterile. Waiting for her to inhabit it.

"陈总希望你有视野。这是大楼里最好的视野之一。"

CEO Chen wanted you to have a view. This is one of the best views in the building.

Weilin's throat was tight. "谢谢。"

She set her portfolio on the desk. Looked out at Shanghai—grey sky, grey buildings, the Huangpu River a dark ribbon. Somewhere down there was her tiny apartment.

Up here was his empire.

"陈总的会议10点结束。他会来找你进行正式介绍。在那之前，请熟悉材料。"

CEO Chen's meeting ends at 10. He'll come find you for formal introduction. Until then, please familiarize yourself with the materials.

Secretary Li left.

Weilin was alone.

She sat in the expensive chair, opened the project brief, tried to focus.

Couldn't.

Her eyes kept drifting to the glass wall separating her office from his.

Right now, his office was dark. Empty.

But in thirty minutes, he'd be there. Meters away.

For six months.

10:05 AM.

Her office door opened. Weilin jumped.

Secretary Li: "陈总的会议结束了。他请你去会议室A参加团队介绍。"

CEO Chen's meeting is over. He's asking you to come to Conference Room A for team introduction.

"现在?" Now?

A slight smile. "现在。"

Conference Room A. Glass walls, long table, eight people already seated.

And at the head: Chen.

CHEN'S POV:

She walks in and the air changes.

I've been preparing for this moment since Friday—the moment I'd see her again in my office, my territory, my world. I thought I was ready.

I'm not.

She's wearing that Armani suit—charcoal, severe. Hair pulled back so tightly it must hurt. No jewelry except small pearl earrings.

The pearls I bought her. Our first anniversary. She kept them. She looks like a stranger.

But I know the exact slope of her collarbone under that blouse. The scar on her left wrist from when she burned herself making tea. The way her left eye twitches when she's nervous.

It's twitching now.

Chen stood, voice cold and professional. "团队，这是沈微琳小姐，我们的新战略顾问。她将领导我们的东南亚扩张项目。"

Team, this is Miss Shen Weilin, our new strategic consultant. She'll be leading our Southeast Asia expansion project. He gestured to the empty chair across from him. "请坐。"

WEILIN'S POV:

I walk to the chair on legs that feel like water.

Sit.

Eight pairs of eyes assess me.

But I can only see him.

Navy suit, white shirt, no tie—he always hated ties. His hair is slightly longer, curling at the collar. He needs a haircut.

I used to cut his hair in our bathroom. Him sitting on the closed toilet, me with kitchen scissors, both of us laughing when I inevitably messed up.

He's not laughing now.

His eyes are dark. Cold. CEO eyes.

Not Moxuan's eyes.

Chen introduced the team:

林瑞 - Lin Rui, CFO. Weilin recognized him—Chen's best friend, at their wedding. His eyes were sympathetic.

张薇 - Zhang Wei, CTO. Brilliant, intimidating. "欢迎。"

孙浩 - Sun Hao, VP of Operations. "很高兴有你加入。"

Four other directors whose names blended together. Weilin was too focused on Chen.

"沈小姐将在接下来的六个月与我们合作。她的专长是市场进入策略和跨文化谈判。她曾在华荣咨询工作，负责多个国际项目。"

Miss Shen will be working with us for the next six months. Her expertise is market entry strategy and cross-cultural negotiation.

Reciting her resume like she was a stranger.

She was a stranger. Wasn't she?

Lin Rui broke the tension. "沈小姐，我们很期待与你合作。你对新加坡市场有什么初步想法吗？"

Miss Shen, we're looking forward to working with you. Do you have initial thoughts on the Singapore market?

Weilin switched to consultant mode. "根据我对材料的初步审查，我认为监管环境是最大的挑战。新加坡的数据隐私法与中国不同。我们需要本地法律顾问和合规策略。"

Based on my preliminary review, I believe the regulatory environment is the biggest challenge. Singapore's data privacy laws differ from China's. We'll need local legal counsel and compliance strategy.

Professional. Competent. Impressive.

Chen gave a slight nod. Was that approval? "同意。这将是你的首要任务。"

Agreed. This will be your first priority.

The meeting continued. Weilin took notes, asked intelligent questions, impressed the team.

Chen watched her. Trying to be subtle. Failing.

She never looked directly at him. Survival instinct.

11:30 AM.

"好的。我想这就够了第一次介绍。沈小姐，请回到你的办公室熟悉材料。我们下午2点有一对一会议讨论具体细节。"

Good. I think that's enough for introduction. Miss Shen, please return to your office. We have a one-on-one meeting at 2 PM to discuss specifics.

One-on-one. Just them. In two and a half hours.

Weilin stood. "明白。谢谢大家。"

She left, feeling his eyes on her back.

12:15 PM. WEILIN'S OFFICE.

Weilin closed her door and leaned against it.

Breathed.

First meeting: survived.

Next meeting: 2 PM. One-on-one. Just them.

Her stomach growled. She should eat. But the thought of the cafeteria—alone, new, people staring—made her nauseous.

She stayed in her office. Opened her sad lunch—7-Eleven sandwich, apple, water.

Ate at her desk, staring out the window.

Through the glass wall, she could see Chen's office. His door was open. He was on a call—animated, gesturing, CEO mode. He ended the call. Sat back. Ran his hand through his hair—old gesture, tired gesture.

His assistant brought lunch. He waved her away. Didn't eat. Just sat, staring at his computer.

CHEN'S POV:

I can see her through the glass wall.

Eating a sandwich alone. Looking so small in that big office. I arranged for her to have the office next to mine. Lin Rui said I was insane.

He's right.

But I needed her close. Even if it kills me.

She takes a bite without tasting. I know that look—the "eating because I have to" look.

She did that during the divorce. Stopped eating. Got too thin. She's still too thin.

1:47 PM.

Weilin's phone buzzed.

From: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Subject: 2点会议

沈小姐，我们的2点会议将在我的办公室进行。请带上你的初步分

析和任何问题。—陈墨轩

Miss Shen, Our 2 PM meeting will be in my office. Please bring your preliminary analysis and any questions. —Chen Moxuan

His office. Not a conference room. Just them.

Her hands shook as she typed: 收到。—沈微琳 Received. Thirteen minutes.

Thirteen minutes to prepare to be alone with him.

2:00 PM EXACTLY.

Weilin stood outside Chen's office door. Took a breath. Knocked.

"进来。" Come in.

She opened the door. Stepped inside. The door closed behind her.

CHEN'S POV:

She's in my office.

The same woman who used to sit on my desk in our apartment, swinging her legs, stealing bites of my dinner while I coded.

But this isn't that woman.

This woman is armored. Professional. A stranger wearing a familiar face.

"坐。" Chen gestured to the chair across from his desk.

Weilin sat—back straight, portfolio on lap, every inch the consultant.

Silence. Too long. Both waiting.

"你对材料的初步想法？" Your initial thoughts on the materials? Business. Safe.

Weilin opened her portfolio. "新加坡市场有三个主要挑战..."

The Singapore market has three main challenges...

She launched into analysis: regulatory environment, local competition, cultural adaptation. Professional. Competent. Brilliant.

Chen listened, asked questions, pushed back.

It was almost normal. Almost like colleagues who'd never met.

Almost.

Until she said: "我们需要本地合作伙伴。有信任和关系的人。"
We need local partners. People with trust and relationships.
Trust and relationships.

The words hung in the air.

They'd had trust once. And relationships. And destroyed both.
Awkward silence.

Chen cleared his throat. "对。我同意。" Right. I agree.

The meeting continued, stilted now, hyperaware of double meanings.

3:15 PM.

"好的。这是个好开始。我希望你下周之前准备一份完整的市场进入策略。"

Good. This is a good start. I'd like a full market entry strategy by next week.

"没问题。" No problem.

Weilin stood to leave.

"微琳—"

He caught himself. "沈小姐。"

She turned, heart in her throat.

Chen struggled. "今天... 做得很好。团队印象深刻。"

Today... good work. The team was impressed.

First genuine compliment.

Weilin smiled—small, couldn't help it. "谢谢。"

Their eyes met. Held. A fraction too long.

Weilin broke first. Had to, or she'd say something she couldn't take back.

She left. Door closed.

Chen alone, head in his hands: "六个月。我怎么可能活下来六个月？"

Six months. How can I possibly survive six months?

6:47 PM.

The office had emptied. Chen's light was still on—Weilin could see his silhouette.

She should leave. But she stayed, reviewing materials, preparing strategy.

Definitely not because leaving meant her empty apartment.

Definitely not because being here—even in separate offices—meant being near him.

7:15 PM.

Chen's light went off. Weilin watched as he grabbed his coat, his briefcase.

He walked past her office. Didn't look in. Disappeared toward the elevator.

She was alone on the 118th floor.

She should leave too. But she was exhausted. Emotionally wrung out.

She put her head on her desk. Just for a minute.

8:43 PM.

Weilin woke with a start. Fell asleep, neck cramped.

The office was dark except for her desk lamp.

She sat up, disoriented.

Noticed something on her desk that wasn't there before.

A yellow Post-it note. Stuck to her closed laptop.

Handwriting she'd recognize anywhere:

今天做得很好。

别忘了吃饭。

—M

Good work today.

Don't forget to eat.

—M

Weilin stared at the note. Picked it up with trembling fingers.

The handwriting was his—the slope of the characters, the way they curved.

He'd come back. While she was sleeping. Left this note.

Signed it M. Not Marcus. Not 墨轩. Just M.

The man in between.

She brought the note to her lips. Closed her eyes.

Whispered: "我也想你。"

I miss you too.

She carefully folded the note. Put it in her wallet next to the old photo from their marriage she'd never thrown away.

Packed up her things. Left the office.

In the elevator down, she allowed herself dangerous, stupid hope:

Maybe this isn't just torture.

Maybe this is a second chance.

Maybe M—whoever he is—left that note because he's not ready to let go either.

The elevator reached ground floor. The doors opened.

She stepped out into Shanghai night. Rain had started again.

She didn't have an umbrella.

Didn't care.

Walked to the subway with a Post-it note burning a hole in

her wallet and hope burning a hole in her heart.

END CHAPTER 9

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CHAPTER 10: THE FAMILY FALLOUT (WEILIN'S RECKONING)

Weilin had forty-eight hours to find a new apartment, and every listing in her price range looked exactly like the one she'd shared with Moxuan seven years ago—which meant she'd spent the entire evening crying into cardboard boxes. 6:47 PM. Tuesday evening. Day two at Chénxī Technologies. Her French Concession apartment—the one her parents paid for—was half-packed. Designer clothes spilled from boxes. The eviction notice sat on the kitchen counter like an accusation. Her laptop glowed with apartment listings, each one a crushing reminder of what ¥4,000 per month got you in Shanghai.

She stared at the screen.

杨浦区，35平米，4楼无电梯，¥3,800/月

Yangpu District, 35 sqm, 4th floor no elevator, ¥3,800/month

The photo showed cracked tile, a single window, a bathroom that was basically a closet with a showerhead. A kitchen that was just a hot plate and mini fridge.

It looked exactly like the apartment she'd shared with Moxuan.

The apartment she'd complained about every single day.

The apartment she'd been so desperate to escape.

The apartment where, despite everything, she'd been happy.

Her phone rang. Different number. She answered without

thinking.

"喂？"

Her mother's voice: "微琳！终于！我打了50次电话！"

Weilin! Finally! I've called 50 times!

Weilin should have hung up. Didn't.

"你在做什么？你知道你的房东联系了我们吗？你被驱逐了！这太丢人了！"

What are you doing? Do you know your landlord contacted us? You're being evicted! This is so embarrassing!

Not "are you okay?" Not "do you need help?" Just embarrassing.

"你停止付款。当然我被驱逐了。" Weilin's voice was flat.

You stopped payment. Of course I'm evicted.

"因为你需要学会教训！你不能只是走出这个家，期望我们继续支持你的反叛！"

Because you needed to learn a lesson! You can't just walk out and expect us to continue supporting your rebellion! Rebellion. Choosing her own life was rebellion.

"我不期望任何东西。我会找到一个我能负担得起的地方。"

I don't expect anything. I'll find a place I can afford.

Her mother laughed—cruel, sharp. "用什么钱？你的顾问薪水？你知道你以前的生活方式花了多少钱吗？"

With what money? Your consultant salary? Do you know how much your former lifestyle cost?

Weilin did know. ¥47,000 per month. Rent, utilities, clothes, food, transportation.

Her new salary: ¥35,000 per month. Generous for a consultant. Poverty compared to her old life.

"回家。道歉。你父亲会原谅你。我们会忘记这整个荒谬的事情。"

Come home. Apologize. Your father will forgive you. We'll

forget this whole ridiculous thing.

"不。" No.

"什么？" What?

"不。我不会回来。我宁愿住在墨轩和我曾经住过的那种公寓里，也不愿回到那个房子。"

No. I won't come back. I'd rather live in the kind of apartment Moxuan and I lived in than go back to that house.

Silence. Then:

"你提到他。那个建筑工人的儿子。"

You mentioned him. That construction worker's son.

"他的名字是陈墨轩。你从来没有费心去学。"

His name is Chen Moxuan. You never bothered to learn it.

"我知道他是谁！我也知道他现在是谁！你以为我不知道你为谁工作吗？"

I know who he is! I also know who he is now! You think I don't know who you're working for?

Weilin's blood ran cold.

"Marcus Chen。晨曦科技。价值十亿美元。" Her mother sounded impressed. Disgusted with herself for being impressed, but impressed.

"所以这就是你的计划？回到他身边？现在他有钱了？"

So this is your plan? Get back with him? Now that he has money?

Fury rose in Weilin's throat. "你以为我就像你一样？你以为我只在乎钱？"

You think I'm like you? You think I only care about money?

"我认为你很聪明。如果你要破坏你的生活，至少嫁给一个亿万富翁。"

I think you're smart. If you're going to ruin your life, at least marry a billionaire.

Weilin hung up. Blocked the number. Threw her phone on the couch.

Screamed into a pillow.

WEDNESDAY EVENING. APARTMENT HUNTING.

After work—another day of forced proximity with Chen, another day of Post-it notes she didn't dare read in front of him—Weilin went apartment hunting.

First apartment: Yangpu District, ¥3,800/month

The building was 1980s grey concrete. No elevator. Garbage piled near the entrance.

The landlord—a woman in her sixties with suspicious eyes—led her up five flights of stairs.

"五楼。没有电梯。你年轻，应该没问题。"

Fifth floor. No elevator. You're young, should be fine.

Weilin climbed in her work heels, passing:

First floor: cooking smells, cabbage.

Second floor: baby crying, couple arguing.

Third floor: old man smoking in the hallway, staring.

Fourth floor: laundry hanging across the hallway, she had to duck under.

Fifth floor: breathless, sweating.

The apartment was 35 square meters. One room. Bed against one wall. Tiny table and two chairs. Kitchen: hot plate, mini fridge, sink—all in one meter of counter space. Bathroom: toilet, sink, showerhead directly over the toilet. Single window facing another building three meters away. Water-stained walls. Cracked linoleum floor.

"¥3,800, 加¥500押金。你什么时候能搬进来？"

¥3,800, plus ¥500 deposit. When can you move in?

Weilin's throat was tight. "我能想一想吗？"

Can I think about it?

The landlord shrugged. "当然。但我有其他人感兴趣。"

Sure. But I have other people interested.

Outside, Weilin called her back. "我要了。我周六搬进来。"

I'll take it. I'll move in Saturday.

The words tasted like ashes.

Before going home, Weilin did something stupid.

She took the subway to their old street. Stood outside their old building—hadn't been here in seven years.

It looked exactly the same. Grey concrete. Six floors. No elevator. Corner store on the ground floor.

She walked inside. Climbed to the third floor on muscle memory.

Stopped outside door 302.

Their old apartment.

Different nameplate now: 王家 Wang Family

She could hear voices inside. Children laughing. A mother calling dinner.

A family lived here now. In the space where their marriage died.

She almost knocked—wanted to see inside, see if the walls still had holes from where Moxuan hung his whiteboard, see if the kitchen still had the burn mark from when she ruined dinner.

Didn't.

Just stood there, hand on the door, tears streaming.

A neighbor emerged from 304. Old Li. He'd lived there when they did.

"小沈? " Little Shen?

Weilin turned, wiping tears. "李叔叔。" Uncle Li.

"是你！我听说你.....你离开了。那个年轻人也离开了。"

It's you! I heard you... you left. That young man left too.

"是的。很久以前。" Yes. Long time ago.

"他是个好孩子。总是帮我搬东西上楼。"

He was a good kid. Always helped me carry things upstairs.

He was. He was good. And she'd thrown him away.

"你回来了？" You're back?

Weilin laughed through tears. "某种程度上。我在杨浦租了一个地方。和这个一样。"

In a way. I rented a place in Yangpu. Just like this one.

"生活是个圆圈。" Life is a circle.

"是的。" Yes.

Full circle. From poverty to wealth back to poverty.

Except this time, she was alone.

THURSDAY NIGHT. PACKING.

Weilin sat on the floor of her French Concession apartment, surrounded by boxes, sorting her life into three piles:

PILE 1: KEEP (fits in four boxes)

- Work clothes
- Laptop, tablet, phone
- Essential toiletries
- Photos hidden at the bottom of her closet—wedding photos she couldn't throw away
- The Post-it notes from Chen (two now)

PILE 2: SELL (everything designer)

- Handbags: Hermès, Chanel, Dior—worth ¥200,000+
- Shoes: Louboutin, Jimmy Choo—¥50,000+
- Jewelry (except the pearl earrings—she was keeping those)
- Her Cartier watch

PILE 3: DONATE

• Everything else

She was photographing designer items for resale when her phone rang. Private number.

"喂？"

Her father's voice. "微琳。"

She almost hung up. Didn't. Some conditioning ran too deep.

"我听说你租了杨浦的公寓。"

I heard you rented an apartment in Yangpu.

How did he know? Was he having her followed?

"是的。"

"你知道那个地区是什么样的吗？那不安全。不适合像你这样的年轻女性。"

Do you know what that area is like? It's not safe. Not suitable for a young woman like you.

"我以前住在那里。我还活着。"

I lived there before. I survived.

"那是不同的。那时你和.....和他在一起。"

That was different. You were with... with him then.

He couldn't even say Moxuan's name.

"回家吧。你母亲过度反应了。我们可以讨论合理的安排。"

Come home. Your mother overreacted. We can discuss reasonable arrangements.

"什么样的安排？" What kind of arrangements?

"你可以回到家里。保留你的工作——如果你坚持的话。但你必须同意一些事情。"

You can come back home. Keep your job—if you insist. But you must agree to some things.

"什么事情？"

"停止.....无论你在和他做什么。这很尴尬。人们在谈论。"

Stop... whatever you're doing with him. It's embarrassing.

People are talking.

There it was. The condition.

She could have their money, their support, their love—as long as she gave up Chen.

Again.

The same choice that destroyed them the first time.

"不。" No.

"微琳，理智点——" Weilin, be reasonable—

"我正在理智。七年来第一次。我选择他。不是他的钱。不是他的成功。是他。如果那意味着我住在一个糟糕的公寓里吃方便面，那就这样吧。"

I'm being reasonable. For the first time in seven years. I choose him. Not his money. Not his success. Him. If that means I live in a shitty apartment eating instant noodles, so be it.

"那么你选择了。你不再是这个家庭的一部分。"

Then you've made your choice. You're no longer part of this family.

"我六年前就不是了。当你让我在你们和他之间选择的时候。我选错了。但不会再选错了。"

I haven't been for six years. When you made me choose between you and him. I chose wrong. But I won't choose wrong again.

She hung up. Blocked his number too.

Sat on the floor surrounded by boxes, designer bags, the ruins of her old life.

And felt... light. Free.

For the first time since she was twenty-five and said "I do" to a man in a borrowed suit, she felt free.

SATURDAY MORNING. THE MOVE.

Weilin moved with help from a cheap moving company—¥800—and two movers who rolled their eyes at her designer bags. No friends. She realized with horror she had no real friends. Just networking contacts.

No family. Obviously.

The new apartment looked worse in daylight. Water damage on the ceiling. Mold in the bathroom corner. The window didn't close all the way—draft even in September.

The movers left.

Weilin stood in the center of 35 square meters. Her four boxes looked pathetic.

She needed everything: bed, table, chairs, dishes, bedding. Her budget: ¥5,000.

IKEA trip. Subway there. Bought the basics. Delivery scheduled for Tuesday.

Saturday night, she slept on the floor wrapped in the one blanket she'd kept.

The floor was hard. The apartment was cold. Neighbors were loud—baby crying, couple fighting, someone's TV blaring. She lay there staring at the water-stained ceiling.

Thinking: Moxuan and I slept on a floor for two weeks when we first moved in together. Couldn't afford a bed yet. We laughed about it. Said we were camping.

I complained so much back then. The noise. The smell. The cramped space.

I'd give anything to have those days back.

Her phone buzzed. Text from Lin Rui: 听说你搬家了。需要帮助吗?

Heard you moved. Need help?

How did he know?

She typed back: 我很好。谢谢。 I'm fine. Thank you.

Lin Rui: 骗子。但我尊重骗局。如果你需要什么，告诉我。

Liar. But I respect the lie. If you need anything, tell me.

She didn't respond. Just lay there. Listening to her new life.

MONDAY. ONE WEEK AT CHÉN XĪ.

Weilin arrived at work at 8:30 AM—earlier than necessary, avoiding her apartment.

Exhausted. Slept on the floor again Sunday night. IKEA delivery rescheduled to Wednesday.

Wearing the same Armani suit from last Monday. She was rotating three outfits now. All she'd kept.

Chen's office was dark when she arrived. She made coffee, started reviewing Singapore contracts.

9:15 AM: Chen arrived. Through the glass wall, he looked... tired. Like he hadn't slept well either.

Their eyes met for half a second. He nodded. Professional. She nodded back.

He disappeared into his office.

11:00 AM. TEAM MEETING.

Weilin presented her Singapore partnership strategy—brilliant, thorough. She'd worked on it all weekend to avoid thinking about her apartment.

"Impressive work, Miss Shen," Chen said.

Always Miss Shen.

Lunch: she ate at her desk. Leftover rice from home. The cheapest option.

Through the glass, she saw Chen eating alone too. Expensive takeout. Barely touched it.

We're both eating alone. Both miserable.

The difference is his misery comes with a penthouse and a

billion dollars.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON.

Email from HR.

Subject: Relocation Assistance Package

沈小姐，作为高级顾问，您有资格获得搬迁援助（高达¥50,000）。请提交收据以供报销。—人力资源部

Miss Shen, As a senior consultant, you're eligible for relocation assistance (up to ¥50,000). Please submit receipts for reimbursement. —HR
¥50,000.

That would solve everything. New furniture, deposit refund, food for months.

But it felt like charity. Felt like... Chen taking care of her. Again.

She emailed back: 谢谢，但我不需要搬迁援助。—沈微琳
Thank you, but I don't need relocation assistance.

Twenty minutes later, Chen appeared at her office door. Knocked even though it was open.

"为什么你拒绝了搬迁援助？"

Why did you refuse the relocation assistance?

Weilin stood. "我不需要它。" I don't need it.

"这是标准福利。所有高级顾问都得到它。"

It's a standard benefit. All senior consultants get it.

"那么他们可以拿。我不要。"

Then they can take it. I don't want it.

They stared at each other. His jaw was clenched. He was angry.

"这不是慈善。这是补偿。"

This isn't charity. It's compensation.

"感觉像慈善。" It feels like charity.

"你住在哪里？" Where are you living?

She shouldn't answer. Did anyway. "杨浦。"

His face changed. Recognition. Pain. Something else.

"杨浦。" He repeated it like a wound. "你从法国租界搬到了杨浦。"

You moved from French Concession to Yangpu.

"是的。"

"因为你的家人停止支付。"

Because your family stopped paying.

How did he know?

"那不关你的事。" That's not your business.

Chen stepped closer. His voice was 墨轩's voice—concerned, protective.

"你睡在哪里？你有床吗？"

Where are you sleeping? Do you have a bed?

Weilin's throat tightened. He sounded like he had seven years ago.

"星期三送货。" Delivery on Wednesday.

"今天是星期二。你睡在哪里？"

Today is Tuesday. Where are you sleeping?

"地板上。我很好。" On the floor. I'm fine.

Something broke in his face. "地板上。"

"我以前做过。我能再做一次。"

I've done it before. I can do it again.

With you. I did it with you. And I was happy.

Long silence.

Chen turned away, voice cold again—Marcus Chen. "接受搬迁援助。这是命令，不是请求。"

Accept the relocation assistance. That's an order, not a request.

"你不能命令我接受钱。"

You can't order me to take money.

He stopped at the door. Didn't look back. "那就把它当作贷款。你可以还给我。"

Then consider it a loan. You can pay me back.

He left.

WEDNESDAY EVENING. 6:47 PM.

Weilin sat on the floor of her apartment eating instant noodles when someone knocked.

She opened the door.

Delivery men. Professional. From an expensive company—not IKEA.

"沈微琳小姐?"

"是的?"

"我们有你的家具交付。"

We have your furniture delivery.

"我没有订购家具。" I didn't order furniture.

The delivery man checked his tablet. "订单来自....."

Order came from...

He showed her.

Ordered by: Chénxī Technologies, Marcus Chen

He didn't. He wouldn't.

Behind the delivery men: a truck full of furniture. Not IKEA.

Expensive furniture. Real bed with mattress. Proper table and chairs. Sofa. Dresser. TV. Everything.

Easily ¥80,000 worth.

Fury rose in her chest. "我不能接受这个。"

I can't accept this.

"但是——" But—

"把它拿回去。我没有订购它。"

Take it back. I didn't order it.

"女士，我们被指示——"

Ma'am, we were instructed—

"我不在乎。我拒绝交付。"

I don't care. I refuse the delivery.

She closed the door. Leaned against it. Trembling with rage and something that felt dangerously like love.

Her phone rang.

Chen.

She answered, shaking. "你做了什么？"

What did you do?

His voice was calm. Infuriating. "你需要家具。我安排了交付。"

You needed furniture. I arranged delivery.

"我不要你的家具！我不要你的钱！我不要你的慈善！"

I don't want your furniture! I don't want your money! I don't want your charity!

"这不是慈善。你是我的员工——"

It's not charity. You're my employee—

"我不是你的员工！我是你的前妻！你不能假装这只是商业！"

I'm not your employee! I'm your ex-wife! You can't pretend this is just business!

Silence. First time either of them had said it out loud.

Ex-wife.

His voice was rough. "我知道你是谁。"

I know who you are.

"那么别这样对我！别.....别照顾我然后假装你不在乎！"

Then don't do this to me! Don't... don't take care of me and then pretend you don't care!

"我不能看着你睡在地板上！"

I can't watch you sleep on the floor!

The admission ripped from him. Raw.

Weilin's tears came. "为什么不能？我看着你睡在地板上。我看着你在那个糟糕的公寓里挣扎，我什么都不做，因为我太骄傲了。现在轮到我了。让我承受。"

Why not? I watched you sleep on the floor. I watched you struggle in that shitty apartment and did nothing because I was too proud. Now it's my turn. Let me suffer.

"微琳——" Weilin—

"我不值得你的帮助。我不值得你的仁慈。我毁了你，现在你想.....什么？拯救我？"

I don't deserve your help. I don't deserve your kindness. I destroyed you and now you want to... what? Save me?

Long pause. His breathing heavy.

"我不想拯救你。我想....." His voice broke. "我只是不能看着你受苦。即使我应该。即使你值得。我不能。"

I don't want to save you. I want... I just can't watch you suffer. Even if I should. Even if you deserve it. I can't.

Weilin slid down the door, sitting on the floor, phone pressed to her ear.

"那我该怎么办？接受它意味着我欠你。拒绝它意味着睡在地板上。无论哪种方式，我都失去了。"

Then what am I supposed to do? Accepting it means I owe you. Refusing it means sleeping on the floor. Either way, I lose.

"那就欠我。" His voice was quiet. "欠我，然后还给我。用时间。用工作。用....."

Then owe me. Owe me and pay me back. With time. With work. With...

He didn't finish.

"用什么？" With what?

Silence. Then:

"和我一起去新加坡。下周。五天。"

Come to Singapore with me. Next week. Five days.

Her heart stopped.

"那已经是计划的一部分。我是项目顾问。"

That's already part of the plan. I'm the project consultant.

"不。我是说.....和我待在一起。不是作为员工。作为....."

No. I mean... stay with me. Not as an employee. As...

He couldn't say it.

"作为什么?" As what?

"作为有人我曾经认识的人。"

As someone I used to know.

Weilin closed her eyes. Tears streaming.

"我接受家具。作为贷款。我会还你的。"

I accept the furniture. As a loan. I'll pay you back.

"好。" Good.

"但墨轩——"

But Moxuan—

"别叫我那个。" Don't call me that.

"那我该叫你什么? Marcus? 陈总? M?"

Then what do I call you? Marcus? CEO Chen? M?

Long silence.

"叫我....." His voice was breaking. "叫我任何让你记得我们曾经是什么的名字。"

Call me... Call me anything that makes you remember what we used to be.

The line went dead.

Weilin sat on the floor of her empty apartment, phone in hand, and whispered to no one:

"墨轩。我从没忘记。"

Moxuan. I never forgot.

Outside, the delivery truck was still waiting.

END CHAPTER 10

=====~=====

CHAPTER 11: THE REFUSAL (CHEN'S CONFUSION)

Chen had been staring at his phone for three hours, reading and re-reading the delivery company's confirmation: "Delivery refused by recipient"—and the two words were destroying him more effectively than the divorce papers ever had.

3:47 AM. Thursday morning. His penthouse on the 62nd floor of a Pudong tower—floor-to-ceiling windows, Shanghai glittering below like scattered diamonds, luxury that felt like a prison.

He sat up in bed. Silk sheets, ¥8,000, temperature-regulating, supremely comfortable, utterly empty. The other side hadn't been touched in six years.

His phone screen glowed in the darkness. Delivery confirmation. Her number in his contacts—unsaved, just digits, but he knew them by heart.

On his nightstand: a framed photo face-down. Their wedding photo. He couldn't look at it but couldn't throw it away.

The penthouse was silent. Expensive soundproofing meant he heard nothing but his own breathing. Occasional car horn from streets below—muffled, distant. The world moving on while he was frozen.

His heartbeat too fast. Had been since she refused the furniture.

CHEN'S POV:

"Delivery refused by recipient."

Four words. I've read them 847 times. Yes, I counted.

I'm losing my fucking mind.

I throw my phone on the bed. It bounces, lands face-up, mocking me.

Stand. Pace to the window.

Shanghai at 3 AM: still alive, still glittering, still the city where I built everything.

Somewhere down there, in Yangpu District, Weilin is sleeping on a floor.

Because she refused my furniture.

Because she'd rather suffer than accept my help.

Because she's not the woman I thought she was.

The woman I divorced would have taken the furniture. Would have taken everything. Would have calculated its value and leveraged it for more.

That's what I told myself for six years.

She married me for potential. Left me when I failed to deliver.

Would only come back if I succeeded.

That was the story. The narrative that let me hate her. That let me build Marcus Chen on the foundation of her rejection.

But the woman who refused ¥80,000 of furniture?

The woman who moved from French Concession to Yangpu?

The woman sleeping on a floor rather than accept my charity?

That's not the woman from my story.

That's someone else.

That's... Weilin. The real one. The one I'm terrified I never actually knew.

My phone rings. 3:52 AM.

Lin Rui. Of course.

I answer. "你为什么醒着？"

Why are you awake?

"因为你给我发了17条关于家具拒绝的消息。你为什么醒着？"

Because you sent me 17 messages about furniture rejection.

Why are you awake?

"我没有—" I check my messages.

Fuck. I did. Sent them between 1 and 3 AM. Increasingly incoherent rants about stubborn women and charity and floors.

"过来。" Come over.

"现在？快4点了。"

Now? It's almost 4 AM.

"是的，现在。你要么过来，要么我过去。但我们需要谈谈在你做一些疯狂的事情之前。"

Yes, now. You either come here or I come there. But we're talking before you do something insane.

"我不会做任何疯狂的事情。"

I'm not going to do anything insane.

"你在凌晨3点送了8万块钱的家具给你的前妻。船已经起航了，兄弟。"

You sent ¥80,000 of furniture to your ex-wife at 3 AM. That ship has sailed, brother.

He hangs up.

I get dressed—jeans, t-shirt, not CEO armor. Too tired for performance.

Drive to Lin Rui's. Twenty minutes, empty Shanghai streets.

LIN RUI'S APARTMENT, 4:23 AM.

Lin Rui lives in Jing'an—nice but not ostentatious. Opens his door in pajama pants and an old MIT t-shirt.

Looks at me like I'm a disaster.

I probably am.

"你看起来像屎。" You look like shit.

"谢谢。很有帮助。" Thanks. Very helpful.

He gestures inside. "进来。我泡茶。"

His apartment is comfortable, lived-in. Books everywhere.

Photos of his family—wife and two kids currently visiting her parents in Hangzhou.

He has what I wanted. What I had, briefly, before we both fucked it up.

Kitchen. Lin Rui makes Pu-erh tea—the good stuff, aged, expensive.

We sit at his IKEA kitchen table. He could afford better but his wife likes it.

Long silence. Just tea steaming between us.

"说吧。" Talk.

"我不知道说什么。"

I don't know what to say.

"从家具开始。你为什么送她家具？"

Start with the furniture. Why did you send her furniture?

"因为她睡在地板上。"

Because she's sleeping on a floor.

"你怎么知道？"

How do you know?

"她告诉我的。星期二。我问她有没有床，她说星期三送货。"

She told me. Tuesday. I asked if she had a bed, she said delivery on Wednesday.

Lin Rui raises an eyebrow. "你问她有没有床。"

You asked if she had a bed.

"是的。"

"为什么？"

I stop. Why did I ask?

"因为你关心。" He answers for me.

Because you care.

"我不—"

"墨轩。别说谎。不是对我。"

Moxuan. Don't lie. Not to me.

He used my Chinese name. He only does that when he's serious.

I exhale. "好吧。我关心。我不想关心，但我关心。满意了吗？"

Fine. I care. I don't want to care, but I care. Happy?

"不。因为显然你关心还不够，不能实际对她好。"

No. Because apparently you care but not enough to actually be nice to her.

I stand, agitated. "我送了她8万块钱的家具！这怎么不好？"

I sent her ¥80,000 of furniture! How is that not nice?

"因为你没有问她想要什么。你只是假设。然后当她拒绝时，你感到被拒绝。"

Because you didn't ask what she wanted. You just assumed. And when she refused, you felt rejected.

Direct hit.

I sit back down. "她不应该睡在地板上。"

"为什么不应该？你睡过地板。我们都睡过。刚创业的时候。"

Why not? You slept on floors. We all did. When we were starting out.

"那不一样。"

That's different.

"怎么不一样？"

"因为她不应该需要！她有家人，有钱，有一—"

Because she shouldn't have to! She has family, money, has—

"她没有。她离开了他们。为了你。"

She doesn't. She left them. For you.

The words land like a punch.

"她没有为了我离开他们。她为了工作离开他们。"

She didn't leave them for me. She left them for a job.

"她为了和你工作的工作离开他们。她知道选择你的公司意味着选择你而不是他们。"

She left them for a job working with you. She knew choosing your company meant choosing you over them.

"你不知道那个。"

"是吗？ 那她为什么拒绝家具？"

I don't answer. Can't.

"她拒绝是因为她不想欠你。因为她试图证明她不是你认为的那个人——那个只关心钱的人。"

She refused because she doesn't want to owe you. Because she's trying to prove she's not who you think she is—the person who only cared about money.

"那她是谁？" Then who is she?

"我不知道。但我认为你也不知道。我认为你爱上了一个故事——你告诉自己的关于她的故事——从来没有真正认识她。"

I don't know. But I don't think you do either. I think you fell in love with a story—the story you told yourself about her—and never actually knew her.

That hurts. More than it should.

Because it might be true.

I stare into my tea. "我认识她。我们结婚了两年。"

I knew her. We were married for two years.

"你认识你想让她成为的人。你认识在你的小公寓里和你一起吃方便面的女孩。但你认识那个告诉你你不够的女人吗？"

You knew who you wanted her to be. You knew the girl who

ate instant noodles with you in your tiny apartment. But did you know the woman who told you that you weren't enough? I think about that.

The woman who left me: cold, cruel, her mother's daughter.

The woman in my office: professional, brilliant, damaged.

The woman who refused furniture: proud, stubborn, choosing poverty over charity.

Which one is real? All of them? None of them?

"她说我永远不够。那些是她的话。"

She said I'd never be enough. Those were her words.

"是吗? 确切地说? 还是那是你记得的版本?"

Were they? Exactly? Or is that the version you remember?

I try to remember the exact conversation. The last fight. The one that ended us.

FLASHBACK FRAGMENT:

Our apartment. Night. I'd just come back from a failed investor meeting.

She was sitting on our cheap sofa, crying.

"怎么了?" What's wrong?

"我不能再这样做了。" I can't do this anymore.

"做什么?" Do what?

"这个。贫穷。挣扎。假装这足够。"

This. The poverty. The struggle. Pretending this is enough.

"我正在努力。创业需要时间—"

I'm trying. Startups take time—

"但它永远不够, 对吗? 你永远不够。"

But it's never enough, is it? You're never enough.

I snap back to Lin Rui's kitchen.

Those were her words. Right?

"她说'你永远不够'。我记得很清楚。"

She said 'you're never enough.' I remember clearly.

"或者她说'它永远不够'——这个情况，这个挣扎——而你听到了'你'？"

Or did she say 'it's never enough'—the situation, the struggle—and you heard 'you'?

Fuck.

"不。她的意思是我。她一定是那个意思。"

No. She meant me. She must have meant me.

"为什么一定？" Why must have?

"因为一周后她就离开了我！"

Because a week later she left me!

"她离开了还是她的父母把她拉走了？"

Did she leave or did her parents pull her away?

Another memory surfaces. She moved back to her parents' house. I called—she didn't answer. I went there. Her mother answered the door.

"她不想见你。" She doesn't want to see you.

"让我和她说话。" Let me talk to her.

"她说得很清楚。结束了。" She was very clear. It's over.

Did I actually hear Weilin say it was over? Or did her mother tell me it was over?

I put my head in my hands. "我不知道。我记不清了。六年了。"

I don't know. I can't remember clearly. It's been six years.

"所以也许你应该问她。实际的她。不是你记忆中的她。"

So maybe you should ask her. The actual her. Not the her you remember.

THURSDAY, 9:17 AM.

I arrive at the office exhausted. No sleep. Tea with Lin Rui until 6 AM. Went home to shower and change.

Weilin is already there. I can see her through the glass wall,

working at her desk.

She looks exhausted too. Dark circles even makeup can't hide.

Did she sleep on that floor again?

The IKEA delivery hasn't come yet—I know because I checked. Yes, I called IKEA at 7 AM. Like a stalker.

I'm aware I have a problem.

I sit at my desk. Pretend to work. Watch her through the glass.

She's wearing a different suit—still professional, but I've noticed she's rotating the same three outfits.

She's drinking coffee from her office machine, not the expensive stuff from the executive café.

Working intensely. Occasionally rubbing her neck. Sore from sleeping on a floor?

9:30 AM. TEAM MEETING.

Weilin presents updates on Singapore regulatory research.

She's brilliant. Always was, but now I'm noticing differently.

Articulate. Strategic. Sees angles others miss.

Zhang Wei, our CTO: "沈小姐，这个分析很出色。你怎么这么快完成的？"

Miss Shen, this analysis is excellent. How did you complete it so quickly?

Weilin gives a slight smile. "昨晚我没什么别的事做。"

I didn't have much else to do last night.

Translation: I worked late because I have no furniture and nothing to do in my empty apartment.

My chest tightens.

After the meeting, I catch Lin Rui.

"她昨晚工作到很晚。"

She worked late last night.

"是的。我看到她的时间戳。报告是凌晨2点发的。"

Yes. I saw her timestamp. Report sent at 2 AM.

"她应该回家休息。"

She should go home and rest.

"也许她的家不是一个休息的地方。"

Maybe her home isn't a place to rest.

Direct hit. Again.

12:30 PM. LUNCH.

I watch Weilin eat lunch at her desk. Brought from home again—rice and vegetables in a plastic container.

She used to love going out for lunch. Loved trying new restaurants.

Now she eats sad rice alone.

My assistant brings my lunch—expensive bento from Xintiandi. I can't eat it. Just stare at it. Look at her eating her sad rice.

Impulse: order lunch for her too.

Resistance: she'll refuse it. Like the furniture.

Compromise: I do nothing. Watch her eat alone. Hate myself.

My phone buzzes. Text from Weilin.

您在盯着我看。这很奇怪。

You're staring at me. It's weird.

She didn't turn around. But she knew.

I type back: 我在思考。I'm thinking.

关于什么？About what?

关于您为什么拒绝搬迁援助。

About why you refused relocation assistance.

因为我不需要它。Because I don't need it.

您睡在地板上。You're sleeping on a floor.

那是我的选择。 That's my choice.

为什么？ Why?

Long pause. Three dots appear, disappear, appear again.

因为如果我接受您的帮助，我就是您认为的那个人——那个只关心钱的人。我需要证明我不是那个人。对您。对我自己。

Because if I accept your help, I'm the person you think I am—the person who only cared about money. I need to prove I'm not that person. To you. To myself.

I stare at the message. Read it five times.

She's trying to prove herself to me.

She's choosing poverty to prove she's changed.

She's sleeping on a floor because my opinion matters to her.

I don't know what to do with that information.

So I don't respond.

Just sit there, staring at her message, feeling like the ground is shifting under me.

AFTER WORK, 6:45 PM.

Weilin leaves at 6:30. I watch her go—subway direction, not taxi.

I stay until 7:00, pretending to work, actually spiraling.

Lin Rui appears at my door. "你要去找她住的地方，对吗？"

You're going to find out where she lives, aren't you?

"不。那很疯狂。" No. That's crazy.

"是的。但你还是要做。"

Yes. But you're going to do it anyway.

"我不——"

"墨轩。去吧。看看她的实际生活是什么样的。然后也许你会明白。"

Moxuan. Go. See what her actual life is like. Then maybe you'll understand.

I don't argue. Grab my coat. Leave.

YANGPU DISTRICT, 7:43 PM.

I know the address. HR records. I shouldn't have access. Did it anyway.

Stand outside her building. Grey concrete. Six floors. No elevator. Exactly like our old building.

This could be our old building. Same era. Same design. Same everything.

She chose this. Not because she had to—there were cheaper places further out.

She chose Yangpu. Near where we lived.

Why?

I look up at the windows. Fourth floor, right side. Light is on. I can see movement through cheap curtains.

She's home. In that apartment. Probably still no furniture.

Probably exhausted. Probably eating instant noodles.

My phone rings. Unknown number.

"喂？"

A woman's voice. Older. Sharp. "陈先生？"

Mr. Chen?

"是的？这是谁？"

Yes? Who is this?

"我是沈太太。沈微琳的母亲。"

I'm Mrs. Shen. Shen Weilin's mother.

My blood runs cold.

"我们需要谈谈我的女儿。"

We need to talk about my daughter.

"我和您没什么好说的。"

I have nothing to say to you.

"但我有话要对您说。关于您对微琳的所作所为。"

But I have things to say to you. About what you're doing to Weilin.

"我没有对她做任何事。"

I'm not doing anything to her.

"您雇佣了她。您知道这会导致什么。您知道她的家人会如何反应。"

You hired her. You knew what it would lead to. You knew how her family would react.

"她是成年人。她做出了自己的选择。"

She's an adult. She made her own choice.

"因为您操纵了她！"

Because you manipulated her!

I laugh—bitter. "我操纵了她？六年前是谁操纵她离开我的？"

I manipulated her? Who manipulated her into leaving me six years ago?

Silence.

"我做了对我女儿最好的事。您那时什么都没有。"

I did what was best for my daughter. You had nothing then.

"而现在我有了一切，所以突然我够好了？"

And now I have everything, so suddenly I'm good enough?

"现在您正在毁掉她的生活。她住在贫民窟！她被她的家人剥夺了继承权！"

Now you're ruining her life. She's living in a slum! She's been disinherited by her family!

"那是您做的。不是我。"

You did that. Not me.

"让她走。给她一个好的推荐信，帮她找到另一份工作。让她回家。"

Let her go. Give her a good reference, help her find another job. Let her come home.

"您的意思是让她离开我。再一次。"

You mean let her leave me. Again.

"是的。" Yes.

"不。" No.

"陈先生—"

"六年前，您从我这里夺走了她。告诉她我永远不够。毒害她对抗我。现在她回来了——不是因为我的钱，而是因为她选择了——而您想让我把她送回给您？"

Six years ago, you took her from me. Told her I'd never be enough. Poisoned her against me. Now she's back—not because of my money, but because she chose to be—and you want me to send her back to you?

I'm breathing hard. Standing outside her building. Talking to the woman who destroyed my marriage.

"她做出了选择。我会尊重那个选择。即使那意味着她睡在地板上。即使那意味着她挣扎。因为那是她的选择。不是您的。不是我的。她的。"

She made a choice. I'll respect that choice. Even if it means she sleeps on a floor. Even if it means she struggles.

Because it's her choice. Not yours. Not mine. Hers.

"您这样做是为了报复。"

You're doing this for revenge.

"也许。或者也许我这样做是因为她值得有选择。这是您从未给她的东西。"

Maybe. Or maybe I'm doing it because she deserves to have a choice. Something you never gave her.

I hang up.

Stand there. Phone in hand. Staring up at her window.

Light still on. Shadow moving.

Her mother just tried to get me to fire her. To send her back

to that house. To take away her choice.

The same thing she did six years ago.

And what have I been doing? Sending furniture she didn't ask for. Forcing relocation assistance. Trying to "save" her.

Taking away her agency just like her mother did.

My phone buzzes. Lin Rui.

你在她的公寓外面吗？

Are you outside her apartment?

你怎么知道？ How do you know?

因为我了解你。上去。

Because I know you. Go up.

我不能。 I can't.

为什么不能？ Why not?

因为如果我上去.....

Because if I go up...

I don't finish. Can't.

如果你上去，你就不能再假装了。你不能假装你不关心。假装这只是商业。假装你不是还在爱着她。

If you go up, you can't pretend anymore. Can't pretend you don't care. Pretend this is just business. Pretend you're not still in love with her.

I close my eyes.

我应该怎么办？

What am I supposed to do?

我不知道。但站在她的公寓外面盯着她的窗户不是答案。要么上去，要么回家。但做个决定。

I don't know. But standing outside her apartment staring at her window isn't the answer. Either go up or go home. But make a decision.

I look up at her window one more time.

The light goes off.
She's going to bed. On that floor.
I make a decision.
I turn around. Walk back to my car.
But not to go home.
I have a different destination in mind.

END CHAPTER 11

=====~=====

CHAPTER 12: THE LETTER (SCENE 2 - WEILIN'S GROVELING)

Weilin had written twelve versions of the letter, and each one was a different shade of pathetic—but at 2:47 AM, sitting on her empty floor with only her laptop screen for light, pathetic felt like the only honest thing left.

Friday morning. One week since she'd started at Chénxī Technologies. Her Yangpu apartment—still no furniture, just floor and boxes—felt like a cell she'd locked herself into. Twelve crumpled drafts scattered around her. Paper, pen, old-school because this needed to be handwritten. Her reflection in the dark window showed someone hollow-eyed, undone. Draft 13 sat blank in front of her.

The silence was oppressive. 3 AM Shanghai quiet. Her breathing too fast. Neighbor's baby crying through thin walls—had been for an hour. The scratch of pen on paper as she finally, finally started writing.

Cold floor under her. Still sleeping on it—IKEA had rescheduled again. Cheap ballpoint pen, fingers cramping from gripping too hard. Tears on paper, smudging ink. She didn't care.

Her phone beside her: Chen's office number saved, unsent

texts, cowardice in digital form.

The smell of instant noodles—she'd eaten them cold an hour ago, couldn't be bothered to heat them. Her unwashed hair. The mustiness of an apartment she wasn't really living in, just surviving.

She hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. Thursday at work had been hell—Chen barely looked at her.

She wore an old university t-shirt and shorts. Hair unbrushed. Face bare. Hands shaking from exhaustion and caffeine. Eyes burning from tears she was too tired to shed anymore.

WEILIN'S POV:

Draft 1: Too formal. "Dear Mr. Chen, I am writing to apologize for..."

Like a business letter. Cowardly.

Draft 2: Too casual. "Moxuan, I miss you."

Three words. Not enough. Too much.

Draft 3: Too angry. "You want to know why I left? Here's why..."
Blame shifting. Not honest.

Draft 4-11: Variations of the same lies I've been telling myself for six years.

Draft 12: Ripped it up before I finished. Started crying instead. Now it's 2:47 AM. I'm sitting on this floor—where else would I sit? I have no furniture and that feels like perfect symbolism. Pen in hand. Blank paper. Draft 13.

I start writing.

亲爱的墨轩，

Dear Moxuan,

我用中文写这封信，因为英文感觉像是在隐藏。而我不想再隐藏了。

I'm writing this in Chinese because English feels like hiding.

And I'm done hiding.

你曾经问我——在那间会议室，第一次会议——我为什么回来。我给了你一个专业的答案。这是真正的答案：

You asked me once—in that conference room, that first meeting—why I came back. I gave you a professional answer. Here's the real one:

我回来是因为我已经花了六年慢慢死去，而在你身边——即使你恨我——感觉比我离开后做的任何事情都更像活着。

I came back because I've spent six years dying slowly, and being near you—even if you hate me—feels more like living than anything I've done since I left.

I stop. Stare at what I've written.

Too honest? No. Not honest enough.

I keep writing.

我需要道歉。不是那种模糊的"我为一切感到抱歉"的道歉。具体的道歉。为具体的残忍。

I need to apologize. Not the vague "I'm sorry for everything" apology. Specific apologies. For specific cruelties.

我很抱歉：

I'm sorry for:

1. 公司聚会。2018年12月。你的创业公司刚刚获得了第一个客户——5万元的合同，你非常自豪。你邀请我参加你团队在杨浦那家饺子店的庆祝活动。我没有去。我说我头疼。真相：我妈妈那天晚上有一个晚宴。我选择了她的晚宴而不是你的胜利。你再也没有邀请我参加庆祝活动。

The company party. December 2018. Your startup had just gotten its first client—¥50,000 contract, you were so proud. You invited me to your team's celebration at that dumpling place in Yangpu. I didn't come. I said I had a headache. The truth: my mother had a dinner party that night. I chose her

dinner party over your triumph. You never invited me to another celebration.

2. 与我父母的晚餐。 2019年3月。你穿着你唯一的西装——那件你在二手店买的，你非常努力地想看起来得体。我父亲问你做什么。你解释了你的物流算法。他问你赚了多少钱。你说"还没有，但技术是可靠的。"他笑了。我妈妈问你是否有"真正的工作前景。"我没有为你辩护。我坐在那里保持沉默，让他们羞辱你。我们在回家的出租车上没有说话。那天晚上你搬到了沙发上睡。第一次。

The dinner with my parents. March 2019. You wore your only suit—the one you'd bought at a secondhand store, tried so hard to look acceptable. My father asked what you did. You explained your logistics algorithm. He asked how much money you'd made. You said "not yet, but the technology is solid." He laughed. My mother asked if you had "real job prospects." I didn't defend you. I sat there in silence and let them humiliate you. We didn't speak in the taxi home. You moved to the couch that night. First time.

My hand is shaking so hard I can barely write.

3. 关于公寓的争吵。 2019年5月。你想粉刷墙壁——让它感觉像家。我说"为什么要费心，我们不会在这里待很久。"你问我是什么意思。我说"当你成功时，我们会搬到更好的地方。"你听到的是："这还不够好。你提供的不够。"那不是我的意思。但那是我说的。话很重要。

The fight about the apartment. May 2019. You wanted to paint the walls—make it feel like home. I said "why bother, we won't be here long." You asked what I meant. I said "when you succeed, we'll move somewhere better." You heard: "this isn't good enough. You're not providing enough." That wasn't what I meant. But it's what I said. And words matter.

4. 投资者拒绝。 2019年7月。你回家很沮丧——那个月的第三个投资者拒绝了。你在质疑一切。我说"也许你应该考虑一份真正的工作。就在创业公司起飞之前。"你看着我就像我刺伤了你。你说"你不相信我。"我说"我相信现实。"那天晚上你睡在林瑞家。还有第二天。还有第三天。

The investor rejection. July 2019. You came home devastated—the third investor that month had passed. You were questioning everything. I said "maybe you should consider a real job. Just until the startup takes off." You looked at me like I'd stabbed you. You said "you don't believe in me." I said "I believe in being realistic." You slept at Lin Rui's that night. And the next. And the next.

I have to stop. Put down the pen. Wipe my eyes.

5. 最后一次争吵。 2019年8月。我从父母家回来。你在编程，没有吃东西，看起来很疲惫。我在父母家度过了整个下午，听我妈妈列举合适的男人——律师、银行家、医生。她给我看照片。问我什么时候"清醒过来。"我回家很生气。对她生气，但我把气撒在你身上。

The last fight. August 2019. I came home from my parents' house. You were coding, hadn't eaten, looked exhausted. I'd spent the afternoon listening to my mother list eligible men—lawyers, bankers, doctors. She showed me photos. Asked when I'd "come to my senses." I came home angry. Angry at her, but I took it out on you.

我说："这不行。"

I said: "This isn't working."

你说："什么不行？"

You said: "What isn't working?"

我说："这个。我们。贫穷。不确定性。假装这就足够了。"

I said: "This. Us. The poverty. The uncertainty. The pretending

it's enough."

你说："你需要它是什么？"

You said: "What do you need it to be?"

我说——天啊，我说——"我需要你成功。我需要你证明他们错了。我需要你足够。"

And I said—God, I said—"I need you to be successful. I need you to prove them wrong. I need you to be enough."

你问："我现在不够吗？"

You asked: "Am I not enough now?"

我没有回答。

And I didn't answer.

我的沉默就是答案。

My silence was the answer.

I'm crying now. Tears hitting the paper, smudging ink. I don't care.

你让我离开。不——你没有让。你只是看着我说："你应该回家。"

You asked me to leave. No—you didn't ask. You just looked at me and said: "You should go home."

我说："这就是家。"

I said: "This is home."

你说："不。这不是。这从来都不是。不是对你。"

You said: "No. It's not. It never was. Not for you."

你是对的。

And you were right.

我那天晚上收拾了一个包。去了我父母家。本来是暂时的——几天时间思考。

I packed a bag that night. Went to my parents' house. Meant it to be temporary—a few days to think.

但我妈妈说："现在你看到了。"

But my mother said: "Now you see."

我父亲说："你值得更好的。"

My father said: "You deserve better."

我相信了他们。

And I believed them.

我相信我值得比一个完全爱我但买不起昂贵东西的男人更好的人。

I believed I deserved better than a man who loved me completely but couldn't afford to buy me expensive things.

我相信我值得比幸福更好的东西。

I believed I deserved better than happiness.

我错了。

I was wrong.

I need to make him understand. Keep writing.

我需要你理解一件事。离开你的那个女人——她是她母亲的女儿。她用钱来衡量价值。她相信爱是有条件的。她认为"足够"意味着宝马、法租界公寓和设计师包。

I need you to understand something. The woman who left you —she was her mother's daughter. She measured worth in money. She believed love was conditional. She thought "enough" meant BMW and French Concession apartments and designer bags.

她是个懦夫。

She was a coward.

她就是我。

She was me.

我恨她。

And I hate her.

你知道我这周学到了什么吗？睡在杨浦的这个地板上？

Do you know what I've learned this week? Sleeping on this floor in Yangpu?

我学到了这个——这个有水渍和霉菌和薄墙的糟糕公寓——这就够了。不是因为我在假装。不是因为我在表演贫穷来向你证明什么。

I've learned that this—this shitty apartment with water damage and mold and thin walls—this is enough. Not because I'm pretending. Not because I'm performing poverty to prove a point to you.

而是因为我终于，终于，正确地衡量价值了。

But because I'm finally, FINALLY, measuring worth correctly. 这个公寓足够了，因为我选择了它。

This apartment is enough because I chose it.

这个地板足够了，因为我没有逃避它。

This floor is enough because I'm not running from it.

这种生活足够了，因为它是我的。

This life is enough because it's mine.

你星期二问我为什么拒绝搬迁援助。

You asked me Tuesday why I refused the relocation assistance.

原因是：因为如果我拿你的钱，我仍然是那个用人民币衡量价值的女人。我仍然是她母亲的女儿。

Here's why: Because if I take your money, I'm still the woman who measures worth in yuan. I'm still her mother's daughter.

我需要证明——对你，对我自己——我可以在没有钱的情况下足够。我可以选择不适而不是妥协。我可以睡在地板上仍然有尊严。

I need to prove—to you, to myself—that I can be enough without money. That I can choose discomfort over compromise. That I can sleep on a floor and still have dignity. 我成功了吗？我不知道。

Am I succeeding? I don't know.

我很累。我很孤独。我想念家具。

I'm exhausted. I'm lonely. I miss furniture.

但我不想念法租界的公寓。我不想念我父母的钱。

But I don't miss the French Concession apartment. I don't miss my parents' money.

我想念你。

I miss you.

我想念我们在我毁掉它之前的样子。

I miss the version of us that existed before I poisoned it.

I stop. Read what I've written. Is this too much?

Yes. Am I going to send it anyway?

I don't know yet.

Keep writing.

你不欠我原谅。我知道。

You don't owe me forgiveness. I know that.

我毁了我们。我选择了地位而不是爱。我相信我的父母而不是你。

I destroyed us. I chose status over love. I believed my parents over you.

那些是我的选择。我的失败。

Those were my choices. My failures.

你建立了一个帝国。你已经成为他们说你永远不会成为的一切。

You've built an empire. You've become everything they said you'd never be.

我真心为你高兴。

And I'm genuinely happy for you.

不是因为它证实了我的损失——"看我错过了什么。"

Not because it validates my loss—"look what I missed out on."

而是因为你应该成功。你应该证明他们错了。

But because you deserved to succeed. You deserved to prove them wrong.

你一直都够了，墨轩。

You were always enough, Moxuan.

只是我太破碎，看不到。

I was just too broken to see it.

所以这是我的问题：

So here's my question:

我们可以重新开始吗？

Can we start over?

不是浪漫地——我知道那是不可能的。我烧毁了那座桥并撒了灰烬。

Not romantically—I know that's impossible. I burned that bridge and scattered the ashes.

但我们可以作为.....曾经认识彼此的人重新开始吗？曾经爱过彼此？曾经毁了彼此？

But can we start over as... people who once knew each other? Who once loved each other? Who destroyed each other?

我们可以诚实吗？

Can we be honest?

因为我不能再做五个月的"沈小姐"和"陈总"，假装我们是陌生人。

Because I can't do five more months of "Miss Shen" and "Mr. Chen" and pretending we're strangers.

我不能透过玻璃墙看着你，假装我的心没有碎。

I can't watch you through glass walls and pretend my heart isn't breaking.

我不能收到你的便利贴——是的，我保留了两张，它们在我的钱包里，旁边是我从未扔掉的我们的婚纱照——假装它们没有意义。

I can't receive your Post-it notes—yes, I've kept them both,

they're in my wallet next to our wedding photo I never threw away—and pretend they don't mean anything.

我不能保持专业，当关于你的一切都让我想尖叫或哭泣或乞求我不配得到的另一次机会。

I can't be professional when everything about you makes me want to scream or cry or beg for another chance I don't deserve.

所以这是我的提议：

So here's what I'm proposing:

真相。完全的真相。

Truth. Complete truth.

我会告诉你任何你想知道的事情。关于离婚。关于我的家人。关于我六年来每天的想法。

I'll tell you anything you want to know. About the divorce.

About my family. About what I've thought every single day for six years.

也许——如果你愿意——你也可以告诉我你的真相。

And maybe—if you want—you can tell me your truth too.

你为什么雇用我。（因为这不仅仅是生意。）

Why you hired me. (Because it wasn't just business.)

你为什么送家具。（因为这不仅仅是职业精神。）

Why you sent the furniture. (Because it wasn't just professionalism.)

你为什么给我留便利贴。（因为你不像你假装的那么冷酷。）

Why you leave me Post-it notes. (Because you're not as cold as you pretend.)

我们可以继续一起工作。我会完成新加坡项目——我很擅长，你知道我很擅长。

We can keep working together. I'll finish the Singapore project—I'm good at it, you know I am.

但也许我们也可以.....诚实。

But maybe we can also be... honest.

也许这就够了。

Maybe that's enough.

也许诚实是我们开始重建的地方。

Maybe honesty is where we start rebuilding.

不是我们。我不是在要求我们回来。

Not us. I'm not asking for us back.

只是.....真相。

Just... truth.

我不期望你回复这封信。我会在星期六早上你来之前把它放在你的桌子上。你可以读它或烧掉它或用它作为骚扰诉讼的证据——我真的不知道什么是合适的了。

I don't expect you to respond to this letter. I'll leave it on your desk Saturday morning before you come in. You can read it or burn it or use it as evidence in a harassment lawsuit—I honestly don't know what's appropriate anymore.

但我需要写它。

But I needed to write it.

我需要你知道。

I needed you to know.

带着我七年前应该给你的所有诚实，

With all the honesty I should have given you seven years ago,
沈微琳

Shen Weilin

I sign it with my Chinese name. Not "Weilin Shen" (the Western professional version).

沈微琳. The name he called me when we were happy.

I read the whole letter. Four pages. Handwritten. Honest. Terrifying.

Am I really going to give him this?

I fold it carefully. Put it in an envelope. Write on the outside:

陈墨轩 (Chen Moxuan—not Marcus Chen)

Put it in my bag.

Lie down on the floor. Close my eyes.

3:42 AM. Maybe I can sleep now.

I can't.

SATURDAY MORNING, 6:13 AM.

I take the subway early—before Chen arrives. He usually gets to the office by 8 AM on Saturdays.

Wearing jeans, old sweater, no makeup. Not work clothes.

This isn't professional.

The letter in my bag feels like it weighs a thousand kilograms.

Arrive at Shanghai Tower, 7:02 AM.

Security guard—different one, weekend shift: "沈小姐? 这么早? "

Miss Shen? So early?

"需要做一些工作。" Need to do some work.

Elevator to 118. The floor is empty. Dark except for emergency lighting.

Chen's office: dark. Good. He's not here.

I go to my office. Unlock the door. Sit at my desk. Pull out the letter.

I could still destroy it. No one would know. I could keep pretending. Keep professional. Keep dying inside.

I stand. Walk to Chen's office—my access card works, all senior consultants have access.

Open his door.

His office is immaculate. Expensive desk, minimalist design, Shanghai sprawling below.

So different from the cluttered apartment workspace where he used to code surrounded by whiteboards and coffee cups and dreams.

I walk to his desk. The surface is clean. Computer, lamp, phone, nothing personal.

Except—

In his desk drawer, slightly open, I can see something.

A photo frame. Face-down.

Don't look. It's private. None of your business.

I look anyway.

Pull open the drawer slightly. Lift the frame. Turn it over.

Our wedding photo.

WEILIN'S POV:

Oh God.

It's us.

That ridiculous photo booth at our reception. We couldn't afford a professional photographer, so Lin Rui brought a photo booth. We're squished together, laughing, I'm wearing that cheap white dress, he's in his secondhand suit, we look absurd and young and so fucking happy.

He kept it.

He keeps it in his desk drawer. Face-down. Hidden. But he kept it.

Tears stream down my face.

He's not as over me as he pretends.

I carefully put the photo back—face-down, exactly as it was.

Close the drawer.

Place my letter on his desk. Center. Impossible to miss.

Stand there, one hand on the envelope.

Last chance to take it back.

I don't.

Leave his office. Close the door. Go back to my office. Pack up my things. Leave the building.

Outside, 7:47 AM, I text him:

周一见。我在您的办公桌上留了点东西。—W

See you Monday. I left something on your desk. —W

Then turn off my phone. Can't handle waiting for his response.

CHEN'S OFFICE, 9:17 AM.

CHEN'S POV:

I arrive later than planned. Bad night—stood outside Weilin's building for an hour like a stalker, went home, didn't sleep. Saturday mornings are usually quiet. Just me and a few engineers who live for code.

I get coffee. Take the elevator to 118. Walk to my office. See it immediately.

Envelope on my desk. My name in her handwriting: 陈墨轩
Not Mr. Chen. Not Marcus. 墨轩.

My phone buzzes. Her text from two hours ago: "See you Monday. I left something on your desk. —W"

She was here. At 7 AM. On Saturday. Left this. Then disappeared.

I sit down. Stare at the envelope.

I could not open it. I could throw it away. I could maintain the boundaries.

I open it.

Four pages. Handwritten. Her neat, careful characters.

I start reading.

Dear 墨轩, I'm writing this in Chinese because English feels like hiding. And I'm done hiding.

I read the whole letter. Every word. Every apology. Every specific cruelty she remembers.

The company party I didn't think she'd remember.

The dinner with her parents where she didn't defend me—I'd buried that memory, pretended it didn't matter.

The fight about the apartment—the paint. Fuck. I'd wanted to paint the walls yellow. She'd said "why bother." I'd heard "this place isn't worth it. You're not worth it."

I read about the last fight.

"I need you to be enough."

That's what I remembered her saying.

But she says she said: "I need you to prove them wrong."

Different words. Same wound.

I get to the part about what she's learned:

"This apartment is enough because I chose it."

Something in my chest cracks.

She's choosing poverty to prove she's not her mother's daughter. She's sleeping on a floor to prove she's changed. She's suffering because she needs me to believe her.

I keep reading.

"You were always enough, 墨轩. I was just too broken to see it."

I have to stop. Put the letter down. Stare out the window. She thinks she was broken. But what if I was broken too? What if I heard her fear as rejection? What if I pushed her away as much as she pulled?

I pick up the letter again. Read her question:

"Can we start over? Not romantically—I know that's impossible. But can we be honest?"

Can we? Can I be honest with her? Can I tell her that I've kept

our wedding photo for six years? Can I tell her that I built this empire partially to prove her wrong but mostly to prove I was worth loving?

Can I tell her that hiring her was the stupidest, most self-destructive thing I've ever done because I knew—KNEW—I'd fall apart having her close?

I read the signature: 沈微琳

Her Chinese name. The name I whispered when we made love. The name I haven't said aloud in six years.

I fold the letter carefully. Put it in my desk drawer.

Right next to the wedding photo.

Pull out my phone. Type a message to her:

我读了你的信。我们需要谈谈。但不是通过短信。不是通过电子邮件。面对面。你想什么时候？—墨轩

I read your letter. We need to talk. But not via text. Not via email. Face to face. When do you want to? —Moxuan

I sign it 墨轩. Not Marcus. Not M.

墨轩. The man I used to be. The man she's asking me to be again.

Send it.

WEILIN'S APARTMENT, 11:42 AM.

My phone buzzes. I turned it back on an hour ago, couldn't stand not knowing.

His name on the screen. Message in Chinese. Signed 墨轩.

He signed it 墨轩. Not Marcus Chen, CEO. 墨轩. Moxuan. The man I married.

I read it three times.

"We need to talk. Face to face."

My hands shake as I type back:

今天？明天？我可以随时。—微琳

Today? Tomorrow? I can do anytime. —Weilin

Three dots appear immediately. He's typing.

今天。下午2点。不是办公室。中性场所。你选。

Today. 2 PM. Not the office. Neutral territory. You choose.

Neutral territory. Somewhere we can be honest without the weight of his empire or my poverty.

I think. Then type:

你还记得那个我们去过的小面馆吗？在四川路？我们曾经说如果我们变老变穷，我们会在那里吃饭直到死？

Do you remember that little noodle place we used to go to? On Sichuan Road? We used to say if we got old and poor, we'd eat there until we died?

Long pause. Then:

我记得。还在那里吗？

I remember. Is it still there?

是的。我上周检查过。同样的老板。同样的菜单。15元一碗面。

Yes. I checked last week. Same owner. Same menu. ¥15 a bowl.

Another pause.

下午2点见。

See you at 2.

That's it. Meeting scheduled. Neutral territory. Truth coming.

I look at the clock: 11:51 AM. Two hours and nine minutes.

I shower—first time in two days. Put on clean clothes—jeans, simple sweater, nothing fancy. No makeup—he asked for honesty. Leave my hair down—he used to love my hair down.

12:47 PM. I leave my apartment. Take the subway to Sichuan Road. Arrive at the noodle shop at 1:38 PM—early, nervous, can't sit still.

The shop: exactly as I remember. Eight tables, fluorescent

lights, hand-written menu on the wall, smell of beef broth and scallions.

The owner—Old Zhao: "哎呀！小沈！好久不见！"

Aiya! Little Shen! Long time no see!

He remembers me.

"赵老板，好久不见。"

Old Zhao: "你丈夫呢？那个高个子男孩？总是点两碗——一碗给你，一碗给他？"

Where's your husband? That tall boy? Always ordered two bowls—one for you, one for him?

My throat tightens.

"他.....他一会儿来。"

He... he's coming soon.

Old Zhao smiles, gestures to a table—corner table, our old spot.

I sit. Wait.

1:47 PM. The door opens.

Chen walks in.

CHEN'S POV:

She's here. In our noodle shop. At our table.

Hair down. No makeup. Wearing jeans and a sweater I've never seen.

She looks like Weilin. Not Miss Shen, consultant. Just... Weilin.

Old Zhao sees me: "哎！是你！高个子男孩！现在不那么瘦了！"

Ai! It's you! Tall boy! Not so skinny now!

He doesn't know who I am. Doesn't recognize Marcus Chen, billionaire CEO.

Just sees 墨轩, the poor grad student who used to eat here with his wife.

I walk to the table. Sit across from her. Just like we used to.
Long silence. Just us. Two people. A table between us.
Everything unsaid.

"谢谢你来。" Her voice shakes.

Thank you for coming.

"谢谢你写信。"

Thank you for writing.

Old Zhao brings tea—jasmine, without asking, because he remembers. Sets it down. Leaves us alone.

I look at her finally. "我不知道从哪里开始。"

I don't know where to start.

"我也不知道。"

Me neither.

Then, at the same time:

"你的信——" Your letter—

"你的照片——" Your photo—

We stop. Stare at each other.

"什么照片?" What photo?

I realize. "你怎么知道照片的事?"

How do you know about the photo?

She looks down at her hands. Caught.

"我.....星期六早上。当我去你办公室留信的时候。你的抽屉是开着的。我看到了。"

I... Saturday morning. When I went to your office to leave the letter. Your drawer was open. I saw it.

Silence. My jaw clenches.

"你翻我的抽屉?"

You went through my drawer?

"不是翻。它是开着的。我看到一个相框朝下。我.....我不应该看。我很抱歉。"

Not through. It was open. I saw a frame face-down. I... I shouldn't have looked. I'm sorry.

More silence. The tea steams between us.

"你保留了它。" Her voice is barely a whisper.

You kept it.

"是的。" Yes.

"为什么？" Why?

The question I've been asking myself for six years.

"我不知道。" I look out the window. "也许因为我需要提醒自己我曾经有过什么。也许因为即使你毁了我，我也无法扔掉我们曾经是什么的证据。"

I don't know. Maybe because I needed to remind myself what I once had. Maybe because even though you destroyed me, I couldn't throw away evidence of what we used to be.

She's crying now. Silent tears.

"我也保留了一张。在我的钱包里。和你的便利贴一起。"

I kept one too. In my wallet. With your Post-it notes.

My chest tightens.

"你为什么留那些？" Why did you keep those?

"因为它们是你第一次在六年里对我好。即使只是告诉我吃饭。"

Because they were the first time in six years you were kind to me. Even if it was just telling me to eat.

I close my eyes. When I open them, she's looking directly at me.

"墨轩，我读了你的回复。一遍又一遍。'我们需要面对面谈。'但我需要知道——我们在谈什么？你想听什么？"

Moxuan, I read your response. Over and over. 'We need to talk face to face.' But I need to know—what are we talking about? What do you want to hear?

I lean forward. "真相。"

The truth.

"哪个真相？ " Which truth?

"所有的真相。 " I'm gripping my tea cup so hard it might break. "你在信中问我你为什么拒绝搬迁援助。你说你需要证明你不是那个只关心钱的人。 "

All of it. You asked in your letter why you refused the relocation assistance. You said you needed to prove you're not the person who only cared about money.

She nods.

"那不是你需要证明的唯一事情。 " My voice is rough. "因为我也需要证明一些事情。 "

That's not the only thing you need to prove. Because I need to prove something too.

"什么？ " What?

"我需要证明我雇用你不仅仅是为了报复。我需要证明送你家具不是为了让你欠我。我需要证明....."

I need to prove I didn't hire you just for revenge. I need to prove sending you furniture wasn't to make you owe me. I need to prove...

I stop. Can't finish.

She reaches across the table. Doesn't touch me, but her hand is there. Waiting.

"证明什么？ " Prove what?

I look at her hand. At her face. At the woman I loved and hated and never stopped thinking about.

"我需要证明我可以看着你，和你一起工作，每天见到你.....而不会再爱上你。 "

I need to prove I can look at you, work with you, see you every day... and not fall in love with you again.

Her breath catches.

"又？ " Again?

"是的，又。因为我从来没有停止过。 "

Yes, again. Because I never stopped.

The words hang between us. Six years of denial, shattered. Old Zhao approaches with his notepad, sees our faces, quietly backs away.

Weilin's hand is shaking on the table. "那为什么——如果你从来没有停止——你为什么对我那么冷酷？ "

Then why—if you never stopped—why were you so cold to me?

"因为爱你会杀了我。 " My voice breaks. "六年前就差点杀了我。如果我让自己再爱你，然后你再离开....."

Because loving you would kill me. It almost killed me six years ago. If I let myself love you again and you left again...

"我不会离开。 " I won't leave.

"你怎么知道？ " How do you know?

"因为我没有地方可去。我烧毁了我所有的桥梁。我的家人，我的旧生活，一切。我只有这个。只有你。 "

Because I have nowhere to go. I burned all my bridges. My family, my old life, everything. I only have this. Only you.

"那不够。 " I lean back. "我不能成为你唯一的选择，因为你没有其他选择。我需要....."

That's not enough. I can't be your only choice because you have no other options. I need...

"你需要什么？ " What do you need?

"我需要知道如果你家人明天打电话说他们原谅你，给你你的公寓回来，给你你的钱回来——你会选择什么？ "

I need to know if your family called tomorrow and said they forgive you, give you your apartment back, give you your money back—what would you choose?

She doesn't hesitate. "你。"

You.

"你说得太快了。" You're saying that too quickly.

"因为我确定。" She's leaning forward now, intense. "墨轩，你不明白。我在那间法租界的公寓里很悲惨。我在那个充满设计师衣服和昂贵晚餐的生活里很悲惨。我已经悲惨了六年。"

Because I'm sure. Moxuan, you don't understand. I was miserable in that French Concession apartment. I was miserable in that life full of designer clothes and expensive dinners. I've been miserable for six years.

"那你为什么留下？" Then why did you stay?

"因为我不认为我值得更好。我不认为我值得快乐。我毁了我们，所以我认为我应该悲惨。"

Because I didn't think I deserved better. I didn't think I deserved happiness. I destroyed us, so I thought I deserved to be miserable.

She wipes her eyes.

"但后来我在那个论坛上看到了你。你对女人很好。你成功了。你是.....你。而我意识到也许，也许我可以.....我不知道。尝试？道歉？"

But then I saw you at that forum. You were kind to that woman. You were successful. You were... you. And I realized maybe, maybe I could... I don't know. Try? Apologize?

"你在你的电子邮件中道歉了。"

You apologized in your emails.

"那些不算。那些很容易。电子邮件很容易。"她看着我。"这个很难。坐在这里，看着你的脸，告诉你我很抱歉毁了我们，我每天都后悔，我会做任何事情——任何事情——得到另一次机会。"

Those don't count. Those were easy. Emails are easy. This is hard. Sitting here, looking at your face, telling you I'm sorry I

destroyed us, that I regret it every day, that I would do anything—anything—for another chance.

My throat is tight. "我不知道我是否可以给你另一次机会。"

I don't know if I can give you another chance.

"我知道。" I know.

"我不知道我是否可以信任你。" I don't know if I can trust you.

"我知道。" I know.

"我不知道我是否可以原谅你。" I don't know if I can forgive you.

"我知道。"她的声音很小。"但你能.....你能尝试吗？"

I know. But can you... can you try?

I look at her. Really look at her. Hair down. No makeup.

Cheap sweater. Exhausted. Honest.

This is Weilin. Not Miss Shen. Not her mother's daughter.

Just her.

"我一直在尝试。"我承认。"从你走进我办公室的那一刻起。我一直在努力不原谅你。"

I have been trying. Since the moment you walked into my office. I've been trying not to forgive you.

"那效果如何？" How's that working?

I almost laugh. "糟糕透了。" Terribly.

She smiles—small, genuine, the first real smile I've seen from her in six years.

Old Zhao finally approaches. "你们要点餐吗？还是我应该再等一个小时？"

Are you going to order? Or should I wait another hour?

We both laugh—wet, broken sounds.

"两碗牛肉面。" I say automatically.

Two bowls of beef noodles.

The same order. Always.

Weilin looks at me, surprise in her eyes. "你还记得。"

You still remember.

"我记得一切。"

I remember everything.

END CHAPTER 12

=====~=====

CHAPTER 13: THE COLD RESPONSE (PROFESSIONAL CRUELTY)

Chen made it three blocks from the noodle shop before he had to pull over—hands shaking too hard to drive, chest too tight to breathe, the taste of jasmine tea and terror coating his throat like poison.

2:47 PM. Saturday. Fifteen minutes since he'd fled.

His car sat in a random alley off Sichuan Road. Hands gripping the steering wheel—knuckles white, whole body trembling. Shanghai traffic blurred beyond the windshield. He couldn't see straight.

His phone on the passenger seat: her last text still open.

"Thank you for coming."

In the rearview mirror: his face—pale, sweating, coming apart. His ragged breathing too fast. Hyperventilating. Car horn somewhere distant. His heartbeat pounding in his ears, drowning everything.

The echo of her voice: "I miss you."

He couldn't unhear it.

Sweat on his palms made the steering wheel slip. His tie was too tight, choking him. He tore it off. The leather seat—expensive, cold, nothing like the plastic chairs in that noodle shop.

Her jasmine perfume still in his nose from sitting across

from her. The noodle shop smell—beef broth, scallions, their past.

His own fear-sweat: sharp, acrid.

CHEN'S POV:

I ran.

I sat across from her for twelve minutes—twelve minutes of her being honest and vulnerable and everything I thought I wanted—and I ran.

Made up some bullshit about a client emergency in Singapore.

Watched her face fall.

Left money on the table for tea we didn't drink.

Got in my car and drove three blocks before I had to pull over because I couldn't fucking breathe.

My phone rings. Weilin.

I don't answer.

It rings again. I silence it.

Text from her: 你还好吗?

Are you okay?

No. I'm having a panic attack in an alley because you looked at me like you still love me and I don't know what to do with that.

I type: 我很好。抱歉。真的有紧急情况。我们周一谈。

I'm fine. Sorry. Real emergency. We'll talk Monday.

Lies. All lies.

Her response: 好的。小心。

Okay. Be careful.

She believes me. Or pretends to. I don't know which is worse.

I sit in my car for forty minutes. Breathing exercises—Dr.

Song taught me. Four counts in, seven counts hold, eight

counts out.

Slowly, the panic recedes. Leaving only shame.

She wrote me a four-page letter. Apologized for specific cruelties. Asked for honesty.

And I ran.

Because I'm a coward.

Because Marcus Chen, billionaire CEO, is just 陈墨轩 in expensive clothes, still terrified of being left.

My phone buzzes. Lin Rui.

她说你们见面了然后你跑了。你他妈在干什么？

She said you met and then you ran. What the fuck are you doing?

How does he know? Is he talking to her?

我没有跑。我有紧急情况。

I didn't run. I had an emergency.

Lin Rui: 骗子。

Liar.

别做你要做的事。

Don't do what you're about to do.

我不知道你在说什么。

I don't know what you're talking about.

你要把她推开。因为她太接近了。别这样做。

You're going to push her away. Because she got too close.

Don't do it.

I don't respond. Because he's right.

And I'm going to do it anyway.

SATURDAY NIGHT, 11:47 PM.

Chen's penthouse. He'd been drinking—whiskey, expensive, didn't help.

Sitting at his home office desk. Laptop open. Her letter

beside him—he'd brought it home, couldn't stop reading it.

Drafting an email.

DRAFT 1:

微琳,

我读了你的信。谢谢你的诚实。我也欠你诚实。

真相是：我雇用你是因为我还没准备好放手。我送家具是因为我不能看着你受苦。我留便条是因为.....

Weilin,

I read your letter. Thank you for your honesty. I owe you honesty too.

The truth is: I hired you because I wasn't ready to let go. I sent furniture because I can't watch you suffer. I leave notes because...

He stopped. Deleted it.

Too honest. Too vulnerable. Too much.

DRAFT 2:

沈小姐,

收到您的信。虽然我理解您想要澄清过去，但我认为最好保持我们的关系严格专业。

Miss Shen,

Received your letter. While I understand your desire to clarify the past, I believe it's best to keep our relationship strictly professional.

Better. More distant. But not enough.

DRAFT 3:

沈小姐,

您的信超出了界限。我雇用您是为了您的专业技能，而不是重温过去的失败关系。请保持专业距离。

Miss Shen,

Your letter crossed boundaries. I hired you for your

professional skills, not to revisit failed past relationships.

Please maintain professional distance.

Harsher. He read it. Still not cruel enough to make her hate him.

Needed to be crueler.

DRAFT 4:

沈小姐,

我们的过去与我们的工作关系无关。您的个人信件不合适且不受欢迎。未来的通信应仅与项目相关。

Miss Shen,

Our past is irrelevant to our working relationship. Your personal correspondence was inappropriate and unwelcome. Future communications should be project-related only.

Getting there.

DRAFTS 5-9: Variations on the same theme. Each slightly crueler. More dismissive.

DRAFT 10:

沈小姐,

请保持专业界限。个人信件是不合适的。未来的通信应仅与项目相关。

—Marcus Chen, 首席执行官

Miss Shen,

Please maintain professional boundaries. Personal correspondence is inappropriate. Future communications should be project-related only.

—Marcus Chen, CEO

Perfect.

Cold. Dismissive. Signed with full title.

This would hurt her. This would make her hate him. This would keep her away. This would keep him safe.

He hovered over 'Send'.

Don't do this.

Lin Rui's voice in his head. Dr. Song's voice: "When you push people away, you're protecting the wound, not healing it."

Weilin's voice from her letter: "Can we be honest?"

He clicked 'Send'. 12:03 AM, Sunday morning.

Immediately: nausea. His hands shook. He closed his laptop. Stared at it.

What did I just do?

Grabbed his phone. Opened email. Message sent. Couldn't unsend.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

He wanted to call her. Explain. Say "I didn't mean it. I'm scared. I'm sorry."

He didn't.

Poured another whiskey instead. Drank until he could sleep.

He didn't sleep.

SUNDAY MORNING, 8:17 AM.

WEILIN'S POV:

She woke up on her floor—still no furniture, IKEA had cancelled again.

Checked her phone, hoping for an explanation about yesterday. Why he ran. What the "emergency" was.

Email notification.

From: m.chen@chenxitech.com

Subject: RE: Professional Boundaries

Her stomach dropped.

Opened it. Read.

"Miss Shen,

Please maintain professional boundaries. Personal

correspondence is inappropriate. Future communications should be project-related only.

—Marcus Chen, CEO"

She read it three times. Each time, it hurt more.

Personal correspondence is inappropriate.

Inappropriate.

My four-page letter apologizing for everything was... inappropriate.

Our marriage was inappropriate.

My honesty was inappropriate.

She physically recoiled. Clutched phone. Curled into herself on the floor.

Didn't cry—too shocked for tears. Just... numb.

I thought...

Yesterday at the noodle shop, he'd signed his text 墨轩. He came to meet her. He said "thank you for the letter."

She thought maybe...

She was wrong.

He's not 墨轩. He's Marcus Chen, CEO.

And she's Miss Shen, inappropriate employee who crossed boundaries.

She typed a response:

收到。我道歉。不会再发生。—沈微琳

Received. I apologize. Won't happen again. —Shen Weilin
Professional. Cold. Mirrored his tone.

Sent it.

Deleted his email. Deleted their entire text thread. Deleted his contact.

If he wanted boundaries, she'd give him boundaries.

If he wanted professional, she'd be the most professional

consultant he'd ever seen.

And she'd never, ever be honest with him again.

MONDAY MORNING.

CHEN'S POV:

Chen arrived at 8 AM—earlier than usual, avoiding Weilin's arrival time.

Went straight to his office. Closed the door. Unusual—his door was usually open.

8:47 AM: Weilin arrived.

He watched through the glass wall. Couldn't help it.

She was in full armor: severe black suit, hair in tight bun, makeup perfect, face like stone.

Didn't look at his office. Went straight to her desk. Closed her door too.

Two closed doors. Glass walls between them.

Might as well be miles.

9:30 AM. TEAM MEETING.

Conference Room B.

Weilin presented Singapore compliance updates.

Professional. Brilliant. Cold.

Didn't make eye contact with Chen once. Addressed all responses to Lin Rui or Zhang Wei. Pretended Chen didn't exist.

Chen tried to engage. "沈小姐，关于合规时间表——"

Miss Shen, regarding the compliance timeline—

Weilin cut him off, speaking to Lin Rui. "林先生，您能回答陈总的问题吗？时间表在第12页。"

Mr. Lin, could you answer CEO Chen's question? The timeline is on page 12.

Using Lin Rui as intermediary. Won't speak directly to Chen.

Lin Rui shot Chen a look that said you did this. "沈小姐可以直接回答陈总。"

Miss Shen can answer CEO Chen directly.

Weilin still didn't look at Chen. "我更愿意通过适当的渠道沟通。为了保持专业界限。"

I prefer to communicate through appropriate channels. To maintain professional boundaries.

She just used his words against him.

The team shifted uncomfortably. This was weird. Everyone knew it was weird.

Meeting ended. Weilin was first to leave.

TUESDAY.

All communication through email or Li Ruolin, Chen's assistant.

Weilin sent project updates to Chen's assistant with a note: 请转发给陈总。

Please forward to CEO Chen.

Chen responded through his assistant.

They didn't speak directly once.

Lunch: Weilin ate in her office. Door closed, blinds drawn—new addition.

Chen couldn't see her anymore.

It was driving him insane.

WEDNESDAY.

Singapore trip was next week. They'd be on the same flight.

In meetings together for five days.

Chen was already dreading it.

Team meeting to prep for trip.

Weilin addressed the room, not Chen. "我建议我们分开飞行时间表。我可以乘早班航班。"

I suggest we separate flight schedules. I can take an earlier flight.

"那是不必要的。我们可以——"

That's unnecessary. We can—

"我坚持。为了保持专业界限。"

I insist. To maintain professional boundaries.

Again. His words. Weaponized.

Chen's jaw clenched. "如你所愿，沈小姐。"

As you wish, Miss Shen.

Lin Rui cornered Chen in his office after. "你需要解决这个问题。"

You need to fix this.

"没有什么可解决的。我们是专业的。"

There's nothing to fix. We're being professional.

"你们都很痛苦。整个团队都能看出来。"

You're both miserable. The entire team can see it.

"这就是应该的样子。"

This is how it should be.

"为什么？因为你害怕？"

Why? Because you're scared?

"因为这样更简单。"

Because it's easier this way.

"对谁更简单？对你还是对她？"

Easier for who? You or her?

Chen didn't answer. Lin Rui left, shaking his head.

THURSDAY.

Chen noticed: Weilin was losing weight. Her suits hung looser. Her face was gaunt. She wasn't eating.

He wanted to say something. Couldn't.

He'd made the boundaries. He had to keep them.

Even if it was killing her. Even if it was killing him.

FRIDAY.

6:30 PM: Most of the team left. Weilin stayed. Chen stayed—watching her through the glass. She didn't know. Her blinds were only closed during the day.

8:00 PM: She was still working.

9:30 PM: Still there.

11:00 PM: Her office light was still on.

Chen walked to her office. Stood outside her door. Raised his hand to knock.

I could apologize. Take it back. Tell her I was scared.

His hand hovered.

Inside, he could see her: head on her desk, asleep.

Exhausted. Alone.

Because of him.

He lowered his hand. Didn't knock.

Went back to his office. Got his jacket. Opened her door quietly—she didn't wake. Draped it over her.

Left a Post-it note: 回家。睡觉。—M

Go home. Sleep. —M

Left the building.

SATURDAY, 3:00 AM.

Chen's penthouse. He couldn't sleep—hadn't slept properly all week.

Kept thinking about her asleep at her desk. About the email. About her response: "Received. I apologize. Won't happen again."

She apologized. For being honest. For trusting him.

And he'd made her apologize for it.

He got up. Went to his study. Opened his desk drawer. Took

out her letter.

Read it again.

"Can we be honest?"

No. Apparently we can't. Because I'm too much of a coward.

His phone rang. 3:17 AM. Unknown number.

He answered, hoping irrationally it was Weilin. "喂？"

Dr. Song's voice: "陈先生，这是宋医生。您这周错过了我们的会议。"

Mr. Chen, this is Dr. Song. You missed our session this week.

Chen had completely forgotten. His standing Thursday appointment. First time he'd missed in two years.

"对不起。我忘了。工作很忙。"

Sorry. I forgot. Work has been busy.

"这不像你。发生了什么事？"

That's not like you. What happened?

Long silence.

"没什么。我很好。"

Nothing. I'm fine.

"你在凌晨3点17分接我的电话。你没有'很好'。"

You're answering my call at 3:17 AM. You're not 'fine.'

Chen sat down, suddenly exhausted. "我搞砸了。"

I fucked up.

"怎么搞砸的？"

"我把她推开了。在她诚实对我之后。在她脆弱之后。我.....我惊慌了，我把她推开了。"

I pushed her away. After she was honest with me. After she was vulnerable. I... I panicked and I pushed her away.

"沈微琳。" Not a question. Statement.

"是的。"

"你想告诉我发生了什么吗？"

You want to tell me what happened?

Chen told Dr. Song everything.

The letter—all four pages. The noodle shop meeting—running away after twelve minutes. The email—the cruel response.

The week of silence. Her using his words against him.

Finding her asleep at her desk at 11 PM.

When he was done, silence.

"你认识到你在做什么吗？"

Do you recognize what you're doing?

"我在保护自己。"

I'm protecting myself.

"不。你在重新创造遗弃。"

No. You're recreating abandonment.

"什么？"

"她六年前离开了你。伤害了你。所以现在，在她回来之前——在她有机会再次离开之前——你在推她走。你在控制叙述。"

She left you six years ago. Hurt you. So now, before she can come back—before she can leave again—you're pushing her away. You're controlling the narrative.

Fuck. He was right.

"你宁愿把她推开也不愿冒险再次被抛弃。即使这意味着你们都受苦。"

You'd rather push her away than risk being abandoned again. Even if it means you both suffer.

Chen's voice broke. "如果我让她进来，她会再次离开。"

If I let her in, she'll leave again.

"也许吧。也许不会。但如果你把她推开，结果是一样的——她走了。唯一的区别是你控制着她怎么走。"

Maybe. Maybe not. But if you push her away, the result is the same—she's gone. The only difference is you control how

she goes.

Silence.

"我不知道怎么停止害怕。"

I don't know how to stop being scared.

"害怕是可以的。害怕意味着你关心。但让恐惧做决定——那是你需要停止的。"

Being scared is okay. Being scared means you care. But letting fear make decisions—that's what you need to stop.

Dr. Song paused. "我要问你一个问题，我要你诚实回答。"

I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer honestly.

"好的。"

"如果她明天离开——离开你的公司，离开上海，永远离开你的生活——你现在推她走的方式——你会后悔吗？"

If she left tomorrow—left your company, left Shanghai, left your life forever—the way you're pushing her away now—would you regret it?

Chen didn't hesitate. "是的。"

Yes.

"那么你知道该做什么。"

Then you know what you need to do.

"我不——"

"是的，你知道。你只是害怕去做。"

Yes, you do. You're just scared to do it.

"周一，上午9点。我的办公室。我们需要谈谈在你破坏这个超出修复之前。"

Monday, 9 AM. My office. We need to talk before you sabotage this beyond repair.

He hung up.

SATURDAY, 4:42 AM.

Chen sat in his study, still holding his phone.

Dr. Song's question echoing: "Would you regret it?"

Yes. Yes, he'd regret it. He already regretted it.

He looked at his computer. Her email still in his sent folder.

Read it again.

"Please maintain professional boundaries. Personal correspondence is inappropriate."

I told her honesty was inappropriate. I told her vulnerability was unwelcome. I told her she was wrong for trying.

His phone buzzed. Text from Lin Rui—also apparently awake at 4:42 AM.

新加坡行程确认。你周一飞。她周二飞。你们甚至不会在同一天。你满意吗？

Singapore trip confirmed. You fly Monday. She flies Tuesday. You won't even be there on the same day. Happy now?

We're going to Singapore separately. Five days of meetings and we've scheduled it so we're never together.

This is insane.

Lin Rui: 这就是你想要的吗？永远避开她？

Is this what you want? Avoid her forever?

Chen stared at the message.

Is this what I want?

No. No, it's not.

But he didn't know how to fix it. The email was sent. The damage was done. She was using his words against him.

She'd closed her blinds. She wouldn't speak to him. She was protecting herself now.

From him.

His phone rang again. Dr. Song. Again.

"我刚想到一件事。"

I just thought of something.

"什么？"

"她的信。她要求诚实，对吗？"

Her letter. She asked for honesty, right?

"是的。"

"那么给她诚实。不是通过电子邮件。不是通过便条。面对面。告诉她真相——你害怕，你惊慌，你搞砸了。"

Then give her honesty. Not via email. Not via notes. Face to face. Tell her the truth—you're scared, you panicked, you fucked up.

"她不会听的。"

She won't listen.

"你怎么知道？你试过了吗？"

How do you know? Have you tried?

Silence.

"周一，9点。别错过。"

Monday, 9 AM. Don't miss it.

Hung up.

Chen sat there. Dawn breaking through his windows.

Saturday morning arriving.

Looked at his phone—Weilin's contact deleted after the email, like she'd deleted his.

Looked at her letter—still on his desk, worn from re-reading.

Looked at the wedding photo—face-up now. He couldn't hide it anymore.

Monday I fly to Singapore. Tuesday she flies to Singapore.

We'll be there for five days and we've arranged it so we're never together.

This is not sustainable. This is not what I want. This is not... living.

He opened his laptop. Started typing an email.

微琳，

我需要和你谈谈。在我们去新加坡之前。请。

—墨轩

Weilin,

I need to talk to you. Before we go to Singapore. Please.

—Moxuan

His finger hovered over 'Send'.

Is this brave or stupid? Will she even read it? Will she respond?

He closed the laptop. Didn't send it. Not yet.

But for the first time in a week, he felt like maybe—maybe—there was a way forward.

Maybe Monday's therapy session would give him the courage he needed.

Maybe Dr. Song was right: honesty was the only way through this.

His phone buzzed. Email notification.

From: w.shen@chenxitech.com

Subject: Trip Cancellation Request

His heart stopped.

Opened it.

陈总，

我想请求取消我的新加坡行程。林先生可以处理现场会议。我可以远程提供支持。

我认为这对每个人都是最好的。

—沈微琳

CEO Chen,

I'd like to request cancellation of my Singapore trip. Mr. Lin can handle the on-site meetings. I can provide support

remotely.

I believe this is best for everyone.

—Shen Weilin

She was trying to remove herself from the project. From Singapore. From him.

No. No no no.

This was his fault. He'd pushed her away.

And now she was leaving.

Just like he was afraid she would.

Except this time, he caused it.

END CHAPTER 13

=====~=====

CHAPTER 14: THE THERAPY SESSION (CHEN'S UNRAVELING)

Chen had been sitting in his car for twenty-three minutes, staring at Weilin's letter like it might spontaneously combust—or like he might—and the only thing keeping him from starting the engine and driving away was the knowledge that running hadn't worked yet and probably wouldn't start working now.

8:47 AM. Monday morning. Thirteen minutes before his emergency therapy appointment.

His car was parked outside Dr. Song's office building in Jing'an District. The letter—creased, worn, he'd read it so many times the ink was smudging—sat in his trembling hands. His reflection in the rearview mirror showed a man who hadn't shaved, dark circles carved under his eyes. He looked like he'd aged five years in one week.

Dr. Song's office building loomed through the windshield.

Third floor, window on the left. Safety or judgment?

His breathing was shallow, controlled, barely there. Shanghai traffic hummed distant and muffled. The world moved while he stayed frozen.

His phone buzzed—silenced, too many notifications. Work. Lin Rui checking on him. Weilin's trip cancellation still unanswered.

The letter felt soft from handling, her handwriting under his fingertips. He gripped the steering wheel too tight, knuckles white again. His tie was strangling him—he'd loosened it twice already. The weight in his chest felt physical, crushing. Stale coffee from the cup holder—this morning's third cup. He hadn't eaten. His cologne—applied automatically, armor. And that faint trace of jasmine perfume, imagined. She hadn't been near his car, but he smelled it everywhere.

He hadn't slept. Seventy-two hours of broken sleep, maybe six hours total. Hadn't eaten properly—coffee and anxiety, that was his diet. His hands trembled constantly now, not just during panic attacks. Chest tight, felt like drowning on dry land. Exhausted but wired on caffeine and cortisol.

CHEN'S POV:

Her trip cancellation email arrived at 5:47 AM Saturday. I've read it 127 times. Yes, I counted. I'm aware I have a problem.

"I believe this is best for everyone."

Everyone. Meaning her. Meaning she can't stand to be near me.

And I did that. I made her want to run.

My phone buzzes again. Lin Rui: 你在宋医生的办公室吗？别当懦夫。进去。

Are you at Dr. Song's office? Don't be a coward. Go in.
How does he know where I am? Probably tracking my
location. We share locations for work emergencies.
This feels like an emergency.

I look at the clock: 8:51 AM. Nine minutes until my
appointment.

I could still leave. Drive to the office. Approve her trip
cancellation. Let her go. Move on.

I can't move on.

I grab the letter. Fold it carefully—it's falling apart from my
handling, tape on two corners now. Put it in my jacket pocket
over my heart, like that means something.

Get out of the car.

The walk to Dr. Song's office feels like walking to my
execution.

Appropriate, since I'm about to execute the last of my
defenses.

DR. SONG'S OFFICE, 8:57 AM.

The waiting room was empty—Dr. Song had scheduled this
as an emergency session, before regular hours. Reception
desk vacant—his receptionist didn't arrive until 9:30.

Just Chen and the closed door.

The door opened.

Dr. Song—late fifties, kind eyes, zero tolerance for bullshit: "陈先生。进来。"

Mr. Chen. Come in.

Chen entered.

Dr. Song's office was familiar. Two armchairs—no couch. Dr.
Song didn't believe in couches, said they made people lie
down and avoid. Window overlooking Jing'an. Bookshelf.

Tissue box.

Chen had never used it. Refused to cry in therapy.

Dr. Song sat in his usual chair. Chen sat across from him.

Silence. Dr. Song always did this—waited, let the patient start.

Chen usually started immediately. Efficient, prepared, here's my problem, let's solve it.

Today, Chen said nothing. Just sat there, hand over his jacket pocket. Over the letter. Over his heart.

After two minutes: "你看起来很糟糕。"

You look terrible.

"谢谢。" Thanks.

"上次我们说话时，你刚刚推开了沈微琳。现在是周一。发生了什么？"

Last time we spoke, you'd just pushed away Shen Weilin.

Now it's Monday. What's happened?

Chen's hand tightened on his jacket.

"她想取消新加坡之行。"

She wants to cancel the Singapore trip.

"因为你推她走了。" Because you pushed her away.

"是的。"

"你要让她取消吗？" Are you going to let her cancel?

Chen hadn't answered her email yet. Didn't know what to say.

"我不知道。" I don't know.

"你想让她去吗？" Do you want her to go?

"我想要....." I want...

What do I want?

He stopped. Couldn't finish.

"陈先生。你手里拿着什么？"

Mr. Chen. What are you holding?

Chen looked down—didn't realize he'd taken the letter out. It

was in his hand now, crumpled.

"没什么。" Nothing.

"那不是什么都没有。那是你过去四天折磨自己的东西。"

That's not nothing. That's what you've been torturing yourself with for the past four days.

Caught.

"告诉我关于这封信的事。"

Tell me about the letter.

"什么信？" What letter?

Dr. Song was patient, knowing. "你拿在手里的那封。你为什么带来这里？"

The one in your hand. Why did you bring it here?

"我没有——我只是——" I didn't—I just—

He was lying. They both knew it.

"你可以撒谎。但这浪费了你的时间和金钱。我的收费是每小时2000元。你想花2000元撒谎吗？"

You can lie. But it wastes your time and money. My rate is ¥2,000 per hour. Do you want to spend ¥2,000 lying?

Chen looked at the letter in his hands, evidence of his obsession.

Quiet: "她给我写了封信。" She wrote me a letter.

"什么时候？" When?

"两周前。周六。她把它留在我的桌子上。"

Two weeks ago. Saturday. She left it on my desk.

"她写了什么？" What did she write?

Chen's throat tightened.

"她道歉了。为一切。具体的事情。她记得.....她记得我忘记的事情。或者试图忘记的事情。"

She apologized. For everything. Specific things. She remembered... she remembered things I forgot. Or tried to

forget.

"比如什么？ " Like what?

Chen unfolded the letter, hands shaking. Stared at her handwriting.

"公司聚会。我的第一个客户。她没来。选择了她母亲的晚宴。我从来没有告诉她那有多伤人。但她知道。她记得。"

Company party. My first client. She didn't come. Chose her mother's dinner instead. I never told her how much that hurt. But she knew. She remembered.

His voice broke slightly.

"继续。" Continue.

"和她父母的晚餐。他羞辱了我。问我赚了多少钱。她坐在那里，什么也没说。只是.....沉默。我那天晚上睡在沙发上。第一次。"

Dinner with her parents. He humiliated me. Asked how much money I made. She sat there and said nothing. Just... silence. I slept on the couch that night. First time.

Dr. Song watched quietly, letting Chen unravel.

"她为那次沉默道歉。六年后。她说她应该为我辩护。她说她太骄傲了，太害怕让她的父母失望。"

She apologized for that silence. Six years later. She said she should have defended me. Said she was too proud, too scared of disappointing her parents.

Tears threatened. Chen blinked them back.

"你相信她吗？ " Do you believe her?

"我——" Do I?

Silence.

"你对她的信有什么回应？ "

What did you respond to her letter?

Chen's face hardened with shame.

"我.....我告诉她保持专业界限。个人信件是不合适的。"

I... I told her to maintain professional boundaries. That personal correspondence was inappropriate.

"你为什么那么回应？" Why did you respond that way?

Chen stood, agitated, couldn't sit still. Paced to the window.

"因为她太诚实了！她写了四页关于她如何失败的详细内容！她要求诚实。她要求.....她要求我原谅她。"

Because she was too honest! She wrote four pages detailing how she failed! She asked for honesty. She asked... she asked me to forgive her.

"那吓到你了。" And that scared you.

Chen turned, angry. "是的！那吓到我了！"

Yes! It scared me!

First admission.

"为什么宽恕吓到你？" Dr. Song remained calm.

Why does forgiveness scare you?

"因为....." Because...

Because if I forgive her, what does that make me?

He sat back down heavily, exhausted.

"如果我原谅她，我就是说她做的事情是可以的。我不够好是可以的。她为了金钱和地位离开我是可以的。"

If I forgive her, I'm saying what she did was okay. That I wasn't good enough was okay. That she left me for money and status was okay.

"或者你是在说她是人。她犯了错误。她很抱歉。"

Or you're saying she's human. She made mistakes. She's sorry.

"那太简单了！" That's too easy!

"为什么？为什么宽恕必须复杂？"

Why? Why does forgiveness have to be complicated?

Chen grabbed the letter, clutched it.

"因为她毁了我！她和她的父母让我觉得我一文不值！我花了六年时间建立这个帝国来证明他们错了！证明我够好！如果我原谅她——如果我说'没关系'——那这一切有什么意义？"

Because she destroyed me! She and her parents made me feel worthless! I spent six years building this empire to prove them wrong! To prove I was enough! If I forgive her—if I say 'it's okay'—then what was the point of all this?

He was shouting now. Tears streaming. The tissue box was right there.

He still didn't reach for it.

"那么你的帝国是为了报复而建立的。不是为了成功。为了报复。"
So your empire was built for revenge. Not for success. For revenge.

"是的！" Yes!

The admission hung in the air.

Chen's voice broke, quieter. "我想让她后悔。想让她看到我的价值。想让她痛苦，像我痛苦一样。"

I wanted her to regret it. Wanted her to see what I was worth. Wanted her to suffer like I suffered.

"她现在在受苦吗？" Is she suffering now?

Chen thought about her empty apartment. Sleeping on a floor. Losing weight. Working until 11 PM. Her closed blinds. Her request to cancel Singapore. Her email: "I believe this is best for everyone."

Whisper: "是的。" Yes.

"那你应该高兴了。你得到了你想要的。"

Then you should be happy. You got what you wanted.

Chen looked up, devastated.

"我不高兴。我很痛苦。" I'm not happy. I'm miserable.

"为什么？" Why?

"因为我爱她！ " Because I love her!

There it is. The truth he'd been running from.

He collapsed back in the chair, head in his hands.

"我还爱她。六年了，我还爱她。我以为我恨她。我以为报复会让我感觉更好。但我只是.....我只是想要她回来。我想要她看着我的样子在她写这封信之前。我想要....."

I still love her. Six years and I still love her. I thought I hated her. I thought revenge would make me feel better. But I just... I just want her back. I want her to look at me the way she did before I wrote that email. I want...

He couldn't finish. Just cried.

Finally reached for the tissue box.

Dr. Song's voice was gentle. "读给我听。 " Read it to me.

"什么？ "

"信。大声读给我听。 " The letter. Read it to me out loud.

Chen looked at him. Was he serious?

Dr. Song nodded.

Chen unfolded the letter, hands shaking so badly he could barely hold it.

Started reading, voice broken:

"亲爱的墨轩，我用中文写这篇是因为英语感觉像是在隐藏。我不再隐藏了。 "

Dear Moxuan, I'm writing this in Chinese because English feels like hiding. And I'm done hiding.

He read the whole thing. Every apology. Every specific memory. Every line about what she'd learned.

"This apartment is enough because I chose it."

"You were always enough, Moxuan. I was just too broken to see it."

By the time he reached her question—"Can we start over?"—

he could barely speak.

Finished reading. Folded the letter carefully.

Silence.

"那是一封美丽的信。" That's a beautiful letter.

Chen gave a bitter laugh. "我告诉她这是不合适的。"

I told her it was inappropriate.

"因为它太真实了。因为它要求你也要真实。"

Because it was too real. Because it required you to be real too.

Chen nodded, couldn't speak.

"你真正害怕的是什么？"

What are you actually afraid of?

Chen took a breath. The real answer, the one he'd been avoiding:

"如果我原谅她，我会再次失去自己。陈墨轩很软弱。他让她践踏他。他相信她会留下来。他.....他为她做了一切，这还不够。如果我再次成为他——如果我让她进来——她会再次离开。而这次会杀了我。"

If I forgive her, I'll lose myself again. Chen Moxuan was weak. He let her walk all over him. He believed she'd stay. He... he gave her everything and it wasn't enough. If I become him again—if I let her in—she'll leave again. And it will kill me this time.

There it was. The core wound.

Dr. Song leaned forward. "或者陈墨轩足够勇敢地去完全爱。而 Marcus Chen 太害怕去尝试。"

Or Chen Moxuan was brave enough to love completely. And Marcus Chen is too afraid to try.

The words hit like a physical blow.

"什么？"

"你称墨轩为软弱。但爱某人完全——信任他们，为他们牺牲，尽管可能失败——这需要巨大的勇气。"

You call Moxuan weak. But loving someone completely—trusting them, sacrificing for them, despite the possibility of failure—that takes enormous courage.

"Marcus Chen有什么？金钱。成功。控制。但没有爱。因为爱需要脆弱。而Marcus Chen不做脆弱。"

What does Marcus Chen have? Money. Success. Control. But no love. Because love requires vulnerability. And Marcus Chen doesn't do vulnerability.

Chen stared at him.

"所以问题不是'如果我原谅她，我会失去自己吗？'问题是：'我想成为谁？墨轩还是Marcus？勇敢还是安全？'"

So the question isn't 'if I forgive her, will I lose myself?' The question is: 'Who do I want to be? Moxuan or Marcus? Brave or safe?'

Silence. Chen processing.

Finally: "我不知道如何成为两者。"

I don't know how to be both.

"为什么你需要成为两者？" Why do you need to be both?

"因为我不能回到我曾经的样子。我不能.....我不能再次变得软弱。"

Because I can't go back to what I was. I can't... I can't be weak again.

"谁说你会？你不是同一个人。你建立了一个公司。你有资源。你有治疗。你有六年的成长。"

Who says you would be? You're not the same person. You've built a company. You have resources. You have therapy. You have six years of growth.

"墨轩在25岁时脆弱，没有资源。你现在32岁，有十亿美元。脆弱

不会杀死你。它会让你成为人。"

Moxuan was vulnerable at 25 with no resources. You're 32 now with a billion dollars. Being vulnerable won't kill you. It will make you human.

Chen looked at the letter. Her handwriting. Her vulnerability. She was vulnerable first. She wrote four pages admitting her failures. She asked for honesty.

And I punished her for it.

"我回应得很残忍。" I responded cruelly.

"是的。" Yes.

"我把她推开了。" I pushed her away.

"是的。"

"她现在不会听我的。" She won't listen to me now.

"你怎么知道?" How do you know?

"因为她想取消新加坡之行。她在避开我。"

Because she wants to cancel the Singapore trip. She's avoiding me.

"就像你避开她一样。" Just like you avoided her.

Fair point.

"你想要什么? 真正想要什么?"

What do you want? Really want?

Chen closed his eyes. The truth:

"我想和她说话。真正的谈话。诚实的。像她在信中要求的那样。"

I want to talk to her. Really talk. Honestly. Like she asked for in the letter.

"那么做吧。" Then do it.

"她不会——"

"你试过了吗? 或者你只是假设?"

Have you tried? Or are you just assuming?

Chen didn't answer. Because he hadn't tried, he'd just

assumed.

"这是你的作业。在你去新加坡之前——或者在她取消之前——和她说话。面对面。诚实地。"

Here's your assignment. Before you go to Singapore—or before she cancels—talk to her. Face to face. Honestly.

"说什么?" Say what?

"真相。你害怕。你惊慌了。你搞砸了。你很抱歉。你不知道如何原谅但你想尝试。"

The truth. You're scared. You panicked. You fucked up. You're sorry. You don't know how to forgive but you want to try.

Chen looked at him. Is it that simple?

"这不会很容易。她可能不会原谅你。但至少你会诚实。至少你会勇敢。至少你会成为墨轩。"

It won't be easy. She might not forgive you. But at least you'll be honest. At least you'll be brave. At least you'll be Moxuan. Chen sat there. Letter in hands. Truth in chest. Terrified and determined.

"如果她拒绝了呢? 如果她说太晚了?"

What if she refuses? What if she says it's too late?

"那么至少你尝试了。至少你不会后悔。"

Then at least you tried. At least you won't have regrets.

CHÉNXĪ TECHNOLOGIES, 6:47 PM.

Chen returned to the office. Therapy went until noon. He'd gone home, sat with his thoughts, came back late.

Most of the team had left.

He went straight to his office. Looked through the glass wall to hers.

Her light was on. Blinds open—first time all week.

She was at her desk.

He watched.

She was working. Papers everywhere, laptop open. She'd been there for hours.

She looked exhausted. Thin. Holding on by a thread.

7:15 PM: Still working.

8:00 PM: Still there.

9:30 PM: She stood, stretched, sat back down.

10:47 PM: She put her head on her desk.

Chen stood. Time to do this. Time to be brave.

Walked to her office. Knocked softly.

No response.

Knocked again. Still nothing.

Opened the door quietly.

She was asleep. Head on her desk, papers everywhere, laptop screen still glowing.

Exhausted. Defeated. Alone.

Chen stood in the doorway, chest aching.

This is my fault. She's working herself to death because being here—near me—is less painful than being in that empty apartment. Or because she's trying to finish the project so she can quit.

He walked to his office. Got his suit jacket—Brioni, expensive, the armor he wore.

Came back to her office. Draped it gently over her shoulders. She didn't wake. Just shifted slightly, unconsciously pulling the jacket closer.

Chen stood there, watching her. Memorizing her face relaxed in sleep. The dark circles. The way her hair had fallen out of its bun.

I did this to her. And tomorrow, I'm going to try to fix it.

He saw a Post-it notepad on her desk. Picked it up. Wrote:

回家。睡觉。我们需要谈谈。明天？—M

Go home. Sleep. We need to talk. Tomorrow? —M

Stuck it to her laptop screen where she'd see it when she woke.

Looked at her one more time.

Whispered so quietly she couldn't hear: "对不起，微琳。我很抱歉。"

I'm sorry, Weilin. I'm so sorry.

Left her office. Closed the door softly.

WEILIN'S POV.

She woke at 11:32 PM. Neck cramped, confused.

Realized: she was in her office. Fell asleep at her desk.

Realized: there was a jacket over her shoulders.

Expensive jacket. Smelled like him. His cologne.

She sat up. The jacket slid off. She caught it.

Brioni label. His jacket.

He was here. While I was sleeping. He covered me.

Saw the Post-it note on her laptop:

回家。睡觉。我们需要谈谈。明天？—M

M. Not Marcus Chen, CEO. Just M.

Her hands shook as she held the note.

We need to talk.

After a week of silence, suddenly we need to talk.

She looked at his office—dark now, he was gone.

Looked at his jacket, still warm from his body heat.

Looked at the note. His handwriting. The same handwriting that had sent her that cruel email.

What changed? Why now? What does he want to say?

She picked up her phone. Typed a response—ridiculous, responding to a Post-it with a text, but she couldn't face him

yet.

好的。明天。什么时候？—W

Okay. Tomorrow. When? —W

Sent it.

Stared at his jacket in her hands.

Tomorrow. They would talk tomorrow.

And she had no idea if that meant salvation or the final ending.

END CHAPTER 14

=====~=====

CHAPTER 15: THE JACKET (WEILIN'S HOPE)

Weilin woke at 3:17 AM with her cheek pressed against a budget spreadsheet and some one's jacket draped over her shoulders—and it took exactly three seconds to recognize the scent of bergamot and cedar and realize that Chen had been here, had seen her asleep, had covered her like she mattered, and the kindness of it shattered her so completely she couldn't breathe.

Dark office. Only emergency lighting, city glow through windows. His jacket—charcoal Brioni, impossibly soft, still warm. How long ago did he leave?

The Post-it note glowed on her laptop screen, his handwriting: "We need to talk."

Papers everywhere, evidence of her fourteen-hour work marathon, running from feelings.

Building silence—3 AM quiet, just HVAC hum. Her ragged breathing. Distant traffic. Shanghai never fully slept. Her

heartbeat too fast, too loud.

The jacket. Cashmere blend, expensive, his warmth still in the fabric. Her cramped neck from falling asleep at her desk again. The Post-it note, paper soft between trembling fingers. Tears on her face. When did she start crying?

His cologne—bergamot, cedar, something uniquely him. She'd know it anywhere. Stale office coffee from her third cup hours ago. Her own unwashed hair. She hadn't showered since yesterday morning.

WEILIN'S POV:

His jacket is still warm.

That's the detail that breaks me.

Still warm. Meaning he was here recently. Meaning he stayed—watching me sleep? for how long?—before finally leaving. Meaning he cared enough to cover me but not enough to wake me.

I sit up. The jacket slides off my shoulders. I catch it reflexively.

Bring it to my face. Breathe in.

Bergamot. Cedar. Him.

The same cologne he wore when we were married. I used to bury my face in his neck just to smell it.

I haven't smelled it in six years. Until now.

The Post-it note glows on my laptop screen—office lights are motion-activated, currently off, just screen glow and city lights:

回家。睡觉。我们需要谈谈。明天？—M

Go home. Sleep. We need to talk. Tomorrow? —M

We need to talk.

After a week of "maintain professional boundaries" and

answering my emails through his assistant—suddenly we need to talk.

After I requested to cancel Singapore—suddenly he wants to communicate.

What changed?

I look at my phone: 3:17 AM.

Missed texts. I'd silenced my phone during work.

11:47 PM, Lin Rui: 他在你的办公室待了20分钟。只是看着你睡觉。我以为你应该知道。

He was in your office for 20 minutes. Just watching you sleep. Thought you should know.

Twenty minutes. He watched me sleep for twenty minutes. Why?

Another text. 12:03 AM, Lin Rui: 他看起来像是心碎了。我不知道他对你做了什么，但他现在很痛苦。

He looked heartbroken. I don't know what he did to you, but he's suffering now.

Good. He should suffer.

No—that's not what I want. I don't want him to suffer.

I want...

I clutch his jacket. Press it to my chest like I'm twenty-five again and he's still mine.

Break down completely. Sob into expensive cashmere.

Alone on the 118th floor at 3 AM, crying over a man who rejected my honesty but covered me with his jacket.

I don't understand him. I don't understand this.

But God, I want to.

WEDNESDAY MORNING, 6:47 AM.

I finally go home. Take a taxi—can't face the subway looking like this. Tear-stained, wearing yesterday's clothes, clutching

a man's jacket.

My apartment still barely furnished. IKEA finally delivered Friday. I have a bed now. Small mercies.

I shower. First time in two days. Stand under water until it runs cold.

Look at myself in the mirror. See: dark circles, weight loss, exhaustion, a woman breaking.

This can't continue. I can't continue like this.

I make instant coffee—still can't afford the good stuff, don't care.

Sit on my new IKEA bed. ¥899, cheap but better than the floor. His jacket draped over my desk chair. I brought it home, couldn't leave it at the office.

Stare at it.

"We need to talk. Tomorrow?"

Tomorrow is today. Wednesday.

Do I respond? Do I wait? Do I pretend I didn't see the note?

I pick up my phone. Type:

好的。今天。什么时候？在哪里？—W

Okay. Today. When? Where? —W

Delete it. Too eager.

Type:

收到您的留言。我会在办公室。—沈微琳

Received your note. I'll be in the office. —Shen Weilin

Delete it. Too cold.

Type:

谢谢您的外套。我今天会还给您。—W

Thank you for the jacket. I'll return it today. —W

Send it before I can overthink. 7:03 AM.

His response comes immediately. He's awake. Was he

waiting?

别客气。10点？我的办公室？—M

You're welcome. 10 AM? My office? —M

His office. Private. Glass walls but his door closes.

10 AM. Three hours.

I respond: 好的。—W

Then stare at my phone.

Three hours until I face him. Three hours to prepare for a conversation I don't understand. Three hours to armor up or be vulnerable.

Which one?

I look at his jacket, still on my chair, still smelling like him.

He was vulnerable. The jacket, the note, the "M"—those were vulnerable.

Maybe I should be too.

I need to tell you about this past weekend. Before the jacket. Before the note. Because it matters.

Saturday morning—two days after his cruel email, I was spiraling.

Woke up in my empty apartment and realized: if I stayed there, I'd break.

Needed to get out. Needed to do something—anything—that wasn't thinking about Chen.

Remembered: a coworker at my old job mentioned volunteering at a migrant children's shelter.

Found the address. Yangpu District, not far from my apartment.

Went.

晨曦希望中心 CHENXI HOPE CENTER

The irony of the name didn't escape me. Chenxi. Dawn. Same

name as his company.

The universe has a sick sense of humor.

The center: repurposed factory building, bright murals on walls, sounds of children laughing.

The coordinator—Mrs. Zhang, fifties, kind face: "你来做志愿者？"

You're here to volunteer?

"是的。如果你需要帮助的话。"

Yes. If you need help.

"我们总是需要帮助。你会说普通话和上海话吗？"

We always need help. Do you speak Mandarin and Shanghainese?

"两者都会。" Both.

Mrs. Zhang smiled. "完美。来吧。" Perfect. Come.

They put me to work:

- Reading to children, ages five to ten, migrant workers' kids
- Helping with homework
- Serving lunch
- Just... being present

It was the first time in weeks I felt useful. The first time I thought about something other than Chen. The first time I felt like maybe, maybe, I was worth something beyond my job or my family's money or my failed marriage.

Saturday afternoon, 2:47 PM.

Mrs. Zhang: "你做得很好。你以前做过这个吗？"

You're doing great. Have you done this before?

"没有。但我想帮忙。"

No. But I want to help.

"为什么？" Why?

I paused. Honest answer:

"因为我需要记住我不是我的错误。我需要记住我可以做好事。"
Because I need to remember I'm not my mistakes. I need to remember I can do good things.

Mrs. Zhang smiled with understanding. "那你来对地方了。"
Then you're in the right place.

SUNDAY MORNING.

I returned. Didn't plan to, but Saturday felt good. Needed more.

Mrs. Zhang: "你回来了！" You came back!

"我可以帮忙吗？" Can I help?

"当然。今天我们在花园里工作。孩子们正在种蔬菜。"

Of course. Today we're working in the garden. The kids are planting vegetables.

The garden: rooftop, makeshift planters, children with tiny shovels.

And another volunteer. Woman, late fifties, wearing simple clothes, baseball cap, gloves. Working alongside the children. Patient. Kind. Smiling.

I joined the planting. Worked next to the woman for two hours.

We talked about how to plant tomatoes. Which children were shy versus outgoing. The weather. Nothing deep, just... pleasant conversation.

The woman laughed as a child accidentally threw dirt on her.

"孩子们让你保持谦卑，对吧？"

Children keep you humble, right?

I smiled. "是的。我需要更多的谦卑。"

Yes. I need more humility.

"我们都需要。" We all do.

We worked in comfortable silence.

I felt... peaceful. For the first time in weeks.

SUNDAY, 11:47 AM.

Lunch break.

The woman and I washing dirt off our hands at the outdoor sink.

She removed her baseball cap to splash water on her face.

I saw her face clearly for the first time.

Froze.

Oh God. Oh God no.

It's her.

Chen's mother.

I'd only met her twice. Once at our wedding—small ceremony, she cried tears of joy, hugged me, said "欢迎来到家庭"—welcome to the family.

Once more, a month before the divorce. She'd brought us dumplings, homemade. Sat in our tiny apartment. Asked if we were okay. I'd lied, said we were fine.

She'd looked at me with kind eyes and said: "婚姻很难。但如果你们相爱，你们可以度过任何难关。"

Marriage is hard. But if you love each other, you can get through anything.

Two weeks later, I moved out.

I never saw her again.

Until now.

Chen's mother looked up. Saw my face.

Recognition dawned slowly.

"微琳？" Weilin?

My throat was tight. "陈太太。" Mrs. Chen.

Long silence. Both staring. The children playing around us, oblivious.

"你.....你在这里做志愿者？"

You... you volunteer here?

"我.....是的。从昨天开始。我没意识到你....."

I... yes. Since yesterday. I didn't realize you...

"我每个周末都来。已经三年了。"

I come every weekend. For three years now.

Of course she does. Of course Chen's mother volunteers at a children's shelter. Of course the universe would put us together.

I started to back away. "我应该走。我不想让你不舒服——"

I should go. I don't want to make you uncomfortable—

"留下。" Stay.

"什么？"

"留下。我们需要帮助。孩子们喜欢你。"

Stay. We need the help. The children like you.

She said it simply. No judgment. No anger. Just... kindness.

Tears threatened. "我不知道该说什么。"

I don't know what to say.

"那就什么都别说。来吧。午饭快好了。"

Then don't say anything. Come on. Lunch is almost ready.

She turned and walked toward the lunch area.

I stood there, shocked, confused.

Mrs. Zhang appeared beside me. "你认识赵太太？"

You know Mrs. Zhao?

Mrs. Zhao. Chen's mother's surname. She uses her maiden name here.

"我.....很久以前认识她。"

I... knew her a long time ago.

"她是我们最好的志愿者。每周都来。从不错过。她的心是金子做的。"

She's our best volunteer. Comes every week. Never misses.
Her heart is made of gold.

Of course it is. Her son has the same heart. Hidden under armor, but it's there.

SUNDAY, 1:47 PM.

After lunch—the children napping, volunteers cleaning up.
Chen's mother approached me. I'd been avoiding her for two hours.

"走路吗？" Walk?

Not a question. An invitation that was really a gentle command.

We walked on the rooftop, away from others. Private.
Silence. I didn't know how to start.

Finally: "你看起来很瘦。你在吃饭吗？"

You look thin. Are you eating?

Just like she used to ask Moxuan. Just like a mother.

"我.....是的。" I... yes.

"撒谎。" Lying.

Caught.

"墨轩也不吃饭。林瑞告诉我。说他瘦了，看起来很糟糕。"

Moxuan's not eating either. Lin Rui told me. Says he's lost weight, looks terrible.

So Lin Rui talks to Chen's mother. Of course he does.

"我很抱歉。关于.....关于一切。"

I'm sorry. About... about everything.

"为什么你道歉？" What are you apologizing for?

"因为我离开了他。因为我伤害了他。因为——"

Because I left him. Because I hurt him. Because—

"因为你25岁，害怕，你的父母在压你？"

Because you were 25 and scared and your parents were

pressuring you?

I stopped walking. Stared at her.

"林瑞告诉我了。不是全部。但足够了。我知道你的父母。我知道他们对你做了什么。"

Lin Rui told me. Not everything. But enough. I know your parents. I know what they did to you.

"那不是借口。" That's not an excuse.

"不。但这是一个解释。"

No. But it's an explanation.

We sat on a bench overlooking the garden, children's laughter below.

"你现在为他工作。" You work for him now.

"是的。"

"为什么?"

"因为我需要证明我改变了。因为我....."

Because I need to prove I've changed. Because I...

I couldn't say "because I still love him" to his mother.

"因为你还爱他。" Because you still love him.

Not a question.

Tears now. "是的。"

"他也还爱你。" He still loves you too.

I looked up. Was she serious?

"他不承认。对我不承认。对自己不承认。但我知道。"

He won't admit it. Not to me. Not to himself. But I know.

"他恨我。" He hates me.

"不。他害怕你。这不一样。"

No. He's afraid of you. That's different.

I wiped tears. This conversation was surreal.

"他六年来第一次来看我是上周。你知道他说了什么吗?"

He came to see me for the first time in six years last week.

You know what he said?

"什么？"

"他说：'妈妈，我搞砸了。我不知道怎么修复它。'"

He said: 'Mom, I fucked up. I don't know how to fix it.'

My breath caught.

"我问他搞砸了什么。他说：'一切。我把她推开了。'我说：'那把她拉回来。'他说：'我不知道怎么做。'"

I asked what he fucked up. He said: 'Everything. I pushed her away.' I said: 'Then pull her back.' He said: 'I don't know how.'

"我给他写了封信。他说这是不合适的。"

I wrote him a letter. He said it was inappropriate.

"他害怕了。" He was scared.

"害怕什么？" Scared of what?

"害怕原谅。害怕脆弱。害怕再次成为陈墨轩。"

Scared of forgiving. Scared of being vulnerable. Scared of being Chen Moxuan again.

She looked at me, really looked, assessing:

"你回到杨浦了。" You're back in Yangpu.

"是的。"

"你离开了你的家人。" You left your family.

"是的。"

"你睡在地板上直到你能买得起床。"

You slept on a floor until you could afford a bed.

How does she know that? Lin Rui. Of course.

"你在这里做志愿者。不是为了给我留下深刻印象——你不知道我会在这里。只是为了做好事。"

You're volunteering here. Not to impress me—you didn't know I'd be here. Just to do good.

"我需要记住我不是我的错误。"

I need to remember I'm not my mistakes.

Chen's mother took my hand. Unexpected, warm:

"你不是。你是一个犯了错误的年轻女人。但你在改正它们。这很重要。"

You're not. You were a young woman who made mistakes. But you're correcting them. That matters.

I broke. Full crying now.

"我不知道该怎么办。他不会听我的。"

I don't know what to do. He won't listen to me.

"那就让他看到。不是通过文字。通过行动。"

Then let him see. Not through words. Through actions.

"什么行动？" What actions?

"继续做你正在做的事。努力工作。住在杨浦。志愿服务。成为你
现在的人——不是为了给他留下深刻印象，而是因为这是你。"

Keep doing what you're doing. Work hard. Live in Yangpu. Volunteer. Be who you are now—not to impress him, but because it's who you are.

"他会看到的。他很聪明。害怕，但聪明。"

He'll see. He's smart. Scared, but smart.

MONDAY MORNING—PRESENT DAY.

That was yesterday. Sunday with his mother.

Who told me he still loves me. Who told me he's afraid. Who told me to keep being myself.

And last night, he left his jacket. And a note. "We need to talk."

Maybe she's right. Maybe he's ready.

Or maybe this is another test I'll fail.

9:47 AM.

I'm in my office. His jacket dry-cleaned overnight—yes, I paid ¥200 to dry-clean a jacket that costs ¥30,000. I'm aware of the irony.

Jacket hanging on its hanger, covered in dry-cleaning plastic.

A Post-it note attached.

I've been writing this note for an hour. Seven drafts, each one different.

Draft 7, final:

谢谢。为了这个，也为了你从未说过的一切。—W

Thank you. For this, and for everything you never said. —W

Everything he never said. The jacket. The Post-it notes. The furniture he sent, even though I refused it. The way he watched me sleep for twenty minutes.

Love in action, not words. Just like his mother said.

I stick the note to the dry-cleaning plastic.

9:58 AM. Two minutes until our meeting.

Pick up the jacket on its hanger, pristine.

Walk to his office.

Chen's office door is closed. He's inside—I can see him through glass, sitting at his desk, looking nervous.

Marcus Chen doesn't get nervous. But there he is, running his hand through his hair repeatedly.

I knock.

He looks up. Sees me. Sees his jacket.

Stands too quickly, nervous energy. Gestures for me to come in.

I open the door. Step inside. The door closes behind me.

Just us. Glass walls—the team can see us but can't hear.

A jacket between us. Everything unsaid.

I hold out the jacket. "你的外套。我让人洗了。"

Your jacket. I had it cleaned.

He takes it, fingers brushing mine—electric contact. "你不必那样做。"

You didn't have to do that.

"我知道。但我想。"

I know. But I wanted to.

He sees the Post-it note on the dry-cleaning plastic. Reads it.

谢谢。为了这个，也为了你从未说过的一切。—W

His eyes snap to mine.

"我从未说过的一切？" Everything I never said?

"是的。"

I'm not elaborating. Making him ask. Matching his vulnerability with my own.

"你想谈谈吗？" Do you want to talk?

"你想吗？" Do you?

He looks at me. Really looks—sees the weight loss, the exhaustion, the armor, the hope.

Quiet: "我不知道从哪里开始。"

I don't know where to start.

"我也不知道。" Me neither.

Long silence.

"我的治疗师说我应该诚实。"

My therapist says I should be honest.

"你在看治疗师？" You're seeing a therapist?

"六年了。自从....." For six years. Since...

Since the divorce. He doesn't have to finish.

"我上周末遇到了你妈妈。"

I met your mother last weekend.

His eyes widen with shock. "什么？"

"晨曦希望中心。我在做志愿者。她也在。"

Chenxi Hope Center. I was volunteering. So was she.

"她.....她说了什么？" She... what did she say?

I could tell him everything. His mother said he still loves me, that he's afraid, that he came to her crying.

I don't. That's his story to tell.

"她说你很聪明。但害怕。"

She said you're smart. But scared.

His jaw clenches. Called out by his own mother through his ex-wife.

"她没错。" She's not wrong.

First real admission.

Silence stretches between us.

I take a breath. "我也害怕。"

I'm scared too.

He looks at me. Surprised.

"我害怕你会再次推我走。我害怕我会再次搞砸。我害怕这次谈话会毁掉我们可能拥有的一切。"

I'm scared you'll push me away again. I'm scared I'll mess up again. I'm scared this conversation will destroy whatever we might have.

His face changes. Softens.

"那我们应该怎么办？" Then what should we do?

I look at him. At this man I loved and lost and found again.

"也许我们只是.....诚实？像你的治疗师说的？像我在信中要求的？"

Maybe we just... be honest? Like your therapist said? Like I asked for in the letter?

He nods slowly. "好的。诚实。"

Okay. Honest.

Takes a breath.

"我读了你的信大概一百次。"

I read your letter about a hundred times.

"然后你告诉我这是不合适的。"

And then you told me it was inappropriate.

"我知道。"痛苦划过他的脸。"我惊慌了。你太诚实了，这吓到了我。"

I know. Pain crosses his face. I panicked. You were too honest and it scared me.

"为什么？" Why?

"因为如果我原谅你，如果我让你进来，你可能会再次离开。而这次会杀了我。"

Because if I forgive you, if I let you in, you might leave again. And it would kill me this time.

My heart breaks. "那外套呢？便条？看着我睡觉二十分钟？"

Then what about the jacket? The notes? Watching me sleep for twenty minutes?

He looks stunned. "你怎么知道——"

How did you know—

"林瑞告诉我了。"

Lin Rui told me.

Chen closes his eyes. "我不能帮助自己。我看到你在那里，累了，独自一人，我.....我需要确保你没事。"

I couldn't help myself. I saw you there, exhausted, alone, and I... I needed to make sure you were okay.

"那不是恨。" That's not hate.

"不。" 他睁开眼睛看着我。"那不是恨。"

No. He opens his eyes, looks at me. That's not hate.

"那是什么？" Then what is it?

Long pause. Then:

"我想那是爱。尽管我拼命试图阻止它。"

I think it's love. Despite my best efforts to stop it.

The words hang between us.

I can't breathe.

"墨轩——" Moxuan—

"我们能慢慢来吗？"他打断我。"我不知道如何原谅。我不知道如何信任。但我想尝试。如果你愿意等我弄清楚的话。"

Can we go slow? He interrupts. I don't know how to forgive. I don't know how to trust. But I want to try. If you're willing to wait while I figure it out.

Tears stream down my face.

"我会等。只要你需要。"

I'll wait. As long as you need.

He reaches out. Hesitates. Then takes my hand.

"新加坡。下周。和我一起去？"

Singapore. Next week. Come with me?

"我以为我取消了。"

I thought I was canceling.

"别取消。我们.....我们可以在那里谈话。远离这里。远离玻璃墙和办公室和过去的所有重量。"

Don't cancel. We... we can talk there. Away from here. Away from glass walls and offices and all the weight of the past. I look at our joined hands. At his face. At the hope I see there, fragile and terrified but real.

"好的。我会去。"

Okay. I'll go.

He exhales like he's been holding his breath for six years.

"谢谢你。"

Thank you.

"不，谢谢你。为了外套。为了便条。为了愿意尝试。"

No, thank you. For the jacket. For the notes. For being willing to try.

We stand there, hands joined, looking at each other through tears and hope and six years of wreckage.

It's not fixed. We're not fixed.

But maybe, maybe, we're starting.

END CHAPTER 15

=====~=====

CHAPTER 16: THE CRACK (SCENE 4 SETUP - LATE NIGHT BAR FORESHADOWING)

Chen had been staring at Weilin's Post-it note for three hours—"Thank you for this, and for everything you never said"—and the longer he stared, the more he realized that "everything he never said" was the entire architecture of his carefully constructed loneliness, and maybe it was time to start demolishing it, brick by expensive brick.

9:47 PM. Monday evening. Twelve hours after the jacket return, after a conversation that went nowhere.

His office at Chénxī Technologies, 118th floor. Alone after everyone left. Dark—he'd turned off the lights hours ago. Just city glow and laptop screen.

The Post-it note yellow against his dark desk, her handwriting impossible to ignore. His cleaned jacket hanging on his office door, still in dry-cleaning plastic. She'd spent money she didn't have to clean his jacket.

Shanghai glittered below, endless and indifferent.

Building silence—HVAC hum, the specific silence of being alone in a place meant for hundreds. His breathing steady, controlled, lying. Occasional ping from his computer, emails he was ignoring. His phone face-down, silent. He kept checking it, waiting for her to text first.

She wouldn't.

The Post-it note—he'd touched it so many times the adhesive was wearing off. His wedding ring, phantom sensation. He hadn't worn it in six years but sometimes his finger still felt empty.

The desk drawer pull, right side, bottom drawer. He kept reaching for it, stopping himself.

Stale coffee, his sixth cup today, cold now. His cologne reapplied after their 10 AM meeting, trying to erase the nervousness-sweat. Nothing else. His office smelled like nothing. Sterile. Unlived-in.

CHEN'S POV:

"Thank you for everything you never said."

What did I never say?

I sit in the dark—turned off the lights two hours ago, can't stand the fluorescent reminder of productivity, of Marcus Chen, CEO.

Stare at her handwriting.

I never said: I kept our wedding photo.

I never said: I watched you sleep for twenty minutes Tuesday night and it took everything in me not to wake you, not to apologize, not to beg.

I never said: I hired you because I'm not over you and punishing myself seemed preferable to forgetting you.

I never said: Every Post-it note I left was me trying to say "I still care" without the vulnerability of saying it.

My hand reaches for the bottom right desk drawer again. Stops.

Don't. You haven't opened that drawer in two years. There's nothing in there you need.

Liar.

I pull it open.

Inside the drawer:

Old business cards from when I was nobody. Receipts from investments that failed. A pen, dried out, but it was the first pen I used to sign a client contract. Random cables.

And—

A USB drive.

Silver. 16GB. Ancient by current standards.

Label in faded Sharpie: 婚礼照片 Wedding Photos

I forgot this was here.

No—I didn't forget. I buried it. Deliberately.

When I moved into this office three years ago, I put this drawer together like a time capsule of failure. Things from my old life. Things 陈墨轩 owned. Things Marcus Chen doesn't need.

I pick up the USB drive. Light, innocuous. A few grams of plastic and metal containing everything I've tried to forget. Stare at it.

I could throw it away. Right now. Trash bin. Done.

I plug it into my computer.

Loading. Feels like forever. Probably three seconds.

Folder opens: 147 photos.

147 photos from one day. Our wedding day. October 15, 2018.

I click on the first one.

Morning preparations. Weilin in that cheap white dress from the bridal shop—¥800, she insisted it was perfect, I thought she deserved better. Her mother doing her makeup in their old house. Weilin looking... young. Nervous. Happy.

Next photo: Me. In the secondhand suit—¥600, Lin Rui helped me pick it. Hair too long, couldn't afford a haircut that week.

Tie crooked, nervous hands. Grinning like an idiot.

I look so young. So hopeful. So fucking naive.

Next: The ceremony. City hall. No church—couldn't afford it, didn't care. Just us, Lin Rui as witness, a city official reading vows.

Next: Weilin saying "I do." Eyes on me. Smiling. Meaning it. She meant it. I know she did. She meant it and then everything fell apart anyway.

I scroll faster—too painful to linger:

The kiss. Signing papers. Walking out of city hall into October sunshine. Her laughing at something I said—I don't remember what. Me carrying her over the threshold of our shitty apartment. Tradition, even in poverty.

Stop scrolling at photo #47.

The noodle shop.

Oh God. The noodle shop.

Photo #47.

The image:

Location: The noodle place on Sichuan Road. Old Zhao's restaurant. Our restaurant.

People: Weilin and me, squished into one side of a table. Tiny table, smaller booth. We didn't fit properly but we didn't care.

Details:

Two bowls of beef noodles—¥15 each, our wedding dinner because we spent all our money on the dress and suit.

Weilin mid-laugh. Head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, completely unselfconscious.

Me looking at her. Not at the camera. At her.

And—this is what makes me laugh now—there's sauce on my nose.

I remember this moment exactly.

We'd just gotten married. Walked from city hall to the noodle shop—couldn't afford taxi, didn't matter, held hands the whole way.

Sat down. Ordered our usual. Old Zhao saw Weilin's dress and my suit and immediately understood.

"结婚了？！" You got married?! he'd shouted.

Entire restaurant turned to look.

Weilin blushed. I nodded.

Old Zhao brought out the good noodles—extra beef, extra broth, extra everything. "恭喜！这是我请的！"

Congratulations! This is on me!

We ate like we were starving.

Weilin kept laughing—giddy, nervous energy from the day.

I was slurping noodles, trying to be romantic and failing.

She leaned over to kiss me.

I didn't see her coming—mid-slurp.

Noodle sauce splashed on my nose.

She pulled back, saw my face, and lost it. Complete breakdown laughing.

"You have—you have sauce on your—" Couldn't finish. Too busy laughing.

I wiped my nose with my napkin, got more sauce on my cheek.

She laughed harder.

I started laughing too—not at the sauce, but at her laugh.

That completely uninhibited, ridiculous laugh.

Lin Rui took this photo. Captured the exact moment of her laugh and my adoration and my sauce-covered nose.

"你们的婚纱照！" Your wedding photo! he'd said.

We'd framed it. Put it on our bedside table.

It was the first thing I saw every morning and the last thing I saw every night.

Until the divorce.

When I took it down. Put it in the drawer face-down. Couldn't look at it. Couldn't throw it away.

Now, staring at the digital version, I—
I laugh.

Out loud. Alone in my dark office at 9:58 PM.

A real laugh. Not a business laugh. Not a polite social laugh.

A genuine, from-the-gut, helpless laugh at the memory of beef noodle sauce on my nose and my wife—ex-wife—losing her mind over it.

The laugh surprises me.

I can't remember the last time I laughed like this.

My office door opens.

Lin Rui standing in the doorway, laptop bag over shoulder, clearly about to leave for the day. Stopped by the sound.

"你在笑什么？" What are you laughing at?

I wipe my eyes. When did I start crying?

"什么？"

"你在笑。我听到了。我以为有人在看喜剧。结果是你。"

You were laughing. I heard it. I thought someone was watching a comedy. Turns out it's you.

He sounds shocked. Rightfully so.

Lin Rui enters, closing the door. "我在这家公司工作了四年。我从来没听过你真正笑过。"

I've worked at this company for four years. I've never heard you actually laugh.

That hits differently than he meant it to.

"我笑。" I laugh.

"不。你做生意的笑。礼貌的笑。'客户说了个笑话我必须假装觉得有趣'的笑。但刚才那个.....那是真的。"

No. You do business laughs. Polite laughs. 'Client made a joke I have to pretend is funny' laughs. But that just now... that was real.

I don't know what to say to that.

Lin Rui gestures to the laptop. "所以是什么？给我看看。"

So what is it? Show me.

"只是.....一张老照片。" Just... an old photo.

"让我猜。是她。" Let me guess. It's her.

I don't respond. Which is a response.

Lin Rui comes around the desk. "给我看。"

I hesitate. This feels private, sacred almost.

But Lin Rui was there. Lin Rui took this photo.

I turn the laptop so he can see.

Lin Rui sees the photo.

Immediate smile. "天啊。我记得这个。面条酱。"

Oh my God. I remember this. The noodle sauce.

"你拍的这张照片。" You took this photo.

"是的。我想我把它寄给了你们两个。"

Yeah. I thought I sent it to both of you.

"你做了。她可能还有。"

You did. She probably still has it.

Lin Rui studies the photo. "你看看你的脸。"

Look at your face.

"我知道。酱——" I know. The sauce—

"不。不是酱。是你看她的方式。像她是宇宙的中心。"

No. Not the sauce. The way you're looking at her. Like she's the center of the universe.

I look at the photo again. Lin Rui's right—I'm looking at Weilin like she hung the stars.

"你上次那样看她是什么时候？"

When's the last time you looked at her like that?

"七年前。" Seven years ago.

"你上次像刚才那样笑是什么时候？"

When's the last time you laughed like you just did?

"七年前。和她一起。"

Seven years ago. With her.

Silence.

Lin Rui sits on the edge of my desk—informal, friend-space not employee-space.

"你注意到了吗？" Have you noticed?

"注意到什么？" Noticed what?

"Marcus Chen从不笑。不是真的。陈墨轩一直在笑。"

Marcus Chen never laughs. Not really. Chen Moxuan laughed all the time.

The observation lands like a punch.

"那不——" That's not—

"是真的。在研究生院，在创业初期，即使你们在那个糟糕的公寓里挣扎——你在笑。开玩笑。活着。"

It is. In grad school, in the early startup days, even when you guys were struggling in that shitty apartment—you were laughing. Joking. Alive.

"然后离婚发生了。你建立了这个。" He gestures around—the office, the empire.

Then the divorce happened. You built this.

"Marcus Chen出生了。成功。富有。强大。也不快乐。"

Marcus Chen was born. Successful. Wealthy. Powerful. Also not happy.

I want to argue. Defend myself, defend my choices.

Can't.

Because Lin Rui is right.

"墨轩很软弱。" Moxuan was weak.

"不。墨轩很人性化。有区别。"

No. Moxuan was human. There's a difference.

Lin Rui stands, preparing to leave but making his point first.

"Marcus Chen有一个帝国。墨轩有一段婚姻。我知道你觉得你失去了哪一个。但你考虑过你为了得到另一个而放弃了什么吗？"

Marcus Chen has an empire. Moxuan had a marriage. I know which one you think you lost. But have you considered what you gave up to get the other?

He leaves. Door closing softly.

I sit alone with the photo. The laughter still echoing. The realization that Lin Rui just diagnosed me with six years of self-amputation.

I go back to the photos. Scroll through all 147.

Watching myself in each image:

Laughing. Smiling. Holding Weilin. Dancing badly. Making faces at the camera. Looking at her like she's everything.

Every photo: 陈墨轩.

None of them: Marcus Chen.

I open a second window on my computer. Pull up my company's About page. Professional photo from last year: Marcus Chen, CEO.

Compare the two images:

Wedding photo: messy hair, cheap suit, sauce on nose, laughing

CEO photo: perfect hair, ¥30,000 suit, serious expression, controlled

Same face. Different person.

I open my phone. Photo gallery. Scroll back through six years of photos:

Business events. Awards ceremonies. Office openings. Team celebrations. Press conferences.

In none of them am I laughing.

Smiling, yes. Professional smile. CEO smile.

But laughing? No.

Lin Rui is right.

Marcus Chen doesn't laugh.

Marcus Chen is efficient, successful, controlled.

Marcus Chen has a billion dollars and an empty penthouse and an empire built on proving someone wrong.

Moxuan ate cheap noodles and got sauce on his nose and laughed until he cried and was happy.

I go back to the wedding photo. Photo #47. The noodle shop. Study it.

That person—that laughing, sauce-covered, completely unselfconscious person—is who she fell in love with.

That person is who I was. Before I armored up. Before I became Marcus Chen to prove I was enough.

But what if 墨轩 was already enough?

What if I amputated the best parts of myself to build something impressive but empty?

My phone buzzes. Text from my mother—of course she's texting at 10:37 PM:

林瑞告诉我他听到你笑了。他说他几乎认不出那个声音。我说我也记不得那个声音了。也许是时候找回它了。—妈妈

Lin Rui told me he heard you laugh. He said he almost didn't recognize the sound. I said I don't remember it either

anymore. Maybe it's time to find it again. —Mom
They're conspiring. Lin Rui and my mother. Tag-teaming me.
It's working.

I look at the noodle shop photo one more time. Then at
Weilin's Post-it note: "Thank you for everything you never
said."

Everything I never said.

I never said: I miss laughing.

I never said: I miss being 墨轩.

I never said: Marcus Chen is successful but 墨轩 was happy.

I never said: Maybe I chose the wrong one.

11:47 PM.

Still at my desk. Everyone left hours ago. City is quieting. I'm
alone with photos and realizations.

I pick up my phone. Open messages. Her contact—saved as
"沈微琳 - Weilin". I added her Chinese name back last week.
Small step.

Type:

你还记得四川路的面馆吗？

Do you remember the noodle place on Sichuan Road?

Delete it. Too random. She'll think I'm drunk or having a
breakdown.

I'm sober and having a breakdown, but still.

Type:

我找到了我们的婚礼照片。我一直保留着。

I found our wedding photos. I kept them all along.

Delete it. Too much. Too vulnerable.

Type:

你还记得四川路的面馆吗？

Do you remember the noodle place on Sichuan Road?

Stare at it. Simple. Non-threatening. A memory we share.
She mentioned it last week—said she checked if it was still there.

She remembers. I remember.

Maybe that's a start.

Send it. 11:52 PM.

Immediately regret it. What if she's asleep? What if she doesn't answer? What if she tells me to stop texting her at midnight like a creep?

Three dots appear immediately.

She's awake.

WEILIN'S POV:

I'm lying in my IKEA bed—¥899, still uncomfortable but better than the floor—when my phone lights up.

11:52 PM. His name.

I should be asleep. Need to be in the office by 8 AM tomorrow for Singapore prep meeting.

But I've been awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking about this morning's conversation that went nowhere.

His text: 你还记得四川路的面馆吗?

Do you remember the noodle place on Sichuan Road?

I sit up. Heart racing.

Of course I remember. I told him last week I remember.

But why is he asking now? At midnight?

I type:

每一个细节。

Every detail.

Send it.

His response comes fast:

我也是。我找到了一张照片。你在笑。我的鼻子上有酱。

Me too. I found a photo. You were laughing. I had sauce on my nose.

Oh God. That photo.

I have that photo. Framed. In the bottom of my closet.

Wrapped in a sweater. Couldn't throw it away. Couldn't look at it either.

But I kept it.

I type:

面条酱。你试图浪漫，失败了。

Noodle sauce. You were trying to be romantic and failed.

His response:

我笑了。刚才。看着那张照片。林瑞说他从来没听过我真正笑过。他说Marcus Chen不笑。只有陈墨轩笑。

I laughed. Just now. Looking at that photo. Lin Rui said he's never heard me really laugh. He said Marcus Chen doesn't laugh. Only Chen Moxuan laughs.

My breath catches.

He's being honest. Vulnerable. Using both his names.

Acknowledging the split.

I type:

你更喜欢哪一个？

Which one do you prefer being?

Long pause. Three dots appear. Disappear. Appear again.

Finally:

我正在努力弄清楚。但我今晚笑了。七年来第一次真正笑了。那感觉.....好。

I'm trying to figure it out. But I laughed tonight. Really laughed for the first time in seven years. It felt... good.

Tears blur my vision.

He laughed. Because of a photo of us. Of who we were.

I type:

老赵的餐厅还在那里。还是¥15一碗。你想.....?

Old Zhao's restaurant is still there. Still ¥15 a bowl. Do you want...?

I can't finish the question.

Do you want to go back there with me? Do you want to remember who we were? Do you want to try again?

His response:

是的。

Yes.

One word. But it's everything.

I type:

什么时候?

When?

His response:

我们从新加坡回来后? 下周五?

After we get back from Singapore? Next Friday?

Singapore. We're going together. Five days. Meetings and proximity and whatever this is between us.

And then: noodle shop. Old Zhao's. Where it all started.

I type:

下周五。晚上7点。

Next Friday. 7 PM.

His response:

这是约会吗?

Is this a date?

Is it?

I type:

这是两个曾经结婚的人吃面条。你决定它是什么。

It's two people who used to be married eating noodles. You

decide what it is.

His response:

公平。晚安，微琳。

Fair. Goodnight, Weilin.

微琳. Not Miss Shen. Not Shen Weilin.

微琳. The name he used when we were happy.

I type:

晚安，墨轩。

Goodnight, Moxuan.

墨轩. Not Marcus. Not Mr. Chen.

墨轩. The man who got sauce on his nose and laughed about it.

I lie back down. Phone on my chest. Smiling at my ceiling.

Next Friday. Noodle shop. Whatever this is.

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's everything.

Maybe it's a chance to find out if 陈墨轩 and 沈微琳 still exist underneath Marcus Chen and Miss Shen.

My phone buzzes one more time.

我保留了那张照片。在我的办公桌抽屉里。六年了。我不能扔掉它。—M

I kept that photo. In my desk drawer. For six years. I couldn't throw it away. —M

I don't respond. What do you say to that?

Just hold my phone and let myself hope.

END CHAPTER 16

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CHAPTER 17: THE COLLAPSE (SCENE 5 - HOSPITAL VISIT PART 1)

Weilin had been standing in front of the projector screen for eleven minutes, presenting the Singapore regulatory strategy with precision that was ninety percent muscle memory and ten percent sheer force of will—and the force of will was failing, evidenced by the way the room kept tilting sideways and Chen's face kept blurring and her heart kept beating too fast and too slow simultaneously, which didn't make sense but nothing made sense anymore including why she couldn't remember if she'd eaten breakfast or if breakfast was even a concept she still understood.

9:47 AM. Tuesday morning. One day after their midnight text exchange. Four days before Singapore.

Conference Room B. Team meeting in progress.

The room kept blurring. Edges fuzzy. Fluorescent lights too bright. Her presentation slides—she was on slide 14 of 23. So far to go. The team, eight faces watching her, concern creeping in.

Chen at the head of the table. Not looking at slides. Looking at her. Eyes sharp with something—worry? She couldn't focus enough to tell.

Her own voice sounded distant, underwater. Was she slurring? Her heartbeat loud, erratic, drowning everything else. The air conditioning an oppressive hum. Someone asking a question—Zhang Wei? Lin Rui? She couldn't distinguish voices.

The clicker in her hand slipping. Sweaty palms. Her feet unsteady. Why won't they stay solid? Her suit too tight,

suffocating. The podium—she was gripping it. When did she start gripping it? Her knuckles were white.

Coffee. Someone was drinking coffee. The smell made her nauseous. Her own fear-sweat. Nothing else. She couldn't smell anything else. Senses shutting down.

She hadn't eaten in thirty-six hours. Forgot yesterday, too nervous this morning. Slept three hours, lying awake thinking about midnight texts, about "墨轩," about hope.

Standing too long. Legs trembling. She'd locked her knees—mistake.

Blood sugar crashing. Dizzy. Vision tunneling.

When did she last drink water?

WEILIN'S POV:

Slide 14: Regulatory Timeline.

I'm talking. Words are coming out of my mouth. Something about MAS approval and timelines and compliance.

The words sound right. But the room is tilting.

I grip the podium harder. Ground yourself. You're fine. Just finish.

Someone asks a question. Zhang Wei? His voice is so far away.

"沈小姐，关于第三季度合规——你能详细说明吗？"

Miss Shen, regarding Q3 compliance—can you elaborate?

I open my mouth. Answer. You know this answer. You wrote this section.

"第三季度合规需要.....需要....."

Q3 compliance requires... requires...

What does it require?

I know this. I literally wrote this slide.

Why can't I remember?

The room tilts harder. Or am I tilting? Hard to tell.

The lights are too bright. Or too dark? Everything's dimming at the edges.

My heartbeat is so loud. Can everyone hear it? It sounds like drums.

I look at Chen. At the end of the table. Why is he standing? When did he stand?

His face: concerned. No—alarmed.

His mouth moving: "沈小姐? " Miss Shen?

Miss Shen. Professional. We're still professional.

Even though we texted until midnight. Even though he called himself 墨轩.

Still Miss Shen in front of the team.

I try to respond. Tell him I'm fine, just need a second.

"我很——" I'm fi—

The room goes sideways.

My legs go numb.

The floor rushes up.

Oh. This is bad.

Everything goes black.

CHEN'S POV:

One second, she's standing at the podium.

The next, she's swaying.

Then, she's falling.

No.

I move. Don't remember deciding to move. Just moving.

Across the conference room. Six meters. I cover it in maybe two seconds.

Catch her. Barely. She's deadweight, collapsing completely.

Her head against my chest. Her body limp in my arms. Her

eyes closed.

"微琳！ " Weilin!

Not Miss Shen. Not Shen Weilin. 微琳.

Her name ripped out of me. No filter. No control.

The team frozen, shocked.

Lin Rui standing: "天啊——" Oh my God—

Zhang Wei: "发生了什么——" What happened—

Li Ruolin, my assistant: "我打120——" I'll call 120—

I shout, cradling Weilin: "打120！ 现在！ "

Call 120! Now!

I lower her to the floor. Gently. Carefully. Her head in my lap.

Tap her face: "微琳？ 微琳， 醒醒。 "

Weilin? Weilin, wake up.

Nothing. She's breathing—I check. Yes, breathing. Pulse in her neck. Fast but there.

But not waking up.

To the room, not looking up: "有人拿水来！ 还有糖！ 她需要糖！ "

Someone get water! And sugar! She needs sugar!

Someone runs. Footsteps. I don't see who.

Lin Rui kneels beside me. "她什么时候最后吃东西？ "

When did she last eat?

"我不知道——" I don't know—

But I should know. I should have been watching.

I noticed she lost weight. I noticed she looked exhausted.

And I did nothing.

Too busy protecting myself to see she was dying.

Her face so pale. Dark circles. Cheekbones too sharp.

How did I not see this? How did I let it get this bad?

Li Ruolin runs back. "120在路上。 五分钟。 "

120 is on the way. Five minutes.

Five minutes is too long.

Still tapping her face, desperate: "微琳，拜托。醒醒。看着我。"

Weilin, please. Wake up. Look at me.

Her eyelids flutter. Barely, but movement.

"对了，就是这样。醒醒。我在这里。"

That's right, that's it. Wake up. I'm here.

She doesn't wake. Just that flutter, then nothing.

I look at Lin Rui. I must look terrified because his face changes.

Lin Rui, quiet: "她会没事的。救护车来了。她会没事的。"

She'll be okay. Ambulance is coming. She'll be okay.

She has to be okay. She has to be.

Because if she's not, it's my fault.

FIVE MINUTES LATER.

Paramedics arrive. Fast. Professional. Efficient.

They take over. Check vitals. Ask questions.

"她有什么已知的医疗状况吗？"

Does she have any known medical conditions?

"不——我不知道——" No—I don't know—

I don't know. I was married to her for two years. And I don't know.

"她今天吃了什么？" What did she eat today?

"我不知道。" I don't know.

"昨天？" Yesterday?

"我不知道！" I don't know!

I don't know anything. I know she lost weight. I know she's been working too hard. I know she's stressed.

But I don't know when she last ate, when she last slept, if she

has medical conditions, if she takes medication—
I know nothing about her current life. Because I kept her at professional distance.

They're loading her onto a stretcher. I stand, following automatically.

Paramedic: "你是家人吗？ " Are you family?

No. I'm her ex-husband who's been torturing her for weeks.

"是的。 " Yes.

I lie. Don't care. I'm going with her.

They wheel her out. I follow.

The team watching, shocked, confused.

Lin Rui: "老板——" Boss—

Not stopping: "取消我今天剩下的时间。处理它。 "

Cancel the rest of my day. Handle it.

"新加坡会议——" The Singapore meetings—

"我说了处理它！ " I said handle it!

I don't look back. Just follow the stretcher into the elevator, out to the ambulance bay.

IN THE AMBULANCE.

They let me ride. Because I said I was family. Because I look desperate enough to be family.

I sit beside her stretcher. Hold her hand. When did I take her hand? Doesn't matter. Not letting go.

Paramedic checking vitals: "血压低。心率快。血糖低。可能是脱水。 "

Blood pressure low. Heart rate fast. Blood sugar low. Likely dehydration.

Malnutrition. Exhaustion. Stress.

All the things the doctor will say when we get there. All the things I caused.

Her hand in mine so small, so cold. I rub it, trying to warm it, trying to do something useful.

Whisper—she can't hear me, but I say it anyway:

"对不起。我很抱歉。这是我的错。全部都是我的错。"

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. This is my fault. All my fault.

The ambulance speeds through Shanghai traffic. Sirens, chaos. I don't care about any of it.

Just watch her face. Still pale. Still unconscious.

Last night we texted until midnight. She said "goodnight, 墨轩."

I fell asleep smiling for the first time in six years.

And twelve hours later she's in an ambulance.

Because I didn't see. Because I was too focused on my own pain to notice hers.

Her fingers twitch. Slight movement in my hand.

Leaning closer: "微琳？你能听到我吗？"

Weilin? Can you hear me?

Her eyelids flutter. Like before, but stronger.

"就是这样。醒醒。我在这里。我不会离开。"

That's it. Wake up. I'm here. I'm not leaving.

She doesn't wake. But her hand squeezes mine. Barely, but there.

She knows I'm here.

EMERGENCY ROOM.

They take her immediately. Rush her through. Efficient. I try to follow.

Nurse stops me: "先生，你需要在等候区等。"

Sir, you need to wait in the waiting area.

"不。我和她在一起。" No. I'm staying with her.

"先生——"

"我说了我和她在一起！" I said I'm staying with her!

Doctor appears. Older woman. Kind but firm. "你是她的丈夫吗？"

Are you her husband?

No. Not anymore. Not for six years.

"是的。" Yes.

Second lie. Still don't care.

"那么你可以陪她。但让我们工作。"

Then you can stay. But let us work.

I step back. Give them space. But don't leave.

Watch them: Check vitals. Start IV. Draw blood. Check pupils.

Ask her questions—she's starting to come around, groggy responses.

Doctor to Weilin: "你今天吃了什么？"

What did you eat today?

Weilin, weak voice: "我.....我不记得了。"

I... I don't remember.

"昨天？" Yesterday?

"也许.....午餐？" Maybe... lunch?

"什么午餐？" What lunch?

"米饭。我想。" Rice. I think.

Rice. One meal. Yesterday. That's why she collapsed.

Doctor looking at me: "她什么时候开始这样的？"

When did she start being like this?

"我不知道。" I don't know.

"你是她的丈夫，你不知道？"

You're her husband and you don't know?

The accusation clear in her voice.

Defensive, guilty: "我们.....情况很复杂。"

We... it's complicated.

"显然。" Apparently.

She turns back to Weilin. Ignores me. Rightfully so.

Twenty minutes later, they've stabilized her.

IV fluids running. Blood sugar coming up. Vitals improving.

Conscious but exhausted.

Doctor to both of us: "营养不良。脱水。极度压力。你的身体正在关闭。"

Malnutrition. Dehydration. Severe stress. Your body is shutting down.

Weilin, weak smile: "我会没事的。" I'll be fine.

"不，你不会。不是如果你继续这样。你需要休息。真正的休息。还有食物。还有压力管理。"

No, you won't. Not if you continue like this. You need rest.

Real rest. And food. And stress management.

Doctor looking at me: "她需要有人照顾她。你能做到吗？"

She needs someone to take care of her. Can you do that?

Can I? I'm the reason she's here. I'm the stress she needs to manage.

"是的。我会的。" Yes. I will.

Doctor, skeptical but accepting: "好。我要留她观察几个小时。然后她可以回家。但她需要休息——至少一周。不工作。"

Good. I'm keeping her for observation for a few hours. Then she can go home. But she needs rest—minimum one week.

No work.

Weilin trying to sit up: "我不能——新加坡——"

I can't—Singapore—

"你不去新加坡。你去家里休息。"

You're not going to Singapore. You're going home to rest.

Weilin looks at me, panicked: "项目——" The project—

"项目可以等。你不能。" The project can wait. You can't.

Doctor nods approvingly. Leaves us.

ALONE.

Weilin in the hospital bed. IV in her arm. Looking small and fragile.

"我很抱歉。" I'm sorry.

Standing beside bed: "你为什么道歉？"

What are you apologizing for?

"毁了会议。制造场面。"

Ruining the meeting. Making a scene.

"你差点死了，你在为'制造场面'道歉？"

You almost died and you're apologizing for 'making a scene'?

She looks away. Ashamed.

I sit in the chair beside her bed, suddenly exhausted. "这是我的错。"

This is my fault.

"不是——" It's not—

"是的，是的。我看到你在减肥。我看到你筋疲力尽。我什么也没做。我太忙于....."

Yes, it is. I saw you losing weight. I saw you exhausted. I did nothing. I was too busy...

Too busy protecting myself. Too busy keeping professional distance. Too busy being Marcus Chen to see that she was dying.

Weilin, quiet: "你发了那封电子邮件。那封'保持专业界限'的邮件。我想证明我可以。证明我很专业。证明我不需要任何人。"

You sent that email. The 'maintain professional boundaries' one. I wanted to prove I could. Prove I was professional.

Prove I didn't need anyone.

So she stopped eating. Stopped sleeping. Worked herself to death.

To prove to me she could be professional.

"我是个白痴。" I'm an idiot.

"是的。" Yes.

At least she's honest.

THREE HOURS LATER.

Chen hasn't left.

Weilin fell asleep. Exhaustion, or the IV fluids, or just her body finally giving permission to rest.

He sits beside her bed. Watches her sleep.

His phone buzzing constantly. He's been ignoring it.

Lin Rui, fifteen messages summarized:

- Team is worried
- Singapore meetings: should we reschedule?
- Press is asking questions (someone saw the ambulance)
- What do you want me to tell people?
- Seriously, answer your phone
- I'm coming to the hospital

Chen finally responds:

她稳定了。在休息。告诉团队她会没事的。新加坡：推迟到下周。新闻界：没有评论。别来医院。我需要独处。—M

She's stable. Resting. Tell the team she'll be okay. Singapore: postpone to next week. Press: no comment. Don't come to the hospital. I need to be alone. —M

Lin Rui's response:

你和她独处。那不是独处。

You're alone with her. That's not alone.

Fair point.

Chen puts his phone down. Face-down. Silenced. Goes back to watching her.

She looks peaceful. First time he's seen her look peaceful in

weeks.

Her face still too thin, still exhausted, but peaceful.

Her hand—he's still holding it. Hasn't let go since the ambulance.

When did I become the kind of person who watches someone sleep and calls it caring? When did I become the kind of person who punishes someone for being honest? When did Marcus Chen become more important than 墨轩?

His phone buzzes. One more message. His mother:

林瑞告诉我了。她还好吗？你还好吗？你在照顾她吗？—妈妈
Lin Rui told me. Is she okay? Are you okay? Are you taking care of her? —Mom

He responds:

她会没事的。我在这里。—M

She'll be okay. I'm here. —M

His mother:

好。别离开她。她需要你。即使她不说。—妈妈

Good. Don't leave her. She needs you. Even if she doesn't say it. —Mom

She needs me.

The woman I've been professionally torturing needs me.

The irony is not lost.

He looks at the noodle shop photo one more time in his mind. Then at Weilin sleeping.

4:47 PM.

Weilin starts to wake. Slowly. Groggily.

Chen sees her eyelids flutter. Leans forward, still holding her hand.

"微琳？" Weilin?

Her eyes open slowly, focusing. Sees him sitting beside her

bed. Still in work clothes. Tie loosened. Hair disheveled.
Looking wrecked.

She stares. Processing: Where am I? Hospital, right, I collapsed. Why is he here? He looks terrible. Is he crying? His eyes are red.

Voice hoarse: "墨轩? " Moxuan?

Not Marcus. Not Mr. Chen. Not CEO Chen. 墨轩.

He closes his eyes. Hearing his name—his real name—from her breaks something.

"我在这里。" I'm here.

Opens his eyes. They're red, wet. He's been crying.

"我在这里。我不会离开。"

I'm here. I'm not leaving.

Weilin, tears now too: "你看起来很糟糕。"

You look terrible.

Chen, laugh-sob: "你也是。" So do you.

They both laugh. Weak, exhausted, but genuine.

"我毁了会议。" I ruined the meeting.

"你吓死我了。" You scared the hell out of me.

"对不起。" I'm sorry.

"别道歉。这是我的错。我推你太狠了。我....."

Don't apologize. It's my fault. I pushed you too hard. I...

I was punishing you for being honest. I was protecting myself. I almost killed you.

He can't say it. Throat too tight.

"你在这里多久了? " How long have you been here?

"从救护车开始。" Since the ambulance.

"你的会议——" Your meetings—

"取消了。" Cancelled.

"新加坡——"

"推迟了。" Postponed.

"项目——"

"我不在乎项目！我在乎你！"

I don't care about the project! I care about you!

The outburst unexpected, raw. Hangs in the air.

Silence.

Weilin staring at him: "你.....你在乎我？"

You... you care about me?

Chen, realizing what he just said, can't take it back, doesn't want to: "是的。"

Yes.

Simple answer. Complicated truth.

"即使在那封电子邮件之后？在'保持专业界限'之后？"

Even after that email? After 'maintain professional boundaries'?

"那封电子邮件是我试图保护自己。因为你的信太诚实了，我不知道如何处理。"

That email was me trying to protect myself. Because your letter was too honest and I didn't know how to handle it.

He's being honest now. Completely. Terrifyingly.

"我一直在乎。我雇用你是因为我还在乎。我送家具是因为我在乎。我离开便条是因为我在乎。"

I've always cared. I hired you because I cared. I sent furniture because I cared. I left notes because I cared.

"然后我惊慌了，我把你推开了。我做了六年前你对我做的事。我让恐惧做决定。"

Then I panicked and I pushed you away. I did what you did to me six years ago. I let fear make decisions.

Weilin's tears streaming now: "我不知道你还在乎。"

I didn't know you still cared.

"我从未停止。" I never stopped.

The confession out there. Can't be taken back.

"那我们现在做什么？" Then what do we do now?

Chen stands, still holding her hand, leaning over her bed:

"现在你休息。你吃饭。你康复。然后.....然后我们弄清楚如何做到这一点。"

Now you rest. You eat. You recover. And then... then we figure out how to do this.

"做什么？" Do what?

"诚实。你在信中要求的。诚实地对待对方。"

Be honest. What you asked for in the letter. Be honest with each other.

Weilin nods. Exhausted but hopeful.

"星期五。面馆。" Friday. Noodle shop.

"星期五。面馆。" Friday. Noodle shop.

He leans down. Impulse, dangerous, can't help it.

Kisses her forehead. Gentle. Chaste. Loaded with everything unsaid.

Weilin, eyes closing: "留下来？" Stay?

"我不会去任何地方。" I'm not going anywhere.

He sits back down in the chair beside her bed. Still holding her hand. Watches her drift back to sleep.

Whispers—she's already asleep, can't hear him:

"我很抱歉我花了这么长时间才变得勇敢。"

I'm sorry it took me so long to be brave.

His phone buzzes. One last message. Lin Rui:

你叫救护车时，你喊了'微琳'。不是'沈小姐'。不是'沈微琳'。只是'微琳'。整个团队都听到了。你的面具掉了。我不认为你可以把它放回去。—LR

When you called the ambulance, you shouted '微琳'. Not

'Miss Shen'. Not 'Shen Weilin'. Just '微琳'. The whole team heard. Your mask fell off. I don't think you can put it back on.
—LR

Chen reads it. Looks at Weilin sleeping peacefully, hand in his.

Types back:

我知道。我不想。—M

I know. I don't want to. —M

END CHAPTER 17

=====~=====

CHAPTER 18: THE VIGIL (SCENE 5 - HOSPITAL VISIT PART 2)

Weilin woke for the third time to find Chen still there—still in the chair beside her bed, still holding her hand like it was the only thing anchoring him to earth, still watching her with eyes that said "I almost lost you and I'm never making that mistake again"—and the tenderness of it was so unexpected, so devastating, that she had to close her eyes and pretend to still be asleep just to process the fact that Marcus Chen, CEO, billionaire, her professional torturer, was looking at her like she was the only thing that mattered.

6:23 PM. Tuesday evening. Same day as the collapse. Ninety minutes after she'd woken.

Private hospital room, Shanghai East Hospital. Upgraded from ER observation—he must have done that, she'd realize later when she saw the bill.

Evening light golden and soft through the window, painting him in warm tones. His face exhausted, unshaven, tie long

gone, top button undone, hair disheveled from running hands through it. The IV in her arm nearly empty—they'd change it soon. Flowers on the windowsill. When did those arrive? Lin Rui, probably.

Heart monitor beeping steady, reassuring. His breathing quiet, controlled, but she could hear the tension in it. Distant hospital sounds—carts, voices, doors. Shanghai traffic below muted through closed windows. His phone buzzing occasionally. He ignored every notification.

His hand warm, calloused from gym workouts, thumb stroking her knuckles unconsciously. Hospital sheets scratchy but clean. Her body sore, heavy, exhausted but less terrible than before. The IV needle a slight ache—she'd gotten used to it.

Hospital antiseptic sharp and clinical. His cologne faded now, hours old, but still there. Food—someone had brought him dinner. It sat untouched on the rolling table.

WEILIN'S POV:

He's still here.

I've woken up three times—once at 4:47 PM, once at 5:30 PM, and now at 6:23 PM—and every time, he's in that chair. Same position. Same expression. Same hand holding mine. Like he's standing guard. Like I'm something worth guarding. I keep my eyes closed. Not ready to face him yet. Need a moment to process.

His thumb is moving. Small circles on my knuckles. Unconscious gesture, soothing.

Does he know he's doing that? Or is it automatic?

His phone buzzes again. Must be the twentieth time. He ignores it. Again.

What is he thinking? Sitting there, holding my hand, ignoring his empire?

What happened to "maintain professional boundaries"? What happened to Marcus Chen, CEO?

I open my eyes.

I try to sit up. Slowly, carefully. My body protesting.

Chen sees immediately. His eyes were on my face, waiting for me to wake.

"别动。" Don't move.

But I'm already moving. Stubborn. Independent. Hate being weak.

Get maybe thirty degrees up before my head spins.

Chen stands fast. One hand still holding mine, other hand on my shoulder.

"我说了别动。" I said don't move.

Gentle pressure, pushing me back down. Firm but careful.

I let him. Too dizzy to fight.

"我想坐起来。" I want to sit up.

"我知道。但你能。还不行。"

I know. But you can't. Not yet.

He adjusts my pillows. Lifting my head carefully, adding another pillow, easing me back down at a slight incline.

Better. Can see him properly now without straining.

"你不必待在这里。" You don't have to stay.

Chen sits back down, hand returning to mine. "我知道。" I know.

But he stays.

"你有工作。会议。新加坡——"

You have work. Meetings. Singapore—

"都处理了。" All handled.

"你的团队——" Your team—

"林瑞在处理。" Lin Rui is handling it.

"媒体——" The press—

"没有评论。" No comment.

He's not leaving. Won't even entertain the idea.

Different approach: "我很好。你可以走了。"

I'm fine. You can go.

Chen looks at me directly. Exhausted but determined.

"你在医院。因为你营养不良和筋疲力尽。你不'很好'。"

You're in the hospital. Because you're malnourished and exhausted. You're not 'fine.'

Fair point.

"而且我不想走。" And I don't want to go.

Simple statement. Devastating honesty.

"为什么？" Why?

He doesn't answer immediately. Thinking, choosing words.

"因为当你倒下时，我以为我杀了你。以为我把你推得太狠了，你就碎了。我.....我不能再让这种事发生。"

Because when you fell, I thought I'd killed you. Thought I pushed you too hard and you broke. I... I can't let that happen again.

My throat tightens.

"你没有杀我。我几乎是自杀，试图证明我不需要拯救。"

You didn't kill me. I almost killed myself trying to prove I didn't need saving.

He looks at me. Really looks. Sees me.

"你不需要拯救。你从来不需要。"

You don't need saving. You never did.

The words settle into my chest like a balm.

"那我需要什么？" Then what do I need?

"休息。食物。也许.....也许有人提醒你，你不必独自做所有事情。"

Rest. Food. Maybe... maybe someone to remind you that you don't have to do everything alone.

Someone. He means him.

6:47 PM.

A nurse enters. Middle-aged woman, kind smile.

"晚餐时间。你饿吗，沈小姐？"

Dinner time. Are you hungry, Miss Shen?

Actually, yes. For the first time in weeks, I'm hungry.

"是的。"

"好。我们有什么....." Good. We have...

She starts listing options. Hospital food, probably terrible, but I don't care.

Chen interrupts. "我会点外卖。" I'll order delivery.

"陈先生，医院食物对她来说更好——"

Mr. Chen, hospital food is better for her—

"我会点清淡的。粥。也许一些鸡汤。对她的胃好。"

I'll order something light. Congee. Maybe some chicken soup. Gentle on her stomach.

The nurse studies him, then smiles.

"很好。但不要太多。慢慢来。"

Very well. But not too much. Slowly.

She leaves.

Chen pulls out his phone. "你想要什么？粥？汤？"

What do you want? Congee? Soup?

"我不在乎。任何东西。" I don't care. Anything.

"你需要在乎。你需要吃真正的食物。"

You need to care. You need to eat real food.

He orders. I hear him on the phone with a restaurant.

"是的，我需要送到上海东方医院.....清淡的食物，有人从营养不良中恢复.....粥，是的。鸡汤。也许一些蒸蔬菜。清淡的豆腐。"

Yes, I need delivery to Shanghai East Hospital... light food, someone recovering from malnutrition... congee, yes.

Chicken soup. Maybe some steamed vegetables. Bland tofu. He knows what to order. He's thought about this.

Hangs up.

"你不必这样做。" You don't have to do this.

"我知道。但我想。" I know. But I want to.

That phrase again: "I want to." Not "I have to." Not "it's my responsibility."

"I want to."

7:23 PM. FOOD ARRIVES.

Chen goes to get it. Leaves the room for the first time in nine hours.

Returns with bags from a good congee place. Expensive. Known for quality.

Sets everything up on the rolling table:

Congee—plain rice, easy to digest. Chicken soup—clear broth, simple. Steamed vegetables—bok choy, carrots. Small bowl of plain tofu.

Also: food for himself. Same items. He ordered doubles.

"你要和我一起吃？" You're going to eat with me?

"你注意到我错过了午餐吗？"

Did you notice I missed lunch?

Actually, I didn't. Too focused on my own crisis.

"我们都需要吃。" We both need to eat.

He helps me sit up. Carefully, supporting my back. Adjusts the table over my lap. Perfect height. Hands me a spoon.

Then sits in his chair. Drags it closer. His own food on his lap.

Waits. Watching me.

"什么? " What?

"吃。" Eat.

"你先吃。" You eat first.

"我会吃。在你吃了之后。"

I will. After you eat.

Stubborn. But also sweet.

I take a small bite of congee. Warm, bland, perfect.

He watches, making sure I'm actually eating.

Then starts eating his own food.

We eat in silence. Companionable. Strange. Domestic.

Halfway through, I have to stop. Stomach too small, too used to emptiness.

"更多。" More.

"我吃饱了。" I'm full.

"再吃三口。" Three more bites.

"墨轩——"

"三口。然后你可以停。" Three bites. Then you can stop.

I eat three more bites. He counts. Actually counts.

Then he lets me stop.

Clears the table. Moves everything aside. Helps me lie back down. Gently. Carefully.

"谢谢。" Thank you.

"别客气。" You're welcome.

NIGHT FALLS. 8:17 PM.

The room is darker now. Shanghai night outside, city lights glowing.

Chen turned on the small bedside lamp. Soft light, not harsh.

Still sitting in his chair. Still holding my hand.

Long silence. Not uncomfortable. Just... present.

Finally: "你应该回家。" You should go home.

"我会的。最终。" I will. Eventually.

"什么时候?" When?

"当我确定你没事的时候。"

When I'm sure you're okay.

"医生说我可以明天出院。"

The doctor said I can be discharged tomorrow.

"那我明天送你回家。"

Then I'll take you home tomorrow.

"我可以坐出租车。" I can take a taxi.

"你可以。但你不会。" You could. But you won't.

Stubborn. But I'm too tired to argue.

"为什么你突然这么关心?"

Why do you suddenly care so much?

He's quiet. Thinking.

"不是突然的。我一直在乎。我只是.....我一直很害怕承认。"

It's not sudden. I've always cared. I was just... too scared to admit it.

"为什么害怕?" Scared of what?

"害怕如果我承认我还在乎，你就有权力再次伤害我。"

Scared that if I admitted I still cared, you'd have the power to hurt me again.

Honest. Painfully honest.

"我不想伤害你。" I don't want to hurt you.

"我知道。现在我知道。但六年来，我相信你想。我相信你离开是因为我不够。所以我建立了Marcus Chen来证明我够了。"

I know. Now I know. But for six years, I believed you did. I believed you left because I wasn't enough. So I built Marcus Chen to prove I was enough.

He's looking at me. Eyes reflecting lamplight.

"但Marcus Chen不笑。不真正笑。林瑞昨天告诉我的。说陈墨轩一直在笑，但Marcus Chen从不笑。"

But Marcus Chen doesn't laugh. Not really. Lin Rui told me that yesterday. Said Chen Moxuan laughed all the time, but Marcus Chen never does.

I remember that laugh. His real laugh. The one from the noodle shop photo. The one that lit up his whole face.

"你昨晚笑了。在短信里，你说你找到了一张照片然后笑了。"

You laughed last night. In the text, you said you found a photo and laughed.

"是的。第一次。七年来第一次真正笑。"

Yes. First time. First real laugh in seven years.

"什么照片？" What photo?

"我们。面馆。我鼻子上有酱。你在笑。我在看着你，就像你是整个世界。"

Us. Noodle shop. I had sauce on my nose. You were laughing. I was looking at you like you were the whole world. My breath catches. I have that photo too. Hidden in my closet.

"我还有那张照片。" I still have that photo.

Chen, surprised: "你有？" You do?

"包在毛衣里。在我的壁橱底部。我不能扔掉它。"

Wrapped in a sweater. Bottom of my closet. I couldn't throw it away.

He's quiet. Processing that we both kept it.

"我也不能扔。放在我的办公桌抽屉里。还有USB驱动器里有所有的婚礼照片。"

I couldn't either. In my desk drawer. And a USB drive with all the wedding photos.

"你保留了所有的？" You kept all of them?

"每一张。我告诉自己我忘记了它们在那里。但我没有。我只是.....不能看它们。"

Every one. I told myself I forgot they were there. But I didn't. I just... couldn't look at them.

Long pause.

"我们搞砸了，不是吗？" We messed this up, didn't we?

"是的。" Yes.

"两个人。都害怕。都在伤害。"

Two people. Both scared. Both hurting.

"我应该为你而战。当你的父母把你拉走的时候。我应该出现，坚持，证明我值得。"

I should have fought for you. When your parents pulled you away. I should have shown up, insisted, proven I was worth it.

"我应该为你辩护。当我爸爸羞辱你的时候。我应该在那封信中说过的所有事情，我应该在当时说。"

I should have defended you. When my father humiliated you. All the things I said in that letter, I should have said them then.

"我们不能改变过去。" We can't change the past.

"不。但也许.....也许我们不必被它定义。"

No. But maybe... maybe we don't have to be defined by it.

9:03 PM.

Chen shifts in his chair. Still holding my hand.

"我的治疗师说我建立了一个帝国来报复。不是为了成功。为了报复。"

My therapist said I built an empire for revenge. Not for success. For revenge.

I've never heard him talk about therapy before.

"你看了多久的治疗师？"

How long have you been seeing a therapist?

"六年。自从离婚以来。"

Six years. Since the divorce.

"六年？"

"我需要它。我有失眠症。焦虑。我在推开每个试图接近的人。宋医生帮我.....她帮我不完全崩溃。"

I needed it. I had insomnia. Anxiety. I was pushing away everyone who tried to get close. Dr. Song helped me... she helped me not completely fall apart.

He's being so honest. More honest than I've ever heard him.

"你还有失眠症吗？" Do you still have insomnia?

"是的。大多数晚上。我躺着，盯着天花板，思考我搞砸的所有方式。"

Yes. Most nights. I lie there and stare at the ceiling and think about all the ways I fucked up.

"什么方式？" What ways?

Chen looks at me directly.

"让你走。不为你而战。花六年时间建立一些东西来证明你错了，而不是让自己成为一个你可以回来的人。"

Letting you go. Not fighting for you. Spending six years building something to prove you wrong instead of making myself someone you could come back to.

My chest aches.

"你以为我会回来吗？" Did you think I'd come back?

"我不知道。一部分的我想要你回来。另一部分害怕你会回来。这就是为什么当你出现在我的办公室时，我惊慌了。"

I didn't know. Part of me wanted you to come back. Part of me was terrified you would. That's why I panicked when you showed up in my office.

"那天你看起来很生气。" You looked angry that day.

"我是生气的。但不是对你。对我自己。因为看到你，我意识到我

什么都没有解决。六年，十亿美元，一个帝国——我什么都没有解决。"

I was angry. But not at you. At myself. Because seeing you, I realized I'd solved nothing. Six years, a billion dollars, an empire—I'd solved nothing.

He's breaking apart. I can see it in his eyes.

"那封电子邮件。'保持专业界限'的那封。我几乎在发送后立即后悔了。但我不知道如何撤回它。所以我只是.....让它坐在那里。毒害一切。"

That email. The 'maintain professional boundaries' one. I regretted it almost immediately after sending. But I didn't know how to take it back. So I just... let it sit there. Poisoning everything.

"我以为你恨我。" I thought you hated me.

"我也以为我恨你。花了我的治疗师两个小时来让我承认真相。" I thought I hated you too. Took my therapist two hours to get me to admit the truth.

"什么真相？" What truth?

"我从未停止爱你。" That I never stopped loving you.

The words hang in the air between us.

He never stopped loving me.

My tears streaming now. Can't stop them.

"墨轩——"

"我不是说这个来给你压力。或者让你觉得你必须说任何话。我只是.....我厌倦了撒谎。厌倦了假装。"

I'm not saying this to pressure you. Or to make you feel like you have to say anything. I just... I'm tired of lying. Tired of pretending.

He stands. Still holding my hand. Leaning over the bed.

"六年来，我建立了一个版本的我，不需要任何人。不想要任何

人。不爱任何人。我以为这让我强大。但这只是让我空虚。"
For six years, I built a version of me that didn't need anyone.
Didn't want anyone. Didn't love anyone. I thought it made me
strong. It just made me empty.

"我也是。我认为如果我能变得足够专业，足够成功，足够独立——我可以证明我不是我父母认为的那个人。证明我不需要他们的钱或你的帮助。"

Me too. I thought if I could be professional enough, successful enough, independent enough—I could prove I wasn't the person my parents thought I was. Prove I didn't need their money or your help.

"那你睡在地板上，饿死自己。"

So you slept on floors and starved yourself.

"是的。"

"我们都是白痴。" We're both idiots.

Laughing through tears: "是的。"

10:47 PM.

The hospital is quiet. Shift change. Night nurses. Fewer interruptions.

Chen is still there. Hasn't left. Won't leave.

I'm exhausted. Emotionally. Physically. Completely.

"你应该回家睡觉。" You should go home and sleep.

"我会的。稍后。" I will. Later.

"什么时候稍后？" When is later?

"当你睡着了。当我确定你在呼吸。"

When you're asleep. When I'm sure you're breathing.

When he's sure I'm breathing. Like he's afraid I'll stop.

"我不会停止呼吸。" I'm not going to stop breathing.

"我知道。但我今天看着你倒下。看着你停止移动。我以为.....我以为我失去了你。"

I know. But I watched you fall today. Watched you stop moving. I thought... I thought I'd lost you.

His voice breaking slightly.

"我不能再经历那个。所以如果你不介意，我要坐在这里看你呼吸，直到我的大脑相信你很好。"

I can't go through that again. So if you don't mind, I'm going to sit here and watch you breathe until my brain believes you're okay.

What do you say to that?

"好的。" Okay.

I close my eyes. Too tired to stay awake. Too exhausted to fight.

Feel his hand still holding mine. Hear his breathing steady, controlled, watching over me.

Fall asleep. First real sleep in weeks. Knowing someone's there. Knowing I'm safe.

CHEN'S POV.

She's asleep. Finally. Deeply. Breathing steady.

I watch her. Like I promised I would.

Her face peaceful. The lines of tension smoothing out. Her hand small in mine. Trusting.

This is what I almost lost. This woman. This person. This... us.

I should go home. My back aches. My neck is stiff. This chair is torture.

I don't.

Just sit. Watching her breathe. Counting each breath like a prayer.

Thank you. Thank you for not leaving. Thank you for still being here.

WEDNESDAY MORNING, 6:17 AM.

WEILIN'S POV:

I wake to voices. Hushed, at the door.

Don't open my eyes. Still half-asleep. Comfortable for the first time in weeks.

Nurse's voice—the morning nurse, different from yesterday:

"他整夜都在这里吗？" He's been here all night?

Other nurse—night shift, leaving: "是的。不会离开。我提议拿枕头和毯子。他拒绝了。说他很好。"

Yes. Wouldn't leave. I offered to get a pillow and blanket. He refused. Said he was fine.

Morning nurse: "非常敬业的丈夫。"

Very devoted husband.

Devoted husband.

I should correct her. He's not my husband. We're divorced.

This is complicated.

I don't.

Just lie there. Eyes closed. Pretending to sleep. Listening.

Morning nurse, coming closer, checking monitors: "他看起来很不舒服。"

He looks uncomfortable.

Night nurse: "他不在乎。她一整晚都在睡觉。他只是在看着她。"

He doesn't care. She slept all night. He just watched her.

He watched me all night. Didn't sleep.

The nurses leave quietly.

I open my eyes.

Chen is asleep now. Finally. Head tilted back against the chair. Neck at an awful angle. Still holding my hand.

His face exhausted even in sleep. Dark circles. Unshaven.

Hair a mess.

He looks terrible. He looks beautiful.
He stayed. All night. Watching me breathe.
Very devoted husband, the nurse said.
I don't correct the lie. Don't want to.
Because maybe, just maybe, it's not entirely a lie anymore.

END CHAPTER 18

=====~=====

CHAPTER 19: THE AFTERMATH (FLASHBACK CONTRAST)

Weilin woke up in a bed that cost more than her entire apartment's annual rent—Egyptian cotton sheets, goose down pillows, mattress so perfect it felt like floating—and for three disoriented seconds she thought she'd died and gone to some bourgeois capitalist heaven before remembering: Chen insisted on bringing her here, to his penthouse, wouldn't even discuss her empty Yangpu apartment as an option, and she'd been too exhausted to fight him, which meant she was now recovering from malnutrition-induced collapse in her ex-husband's guest room while he worked from home like this was normal, like caring for her was something he just... did.
2:47 PM. Wednesday afternoon. Day after the collapse. Just discharged from the hospital.

Guest room at Chen's penthouse, Pudong. Minimalist luxury, all whites and grays, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the skyline, the Bund visible across the river. Afternoon light golden, filtered through sheer curtains. Her clothes washed and folded neatly on the dresser—his housekeeper? A tray on the bedside table, soup still warm. He must have brought it

while she slept.

Silence. Thick, expensive silence of good insulation. Distant sounds—his voice, he was on a call somewhere in the apartment. Shanghai below muted. Forty-seven floors is another world. Her heartbeat calmer than yesterday, but still anxious.

The sheets sinfully soft. She'd never felt anything like this. Her body sore, weak, but better—the IV fluids helped. Her phone charging on the nightstand. He'd plugged it in. The air perfect temperature, climate-controlled.

Soup—chicken, ginger, something expensive and homemade. Clean linen, the sheets smelling like luxury detergent. Faint trace of his cologne. Did he sit in here while she slept?

WEILIN'S POV:

This isn't my apartment.

Obviously. My apartment doesn't have windows this big. Or sheets this expensive. Or soup that smells like a professional chef made it.

This is Chen's penthouse. He brought me here.

I should be angry about that. I'm not.

I'm just... confused.

I sit up slowly, carefully. My body still protesting.

See the soup on the bedside table, in a covered bowl, still steaming slightly.

There's a note beside it.

Pick it up. His handwriting, neat and precise:

吃这个。全部吃完。我在工作，但如果你需要什么就叫我。—M
Eat this. All of it. I'm working, but call if you need anything. —M

"Call if you need anything."

Like I'm allowed to need things. Like needing isn't weakness. I lift the soup bowl cover. Steam rises. Chicken and ginger, herbs I can't identify. Absolutely perfect.

Take a sip.

Oh God. This is the best soup I've ever tasted.

FLASHBACK.

The taste triggers something. Being cared for triggers something.

Winter 2019. Their apartment.

I was sick. Really sick. Flu that turned into something worse, fever of 39.5°C, couldn't get out of bed.

Moxuan took the day off work. Couldn't afford to—his startup was barely surviving, every day away meant less progress, less chance of success.

He took it anyway.

The memory vivid, painful:

Moxuan sitting on the edge of our bed, hand on my forehead.

"你的烧还在。我要去买药。"

Your fever's still high. I'm going to get medicine.

Me barely coherent: "你不能错过工作。"

You can't miss work.

"我不在乎工作。我在乎你。"

I don't care about work. I care about you.

He went out. Came back with medicine, fever reducers, cold packs.

Made congee on our terrible electric burner. Plain rice congee because we couldn't afford anything fancy.

Fed me spoon by spoon, patient when I could barely swallow.

Read to me from a book he'd bought at a secondhand store.

Sat beside me for hours reading aloud because I couldn't

sleep but needed distraction.

I remember thinking: This is love.

Not expensive gifts or fancy dinners. This. Sitting beside me.

Reading to me. Making sure I ate.

Then my mother called.

Phone ringing. I was too weak to answer. Moxuan picked up.

"喂?是的, 她在这里.....她病了.....流感.....是的, 我在照顾她....."

Hello? ...Yes, she's here... She's sick... The flu... Yes, I'm taking care of her...

I could hear my mother's voice sharp even through the phone:

"你应该在工作! 不是在玩护士! 你以为照顾她会付账单吗? "

You should be at work! Not playing nurse! You think taking care of her pays bills?

Moxuan's face tightening, jaw clenched, but voice stayed calm:

"她需要有人照顾她。我是她的丈夫。这是我的工作。"

She needs someone to take care of her. I'm her husband.

This is my job.

My mother: "你的工作是养活她! 不是坐在那里读书! "

Your job is to provide for her! Not sit there reading books!

Moxuan looked at me. Lying in bed, feverish, listening.

Waiting for me to defend him. To say something.

I said nothing. Just closed my eyes. Pretended I was too sick to hear.

Too weak to defend him. Too ashamed to admit my mother was wrong. Too afraid of disappointing her.

Moxuan into the phone, voice tight: "我需要走了。我会让她稍后给你回电话。"

I need to go. I'll have her call you later.

Hung up. Sat there beside me, silent, hurt radiating off him.

Me whispered: "对不起。" I'm sorry.

"为什么道歉？" What are you apologizing for?

"她不应该那样说。" She shouldn't have said that.

"但你不告诉她那个。" But you didn't tell her that.

Silence. The hurt between us. Growing.

Moxuan standing, defeated: "我要做更多的粥。"

I'll make more congee.

He left the room.

I cried silently, alone, knowing I'd failed him again.

END FLASHBACK.

Chen's penthouse. Now.

I'm sitting in a guest room that costs more per month than that entire apartment.

Eating soup made by a professional chef. In a penthouse with floor-to-ceiling windows. Being cared for by the same man.

The man who made me ¥3 congee on a broken burner. The man who read to me while I was sick. The man my mother said should be working instead of playing nurse.

He's working now. I can hear him on a call. But he's working from home. So he can "monitor me"—his words when he brought me here.

Same care. Different context.

I finish the soup. All of it, like his note said. Set the bowl down.

Stand slowly. My legs shaky but holding.

Walk to the window. Pudong sprawling below, the wealth he's built, the empire he created.

He built this to prove he was enough.

But he was always enough.

The man who made me congee was enough. The man who read to me was enough. The man who took a day off work he couldn't afford to miss was enough.

I was just too broken to see it.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. Text from Lin Rui:

他告诉我带你去他的地方。聪明。你不应该一个人在那个空公寓里。你感觉好些了吗？—LR

He told me he took you to his place. Smart. You shouldn't be alone in that empty apartment. Feeling better? —LR

I respond:

好些了。这很奇怪。在这里。—W

Better. This is strange. Being here. —W

Lin Rui:

为什么奇怪？他在照顾你。这就是他做的。即使当他假装他不平时。—LR

Why strange? He's taking care of you. It's what he does. Even when he pretends he doesn't care. —LR

"It's what he does."

Another text:

顺便说一句，他今天取消了三个会议。推迟了新加坡又一周。告诉团队他在'处理个人紧急情况'。整个办公室都知道'个人紧急情况'是你。—LR

By the way, he cancelled three meetings today. Postponed Singapore another week. Told the team he's 'handling a personal emergency.' Whole office knows the 'personal emergency' is you. —LR

He cancelled meetings. Postponed Singapore again. For me. I walk out of the guest room. Need to find him. Need to talk. Need to understand this.

The penthouse. I've never been here before.

Main living area: Open concept, minimalist, expensive furniture that looks barely used, kitchen clearly professional-grade but feels unlived-in, windows everywhere. City sprawling below. Life happening down there while up here it's silent.

Art on walls—modern, abstract, probably worth millions, completely impersonal.

Bookshelves—business books, technical manuals, a few novels that look unread.

No photos. No personal touches. Nothing that says "墨轩 lives here."

Everything says "Marcus Chen works here."

This is where he lives? This beautiful, empty space?

I hear his voice coming from down a hallway:

"不，推迟到下周。我有家庭紧急情况.....是的，我明白这不方便.....处理它。"

No, postpone to next week. I have a family emergency... Yes, I understand it's inconvenient... Handle it.

Family emergency. That's me. I'm his family emergency.

I follow the voice to his home office. Door slightly open. Peek in.

Chen at his desk, laptop open, papers everywhere, phone to ear, looking exhausted.

"告诉客户我们会补偿延迟.....我不在乎成本.....只要让它发生。"

Tell the client we'll compensate for the delay... I don't care about the cost... Just make it happen.

He looks terrible. Didn't sleep last night—sat in that hospital chair watching me. Hasn't slept properly in who knows how long.

Running his empire and babysitting his ex-wife.

He hangs up. Runs hand through hair. Sees me in the doorway.

Stands immediately: "你应该躺着。" You should be lying down.

"我吃了汤。" I ate the soup.

"全部?" All of it?

"全部。" All of it.

Relief crosses his face. "好。" Good.

Awkward silence. Him in his home office. Me in his doorway.

Too much history between us.

"你的公寓很漂亮。" Your apartment is beautiful.

"谢谢。" Thank you.

"感觉像个酒店。" Feels like a hotel.

He winces. Direct hit.

"我不怎么在这里。大多在办公室。"

I'm not here much. Mostly at the office.

"那你为什么有这么大的地方?"

Then why do you have such a big place?

"因为我能负担得起。" Because I can afford it.

Because he built an empire to prove he could afford it. But empire and home aren't the same thing.

"你寂寞吗?" Are you lonely?

The question too direct, too honest, but we're past pretense.

Chen sits back down, suddenly exhausted. "是的。" Yes.

Simple admission. Devastating.

"我建了这一切——公司，公寓，生活——我以为它会填补....."

I built all this—company, apartment, life—I thought it would fill...

Stops. Can't finish.

"填补什么？" Fill what?

"你留下的洞。" The hole you left.

Oh.

CHEN'S POV.

She's standing in my office doorway looking like she might collapse again.

Too weak to be out of bed. Too stubborn to stay down.

Exactly like she was seven years ago when she had the flu and wouldn't rest.

Same woman. Same stubbornness. Different context.

Brief flashback—his memory of that day:

Her mother calling. Criticizing me. Telling me I should be working.

Weilin lying there, saying nothing. The silence louder than any insult.

I'd made her congee. Read to her. Stayed home from work.

And it still wasn't enough. I still wasn't enough.

Now I can make her professional soup. Have a chef prepare it. Give her a guest room with ¥20,000 sheets.

But the care is the same. Watching her. Making sure she eats. Staying close in case she needs me.

The difference: Now I can afford to take the day off. Can postpone meetings. Can tell my team "handle it."

Then I was scrambling. Startup failing. Every day off was money we didn't have.

But I did it anyway. Because she needed me.

She needed me then. She needs me now.

And this time, I'm not going to let fear or pride stop me from being here.

"你应该回床上。" You should get back to bed.

"我不累。" I'm not tired.

"你昨天崩溃了。你很累。"

You collapsed yesterday. You're tired.

"我不想躺着。我想....."

I don't want to lie down. I want...

She looks around my office. Papers, laptop, the work I'm trying to do while monitoring her.

"我可以坐在这里吗？和你在一起？我不想一个人在客房里。"

Can I sit in here? With you? I don't want to be alone in the guest room.

She doesn't want to be alone.

"当然。" Of course.

I clear papers from the small sofa near my desk. Leather, uncomfortable—I never use it.

She sits carefully, slowly, still weak.

I grab a throw blanket from somewhere. Find it in a closet, never used, still has tags. Drape it over her.

She looks up at me, surprise in her eyes. "你有毯子？"

You have a blanket?

"显然。" Apparently.

I didn't know I had a blanket. This penthouse came furnished.

I never bothered to check what was in the closets.

She settles in. "谢谢。" Thank you.

I go back to my desk. Try to work. Emails, reports, client updates.

Can't focus. She's right there, ten feet away, breathing, alive, in my space.

Twenty minutes pass.

I look over. She's fallen asleep, curled on the sofa, blanket pulled up, looking peaceful.

Same as seven years ago. Falling asleep while I worked.
Trusting me to watch over her.

7:47 PM.

WEILIN'S POV:

I wake to the smell of food. Real food. Cooking.

Sit up, disoriented. I'm on Chen's office sofa, blanket over me. He's gone.

Follow the smell to the kitchen.

Chen is cooking.

Chen is cooking.

Marcus Chen, billionaire CEO, is standing at a stove, stirring something.

"你在做饭？" You're cooking?

Chen turns, spatula in hand. "你醒了。好。坐。"

You're awake. Good. Sit.

Gestures to the kitchen island. Two stools. He's set places.

I sit, stunned. "你会做饭？" You can cook?

"会一点。基础的东西。" A little. Basic stuff.

"你有私人厨师。" You have a personal chef.

"她今天休息。我.....我想为你做这个。"

She's off today. I... I wanted to make this for you.

He wanted to make it for me.

Watch him cook. He's making 疙瘩汤—flour drop soup.

Simple, homey, the kind of thing mothers make.

"你在做疙瘩汤？" You're making flour drop soup?

"你以前喜欢它。当你生病的时候。我妈妈教我怎么做。"

You used to like it. When you were sick. My mother taught me how to make it.

He remembers. Seven years later, he remembers I liked this soup when I was sick.

He plates it. Two bowls. Brings them to the island. Sits beside me. Not across—beside.

"吃。" Eat.

I take a sip. Perfect. Exactly how I remember. Exactly how his mother made it.

"这很完美。" It's perfect.

"这很简单。" It's simple.

"简单并不意味着容易。" Simple doesn't mean easy.

We eat in comfortable silence.

Finally: "谢谢你。为了这个。为了一切。"

Thank you. For this. For everything.

"别客气。" You're welcome.

"不。我是认真的。为了汤。客房。照顾我。取消你的会议。"

No. I mean it. For the soup. The guest room. Taking care of me. Cancelling your meetings.

Chen sets down his spoon. Looks at me directly.

"我会取消一切。整个公司。如果这意味着确保你没事。"

I'd cancel everything. The whole company. If it meant making sure you were okay.

My breath catches.

"你不是认真的。" You don't mean that.

"我是。" I do.

Later. After soup. After cleaning up together. After I insist I can help with dishes and he lets me dry while he washes.

We're in the living room. I'm on the sofa. He's in the chair.

Maintaining distance but close.

Shanghai lights below. Night falling. City glowing.

"为什么你对我这么好？"

Why are you being so kind to me?

The question I've been wanting to ask all day.

Chen stands. Paces to the window. Back to me. Silhouette against city lights.

"因为我从未停止——"

Because I never stopped—

Stops. Mid-sentence. Like he almost said something he can't take back.

I stand. Walk closer. "你从未停止什么？"

You never stopped what?

He doesn't turn around. Shoulders tense. Fighting something.

"我需要.....我需要去检查一些电子邮件。"

I need to... I need to check some emails.

Running. He's running.

"墨轩——"

Chen finally turns. His face raw, vulnerable, desperate.

"别。拜托别用那个名字看着我，除非你准备好听我说完那句话。"

Don't. Please don't look at me with that name unless you're ready to hear me finish that sentence.

Silence. Us standing there. Ten feet apart. Entire history between us.

Whispered: "我准备好了。" I'm ready.

Chen closes his eyes like I just asked him to jump off a cliff.

"不，你没准备好。因为如果我说了，一切都会改变。我们不能回去假装我们只是前同事或前配偶或任何我们一直在假装的东西。"

No, you're not. Because if I say it, everything changes. We can't go back to pretending we're just former colleagues or former spouses or whatever we've been pretending to be.

"也许我不想假装了。"

Maybe I don't want to pretend anymore.

His eyes open. Looking at me like I'm the sun and he's been in darkness for years.

"你知道你在说什么吗？" Do you know what you're saying?

"不。但我知道我厌倦了害怕。厌倦了躲在专业界限和过去的错误后面。"

No. But I know I'm tired of being scared. Tired of hiding behind professional boundaries and past mistakes.

He takes a step toward me. I don't move.

"如果我说完那句话，我不能再收回它。"

If I finish that sentence, I can't take it back.

"那就别收回它。" Then don't take it back.

Another step. Closer. We're maybe five feet apart now.

"微琳——"

His phone rings. Shattering the moment.

Both of us freeze. Phone keeps ringing.

Chen curses. "我需要接这个。是新加坡客户。"

I need to take this. It's the Singapore client.

Of course it is.

He steps back. Distance restored. Answers the phone, voice shifting to professional, Marcus Chen returning.

"喂？.....是的.....我理解....."

Hello? ...Yes... I understand...

Walks away. Into his office. Door closing.

I stand there alone in his living room. Heart racing. Almost-confession hanging in the air.

"Because I never stopped—"

Never stopped what? Caring? Loving me? Thinking about me? What was he going to say?

My phone buzzes. Text from Lin Rui, because of course:

他告诉我他在为你做饭。陈墨轩正在回来。注意。—LR

He told me he's cooking for you. Chen Moxuan is coming back. Watch out. —LR

I type back:

我知道。我不知道该怎么办。—W

I know. I don't know what to do. —W

Lin Rui:

让他说完那句话。不管他要说什么。让他说。你们俩都需要这个。—LR

Let him finish the sentence. Whatever he was going to say.

Let him say it. You both need this. —LR

Let him finish the sentence.

I look at his office door. Closed. I can hear his voice.

Professional. Controlled.

When he comes out, I'm going to ask him to finish it.

No more interruptions. No more running. No more fear.

"Because I never stopped—"

I need to know.

END CHAPTER 19

=====~=====

CHAPTER 20: THE ALMOST (SCENE 4 - LATE NIGHT BAR)

Chen had been nursing the same whiskey for forty-three minutes—Macallan 18, ¥800 per glass, the kind of expensive he usually didn't notice but tonight tasted like liquid anxiety—because Lin Rui had dragged him here with vague promises of "unwinding" and "being normal for once," and Chen hadn't been to a bar socially in six years, didn't know how to "unwind," and was starting to suspect this entire evening was an elaborate trap designed to make him confront feelings he'd been successfully avoiding for seventy-two hours, which

was exactly when Weilin walked in.

10:47 PM. Friday night. Three days after Weilin left the hospital. She'd been back at work for two days against his wishes.

微光酒吧—Twilight Bar—Jing'an District. Upscale but intimate. Low lighting, jazz playing. The bar dim, intimate, wood and leather, soft amber lighting. His whiskey amber in crystal glass, ice melting. He'd barely touched it. Lin Rui across the table, too casual, checking his phone too often. Suspicious.

The door. He'd been watching it subconsciously. Didn't know why until she walked through.

Jazz quartet live in the corner, playing something slow and sultry. Murmured conversations, Friday night crowd, couples mostly. He felt out of place. Ice clinking in glasses. His heartbeat accelerating—she just walked in.

The glass cold, wet with condensation, something to hold. The booth leather expensive, worn soft. His tie loosened for the first time all week. Felt naked. Tension in his shoulders. Hadn't relaxed despite the alcohol.

Whiskey peaty, smoky. Bar smell—wood polish, cigarette smoke from the outdoor patio, someone's expensive perfume. Not hers. Hers was jasmine. He'd know it anywhere.

CHEN'S POV:

She just walked in.

Lin Rui's head snaps up—too fast, too prepared—and I know. I've been set up.

Lin Rui grinning like the scheming bastard he is: "哦，看。微琳在这里。多巧。"

Oh look. Weilin's here. What a coincidence.

"这不是巧合。" This is not a coincidence.

"不是吗？奇怪。我可能提到过我今晚在这里。她可能决定过来。"
Isn't it? Strange. I might have mentioned I'd be here tonight.
She might have decided to come by.

I'm going to kill him.

Weilin sees us. Stops mid-step. Surprise crossing her face—
genuine surprise. Maybe she didn't know either.

Lin Rui waving enthusiastically: "微琳！过来！"

Weilin! Come over!

She hesitates. We haven't been alone together since
Wednesday night. Since "Because I never stopped—". Since
the phone call interrupted.

Then walks over. Because refusing would be obvious. Would
admit there's something to avoid.

Slides into the booth. Lin Rui's side. Across from me. Safe
distance.

Our eyes meet. Brief, electric. I look away first.

"嗨。" Hi.

"嗨。"

Brilliant conversation. Marcus Chen, CEO, master negotiator,
reduced to monosyllables.

Lin Rui enjoying this way too much: "我给你点饮料。你喜欢什
么？"

I'll get you a drink. What do you like?

Weilin orders wine. Red wine, something mid-range. She's
still budget-conscious even though I gave her a raise last
week. She doesn't know I gave her a raise. Did it through HR.
Anonymously.

Lin Rui orders another round for everyone.

Conversation starts awkwardly.

"那么，微琳，你感觉好些了吗？"

So, Weilin, feeling better?

"是的。谢谢。" Yes. Thank you.

"老板对你很好，对吧？确保你休息？"

Boss took good care of you, right? Made sure you rested?

Both of us shift uncomfortably.

"他.....他很周到。" He was... very thoughtful.

Thoughtful. Understatement of the century. I kept her at my penthouse for three days. Cooked for her. Worked from home. Almost told her I never stopped loving her.

"周到。好词。他很擅长周到。特别是当他关心某人的时候。"

Thoughtful. Good word. He's very good at thoughtful.

Especially when he cares about someone.

I kick him under the table. He doesn't even flinch.

Thirty minutes later. Alcohol is working.

Weilin on her second glass of wine. Cheeks flushed. More relaxed.

"记得新加坡项目第一周吗？当张伟把合规文件搞混了？"

Remember the first week of the Singapore project? When Zhang Wei mixed up the compliance documents?

I laugh. Actual laugh. Remembering.

"他给监管机构发了内部备忘录。我以为我们都要被解雇。"

He sent the internal memo to the regulators. I thought we'd all be fired.

Weilin laughing: "你脸上的表情！纯粹的恐慌！"

The look on your face! Pure panic!

"我很恐慌！我们几乎毁了一个价值5000万美元的交易！"

I was panicked! We almost tanked a ¥50 million deal!

Lin Rui watching us laugh together. Satisfied smirk.

"你们俩工作得很好。" You two work well together.

The laughter dies. Sudden awareness of what he's implying.

"我们是好的.....同事。" We're good... colleagues.

"当然。同事。" Of course. Colleagues.

His tone says: Keep telling yourselves that.

11:47 PM. The bar is emptying.

Friday night crowd thinning. Couples leaving. Just a few stragglers.

Lin Rui's phone buzzes. He checks it. Grins.

"哦，我需要接这个。工作。我会在外面。"

Oh, I need to take this. Work. I'll be outside.

Slides out of the booth. Too smoothly. Too quickly. Leaves.

Just us. In a dimly lit booth. Both tipsy. History and tension and unfinished sentences between us.

I'm going to murder Lin Rui. Slowly. Painfully.

Silence. Not uncomfortable, but charged.

Weilin looking at her wine glass, not at me. "他不微妙。"

He's not subtle.

"从来都不是。" Never has been.

"你认为他要回来吗？" Do you think he's coming back?

"最终。当他认为我们'处理了我们的问题'。"

Eventually. When he thinks we've 'dealt with our issues.'

She laughs. Soft, genuine.

Slides over. To my side of the booth. "So we don't have to shout across the table," she says. But we weren't shouting.

Now she's next to me. Maybe two feet away. Close enough to smell her jasmine perfume. Close enough to feel her warmth.

Danger. This is dangerous.

Weilin looking at me, wine-brave: "你看起来不同。今晚。"

You look different. Tonight.

"不同怎样？" Different how?

"更轻松。更少.....Marcus Chen。更多....."

More relaxed. Less... Marcus Chen. More...

She doesn't finish. But I know what she means.

"更多墨轩？" More Moxuan?

"是的。"

I look at her. Really look. Her hair down, jeans, simple top, no armor.

"你也看起来不同。更轻松。"

You look different too. Lighter.

Weilin smiling: "我是。贫穷适合我。"

I am. Poverty suits me.

She's joking. But it's true—she looks more alive in jeans and a simple top than she ever did in designer clothes.

"你从来都不是衣服或金钱。你一直都是.....你。"

You were never the clothes or the money. You were always just... you.

Her breath catches. Looking at me. Eyes wide. Vulnerable.

"那为什么你雇用我？如果不是为了证明你现在有钱？"

Then why did you hire me? If not to prove you have money now?

Honest question. Deserves honest answer.

"因为看到你在那个面试中，坐在那里努力保持镇定，我意识到我从未真正放手。六年，我假装我已经继续前进。然后你走进我的办公室，一切都崩溃了。"

Because seeing you in that interview, sitting there trying to hold it together, I realized I never actually let go. Six years I pretended I'd moved on. Then you walked into my office and it all fell apart.

She's quiet. Processing.

"所以你雇用我来折磨我？"

So you hired me to torture me?

"我雇用你是因为让你离开再次不可想象。即使这意味着每天看到你并且无法....."

I hired you because letting you leave again was unthinkable. Even if it meant seeing you every day and not being able to... Stop. Can't finish that sentence. Too dangerous.

"无法什么？" Not being able to what?

We're so close. When did we get this close? Her knee is touching mine. I can feel her breath.

"无法触摸你。无法告诉你真相。无法....."

Not being able to touch you. Tell you the truth. Not being able to...

Kiss you. Hold you. Beg you to give me another chance.

She's looking at me. Eyes dark. Lips parted. Leaning in—or am I leaning in? Someone's leaning.

Her hand on the booth between us. Fingers almost touching mine.

My hand moving. Covering hers. Warmth and electricity.

Weilin whispered: "墨轩....."

That name. In that voice. I'm lost.

I lean in. Closing the distance. Slow. Giving her time to pull away.

She doesn't pull away. Tilts her face up. Eyes closing. Waiting. One inch apart. Half inch. I can feel her breath on my lips.

Then—

I pull back. Hard. Fast. Putting distance between us.

Weilin's eyes open. Confused. Hurt. "什么——"

I run my hand through my hair. Stand. Need space.

"我们不能。合同。" We can't. The contract.

Weilin stands too. Wine-flushed and angry.

"去他妈的合同。" Fuck the contract.

Did she just— Yes. She did.

"微琳——"

"别。别'微琳'我。你就要吻我了。我们都知道。你想要。我想要。那为什么——"

Don't. Don't 'Weilin' me. You were about to kiss me. We both know it. You wanted to. I wanted to. So why—

"因为如果我吻你，一切都会改变。"

Because if I kiss you, everything changes.

"也许我想要它改变！"

Maybe I want it to change!

"你不知道你想要什么。你喝了酒。我喝了酒。这是——"

You don't know what you want. You've been drinking. I've been drinking. This is—

Weilin stepping back. Hurt hardening to anger.

"对。我喝了酒。这就是为什么我想吻你。不是因为我已经想了三天。不是因为当我在你的客房醒来时，我希望是你的房间。只是酒精。"

Right. I've been drinking. That's why I want to kiss you. Not because I've been thinking about it for three days. Not because when I woke up in your guest room, I wished it was your room. Just the alcohol.

She wished it was my room. She's been thinking about kissing me. For three days.

She grabs her bag. Moving to leave.

"谢谢你提醒我为什么我们离婚了。你总是太害怕去想要任何东西。"

Thanks for reminding me why we got divorced. You were always too scared to want anything.

That hits. Direct hit. Devastating.

"那不公平——" That's not fair—

"什么是公平的？你几乎吻我然后因为'合同'而退缩？"

What's fair? You almost kissing me then pulling back because of a 'contract'?

"合同是真实的！你为我工作！如果我们——如果这个——这是道德问题，法律问题——"

The contract is real! You work for me! If we—if this—it's an ethics issue, a legal issue—

"那解雇我。" Then fire me.

Silence.

"什么？"

"解雇我。如果合同是唯一阻止你的东西。解雇我，然后吻我。"

Fire me. If the contract is the only thing stopping you. Fire me and then kiss me.

Is she serious?

"我不能解雇你。你需要这份工作。你需要钱——"

I can't fire you. You need this job. You need the money—

"我不需要你的怜悯工作！我需要你诚实！"

I don't need your pity job! I need you to be honest!

"我一直在诚实！" I have been honest!

"不，你一直在害怕！有区别！"

No, you've been scared! There's a difference!

She's right. She's absolutely right. And I can't admit it.

Weilin grabbing her coat: "我要走了。当你准备好停止害怕时，让我知道。"

I'm leaving. When you're ready to stop being scared, let me know.

She walks out. Just like that. Leaves me standing in the bar. Frozen. Stupid. Terrified.

Lin Rui appearing from nowhere—he was never on a call.

"你是个白痴。" You're an idiot.

"我知道。" I know.

"她刚才基本上请求你吻她。"

She basically begged you to kiss her.

"我知道！"

"那你为什么让她走？" So why did you let her go?

I sit down heavily. Head in hands.

"因为如果我开始，我不会停止。"

Because if I start, I won't stop.

I walk. Home is two kilometers. I need the air. Need to think.

Shanghai at midnight. Still alive. Still buzzing. People everywhere. I'm alone in the crowd.

I almost kissed her. I wanted to kiss her. She wanted me to kiss her.

And I stopped. Because of a contract. Because of fear.

She's right. I'm always too scared to want anything.

Lin Rui's words in my head: "You're an idiot."

Dr. Song's words: "When are you going to stop protecting the wound and start healing it?"

Weilin's words: "Fire me and then kiss me."

Could I? Could I just... fire her? End the contract? Give her severance, recommendation, whatever she needs? And then... And then what? Kiss her? Beg her to try again? Risk everything?

Yes. That's exactly what I want.

I pull out my phone. Drunk courage. Or maybe just drunk.

WEILIN'S POV:

I'm walking. No destination. Just away. Crying and angry and embarrassed.

He almost kissed me. I could feel it. His breath on my lips.

And then he pulled away. Because of a fucking contract.
I told him to fire me. I basically begged him to choose me
over professionalism.

And he chose professionalism.

Just like I chose my parents over him seven years ago.

We're both cowards. Perfect for each other. Except we're not
together.

My phone buzzes. Text from him.

Oh God. What's he going to say? "I'm sorry"? "Let's forget this
happened"? "We should maintain boundaries"?

I open it. Hands shaking.

CHEN (11:58 PM):

我想吻你。

I wanted to kiss you.

My heart stops.

I stand on the street corner. People flowing around me. I'm
frozen.

Type:

那你为什么不吻?

Why didn't you?

Three dots. He's typing. They disappear. Appear again.

Disappear.

He's struggling. Good. He should struggle.

Finally:

因为如果我开始，我不会停止。

Because if I start, I won't stop.

Oh.

My fingers trembling. Typing:

也许我不想你停止。

Maybe I don't want you to stop.

Immediate response:

你不知道你在说什么。你喝了酒。

You don't know what you're saying. You've been drinking.

我没那么醉。我知道我在说什么。

I'm not that drunk. I know what I'm saying.

微琳.....

别。别'微琳'我然后找借口。如果你不想吻我，就说出来。但别责怪合同或酒精或任何其他东西。

Don't. Don't 'Weilin' me and then make excuses. If you don't want to kiss me, say that. But don't blame the contract or alcohol or anything else.

Long pause. No typing dots. Nothing. One minute. Two.

Maybe I pushed too hard. Maybe he's done. Maybe—

Phone rings. His name. He's calling.

I answer. Breathless. "喂？"

Chen's voice rough, desperate:

"我想吻你。我想不仅仅是吻你。我想.....我想要一切。"

I want to kiss you. I want more than kiss you. I want... I want everything.

My breath catches.

"那为什么你不——" Then why don't you—

"因为我害怕。你说得对。我一直害怕。"

Because I'm scared. You're right. I've been scared.

"害怕什么？" Scared of what?

Silence. I can hear him breathing. Walking. Traffic in the background.

"害怕如果我让自己想要你，你会再次离开。害怕如果我让你进来，你会看到墨轩仍然在那里，仍然是那个不够的男人。"

Scared that if I let myself want you, you'll leave again. Scared that if I let you in, you'll see Moxuan is still in here, still that

man who wasn't enough.

My tears falling now. Standing on a Shanghai street at midnight. Crying.

"墨轩总是够的。我是太破碎而看不到的那个人。"

Moxuan was always enough. I was the one too broken to see it.

"那我们现在做什么？" Then what do we do now?

"我不知道。但我知道我厌倦了害怕。厌倦了假装我不想要这个。"

I don't know. But I know I'm tired of being scared. Tired of pretending I don't want this.

"想要什么？" Want what?

"你。我们。第二次机会。"

You. Us. A second chance.

Long pause.

Chen, voice breaking: "我也是。上帝帮助我，我也是。"

Me too. God help me, me too.

"那周一。我们谈谈。真正谈谈。没有酒精。没有借口。只是诚实。"

Then Monday. We talk. Really talk. No alcohol. No excuses. Just honesty.

"周一。" Monday.

"你还在那里吗？在街上？" Are you still out there? On the street?

"是的。走回家。你呢？" Yes. Walking home. You?

"是的。"

Silence. Both of us walking. Phone connected. Not talking but together.

Chen finally: "我想和你一起走。"

I wish I was walking with you.

"我也是。" Me too.

"我想.....我想不仅仅是走路。"

I wish... I wish more than just walking.

"墨轩——"

"我想带你回家。我的家。不是客房。我的房间。"

I wish I was taking you home. My home. Not the guest room.
My room.

Oh God.

Voice shaking: "我们说了周一。谈话。没有酒精。"

We said Monday. Talking. No alcohol.

"我知道。我只是.....我想让你知道。我想要那个。最终。如果你.....如果我们....."

I know. I just... I wanted you to know. I want that. Eventually.
If you... if we...

"我也想要。" I want that too.

Silence. Loaded. Electric. Promising.

"到家了吗？" Are you home?

"快到了。你呢？" Almost. You?

"五分钟。" Five minutes.

"好。"

"晚安，微琳。"

"晚安，墨轩。"

Neither of us hangs up. Just breathe. Together. Connected.
Phone line between us.

Finally, I hear his door. Keys. Lock.

"到家了？" Home?

"是的。你呢？"

"刚开门。" Just unlocking my door.

"好。锁好门。" Good. Lock your door.

"我会的。"

Another pause.

"周一。10点。我的办公室。"

Monday. 10 AM. My office.

"我会在那里。" I'll be there.

"微琳？"

"嗯？"

"谢谢你。为了今晚。为了诚实。"

Thank you. For tonight. For being honest.

"谢谢你不吻我。" Thank you for not kissing me.

Chen surprised: "为什么？"

"因为当你真正吻我时，我希望我们都清醒。都确定。都准备好承担后果。"

Because when you finally kiss me, I want us both to be sober.
Both sure. Both ready for the consequences.

Long pause.

"当。不是如果。" When. Not if.

"当。"

"晚安。"

"晚安。"

Hang up.

Stand in my apartment. Dark. Empty. Alone. Phone in hand
still warm from the call.

Monday. We talk. And then...

When, not if.

END CHAPTER 20

=====~=====

CHAPTER 21: THE MORNING AFTER (REGRET & LONGING)

Weilin woke up at 7:23 AM with a headache that felt like

divine punishment for wanting things she shouldn't want, a mouth that tasted like regret and red wine, and her phone clutched in her hand displaying last night's text exchange with Chen—"Maybe I don't want you to stop"—and the mortification was so complete, so devastating, that she seriously considered moving to another city, changing her name, and pretending the last twelve hours had happened to someone else entirely.

7:23 AM. Saturday morning. Nine hours after the bar, the phone call, everything.

Her apartment in Yangpu. Still sparse. Still poor. Now with added hangover.

Her phone screen bright, accusatory, text exchange scrolling endlessly. Her apartment, morning light harsh through uncurtained windows. Her reflection in the phone screen—hair disaster, makeup smeared, still wearing last night's clothes.

Silence. Oppressive Saturday morning silence. Her heartbeat panicked, racing. Shanghai waking up outside. Traffic, life continuing while she died of embarrassment.

Phone hot in her hand. Been clutching it all night. Her head pounding, dehydrated. Her body lying on top of covers. Fell asleep in clothes. Everything aches.

Stale wine on her breath. Yesterday's perfume too strong now, nauseating. Nothing else. She didn't eat dinner. Didn't eat breakfast. Stomach empty and churning.

WEILIN'S POV:

I scroll through the texts again. Fifth time this morning. Masochist.

ME (11:58 PM): 也许我不想你停止。

Maybe I don't want you to stop.

CHEN (12:01 AM): 因为如果我开始，我不会停止。

Because if I start, I won't stop.

ME (12:03 AM): 也许我不想你停止。

Maybe I don't want you to stop.

I said it twice. TWICE.

I basically begged him to... to what? Kiss me? More than kiss me?

Then the phone call. His voice: "I want to kiss you. I want more than kiss you. I want... everything."

My voice: "You. Us. A second chance."

I drop the phone. Can't look anymore.

Bury my face in my pillow. Scream. Muffled. Neighbors don't need to hear this breakdown.

What was I thinking? He's my boss. My ex-husband. The man I destroyed six years ago.

And I'm drunk-texting him about wanting him to kiss me.

My phone buzzes. New text. Oh God, is it him?

Grab it. Desperate. Terrified.

Lin Rui. Of course it's Lin Rui.

你和老板谈过了吗？你们俩周五晚上几乎燃烧了那个酒吧。—LR

Have you talked to boss? You two almost burned down that bar Friday night. —LR

Great. Lin Rui knows. Of course Lin Rui knows. Lin Rui knows everything.

I don't respond. Can't. What would I say?

Another text. Thirty seconds later.

我把它当作'不'。你在避开他。他在避开你。你们都是白痴。—LR

I'm taking that as a 'no.' You're avoiding him. He's avoiding you. You're both idiots. —LR

He's avoiding me?

Type: 他也在避开我吗? —W

He's avoiding me too? —W

Immediate response:

他整个周末都在家。没有回复工作邮件。关了电话。他从不这样做。显然你吓到他了。 —LR

He's been home all weekend. Not answering work emails. Phone off. He never does that. Apparently you scared him. —LR

I scared him. Good. He terrified me.

I spend Saturday in bed. Depression? Hangover? Existential crisis? All three.

Don't check work email. Can't face it.

Don't check phone. Except for the seventeen times I do. Compulsively. Hoping and dreading he'll text.

He doesn't text.

3:47 PM, I finally get up. Shower. Change. Pretend to be human.

Make instant noodles. All I have. All I can afford until payday. Sit on my IKEA bed. ¥899. Still uncomfortable. Still better than the floor.

Stare at my phone.

Should I text him? Apologize? Pretend it never happened?

Lean into it?

Open messages. Draft something:

关于周五晚上——

About Friday night—

Delete it. What would I even say? "Sorry I drunkenly propositioned you"? "Sorry I asked you to fire me so you could kiss me"? "Sorry I admitted I want a second chance"?

I'm not sorry. That's the problem. I meant it all.

SUNDAY MORNING.

I try to prepare for Monday.

Wash my work clothes. Hand-wash in bathroom sink. Hang to dry.

Review Singapore project files. Distraction. Professionalism. Pretending I can face him.

Practice what I'll say. In mirror. To myself. Increasingly desperate.

"陈先生，关于周五——" Mr. Chen, about Friday—

Too formal. We're past "Mr. Chen" after I said I wanted him.

"墨轩，我们需要谈谈——" Moxuan, we need to talk—

Too intimate. Maybe we're not there yet. Are we there?

"嘿，所以，关于我基本上请你吻我的时候——"

Hey, so, about when I basically begged you to kiss me—

Too casual. This isn't casual. This is terrifying.

Give up. No script will save me.

Text Lin Rui: 我周一要做什么？—W

What do I do Monday? —W

出现。专业。等他采取行动。或者你采取行动。有人需要采取行动。—LR

Show up. Be professional. Wait for him to make a move. Or you make a move. Someone needs to make a move. —LR

Helpful. Very helpful.

SUNDAY NIGHT.

Can't sleep. Lie awake, staring at ceiling.

Replay Friday night. The bar. The booth. The almost-kiss.

His face inches from mine. His breath on my lips. The moment before he pulled away.

What if he hadn't pulled away? What if I'd just kissed him?

Closed that last half-inch?

Would he have kissed back? Or would he have pushed me away, reminded me of professionalism, broken my heart again?

My phone charging beside bed. Silent all weekend.

Check it. 1:47 AM. No messages from him.

He's avoiding me. Completely.

We agreed to talk Monday. 10 AM. His office.

But what if he doesn't show? What if he cancels? What if he fires me?

"Fire me and then kiss me," I said.

What if he only does the first part?

Finally fall asleep. 3:30 AM. Exhausted. Terrified. Hopeful. Confused.

MONDAY, 7:47 AM.

I arrive at the office early. Too early. Avoiding the chance of arriving at the same time as him.

Office is empty. Cleaning crew just leaving. Lights flickering on.

My office small, glass-walled, view of his office—currently dark.

He's not here yet. Good. I can prepare. Armor up.

Professionalism as shield.

8:15 AM. His office light turns on. He's here.

I watch through glass walls. Can't help it.

Chen at his desk. Laptop opening. Coffee in hand. He brought his own. Didn't stop at office machine. Avoiding common areas. Avoiding people. Avoiding me.

He doesn't look at my office. Doesn't acknowledge I'm here. Just sits. Stiff. Controlled. Marcus Chen in full armor.

10 AM, we said. His office. We talk.

That's in 105 minutes. I might die before then.

8:47 AM. THE TEAM ARRIVES.

Zhang Wei waving: "早上好！ " Good morning!

Li Ruolin, Chen's assistant, professional smile: "早，沈小姐。 "

Morning, Miss Shen.

Lin Rui last to arrive. Sees me. Sees Chen. Grins—bastard.

"早上！ 有趣的周末吗？ "

Morning! Interesting weekend?

I ignore him.

Lin Rui comes to my office. Closes door. Privacy.

"你还没和他说话。 " You haven't talked to him.

"我们说了10点。 " We said 10 AM.

"那是75分钟后。你在对彼此施加的那种紧张度是荒谬的。 "

That's 75 minutes from now. The tension you're both radiating is ridiculous.

"我不知道你在说什么。 "

I don't know what you're talking about.

Lin Rui gestures through glass wall—Chen's office, where Chen is very obviously not looking at my office.

"他每30秒检查一次你的办公室。假装他在看文件。他盯着你的门。 "

He checks your office every 30 seconds. Pretends he's looking at documents. He's staring at your door.

He's watching me?

"他没有——" He's not—

"他是。你也在做。你们俩都可悲。去和他说话。 "

He is. You're doing it too. You're both pathetic. Go talk to him.

"我们说了10点——"

"现在是8:50。为什么要等？ " It's 8:50. Why wait?

Because I'm terrified. Because what if it goes wrong?

Because what if he changed his mind?

"我.....我需要准备。" I... I need to prepare.

"准备什么? 诚实? 你周五已经诚实了。"

Prepare what? Honesty? You were honest Friday.

Too honest. Embarrassingly honest.

Lin Rui leaving, hand on door: "10点。别鸡了。你们中的一个人。"

10 AM. Don't chicken out. One of you.

9:30 AM. TEAM MEETING.

Conference room. Weekly team meeting. Everyone present.

Chen and I on opposite ends of the table—maximum distance.

Chen, professional, cold: "让我们开始。新加坡更新?"

Let's begin. Singapore update?

Zhang Wei presents. Compliance timelines. Regulatory approvals. On track.

Chen nods. Barely looking up from his laptop.

Then: "沈小姐, 客户关系状态?"

Miss Shen, client relations status?

Miss Shen. Not Weilin. Not even "Shen Weilin."

Back to "Miss Shen." Professional. Distant. Like Friday never happened.

I present. Voice steady. Professional. Pretending my heart isn't breaking.

"所有客户都已确认。安排了会议。关系稳定。"

All clients confirmed. Meetings scheduled. Relationships stable.

"好。" Good.

That's it. "Good." Not "thank you." Not "well done." Just "good."

Lin Rui watching us, frustrated: "你们两个需要在新加坡之前解决这个问题。"

You two need to resolve this before Singapore.

Both of us: "解决什么?" Resolve what?

We say it simultaneously. Then look at each other. First time all morning. Eye contact. Electric.

Look away immediately.

Lin Rui: "那个。那种紧张。显而易见。"

That. That tension. It's obvious.

Chen stands, ending meeting: "没有紧张。我们很专业。会议结束。"

There's no tension. We're professional. Meeting adjourned. Walks out. Just like that. 10 AM meeting approaching. He's running.

MONDAY, 10:15 AM.

I go to his office at 10:00. As agreed.

Door is closed. Knock.

Chen's voice: "进来。" Come in.

Open the door. Heart racing.

He's at his desk. Not looking up.

"沈小姐。你需要什么?"

Miss Shen. What do you need?

Miss Shen. We're really doing this. Pretending Friday didn't happen.

"我们说了.....我们要谈谈。"

We said... we were going to talk.

"关于?" About?

Is he serious?

"关于周五。关于——" About Friday. About—

"周五是个错误。我们喝了酒。说了我们不是认真的话。最好忘记

它。"

Friday was a mistake. We'd been drinking. Said things we didn't mean. Best to forget it.

Things we didn't mean.

My chest crushing. Can't breathe.

"你不是认真的吗？" You didn't mean it?

Chen finally looking up. His eyes guarded, careful, lying.

"不。我不是。你呢？"

No. I didn't. Did you?

He's giving me an out. A chance to pretend. To preserve professionalism. To avoid vulnerability.

I should take it. Should say "no, I didn't mean it either." Should let us both retreat to safety.

"是的。我是认真的。" Yes. I meant it.

His mask cracks. Just slightly.

"微琳——"

"别。你刚才叫我沈小姐。坚持这个。如果我们要假装，就做对。"

Don't. You just called me Miss Shen. Stick with it. If we're going to pretend, do it right.

Leave before I cry. Before I break. Before I beg.

His voice behind me: "微琳，等等——"

Weilin, wait—

Don't stop. Close the door.

Go to bathroom. Cry in stall. Professional breakdown in professional bathroom.

MONDAY-WEDNESDAY: THE COLD WAR.

Three days of painful professionalism.

Monday afternoon: Email correspondence only. Even though our offices are fifteen meters apart.

Tuesday: Team meeting. We don't make eye contact.

Everyone notices. No one comments.

Wednesday morning: Singapore trip confirmed. Departure tomorrow. Twelve-hour flight. Three days of meetings. Hotel rooms. Proximity.

Wednesday, 2:47 PM. I'm packing my office bag when Lin Rui appears.

"你和老板说话了吗？" Have you talked to boss?

"我们星期一说了。" We talked Monday.

"那不算。那是你说话，他撒谎。真正的对话。"

That doesn't count. That was you talking and him lying. Real conversation.

"他说周五是个错误。我们喝了酒。我们不是认真的。"

He said Friday was a mistake. We were drinking. We didn't mean it.

"他在撒谎。" He's lying.

"也许吧。但我不能强迫他诚实。"

Maybe. But I can't force him to be honest.

Lin Rui: "你明天有12个小时坐在他旁边。在飞机上。商务舱。我安排了座位。"

You have 12 hours sitting next to him tomorrow. On a plane. Business class. I arranged the seats.

I stare at him. "你做了什么？" You did what?

"我把你们俩安排在一起。12小时。你不能避开彼此。他不能跑。你不能躲。你们会谈话或者坐在痛苦的沉默中。"

I seated you together. 12 hours. You can't avoid each other. He can't run. You can't hide. You'll talk or sit in painful silence.

"林瑞——"

"有人必须做点什么。你们都太骄傲了，太害怕了。所以我在做。明天。飞机上。解决这个问题。"

Someone has to do something. You're both too proud, too

scared. So I'm doing it. Tomorrow. On the plane. Fix this.
Leaves.

I sit at my desk. Head in hands.

Twelve hours. Next to Chen. On a plane. Nowhere to run.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT, 8:47 PM.

Packing for Singapore. Three days. Business casual. Trying to pack light because I still can't afford checked baggage fees.

My suitcase:

- Two work outfits, washed, pressed carefully
- One casual outfit for hotel downtime
- Toiletries, travel-size, cheap
- Laptop, documents, files
- The photo from my closet. The noodle shop photo. I don't know why I'm bringing it. But I can't leave it.

My phone buzzes. Text from Lin Rui.

打包了吗？不要过度思考明天。只是12小时。你们能处理12小时。—LR

Packed? Don't overthink tomorrow. It's just 12 hours. You can handle 12 hours. —LR

Twelve hours next to the man I told I wanted. The man who said he wanted me. The man who's now pretending none of it happened.

Just twelve hours. I'll be fine.

I won't be fine.

THURSDAY, 6:47 AM. PUDONG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.

Check-in. Business class. Company paid—one luxury of working for Chen.

Security smooth. Early morning efficiency.

Lounge. Looking for coffee. Trying to wake up. Haven't slept.

See him across the lounge. He's here. Coffee in hand. Laptop open. Working. Always working.

He sees me. Eye contact. Brief. He looks away first.

We haven't spoken since Monday. Three days of professional emails and avoided glances.

And now: twelve hours on a plane.

Boarding call. Singapore Airlines SQ830. Business class boarding.

We board separately. He goes first. I wait. Maintain distance.

ON THE PLANE.

Find my seat. Business class. Window—I requested window for the view, the escape.

See the seat next to mine. Aisle. Currently empty.

Maybe Lin Rui was joking. Maybe Chen isn't actually sitting next to me. Maybe—

Chen appears in the aisle. Carry-on in hand. Boarding pass in other hand. Checking seat number.

Stops at my row. Looks at me. Surprise? Resignation? Fear?

"看来我们坐在一起。" Seems we're seated together.

"看来是的。" Seems so.

He stows his bag overhead. Efficient. Avoiding eye contact.

Sits. Aisle seat. Maximum distance within proximity. We're maybe eighteen inches apart.

Silence.

Attendant: "先生，小姐，你们想要饮料吗？"

Sir, Miss, would you like drinks?

"水，谢谢。" Water, thank you.

"一样。" Same.

Attendant leaves. We sit side by side. Not looking at each other.

The plane fills. Other passengers. Business travelers. Families. Everyone else living normal lives while we sit in excruciating tension.

Safety announcement. In Chinese, English. We both ignore it. Plane pushes back from gate. Taxiing to runway.

Still haven't spoken.

Takeoff. Engines roaring. Acceleration. Liftoff. Shanghai disappearing below.

Climb to cruising altitude. Thirty minutes of engine noise. Perfect excuse not to talk.

Seatbelt sign turns off.

Attendant: "先生，小姐，我们的飞行时间是12小时15分钟。午餐服务将在一小时内开始。"

Sir, Miss, our flight time is 12 hours and 15 minutes. Lunch service will begin in one hour.

Twelve hours and fifteen minutes. Sitting eighteen inches apart. Nowhere to go.

One hour into flight. Lunch service starting. We've both been pretending to work. His laptop. My files. Neither of us actually productive.

Chen finally, quietly: "我们需要谈谈。"

We need to talk.

I close my laptop. Slowly. Carefully. Buying time.

"关于？" About?

"周一。我撒谎了。" Monday. I lied.

My breath stops. Heart racing.

"关于什么？" About what?

Chen turns to look at me. His eyes vulnerable. Terrified. Honest.

"关于我说周五是个错误。关于我说我不是认真的。关于.....关于一

切。"

About saying Friday was a mistake. About saying I didn't mean it. About... about everything.

The plane humming around us. Thirty-five thousand feet. Nowhere to run. Eleven hours left.

"那你为什么撒谎？" Then why did you lie?

"因为周一早上，看着你走进我的办公室，我意识到如果我承认我是认真的，一切都会改变。我们不能回去。我.....我很害怕。"

Because Monday morning, watching you walk into my office, I realized if I admitted I meant it, everything would change.

We couldn't go back. I... I was scared.

"害怕什么？" Scared of what?

Chen laughs. Bitter. Self-deprecating.

"你还需要问吗？害怕你会改变主意。害怕这是酒精说话。害怕如果我让自己想要你，你会意识到你实际上不想要我。"

Do you really need to ask? Scared you'd change your mind.

Scared it was the alcohol talking. Scared that if I let myself want you, you'd realize you don't actually want me.

My hand reaches out. Covers his on the armrest. First physical contact in days.

"我不会改变主意。不是酒精。我想要....."

I'm not changing my mind. It wasn't the alcohol. I want...

Pause. What do I want?

"我想要诚实。我想要第二次机会。我想要.....我想要你停止害怕，开始尝试。"

I want honesty. I want a second chance. I want... I want you to stop being scared and start trying.

His hand turns under mine. Fingers lacing. Holding.

"我也想要那个。但我不知道怎么做。我六年来一直是Marcus Chen。我不知道如何回到墨轩。"

I want that too. But I don't know how. I've been Marcus Chen for six years. I don't know how to be Moxuan again.

I squeeze his hand. "也许你不必回到墨轩。也许你只需要找到一种方式成为两者。"

Maybe you don't have to go back to being Moxuan. Maybe you just need to find a way to be both.

He looks at our joined hands. Then at me.

"我想尝试。和你一起。如果你愿意等我弄清楚。"

I want to try. With you. If you're willing to wait while I figure it out.

"我已经等了六年。我想我可以再等一会儿。"

I've waited six years. I think I can wait a little longer.

He smiles. Small. Real. The first genuine smile I've seen in weeks.

"十一个小时。从这里到新加坡。我们从哪里开始？"

Eleven hours. From here to Singapore. Where do we start?

I lean back. Still holding his hand. "从头开始。告诉我关于 Marcus Chen 的一切。我想了解你现在是谁。"

From the beginning. Tell me about Marcus Chen. I want to know who you are now.

He nods. Takes a breath.

And starts talking.

END CHAPTER 21

=====~=====

=====~=====

CHAPTER 22: THE FLIGHT (FORCED INTIMACY)

Weilin had been acutely, agonizingly aware of Chen's presence for exactly one hour and seven minutes—aware of

his breathing (steady, controlled, lying), aware of his cologne (bergamot and cedar, the same one that destroyed her composure weeks ago), aware of the eighteen inches between their seats that felt simultaneously like miles and millimeters, aware that his hand was still holding hers from when she'd grabbed it during confession and neither of them had let go and this, this forced intimacy at 35,000 feet with eleven hours remaining, was either going to kill her or save her and she honestly didn't know which she preferred.

9:47 AM. One hour into twelve-hour flight. Eleven hours remaining.

Singapore Airlines SQ830, business class—row 12, seats A & C. 35,000 feet.

Business class cabin cream leather, subdued lighting.

Privacy but not isolation. His profile visible peripherally. Jaw tight. Pretending to read emails. Their hands still intertwined on the armrest. His thumb moving—unconscious circles on her knuckles. Does he know he's doing that? Outside, clouds, endless blue. Trapped in sky.

Engine hum constant, white noise. Other passengers' murmured conversations. Clinking glasses. Normalcy. His breathing—she's counting it. Four counts in, four counts out. Too measured. He's as nervous as she is. Her heartbeat too loud. Does he hear it?

His hand warm, calloused, strong. Holding hers like it's natural. The leather seat cool, expensive. Her seatbelt tight, constricting. Or maybe that's just her chest. The air recycled, slightly too cold. Goosebumps on her arms.

His cologne devastating. Familiar. Home. Airplane smell—coffee, recycled air, someone's perfume. Lunch being

prepared. Galley smells, savory. Her stomach reminds her she skipped breakfast.

WEILIN'S POV:

We're holding hands.

We've been holding hands for an hour. Since I said "I want you to stop being scared and start trying."

Since his hand turned under mine and our fingers laced.

His thumb moving again. Circles on my knuckles. Soothing gesture. Probably unconscious.

Does he know he's doing that? Does he remember we used to do this? Seven years ago, on our couch, watching movies, holding hands exactly like this?

I glance at him. Peripherally. Trying to be subtle.

He's staring at his laptop. Email open. Hasn't scrolled in ten minutes. Definitely not reading.

Chen without looking at me: "你要盯着我看多久？"

How long are you going to stare at me?

Caught.

"我没有盯着。" I'm not staring.

"你是。你过去十分钟一直在看我。"

You are. You've been looking at me for the past ten minutes.

"你怎么知道如果你一直在看你的笔记本电脑？"

How do you know if you've been looking at your laptop?

He finally looks at me. Small smile. First real smile in days.

"因为我的笔记本电脑屏幕是黑色的。它反映了你。我一直在看反射。"

Because my laptop screen is dark. It reflects you. I've been watching the reflection.

Oh.

Both of us watching each other through reflections. Both of

us pretending not to. Both of us holding hands and pretending that's normal.

"那我们两个都是跟踪狂。" So we're both stalkers.

"显然。" Apparently.

He closes his laptop. Giving up the pretense. Turns to face me. Properly. Directly. Our hands still connected.

"我们还有11个小时。我们不能假装工作那么久。"

We have 11 more hours. We can't pretend to work that long.

"那我们做什么？" Then what do we do?

"我们谈话。真正谈话。你说你想要诚实。我.....我想尝试那个。"

We talk. Really talk. You said you wanted honesty. I... I want to try that.

HOUR TWO. 10:47 AM.

The plane shudders. Sudden. Unexpected.

Seatbelt sign dings on.

Pilot's voice calm, professional: "女士们先生们，我们正在经历一些湍流。请回到座位并系好安全带。"

Ladies and gentlemen, we're experiencing some turbulence. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts.

Another shudder. Harder. The plane dropping slightly.

My stomach lurching. I hate turbulence. Always have.

My hand—the one not holding Chen's—grips the armrest.

Knuckles white.

Chen sees. Of course he sees.

"你还是害怕飞吗？" You still hate flying?

"我不害怕飞。我害怕坠落。"

I don't hate flying. I hate falling.

Big drop. Plane shuddering. My breath catches.

My other hand shoots out. Grabs his arm—instinct, terror, need for anchor.

Chen covers my hand with his free hand. Now both his hands holding both mine.

"没事。这只是湍流。我们没有坠落。"

It's okay. It's just turbulence. We're not falling.

But I am falling. Metaphorically. Emotionally. Completely.

The turbulence continues. Five minutes of shuddering. My hands gripping his like lifelines.

He doesn't let go. Just holds me. Steady. Anchor in chaos.

Finally the plane smooths. Turbulence ending. Seatbelt sign off.

I realize I'm gripping him hard enough to hurt.

Try to let go. Embarrassed. Too vulnerable.

He holds on. Doesn't let me pull away.

"没事。你可以继续握着。"

It's okay. You can keep holding on.

"我很抱歉。我只是——" I'm sorry. I just—

"我知道。你一直都害怕湍流。我记得。"

I know. You've always been scared of turbulence. I remember.

He remembers. Seven years later, he remembers I hate turbulence.

We sit. Both my hands in both his hands. Too intimate. Too much. Not enough.

Chen quiet: "你想让我放手吗？"

Do you want me to let go?

"不。" No.

"好。因为我也不想。"

Good. Because I don't want to either.

"告诉我你家人的事。那封信里，你说了一些事情，但不是全部。告诉我全部。"

Tell me about your family. In that letter, you said some things,

but not everything. Tell me everything.

Everything. Does he really want everything? The humiliation, the threats, the way they broke me?

"你真的想知道吗？" Do you really want to know?

"我需要知道。我需要理解为什么你离开了。不是我告诉自己的版本。真实的版本。"

I need to know. I need to understand why you left. Not the version I told myself. The real version.

I take a breath. This is it. Full honesty.

"我父亲.....他没有只是不赞成你。他鄙视你。他说你让我堕落。说我嫁给贫困，嫁给失败。"

My father... he didn't just disapprove of you. He despised you. He said you were dragging me down. That I'd married poverty, married failure.

Chen's hands tighten on mine. Jaw clenched. But he doesn't interrupt.

"他每周都来。到我们的公寓。看着我们住的地方，看着你不在时的我。他.....他会留下钱。在柜台上。像我是妓女一样。"

He came every week. To our apartment. Looked at where we lived, at me when you weren't there. He... he'd leave money. On the counter. Like I was a prostitute.

"微琳——"

"我总是把它还给他。但他会继续留下。然后是威胁。他说如果我不离开你，他会毁了你的创业。他认识人。监管机构的人。他可以做到。"

I always gave it back. But he'd keep leaving it. Then came the threats. He said if I didn't leave you, he'd destroy your startup. He knew people. People in regulatory bodies. He could do it. Chen's face white. Furious.

"你从来没告诉我。" You never told me.

"我怎么能告诉？'嘿，墨轩，我爸爸威胁要毁了你，除非我离开你？你会做什么？为我而战？用什么资源？你会失去一切。"

How could I tell? 'Hey, Moxuan, my dad threatened to destroy you unless I leave you'? What would you have done? Fought for me? With what resources? You would have lost everything.

"我会选择你。每次我都会选择你。"

I would have chosen you. Every time I would have chosen you.

My tears finally falling. Can't hold them.

"那就是为什么我不能告诉你。因为你会选择我而不是你的梦想。我不能让你这样做。"

That's why I couldn't tell you. Because you'd choose me over your dreams. I couldn't let you do that.

CHEN'S POV:

She's crying. Silent tears streaming down her face.

Because her father threatened to destroy me. And she left to protect me.

"你知道你离开后发生了什么吗？"

Do you know what happened after you left?

Weilin shakes her head. "你建了这个。帝国。成功。"

You built this. The empire. Success.

"之前。离婚后的第一年。你知道那年吗？"

Before that. The first year after the divorce. Do you know that year?

She's quiet. Doesn't know. I never told anyone.

"创业失败了。完全失败。我失去了一切。我们的投资者，我们的客户，全部。"

The startup failed. Completely failed. I lost everything. Our investors, our clients, all of it.

"我不知道——" I didn't know—

"我睡在林瑞的沙发上六个月。我在一个仓库工作。夜班。装卸箱子。因为我不能在白天面对任何人。"

I slept on Lin Rui's couch for six months. I worked in a warehouse. Night shift. Loading boxes. Because I couldn't face anyone during the day.

Her hand gripping mine tighter. Horror on her face.

"然后是失眠。焦虑。我会开车经过你父母的房子，只是看看你是否在那里。看看你是否还好。我.....我想了很多次去敲门。"

Then came the insomnia. Anxiety. I'd drive past your parents' house, just to see if you were there. To see if you were okay. I... I thought about knocking so many times.

"为什么你没有？" Why didn't you?

"因为你选择了离开。我以为这意味着你不想要我。我不知道是威胁。我以为.....我以为你意识到我不够。"

Because you chose to leave. I thought that meant you didn't want me. I didn't know about the threats. I thought... I thought you realized I wasn't enough.

"你一直都够。" You were always enough.

"那我为什么花了六年建立一个帝国来证明它？"

Then why did I spend six years building an empire to prove it? No answer. Because we both know why.

12:47 PM. LUNCH SERVICE.

WEILIN'S POV:

Flight attendant approaching with cart. "午餐服务。你们想要什么？"

Lunch service. What would you like?

We finally let go of hands. Need to eat. Practical necessity.

Both of us reluctant.

"你想要什么？" What do you want?

"我.....我不知道。什么都好。"

I... I don't know. Whatever is fine.

He orders for both of us. Remembering what I like—or what I used to like.

"两份鸡肉。一份米饭，一份面条。还有水果沙拉。"

Two chicken. One rice, one noodles. And fruit salad.

He ordered variety. So we can share. Like we used to.

Food arrives. His tray. My tray. Between us.

We eat separately at first, then—

Chen's fork reaches to my tray. Takes a piece of chicken.

"我可以尝一下你的吗？" Can I try yours?

Old habit. From when we were married. Always sharing food.

"当然。" Of course.

Offer him my fork with noodles. He takes it. Eating from my fork. Intimate. Domestic. Too familiar and not familiar enough.

We share the rest of the meal. Trading bites. Old rhythm returning.

"你的鸡肉更好。" Your chicken is better.

"你的米饭更好。" Your rice is better.

"想交换吗？" Want to switch?

"是的。"

We switch trays. Completely. Eating each other's meals like it's natural.

Chen watching me eat his meal. Small smile.

"我们以前一直这样做。"

We used to do this all the time.

"我知道。"

"我忘了.....我忘了这感觉有多好。正常。"

I forgot... I forgot how good this felt. Normal.

Normal. Sharing food at 35,000 feet. Like we're married again.

Except we're not. Except maybe we're trying.

HOUR SIX. 3:47 PM.

Movie time. Screens down. Options available. Chen scrolling through selections.

Chen pulls out pill bottle. "我需要吃我的安眠药。医生为飞行开的。"

I need to take my sleeping pill. Doctor prescribed for flights.

"你需要安眠药才能在飞机上睡觉？"

You need sleeping pills to sleep on planes?

"我需要安眠药才能睡觉。时期。飞机只是让它变得更糟。"

I need sleeping pills to sleep. Period. Planes just make it worse.

He still has insomnia. Six years later. Still not sleeping.

He takes the pill with water. Settles back into seat. Selects a movie. Something mindless. Action film. Doesn't matter.

Twenty minutes pass. The pill working. I can see it.

Chen's eyes drooping. Fighting it. His posture relaxing.

Defenses lowering. His head tilting. First toward the window, then—

Toward me.

His head on my shoulder. Heavy. Warm. Trusting.

He's falling asleep on me.

Should I move? Wake him? Let him?

I freeze. Afraid to breathe. Afraid to break the moment.

Chen, voice slurred, drowsy, barely conscious: "微琳？"

"嗯？"

"我想告诉你一些事情。" I want to tell you something.

"什么？"

Long pause. I think he's fallen asleep, then:

"我想你。每一天。我想你。"

I miss you. Every day. I miss you.

My breath stops. Heart stops. World stops.

Whispered: "什么? "

Chen mumbling, half-asleep: "六年。每一天。我醒来就想你。

我想你做饭。我想你笑。我想.....我想你在那里。"

Six years. Every day. I wake up missing you. I miss you cooking. I miss you laughing. I miss... I miss you being there.

My tears falling silently. Can't stop them.

"我也想你。" I miss you too.

No response. He's asleep. Fully asleep. Didn't hear me.

His breathing deep, even. Finally peaceful.

His head heavy on my shoulder. Trust and vulnerability.

I don't move. Can't move. Won't move.

Just sit. Crying silently. His confession echoing.

"I miss you. Every day."

HOURS 6-12.

He sleeps on my shoulder. For six hours.

I don't move. My arm goes numb around hour three. I don't care.

Flight attendant passing. Seeing us. Smiling.

"你的丈夫睡得很好。" Your husband is sleeping well.

I don't correct her. Just nod. Let her think we're married. Let myself pretend.

Hour seven. My neck aches. His head is heavy. My shoulder cramping.

Don't care. Just watch him sleep. Peaceful. Unguarded. The lines of tension smoothed.

This is 墨轩. Not Marcus Chen.

墨轩 sleeping on my shoulder like he used to. Like we're on our couch in our shitty apartment. Like we never divorced. Hour eight. He shifts. Mumbling in sleep.

"别走.....拜托别走....."

Don't leave... please don't leave...

My hand moves to his hair. Stroking gently. Old habit.

"我没有离开。我在这里。"

I'm not leaving. I'm here.

He settles. Reassured even in sleep.

Hour eleven. Pilot announces beginning descent into Singapore.

Chen needs to wake up. Seatbelt sign will come on.

I don't want to wake him. Want this moment to last. Want to stay here, frozen. Him trusting me. Me holding him.

But:

Gently, hand on his shoulder: "墨轩。醒醒。我们快到了。"

Moxuan. Wake up. We're almost there.

CHEN'S POV:

I wake slowly. Groggy. Comfortable—too comfortable.

Realize I'm leaning on something warm. Not something.

Someone. Weilin.

Sit up fast. Disoriented.

"我.....我睡着了吗?" I... I fell asleep?

Weilin stretching her shoulder. Wincing—I was on her for how long?

"六个小时。" Six hours.

Six hours?

"你为什么不动我?" Why didn't you move me?

"你看起来很平静。我.....我不想打扰你。"

You looked peaceful. I... I didn't want to disturb you.

Memories flooding back. Hazy. Pill-induced.

Did I say something? I think I said something. Oh God, what did I say?

"我说了什么吗？在我睡着之前？"

Did I say anything? Before I fell asleep?

She looks at me. Eyes red—has she been crying?

"你说了一些事情。" You said some things.

"什么事情？" What things?

She's quiet. Deciding whether to tell me.

"你说你想我。每一天。六年来，你每天醒来都想我。"

You said you miss me. Every day. For six years, you wake up missing me.

Oh God. I said that. Out loud. To her.

Panicking: "我.....那是安眠药。我不是——假装我没说那个。"

I... that was the sleeping pill. I didn't mean—pretend I didn't say that.

Weilin looking at me directly. Tears still visible.

"我不能。" I can't.

"什么？"

"我不能假装。你说了。我听到了。我不能假装我没听到或者它不重要。"

I can't pretend. You said it. I heard it. I can't pretend I didn't hear it or that it doesn't matter.

Silence. Plane descending. Singapore approaching. Reality returning.

"那我们现在做什么？" Then what do we do now?

"我不知道。但我知道我也想你。我在我的信里告诉过你。我在酒吧告诉过你。现在我再告诉你一次。"

I don't know. But I know I miss you too. I told you in my letter. I told you at the bar. And I'm telling you again now.

"我想你做饭。我想你笑。我想你看着我，就像我是重要的。我想要.....我想要我们回来。"

I miss you cooking. I miss you laughing. I miss you looking at me like I matter. I miss... I miss us back.

The plane touches down. Wheels hitting runway. Return to earth.

"我们不能回到过去。"

We can't go back to what we were.

"我不想回到过去。我想要我们可能成为的东西。如果我们都停止害怕。"

I don't want to go back to what we were. I want what we could be. If we both stopped being scared.

Plane taxiing to gate. Journey ending. New journey beginning?

"我不知道如何不害怕。"

I don't know how to not be scared.

"我也不知道。但也许我们一起学习。"

I don't know either. But maybe we learn together.

Seatbelt sign turns off. Passengers standing. Gathering bags. Normal life resuming.

We sit. Not moving. Everyone flowing around us.

"我们有三天。在新加坡。会议，是的。但也有晚上。晚餐。时间。"

We have three days. In Singapore. Meetings, yes. But also evenings. Dinners. Time.

"你建议什么？" What are you suggesting?

"我建议我们停止避开彼此。停止假装。尝试.....尝试诚实。尝试看看这是什么。"

I'm suggesting we stop avoiding each other. Stop pretending. Try... try being honest. Try seeing what this is.

"这违反了合同。" This violates the contract.

"那我们修改合同。或者我辞职。或者我们找到另一种方式。但我不能再继续假装我不想要这个。"

Then we amend the contract. Or I quit. Or we find another way. But I can't keep pretending I don't want this.

The gate arriving. Plane stopping. Doors opening.

I stand. Offer my hand.

"三天。我们尝试诚实。看看会发生什么。"

Three days. We try honesty. See what happens.

She takes my hand. Stands. Faces me.

"三天。"

We walk off the plane. Hand in hand. Together. Terrified and hopeful.

Singapore waiting. Three days of proximity and truth and whatever comes next.

My phone buzzes. Text from Lin Rui—he's psychic or has spies:

12小时坐在一起。你们谈了吗？修复了吗？还是我需要安排你们共享一个酒店房间？—LR

12 hours sitting together. Did you talk? Fix it? Or do I need to arrange for you to share a hotel room? —LR

I show Weilin the text.

She laughs. First real laugh in days.

"他会那样做吗？" Would he do that?

"毫无疑问。" Without question.

She types on my phone:

我们谈了。我们在尝试。别安排共享房间。还没有。给我们时间。—W

We talked. We're trying. Don't arrange a shared room. Not yet. Give us time. —W

"Not yet." She said "not yet."

Not "no."

"Not yet."

END CHAPTER 22

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CHAPTER 23: SINGAPORE (PROFESSIONAL TORTURE)

Chen had been watching Weilin destroy him professionally for two hours—watching her charm the Singaporean regulatory partners with perfect Mandarin and flawless English, watching her navigate complex compliance questions with ease, watching her laugh at Managing Partner Tan's terrible jokes like they were comedy gold, watching her be everything he'd hired her to be while simultaneously making him want to cancel the entire dinner and drag her back to the hotel to finish the conversation they started on the plane—and the cognitive dissonance between "brilliant colleague" and "woman I'm falling for again" was going to kill him before dessert arrived.

7:47 PM. Day 2 in Singapore. Thursday evening. Partner dinner ongoing.

Raffles Hotel restaurant, private dining room. Client dinner with Singaporean partners.

Private dining room elegant, understated luxury. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Marina Bay. The table set for eight people. Formal place settings. Weilin across from him—

strategic seating, professional distance, torture.

Her wearing navy dress. Professional but devastating. Hair up. Pearl earrings. Every inch the competent executive. The partners watching her with approval. With interest. Is Partner Tan flirting? Chen's jaw clenches.

Conversation flowing in Mandarin, English, code-switching seamlessly. Her voice confident, warm, professional—he knows her other voices. Soft morning voice. Angry voice. Voice when she's about to cry. Cutlery on china making civilized sounds. He wants to flip the table. His heartbeat too fast. Too obvious.

His wine glass—gripping too hard. Careful not to shatter it. His suit too tight. Too hot. Singapore humidity plus desire equals suffocation. His phone in pocket vibrating. Probably Lin Rui checking in. He ignores it.

Food—Singaporean cuisine. Chili crab. Black pepper crab. Too spicy. He's barely eating. Her perfume—jasmine—drifting across table when she gestures. Destroying his focus. Wine trying to drown in it politely. Not working.

CHEN'S POV:

Partner Tan is laughing at something Weilin said. Leaning too close.

She smiles. Professional smile. I can tell the difference between professional and real. This is professional.

He doesn't know the difference. Thinks she's charmed.

Partner Tan, Singaporean accent, jovial: "沈小姐，你真的太有才了。陈总，你从哪里找到她的？"

Miss Shen, you're really too talented. Mr. Chen, where did you find her?

In my marriage. In my past. In my nightmares and dreams for

six years.

Professionally: "沈小姐来得很推荐。她超出了所有期望。"

Miss Shen came highly recommended. She's exceeded all expectations.

Understatement of the century.

Weilin looking at me across table. Brief eye contact—is that amusement? Awareness that I'm dying?

"陈总太慷慨了。这是团队努力。"

Mr. Chen is too generous. It's a team effort.

"Mr. Chen." We're back to that. In public. In professional settings.

But her eyes say: I know you're watching. I know what you're thinking.

Partner Tan: "你们一起工作得很好。化学反应显而易见。"

You work together very well. The chemistry is obvious.

Chemistry. If you only knew.

POST-DINNER. 10:47 PM.

Back at hotel. Marina Bay Sands. Company booked rooms—separate rooms, different floors even. Lin Rui's doing.

Maintaining propriety.

Elevator. Just the two of us. Clients gone. Professionalism can slip slightly.

"我认为那进行得很顺利。" I think that went well.

"你很出色。" You were brilliant.

She looks at me. Elevator quiet. Intimate. Nobody else.

"我很紧张。我的第一次大客户晚餐。"

I was nervous. My first major client dinner.

"你完全没有显示出来。Partner Tan印象深刻。"

You didn't show it at all. Partner Tan was impressed.

Too impressed. Too interested.

"他很好。友好。" He was nice. Friendly.

"他在调情。" He was flirting.

She blinks, surprised. "什么？不，他没有——"

What? No, he wasn't—

"他是。倾身太近。问你是否单身。暗示你应该'在新加坡多待几天看看城市'。"

He was. Leaning too close. Asking if you're single.

Suggesting you should 'stay a few extra days in Singapore to see the city.'

Weilin, small smile: "你很关注。"

You were paying attention.

"我总是关注你。" I'm always paying attention to you.

Elevator stops. Her floor. 47th. Doors open.

She doesn't move immediately.

"我们需要审查明天的演示文稿。"

We need to review tomorrow's presentation.

"现在？现在是晚上11点。"

Now? It's 11 PM.

"你更愿意早上做吗？当我们与监管机构会面时意识到我们错过了什么？"

Would you rather do it in the morning? When we're meeting with the regulators and realize we missed something?

She has a point.

"好的。你的房间还是我的？"

Fine. Your room or mine?

The question loaded. Dangerous. We both hear it.

"你的。我的乱七八糟。" Yours. Mine's a mess.

My room. Weilin in my hotel room. At 11 PM. To "review presentations."

This is fine. I'm fine.

I'm not fine.

"给我十分钟换衣服。然后我会上来。你在哪一层？"

Give me ten minutes to change. Then I'll come up. What floor are you on?

"53。5312房间。" 53. Room 5312.

She nods. Steps out of elevator. Doors close.

I ride up alone. Six more floors. Trying to calm down.

It's just work. Professional review. She's changing into comfortable clothes.

I should change too. Into what? Not pajamas—too intimate.

Not suit—too formal. Casual. Professional casual.

Why am I panicking about wardrobe choices?

11:17 PM. CHEN'S HOTEL ROOM.

I change quickly. Jeans and t-shirt—casual, comfortable, trying for "relaxed professional."

Order coffee from room service. We'll need it.

Set up laptop on the desk. Professional workspace.

Knock at the door. Exactly ten minutes later. She's punctual. Open it.

Weilin in leggings and oversized sweater. Hair down. Glasses on. Laptop bag over shoulder.

"嗨。"

Glasses. She's wearing glasses. I forgot she wears glasses when she works late.

I'm dead.

"嗨。进来。" Hi. Come in.

She enters my hotel room. Surveying—king bed dominating space, desk, small sofa, floor-to-ceiling windows with Singapore skyline.

"好房间。比我的大。" Nice room. Bigger than mine.

"CEO特权。" CEO perks.

Coffee arrives. Room service. Perfect timing.

We set up. I take the desk. She takes the sofa—distance, safe, professional.

Work begins: reviewing presentation slide by slide. Technical details. Regulatory language. Compliance requirements.

Professional. Completely professional. For about an hour.

12:47 AM. CRACKS FORMING.

Weilin stretching. Taking off glasses. Rubbing eyes.

"我们应该在幻灯片17上添加更多关于数据本地化的内容。"

We should add more about data localization on slide 17.

"同意。我会做个注释。" Agreed. I'll make a note.

She stands. Walks to window. Looking out at Singapore—lights, Marina Bay, endless city.

"这很美。新加坡。" It's beautiful. Singapore.

"是的。"

But I'm not looking at Singapore. I'm looking at her.

Silhouetted against city lights. Hair down. Barefoot—when did she take off her shoes? Oversized sweater slipping off one shoulder.

She turns. Catches me staring.

"你在看什么？" What are you looking at?

"你。抱歉。我.....我在想晚餐。你有多出色。"

You. Sorry. I... I was thinking about dinner. How brilliant you were.

She walks back to sofa. Sits. Closer to my desk than before.

"我一直想知道如果我们.....如果事情不同，我们会一起工作成什么样。"

I always wondered what we'd be like working together. If we... if things had been different.

"我们工作得很好。" We work well.

"是的。但这很复杂。" Yes. But it's complicated.

"因为我们的历史。" Because of our history.

"因为我想吻你，我应该专注于幻灯片17。"

Because I want to kiss you and I should be focused on slide 17.

The air stops. Everything stops.

Did she just— Yes. She did.

"微琳——"

"抱歉。那不专业。我不应该——"

Sorry. That wasn't professional. I shouldn't have—

"我也想吻你。" I want to kiss you too.

Silence. Two AM confession. Hotel room. Alone.

"但我们不会。因为我们在工作。因为这很复杂。"

But we won't. Because we're working. Because it's complicated.

"对。我们不会。" Right. We won't.

Both of us staring at each other. Not working. Not kissing. Just existing in tension.

Weilin finally returning to laptop: "幻灯片17。数据本地化。"

Slide 17. Data localization.

"对。幻灯片17。"

Back to work. Pretending we didn't just admit we want to kiss each other. Professional.

2:47 AM. EXHAUSTION WINS.

We're still working. Three hours now. Running on coffee and tension.

Weilin on sofa. Laptop on her knees. Eyes drooping.

"你累了。我们应该停下。" You're tired. We should stop.

"不，我很好。我只需要....."

No, I'm fine. I just need...

Her eyes close mid-sentence. Head tilting back against sofa. Asleep. Just like that.

I watch her. Laptop sliding on her lap. I catch it before it falls. Set it aside carefully.

She's asleep on my sofa. In my hotel room. Glasses askew. Mouth slightly open. Completely vulnerable.

I should wake her. Send her back to her room. Professional. I don't.

Instead, I get a blanket from the closet. Drape it over her carefully. Remove her glasses gently. She doesn't wake. Adjust the pillow under her head. She shifts. Mumbles something in sleep.

I sit on the edge of the sofa. Just watching her sleep. Like I did on the plane. Like I used to do seven years ago.

This woman. This brilliant, stubborn, beautiful woman. Who left to protect me. Who came back. Who wants to kiss me. Who I want to kiss.

Who I never stopped loving.

My phone buzzes. Text from Lin Rui. 3 AM. Of course.

你还在和微琳一起工作吗？还是你们最终停止假装了？—LR

Are you still working with Weilin? Or did you two finally stop pretending? —LR

I type back: 她睡着了。在我的沙发上。我不知道该怎么办。—M

She fell asleep. On my couch. I don't know what to do. —M

Lin Rui: 让她睡。给她盖毯子。看着她像个怪人。明天早上当她醒来时告诉她真相。—LR

Let her sleep. Cover her with a blanket. Watch her like a creep. Tell her the truth in the morning when she wakes up. —LR

什么真相? —M

What truth? —M

你爱她的真相。停止拖延。 —LR

The truth that you love her. Stop stalling. —LR

I put my phone down.

Look at her sleeping.

Do I love her? Still? Again?

I never stopped.

Six years of building empires. Six years of therapy and insomnia and pretending I moved on.

I never moved on.

I just got better at lying.

6:47 AM. MORNING.

I wake up. Neck stiff. I fell asleep in the desk chair. Watching her.

Weilin still asleep on the sofa. Blanket pulled up to her chin. Peaceful.

My phone alarm going off. 7 AM meeting prep. We need to be ready in two hours.

I turn it off quickly. Don't want to wake her yet.

Stand. Stretch. Go to bathroom. Splash water on face.

When I come out, she's awake. Sitting up. Disoriented.

"我.....我睡着了?" I... I fell asleep?

"是的。大约四个小时前。" Yes. About four hours ago.

"你为什么不叫醒我?" Why didn't you wake me?

"你需要睡眠。我们都需要。"

You needed sleep. We both did.

She looks at the blanket. At her glasses on the table.

"你给我盖了毯子。" You covered me with a blanket.

"是的。"

"谢谢。" She stands. Stretches. "我需要回房间。淋浴。换衣服。我们什么时候需要离开？"

Thank you. I need to get back to my room. Shower. Change. When do we need to leave?

"一个小时。" One hour.

She gathers her things. Laptop. Shoes. Heads to the door. Stops. Turns back.

"墨轩？"

"嗯？"

"昨晚.....当我说我想吻你....."

Last night... when I said I wanted to kiss you...

My heart stops.

"我是认真的。" I meant it.

Then she's gone. Door closing. Leaving me standing in hotel room. Heart racing.

She meant it.

9:47 AM. REGULATORY MEETING.

Conference room. Singaporean regulatory authority. High stakes meeting.

Weilin presenting. Flawless. Confident. Fielding questions with precision.

I'm barely functional. Running on three hours sleep and the echo of "I meant it."

The regulators approve our framework. Preliminary green light. Major win.

Partner Tan shaking our hands. "Congratulations. Your team is exceptional."

Looking at Weilin. "Especially Miss Shen. Brilliant work."

She smiles. Professional. Thanks him.

We leave. Success. We should celebrate.

Instead, we're silent in the car back to hotel.

2:47 PM. HOTEL.

Back at Marina Bay Sands. Free afternoon. Tonight's dinner is informal. Tomorrow we fly home.

Elevator. Alone again.

Weilin: "我们做到了。" We did it.

"你做到了。你太棒了。" You did it. You were incredible.

"我们是一个好团队。" We're a good team.

"是的。我们是。" Yes. We are.

Elevator stopping. Her floor.

She doesn't move.

"微琳——"

"我的房间。现在。我们需要谈谈。"

My room. Now. We need to talk.

Not a question. A demand.

"好的。" Okay.

HER ROOM. 3:03 PM.

Smaller than mine. But same view. Same bed dominating space.

She closes the door. Leans against it.

"我不能再这样做了。" I can't do this anymore.

My chest tightens. "做什么?"

Do what?

"假装。在会议中专业。在电梯里礼貌。假装我不想....."

Pretend. Professional in meetings. Polite in elevators.

Pretend I don't want...

She stops. Can't finish.

I step closer. "想什么?" Want what?

"你。我想要你。我想要我们。我厌倦了害怕。"

You. I want you. I want us. I'm tired of being scared.

Another step. We're three feet apart now.

"我也是。" Me too.

"那为什么我们不——"

Then why don't we—

My phone rings. Loud. Jarring.

I ignore it.

It rings again.

"接它。可能是重要的。" Answer it. It might be important.

I pull it out. Lin Rui.

Answer. "什么？" What?

Lin Rui's voice panicked: "老板。上海有紧急情况。张伟刚打来。监管机构突击检查了办公室。他们在问问题。关于新加坡交易。我们可能有泄密者。"

Boss. Emergency in Shanghai. Zhang Wei just called.

Regulators raided the office. They're asking questions. About the Singapore deal. We might have a leak.

My blood goes cold.

"什么时候？" When?

"一个小时前。他们还在那里。要求文件。问你在哪里。"

An hour ago. They're still there. Demanding documents.

Asking where you are.

"我马上回来。订最早的航班。"

I'm coming back. Book the earliest flight.

Hang up.

Look at Weilin. Her face already knows.

"我需要回去。" I need to go back.

"我知道。我和你一起去。" I know. I'm coming with you.

"微琳——"

"别争论。我们是一个团队，记得吗？我们一起去。"

Don't argue. We're a team, remember? We go together.

We pack. Fast. Efficient. Professional mode activated.
But in the taxi to the airport, her hand finds mine.
Holds tight.

"不管发生什么。我们会处理它。一起。"

Whatever this is. We'll handle it. Together.

"一起。" Together.

But in my head, one thought: Someone leaked our Singapore deal. Someone wants to destroy this. And they might destroy us in the process.

END CHAPTER 23

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CHAPTER 24: THE RIGHT (SCENE 6 - ACT II CLIMAX, HOSPITAL CONFRONTATION)

Weilin woke to Chen's phone ringing—violent, insistent, emergency ringtone cutting through the 2 AM Singapore silence—and in the three seconds between sleep and consciousness she remembered: his hotel room, falling asleep on his couch, his whispered "I don't know how to stop loving you," her eyes opening to answer "then don't," the moment they were about to kiss, and now his phone destroying everything because that's what phones did, that's what reality did, it crashed in exactly when you were about to break through.

WEILIN'S POV:

The ringing. Piercing. Emergency tone. Chen's phone across room.

He lunges for it. Was he beside me? When did he move beside me?

Answers. Voice rough. "喂？什么？什么时候？我马上

来。"

Hello? ...What? ...When? ...I'm coming immediately.

His face white. Stricken. Every softness gone.

Hangs up. Looks at me but not seeing me. Seeing through me.

"我爸爸。心脏病发作。他在医院。我需要——我需要回上海。"

My father. Heart attack. He's in the hospital. I need—I need to get back to Shanghai.

I sit up. Fully awake now. Adrenaline.

"他还好吗？他稳定吗？"

Is he okay? Is he stable?

Chen already moving. Grabbing laptop, phone, wallet.

"我不知道。我妈妈.....她在哭。我听不清细节。我需要离开。"

I don't know. My mother... she was crying. I couldn't hear details. I need to leave.

"我和你一起去。让我收拾——"

I'll go with you. Let me pack—

Chen not looking at me. Moving like machine.

"不。留下来。完成会议。"

No. Stay. Finish the meetings.

"Chen，你的父亲——"

"有人需要处理监管机构。向合作伙伴道歉。你能做到。留下来。"

Someone needs to handle the regulators. Apologize to partners. You can do it. Stay.

He's leaving me. Emergency or not, he's leaving me here.

After "I don't know how to stop loving you." After "then don't."

After we were about to—

"墨轩——"

Chen finally looking at me. His eyes closed. Shut down.

Marcus Chen back in full armor.

"我需要走了。对不起。"

I need to go. I'm sorry.

Walks out. Doesn't look back.

Leaves me in his hotel room. Alone. Confused. Terrified for him. Terrified for us.

The door closing. Final. Devastating.

FRIDAY MORNING, 6:47 AM.

I couldn't sleep. Went back to my room at 3 AM. Lay awake.

Checking phone obsessively.

No messages from Chen.

Flight tracker shows he got on the 5 AM Singapore to Shanghai. Earliest flight.

I'm stuck. Meetings scheduled. Regulatory presentation at 9 AM. Partner lunch at noon. Can't abandon it.

Text to Lin Rui, 6:52 AM:

你听说陈爸爸的事了吗？他还好吗？陈还好吗？—W

Have you heard about Chen's father? Is he okay? Is Chen okay? —W

Lin Rui, immediate response:

老陈先生稳定。心脏病发作，但医生说他会活下来。老板在医院。拒绝离开。拒绝和任何人说话。—LR

Old Mr. Chen is stable. Heart attack, but doctors say he'll survive. Boss is at the hospital. Refusing to leave. Refusing to talk to anyone. —LR

我应该回去吗？我能帮什么忙吗？—W

Should I come back? Can I do anything? —W

完成新加坡。他坚持。他不想让交易失败。你知道他是怎样的。工作，即使他的世界在燃烧。—LR

Finish Singapore. He insisted. He doesn't want the deal to fail. You know how he is. Work, even when his world is

burning. —LR

Work, even when his world is burning. That's exactly who Marcus Chen is.

But 墨轩? 墨轩 would want me there.

THE PROFESSIONAL HELL. FRIDAY.

9:00 AM: Regulatory presentation. I deliver it. Perfectly.

Mechanically. Thinking about Chen the entire time.

12:00 PM: Partner lunch. Apologize for Chen's absence.

"Family emergency." They're understanding. Sympathetic.

3:00 PM: Follow-up meeting. Close the deal. Sign preliminary documents. Professional success that feels hollow.

6:00 PM: Flight back to Shanghai. Earliest I could book. Seven hours. Endless.

On the plane, I draft messages. Never send them:

我很抱歉关于你的父亲。我在为你祈祷。—W

I'm so sorry about your father. I'm praying for you. —W

Delete. Too personal? Not personal enough?

如果你需要任何东西，请让我知道。我在这里。—W

If you need anything, please let me know. I'm here. —W

Delete. He told me to stay in Singapore. Does he want me there?

墨轩，我想要在你身边。请让我在你身边。—W

Moxuan, I want to be there for you. Please let me be there for you. —W

Delete. Too desperate? Too needy? What if he doesn't want me?

Send nothing. Just sit. Seven hours. Thinking about his face when he got that call. Thinking about "I don't know how to stop loving you." Thinking about how close we were.

And now his father is dying. And I'm not there. And I don't

know if he wants me there.

SATURDAY MORNING, 9:47 AM. SHANGHAI.

Landed at 6 AM. Went home. Showered. Changed. Bought flowers—white lilies, appropriate for hospital.

Researched. Found out which hospital: 上海仁济医院, Renji Hospital. Cardiac ICU. Third floor.

Debated for an hour: Should I go? Do I have the right? What if he doesn't want to see me?

Decided: I'm going. Because he's hurting. Because his father is there. Because I need to be there even if he doesn't want me.

Taxi to hospital. Clutching flowers. Rehearsing what to say: "I'm here for you."

"I'm sorry."

"Let me help."

"You don't have to be alone."

Hospital large. Sterile. Typical Shanghai hospital—crowded, chaotic, smell of antiseptic.

Find Cardiac ICU. Third floor. Elevator up. Heart pounding.

Waiting area outside ICU. Families clustered. Worried faces. Hushed voices.

See them. Chen's family:

- Chen's mother sitting. Face drawn. Being comforted by relative.
- Chen's father must be inside ICU. Stable but critical per Lin Rui.
- Chen standing apart. By window. Phone to ear—work call even now, even here.

He looks terrible. Hasn't slept. Suit rumpled. Hair disheveled. Face like stone.

My heart breaks for him.

I approach slowly. Clutching flowers. Trying to be respectful of space.

Chen's mother sees me first. Looks up. Confused—who is this woman?

Then recognition. Eyes widening. "沈微琳？"

Shen Weilin?

Chen turns at my name. Phone call forgotten. Seeing me.

His face hardens. Every softness gone. Anger flashing.

Oh no.

Chen to phone: "我稍后给你回电话。"

I'll call you back.

Hangs up. Walks toward me. Not welcoming. Stalking.

Predatory.

"你在这里做什么？"

What are you doing here?

Holding out flowers. Trying to smile. "我听说了你爸爸的事。我想——我想要在你身边。"

I heard about your father. I wanted—I wanted to be here for you.

He stares at the flowers. Like they're offensive. Like I'm offering poison.

"你想要在这里。" You wanted to be here.

"是的。我——"

"跟我来。" Come with me.

Takes my arm. Not gently. Firm. Almost rough.

Leads me away from his mother. Down hallway. To empty corridor. Away from witnesses.

This is wrong. This is very wrong.

HOSPITAL HALLWAY. PRIVATE.

Chen releases my arm. Faces me. His face cold fury.

"你为什么在这里？" Why are you here?

"我告诉过你。我想支持你。你的父亲——"

I told you. I wanted to support you. Your father—

"我的父亲。对。让我们谈谈我的父亲。"

My father. Right. Let's talk about my father.

His voice sharp. Scalpel-precise. Designed to cut.

"你还记得我的父亲吗，微琳？你还记得你怎么看他的吗？"

Do you remember my father, Weilin? Do you remember how you looked at him?

"什么？我从来没有——"

"在我们的婚礼上。当他和你父亲说话时。我看到了你的脸。当你父亲嘲笑他的工作，他的教育，他的一切时。"

At our wedding. When he talked to your father. I saw your face. When your father mocked his job, his education, his everything.

Oh God. The wedding. I remember.

"你看起来很尴尬。羞愧。你父亲说'这是你的岳父？一个工厂工人？'你什么也没说。"

You looked embarrassed. Ashamed. Your father said 'this is your father-in-law? A factory worker?' You said nothing.

"墨轩，我年轻。我害怕——"

Moxuan, I was young. I was scared—

"你看着我的父亲，这个养育了我，牺牲了一切给我教育的男人，你看着他就像他不值得。"

You looked at my father, the man who raised me, sacrificed everything for my education, you looked at him like he wasn't worth anything.

Tears streaming down my face now.

"那不是真的。我从来没有——"

That's not true. I never—

Chen steps closer. Voice dropping to deadly quiet.

"现在他躺在ICU里。心脏病发作因为他的'失败'儿子终于成功了，压力杀了他。现在你带着花出现。"

Now he's lying in ICU. Heart attack because his 'failure' son finally succeeded and the stress killed him. And now you show up with flowers.

"我不是因为那个——"

I'm not here because of that—

"为什么？因为现在他值得你的同情吗？现在他的儿子是亿万富翁？现在他的家庭不再让你尴尬？"

Why then? Because now he's worth your sympathy? Now that his son is a billionaire? Now that his family doesn't embarrass you?

The words like knives. Each one cutting deeper.

"求你了，那不公平——"

Please, that's not fair—

"什么是公平的？六年前，你不屑一顾地看着他。看着我。看着我们的生活，觉得它不够。现在你带着花来，假装你关心？"

What's fair? Six years ago, you looked at him with contempt. Looked at me. Looked at our life and found it lacking. Now you come with flowers, pretending you care?

Sobbing now. "我变了。我不是那个人了。我——"

I've changed. I'm not that person anymore. I—

Chen laughing. Bitter. Cruel.

"你变了。因为贫穷改变了你？因为失去一切教会了你同情？这很方便，不是吗？"

You've changed. Because poverty changed you? Because losing everything taught you compassion? How convenient, isn't it?

"我想要在你身边——"

I wanted to be there for you—

Chen cutting me off. Final blow.

"你没有权利在这里。你没有权利关心他。你没有权利关心我。你六年前放弃了那个权利。当你选择你的家人而不是我的家人。当你决定我们不够。"

You have no right to be here. No right to care about him. No right to care about me. You gave up that right six years ago. When you chose your family over mine. When you decided we weren't enough.

The flowers falling from my hands. Hitting floor. White lilies scattering.

"回去工作。做你擅长的。假装专业。但别假装你关心我的父亲。别假装你有权利在这里。"

Go back to work. Do what you're good at. Pretending to be professional. But don't pretend you care about my father. Don't pretend you have a right to be here.

Turns. Walks away. Back to ICU waiting area. Back to his family.

Leaving me standing there. Destroyed.

HOSPITAL CORRIDOR. ALONE.

I stand frozen. Flowers scattered at my feet. Unable to move. Hospital staff passing. Staring. This woman crying in hallway. Don't care. Can't move.

He's right. I didn't defend his father at the wedding. I didn't defend him. I was ashamed. Young and stupid and ashamed. And now I've lost him. Again. Permanently.

Finally move. Pick up flowers with shaking hands. Walk to trash. Throw them away.

Leave. Hospital. Can't stay. Can't breathe. Need air.

OUTSIDE. 11:23 AM.

Shanghai. Busy street. Traffic. Normal life continuing while mine ends.

Taxi. Flag one down. Climb in.

"杨浦区。" Yangpu District.

Going home. To my empty apartment. To be alone. Where I belong.

Driver looking in rearview mirror: "你还好吗，小姐？"

You okay, Miss?

"我很好。" I'm fine.

I'm not fine. I'm destroyed.

My phone buzzing. Text from Lin Rui:

我听说你去了医院。老板做了什么？他看起来像谋杀。—LR

I heard you went to the hospital. What did boss do? He looks like murder. —LR

What did he do? He told me the truth. That I have no right to be here. That I gave up that right. That I'm not family anymore.

Don't respond. Can't. Throat too tight.

Another buzz. Email notification. Personal email—why would work email me personally?

Open it. Hands shaking:

FROM: HR Department, Chénxī Technologies

TO: Shen Weilin

SUBJECT: Contract Review Meeting - Urgent

亲爱的沈小姐，

您的合同审查会议已安排在周一上午10点在人力资源部办公室举行。这次会议将讨论您的就业状况，包括可能提前终止的讨论。

请带上您的员工证件和公司财产清单。

此致，

李敏

人力资源总监

Dear Miss Shen,

A contract review meeting has been scheduled for Monday at 10 AM in the HR Department office. This meeting will discuss your employment status, including potential early termination discussion.

Please bring your employee ID and company property inventory.

Sincerely,

Li Min

HR Director

The email. Staring at it. Reading it again. Not believing. Contract review. Early termination discussion. He's firing me. Not just rejecting me personally. Rejecting me professionally. Removing me from his life completely.

THE TAXI RIDE.

I sit in back of taxi. Shanghai passing by. Email open on phone. Everything crumbling.

Singapore: "I don't know how to stop loving you."

My response: "Then don't."

Two days later: "You have no right to be here."

How did we get here? How did "I love you" become "you have no right"?

The taxi stopping at red light. I see my reflection in window. Face blotchy from crying. Eyes red. Destroyed.

This is who I am. The woman who lost everything. Twice. Because I keep making the same mistakes.

My phone buzzing again. Another text. Unknown number:

沈小姐，我是陈太太。我听说你来医院了。谢谢你的好意。对不

起我儿子今天的行为。他在受伤和害怕。请不要对他评判太严厉。—陈太太

Miss Shen, this is Mrs. Chen. I heard you came to the hospital. Thank you for the kind thought. I'm sorry for my son's behavior today. He's hurting and scared. Please don't judge him too harshly. —Mrs. Chen

His mother. Apologizing for him. Even though he's right. Even though I have no right to be there.

Can't respond. What would I say? "It's okay"? It's not okay. Nothing is okay.

Taxi arriving at my building. Sad Yangpu apartment building. Pay. Mechanically. Climb stairs. Six floors. Each step heavier. Unlock door to empty apartment. IKEA furniture. Poverty and failure.

Inside. Close door. Lock it. Slide down to floor with back against door.

Cry. Really cry. For the first time since this all started. For his father in the hospital. For Chen's pain. For my stupidity in thinking I could fix this. For the look on his face when he said "you have no right." For the wedding six years ago when I didn't defend his father. For every mistake I've made.

For losing him. Again. Forever.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, 3:47 PM.

Still sitting on the floor. Hours passed. Can't move.

Another email notification. Phone beside me.

What now? What else can they take?

Open it:

FROM: Chen Moxuan

TO: Shen Weilin

SUBJECT: Professional Boundaries - Final

He emailed me. Not texted. Emailed. Formal. Professional. Final.

Body:

沈小姐，

鉴于最近的事件和我们专业关系的复杂性，我认为最好我们分道扬镳。您的合同将在周一会议后被终止，附带六个月的遣散费和积极的推荐信。

您在这里的工作一直很出色。这个决定反映的是环境，而不是您的能力。

我希望你在未来的努力中一切顺利。

此致，

陈墨轩

Miss Shen,

Given recent events and the complexity of our professional relationship, I believe it's best we part ways. Your contract will be terminated following Monday's meeting, with six months' severance and a positive reference.

Your work here has been exemplary. This decision reflects circumstances, not your capabilities.

I wish you well in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Chen Moxuan

The formality. "Miss Shen." "Part ways." "Future endeavors." Like Singapore didn't happen. Like "I don't know how to stop loving you" didn't happen. Like we're just boss and employee. Like I'm nothing.

I read it again. Again. Looking for any warmth. Any sign of 墨轩.

Find none. Just Marcus Chen. Professional. Cold. Final.

Type response. Fingers shaking:

陈先生，

我理解。我会在周一出席会议并归还所有公司财产。

我为我的行为对您或您的家人造成的任何痛苦道歉。这不是我的意图。

谢谢你给我的机会。

此致，

沈微琳

Mr. Chen,

I understand. I will attend Monday's meeting and return all company property.

I apologize for any pain my actions caused you or your family. It was not my intention.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Shen Weilin

Send it.

Sit. Phone in hand. Waiting—for what? For him to respond?

To take it back? To say he was wrong?

Nothing. No response. Just silence.

Look around my apartment:

- IKEA furniture (¥899 bed)
- Empty walls (no photos, no personal touches)
- One suitcase (still half-packed from Singapore)
- Nothing (I have nothing, I am nothing)

My phone. One more notification. Lin Rui:

我不知道发生了什么，但我知道你们俩都在痛苦中。别放弃。求你了。你们俩都值得更好的。—LR

I don't know what happened, but I know you're both hurting.

Don't give up. Please. You both deserve better. —LR

Don't give up.

But what's left to fight for? He doesn't want me in his life. Not personally. Not professionally. Not at all.

Stand finally. Legs shaking. Walk to window. Six floors up.

Shanghai beyond. City that doesn't care.

Monday. Contract termination. Six months' severance. Then what?

Start over again? Find another job? Pretend this didn't happen? Pretend I didn't fall in love with him again? Pretend losing him twice doesn't destroy me?

My reflection in window. Ghost against Shanghai skyline.

Broken. Again. Still.

END CHAPTER 24

=====~=====

CHAPTER 25: THE AFTERMATH (CHEN'S REGRET)

Chen had been replaying the moment he destroyed Weilin for five hours—"you have no right to be here," his voice like a weapon, her face crumpling like he'd struck her, white lilies scattering on hospital linoleum, the sound of her crying as she walked away—and the guilt was so crushing, so complete, that he understood for the first time how his father's heart could simply stop from pressure because his own felt like it was being squeezed by a fist made of every cruel word he'd said, every true accusation, every justified rejection that still felt like murder.

4:47 PM. Saturday afternoon. Five hours after destroying

Weilin in hospital hallway.

Hospital waiting area. Cardiac ICU. Father stable but sedated. Chen alone with guilt.

Waiting room institutional gray. Fluorescent lights harsh and unforgiving. Other families clustered in grief. His hands shaking slightly. Still feel her arm where he grabbed her. Too rough. Too cruel. The hallway where it happened. Where he said those things. Where she dropped the flowers. His reflection in dark window. Monster staring back.

Hospital sounds—monitors beeping, nurses calling codes, normal tragedy. His mother in with father. Her voice murmuring prayers. His heartbeat too fast. Guilty rhythm.

Weilin's voice in his memory: "I've changed," sobbing, broken.

Plastic chair uncomfortable. He deserves uncomfortable.

His phone in pocket. Heavy with the email he sent—formal, cruel, final. His tie loosened hours ago. Still feels like noose.

Exhaustion bone-deep. Guilt-laden.

Hospital antiseptic cleaning away mistakes. Can't clean away his. Coffee cold in paper cup. Untouched. Nothing else. His senses narrowed to guilt and self-loathing.

CHEN'S POV:

I can still see her face.

The exact moment I said "you have no right."

The way her eyes widened. Like I'd hit her.

Maybe I did. Words as weapons. I'm very good at weapons.

My phone buzzing again. I ignore it. Probably Lin Rui calling to tell me I'm an asshole. Which I know. Or work emergency. Which I don't care about.

My father stable, the doctors say. Sedated. Recovering.

Heart attack brought on by stress. Stress from watching his

son build an empire. Pride and fear mixed together.

"I'm so proud," he said last week, "but you work too hard.

You're angry. Find peace, 墨轩."

Peace. There is no peace.

There's just work and revenge and building monuments to prove I'm enough.

And now I've destroyed the only person who ever actually loved me for being not-enough.

Replay the confrontation again. Can't stop. Penance through repetition.

"You have no right to be here."

Her voice: "Please, that's not fair—"

Me: "Six years ago, you looked at him with contempt."

Did she? Or did I imagine that? Or did I take her fear, her youth, her weakness, and turn it into contempt because it was easier than forgiving?

The flowers. White lilies. Scattered on hospital floor.

My mother watching from waiting area. Seeing everything. Saying nothing.

Until now.

Movement. Peripheral vision. Someone sitting in chair beside me.

My mother. 陈太太. Sixty-three years old. Small and fierce. Eyes red from crying but clear now.

She doesn't speak immediately. Just sits. Presence heavy with judgment and love.

"你父亲睡着了。他们说他们明天可以离开ICU。"

Your father is sleeping. They say he can leave ICU tomorrow.

"好。" Good.

Silence. Loaded. Waiting.

"我看到你对微琳做了什么。"

I saw what you did to Weilin.

There it is.

"她没有权利在这里。" She had no right to be here.

"你错了。" You're wrong.

I look at her. Finally. Direct eye contact.

"她在我们的婚礼上为你和爸爸感到羞耻。你知道她的父亲说了什么。你看到了她的脸。"

She was ashamed of you and father at our wedding. You know what her father said. You saw her face.

Mother steady. Unshaken.

"我看到了一个害怕的年轻女孩。被她父亲控制。努力在两个世界之间找到平衡。"

I saw a scared young girl. Controlled by her father. Trying to navigate between two worlds.

"她选择了她的世界。不是我们的。"

She chose her world. Not ours.

"她选择了保护你。" She chose to protect you.

I stand. Can't sit. Too much energy. Too much anger.

"保护我？她离开了我！"

Protect me? She left me!

Mother still sitting. Looking up at me with those eyes that see everything.

"你读了那封信。你知道她的父亲威胁了什么。如果她留下来，他会毁了你。她离开是为了拯救你的梦想。"

You read the letter. You know what her father threatened. If she stayed, he would have destroyed you. She left to save your dreams.

"我没有要求她拯救我！我会为她而战！"

I didn't ask her to save me! I would have fought for her!

"用什么？你一无所有。没有钱，没有权力，没有对抗她父亲的方式。她知道。所以她离开了。"

With what? You had nothing. No money, no power, no way to fight her father. She knew it. So she left.

Sit back down. Heavily. Deflated.

"那为什么现在回来？为什么出现在这里？"

Then why come back now? Why show up here?

"因为她爱你。" Because she loves you.

Bitter laugh escapes before I can stop it.

"她爱什么？我建造的东西？钱？帝国？"

She loves what? What I built? The money? The empire?

Mother standing now. Facing me.

"她爱墨轩。总是爱。"

She loves Moxuan. Always has.

"你知道我每周六去哪里吗？"

Do you know where I go every Saturday?

"慈善避难所。你志愿服务。"

The charity shelter. You volunteer.

"对。在杨浦区。为无家可归和贫困家庭服务。"

Yes. In Yangpu District. For homeless and poor families.

She sits again. Gestures for me to sit. I do. Obedient child again.

"你知道谁每周也在那里吗？"

Do you know who else is there every week?

I know where this is going.

"微琳。"

"是的。微琳。过去三个月，每周六。帮助分发食物，与孩子们交谈，教妇女简历写作。"

Yes. Weilin. For the past three months, every Saturday.

Helping distribute food, talking to children, teaching women

resume writing.

"她在赎罪。为了她的特权感到内疚。"

She's atoning. Feeling guilty about her privilege.

"她住在杨浦区。一个很小的公寓。她走路去避难所因为她买不起地铁。"

She lives in Yangpu District. A tiny apartment. She walks to the shelter because she can't afford the subway.

Can't afford the subway. Even with the salary I pay her. How?

"你知道她用她的钱做什么吗？她的薪水？"

Do you know what she does with her money? Her salary?

"告诉我。" Tell me.

"她资助三个家庭。每月给他们租金帮助。我知道是因为她通过避难所做。她要求匿名，但我管理账户。"

She sponsors three families. Gives them monthly rent assistance. I know because she does it through the shelter. She asks to be anonymous, but I manage the accounts. Three families. Rent assistance. That's why she can't afford the subway.

"她出现时没有化妆。没有设计师服装。只穿简单的衣服。她坐在地板上和孩子们玩。她和我一起洗碗。她.....她变了，墨轩。"

She shows up with no makeup. No designer clothes. Just simple clothes. She sits on the floor and plays with children. She washes dishes with me. She... she's changed, Moxuan.

"为什么你从来没告诉我？"

Why did you never tell me?

"因为她要求我不要。她说如果你知道，你会认为她在试图打动你。她只是.....她只是想帮助。因为她记得贫穷的感觉。"

Because she asked me not to. She said if you knew, you'd think she was trying to impress you. She just... she just wants to help. Because she remembers what poverty felt like.

She remembers poverty. Because I didn't pay her enough when she first started. Because I wanted her to suffer. Because I'm a monster.

"今天，她带着花来。白百合。得体且尊重。她没有穿着炫耀或假装某事。她来是因为她在乎。"

Today, she came with flowers. White lilies. Respectful and appropriate. She wasn't dressed to show off or pretending anything. She came because she cares.

My face in my hands. Can't look at her.

"妈妈，我对她说了很可怕的话。"

Mom, I said terrible things to her.

"我知道。我听到了。" I know. I heard.

"我告诉她她没有权利在这里。她没有权利关心你或爸爸。"

I told her she had no right to be here. No right to care about you or father.

"你为什么说那些话？" Why did you say those things?

Look up. Eyes burning.

"因为如果我让她关心，如果我承认她变了，我就必须原谅她。我就必须承认我花了六年惩罚一个犯了错误的害怕的年轻女孩。"

Because if I let her care, if I admit she's changed, I have to forgive her. I have to admit I spent six years punishing a scared young girl who made a mistake.

Mother's hand on my shoulder. Warm. Grounding.

"你不是在惩罚她。你在惩罚你自己。"

You're not punishing her. You're punishing yourself.

"我在惩罚我自己？" I'm punishing myself?

"为了不够。为了让她离开。为了不能阻止她。"

For not being enough. For letting her leave. For not being able to stop her.

Is she right? Am I punishing myself?

"我建造了这一切。公司，金钱，帝国。证明我够了。"

I built all this. Company, money, empire. To prove I was enough.

"你为谁证明？为她？还是为你自己？"

Prove to whom? To her? Or to yourself?

Silence. Crushing. Because I know the answer.

"为我自己。我仍然感觉不够。"

To myself. I still don't feel enough.

Mother sitting closer. Voice soft.

"墨轩，你在我们小公寓里学习时就够了。你在赚你的第一笔钱时就够了。你在爱她时就够了。你一直都够。"

Moxuan, you were enough when you studied in our small apartment. You were enough when you made your first salary. You were enough when you loved her. You've always been enough.

My throat tight. Tears threatening—when did I last cry? Six years? Longer?

"那为什么她离开了？" Then why did she leave?

"因为她害怕。不是因为你不够。因为她的父亲威胁要毁了你，她爱你太多而不愿让那发生。"

Because she was scared. Not because you weren't enough. Because her father threatened to destroy you and she loved you too much to let that happen.

"她应该告诉我。" She should have told me.

"她应该。但她二十三岁，害怕，被操纵。你现在三十一岁，强大，富有。你今天做得更好吗？"

She should have. But she was twenty-three, scared, manipulated. You're thirty-one now, powerful, wealthy. Did you do better today?

Direct hit.

"不。我.....我摧毁了她。" No. I... I destroyed her.

"你害怕。就像她当时一样。"

You were scared. Just like she was then.

"害怕什么？" Scared of what?

"害怕如果你原谅她，如果你让她回到你的生活，她会再次离开。所以你先攻击。你先推开她。所以当她离开时——因为你确信她会——你可以说这是你的选择。"

Scared that if you forgive her, if you let her back in your life, she'll leave again. So you strike first. You push her away first. So when she leaves—because you're certain she will—you can say it was your choice.

Oh God. She's right. That's exactly what I did.

Voice breaking: "妈妈，我不知道怎么办。我给她发了电子邮件。正式的。告诉她我们周一终止她的合同。"

Mom, I don't know what to do. I sent her an email. Formal. Telling her we're terminating her contract Monday.

"你爱她吗？" Do you love her?

Simple question. Impossible question.

"我....."

"墨轩。你爱她吗？"

Whispered: "我从未停止过。"

I never stopped.

There it is. The truth I've been avoiding for six years. I never stopped loving her.

"那你需要决定。你是继续惩罚你们俩因为六年前的错误，还是你原谅并尝试再次？"

Then you need to decide. Do you keep punishing both of you for mistakes made six years ago, or do you forgive and try again?

"太晚了。你没看到她的脸。我对她说的话。她永远不会原谅我。"

It's too late. You didn't see her face. What I said to her. She'll never forgive me.

"为她？还是为你？" Too late for her? Or for you?

For me. It's too late for me. Because I don't know how to stop being Marcus Chen and become 墨轩 again.

I stand again. Can't sit. Need to move. Need to think.

"我建造了这个人。Marcus Chen。冷酷，专业，无需任何人。我不知道如何回到墨轩。"

I built this person. Marcus Chen. Cold, professional, needing no one. I don't know how to go back to Moxuan.

Mother standing too. Facing me.

"也许你不需要回去。也许你需要向前。成为一个集两者的人。"

Maybe you don't go back. Maybe you go forward. Become someone who is both.

"我不知道那个人是谁。"

I don't know who that person is.

"那个人是爱她的人。承认他害怕的人。原谅自己不完美的人。"

That person is someone who loves her. Who admits he's scared. Who forgives himself for not being perfect.

"如果她不原谅我呢？" What if she doesn't forgive me?

"那你至少试过了。至少你诚实了。这比让她认为你恨她要好。"

Then you at least tried. At least you were honest. That's better than letting her think you hate her.

Letting her think I hate her. Do I hate her?

No. I hate myself. For not being enough. For letting her go. For not fighting harder. For becoming someone she might not even recognize.

My phone buzzing again. Persistent. Pull it out. Lin Rui calling. Seventh time.

Answer: "什么？"

Lin Rui, voice tight, urgent: "你终于接了。你需要回办公室。现在。"

You finally answered. You need to come back to the office. Now.

"我在医院。我父亲——"

I'm at the hospital. My father—

"我知道你在哪里。这很紧急。关于微琳。"

I know where you are. This is urgent. About Weilin.

My chest tightening. "她怎么了？"

What about her?

"人力资源。他们按你的电子邮件安排了周一的会议。合同审查。终止。"

HR. They scheduled Monday's meeting per your email.

Contract review. Termination.

"我知道。我告诉他们那样做。"

I know. I told them to do that.

"好吧，现在法律部门参与了。他们说如果你终止她——鉴于你们的历史，鉴于新加坡，鉴于每个人都知道你们之间的紧张——它看起来像报复性解雇。"

Well now Legal is involved. They're saying if you terminate her—given your history, given Singapore, given everyone knows about the tension between you—it looks like retaliatory firing. Retaliatory firing. That's not—— Or is it?

"我有正当理由——" I have legitimate reasons—

"你有吗？她的工作一直很出色。新加坡交易完成了。客户爱她。你唯一的'理由'是个人的。"

Do you? Her work has been exemplary. Singapore deal closed. Clients love her. Your only 'reason' is personal. He's right. Damn it, he's right.

"法律说如果你周一终止，她可以起诉。不当解雇。鉴于你的历

史，她会赢。"

Legal says if you terminate Monday, she can sue. Wrongful termination. Given your history, she'd win.

"那我做什么？" Then what do I do?

"你有三个选择。一：你保留她并处理不舒服。二：你让她辞职自愿。三：你解决你们的个人问题，这样你们就可以专业地一起工作。"

You have three choices. One: You keep her and deal with the awkwardness. Two: You let her resign voluntarily. Three: You resolve your personal shit so you can work together professionally.

Silence. My mother watching me. Lin Rui waiting. Choices spinning.

"你需要决定。今晚。因为她周一来参加那个会议期待被解雇。你需要在那之前决定你想要什么。"

You need to decide. Tonight. Because she's coming to that meeting Monday expecting to be fired. You need to decide what you want before then.

"我想要——" I want—

What do I want?

Hang up. Can't finish that sentence. Not to Lin Rui.

Mother still there. Patient.

"你想要什么，墨轩？" What do you want, Moxuan?

Turn to face her.

"我想要她。我想要我们。我想要.....我想要停止害怕。"

I want her. I want us. I want... I want to stop being scared.

"那周一，你不解雇她。你道歉。你告诉她真相。"

Then Monday, you don't fire her. You apologize. You tell her the truth.

"什么真相？" What truth?

"你爱她。你害怕。你对不够感到抱歉。"

That you love her. That you're scared. That you're sorry for not being enough.

"如果她不想听怎么办？今天之后，我为什么她会想听？"

What if she doesn't want to hear it? After today, why would she want to hear it?

Mother walks to me. Takes my hands.

"那你至少试过了。至少你诚实了。至少你给了她选择。不是像今天那样替她做决定。"

Then you at least tried. At least you were honest. At least you gave her the choice. Instead of making it for her like you did today.

My phone. Text notification. Can't ignore it.

Dr. Song, my therapist. Lin Rui must have told her:

你推开了她。再次。因为你害怕被拒绝。但你知道吗？通过推开她，你保证了你害怕的事情。她不能拒绝不存在的事情。停止保护伤口。开始治愈它。—宋医生

You pushed her away. Again. Because you're scared of rejection. But you know what? By pushing her away, you guarantee the thing you're scared of. She can't reject something that doesn't exist. Stop protecting the wound.

Start healing it. —Dr. Song

Stop protecting the wound. Start healing it.

Look at my mother. "我不知道怎么治愈它。"

I don't know how to heal it.

"你从诚实开始。从道歉开始。从出现开始。"

You start with honesty. With apology. With showing up.

"如果我出现而她不想看到我怎么办？"

What if I show up and she doesn't want to see me?

"那你尊重那个。但至少你试过了。"

Then you respect that. But at least you tried.

My father's voice from doorway. Weak but present.

"你在和谁说话，墨轩？"

Who are you talking to, Moxuan?

Turn. Father standing there. Hospital gown. IV pole. Awake.

"爸爸！你应该躺着——"

Dad! You should be lying down—

Father shuffling to chair. Mother helping him sit.

"我听到了你们的谈话。关于微琳。"

I heard your conversation. About Weilin.

"爸爸，对不起。今天——"

Dad, I'm sorry. Today—

"今天你害怕了。就像我年轻时对你妈妈一样。"

Today you were scared. Like I was with your mother when I was young.

My father. Telling stories. From a hospital bed. After a heart attack.

"当我遇见你妈妈时，她的家人不赞成我。工厂工人，没有教育。她的父亲说她可以做得更好。"

When I met your mother, her family disapproved of me.

Factory worker, no education. Her father said she could do better.

"我不知道这个。" I didn't know this.

"因为我们从不谈论它。我们只是.....我们一起工作。我证明了我够了。不是通过金钱。通过爱。通过出现。"

Because we never talk about it. We just... we worked through it. I proved I was enough. Not through money. Through love. Through showing up.

Looks at me directly. Father to son.

"你建造了一座帝国来证明你够了。但你已经够了。你一直都够。"

现在去告诉她。"

You built an empire to prove you were enough. But you were already enough. You always were. Now go tell her that.

"周一。人力资源会议。我可以——"

Monday. HR meeting. I can—

"不是周一。现在。今晚。去告诉她你对今天感到抱歉。你害怕。你爱她。"

Not Monday. Now. Tonight. Go tell her you're sorry for today. That you're scared. That you love her.

"她不会想看到我——"

She won't want to see me—

"那你至少试过了。" Then you at least tried.

Both parents looking at me. United front. Two people who worked through disapproval and poverty and everything.

"墨轩。出现。这就是爱。"

Moxuan. Show up. That's what love is.

END CHAPTER 25

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CHAPTER 26: THE DECISION (WEILIN'S STRENGTH)

Weilin had been sitting on her IKEA bed for three hours—knees pulled to chest, laptop open but untouched, the cursor blinking on a blank document like a heartbeat that refused to quit even when quitting seemed like the only mercy left—when she realized: she was done being destroyed by a man who couldn't decide if he loved her or hated her, done performing competence to earn proximity, done torturing herself in glass offices where every glance carried six years

of unresolved everything, and the realization didn't arrive like lightning or revelation but like breath returning after drowning, quiet and essential and hers.

Saturday afternoon. 3:47 PM. Hours after hospital devastation. After taxi ride home. After complete collapse. Weilin's Yangpu apartment. Small. Sparse. Hers.

Late afternoon light dusty and golden. Falling on cheap furniture that suddenly looks like freedom. Laptop screen showing blank document. Cursor blinking—waiting for her to claim her voice. Her hands steady now. No longer shaking. Outside window, Shanghai moving on. Indifferent. Kind in its indifference.

Silence profound. Not oppressive—the silence of choice, not abandonment. Neighbor's TV muffled through thin walls. Somebody laughing at a game show. Her breathing evening out. Deepening. Finding rhythm.

The bed—¥899, uncomfortable, hers. Laptop keys cool under fingertips. Waiting. Her phone face down on bed. Ignored—his email still there. She doesn't need to reread it. Tissue box empty now. Grief spent. Clarity arriving.

Instant noodles from earlier. MSG and salt. Poor person's comfort. Her apartment smell slightly musty. Lived-in. Real. Nothing expensive. No perfume today. No armor. Just her.

WEILIN'S POV:

I open a new document. Title it: "Resignation Letter."

Stare at it for thirty seconds.

This is real. I'm really doing this.

Quitting the job. Quitting him. Choosing me.

Type slowly. Deliberately. Each word a choice:

致陈先生，

即日起，我辞去在晨曦科技的职位。

感谢您提供的机会。

此致，

沈微琳

Dear Mr. Chen,

Effective immediately, I resign from my position at Chénxī Technologies.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Shen Weilin

That's it. No explanation. No apology. No emotion.

Just: I'm done.

Reread it. Looking for weakness. Finding none.

It's perfect. Because it's simple. Because it's mine. Because it doesn't perform pain for an audience.

Save it. Print it. My cheap printer groans. Spits out the page.

Hold it. Physical paper. Harder to un-send than digital.

This is power. Not his power. Mine.

I sit with the letter on my bed. Holding it like something fragile and fierce simultaneously.

The truth arriving in waves. Each one landing softer than the last:

I took this job for him. Not for career. Not for passion. For proximity. To be near him. To prove I changed. To earn... what? Forgiveness? Love? A second chance?

But you can't earn those things. They're given freely or not at all.

Look around my apartment:

- IKEA bed (¥899, still uncomfortable, but I bought it)
- Small kitchen (two burners, I cook meals that sustain me)

- Books (from secondhand shop, stories that taught me I'm not alone)
- Volunteer schedule (on fridge, Saturdays at shelter, helping families like mine became)

This is my life. Small. Poor. Mine.

And it's enough. I'm enough.

Without him. Without his approval. Without performing competence in glass offices.

6:47 PM. I MAKE DINNER.

Instant noodles. Egg. Preserved vegetables—same meal as yesterday. Tastes different today.

Eat slowly. Tasting it. Present. Not rushing through to get to work emails or anxiety.

Wash my bowl. Hot water. Soap. The small meditation of care.

My phone. Still face-down. I finally pick it up.

Messages:

- Lin Rui (three texts): 你还好吗？ Are you okay?
- Mrs. Chen (one text): 避难所的孩子们明天问你。 Shelter kids asked about you for tomorrow.
- Chen (nothing new since the formal email)

Respond to Lin Rui:

我很好。我做了一个决定。周一你会看到。—W

I'm fine. I made a decision. You'll see Monday. —W

Respond to Mrs. Chen:

我明天会在那里。一如既往。—W

I'll be there tomorrow. As always. —W

Don't respond to Chen. Nothing to say that resignation letter won't say better.

SUNDAY MORNING. THE SHELTER.

7 AM. Earlier than usual. Need the grounding.

Mrs. Chen sees me. Smiles. Says nothing about hospital—she knows, I can tell. But respects my silence.

Work. Distribute food. Help with paperwork. Play with children—little 小明 shows me his drawing of a rocket.

"微琳姐姐，这是去月亮的火箭。你想去月亮吗？"

Sister Weilin, this is a rocket to the moon. Do you want to go to the moon?

Kneel to his level. "有时候。但今天我喜欢在这里。和你在一起。"

Sometimes. But today I like being here. With you.

He hugs me. Small arms. Sticky hands. Pure affection with no conditions.

This. This is what matters.

Not glass offices. Not proximity to pain. This.

Mrs. Chen appears beside me after 小明 runs off.

"你看起来不同。平静。"

You look different. Peaceful.

"我做了一个决定。" I made a decision.

"好的决定？" A good decision?

"我的决定。这就是全部。"

My decision. That's all that matters.

She nods. Understanding beyond words.

"有时候那是最好的种类。"

Sometimes that's the best kind.

SUNDAY EVENING. 8:47 PM.

Prepare for Monday:

Iron my clothes. Simple black pants. White blouse—professional, dignified. Not trying to impress.

Pack my work bag. Laptop to return. Badge to return.

Personal items to take—just a photo of shelter kids. A plant I bought with my own money.

Review resignation letter one more time. Still perfect. Still simple. Still mine.

Print a second copy. One for Chen's desk. One for HR if they insist on the meeting.

Write a brief handover document. Professional to the end—Singapore project status, pending items, contact information for clients.

I will not leave chaos. I will not perform anger. I will leave cleanly, professionally, with dignity.

Because that's who I am.

Before bed, I write one more thing. Not to him. Not to HR. To me:

致沈微琳，

你不是因为太小而离开。你是因为终于变得太大而无法适应这个笼子而离开。

你尝试了。你是诚实的。你努力工作。你变了。

现在你要离开，不是因为失败，而是因为你值得一个不惩罚你爱的地方。

你够了。你一直都够。

爱，

你自己

Dear Shen Weilin,

You are not leaving because you are too small. You are leaving because you finally became too large for this cage.

You tried. You were honest. You worked hard. You changed.

Now you leave, not because of failure, but because you deserve a place that doesn't punish you for loving.

You are enough. You always were.

Love,

Yourself

Fold it. Tuck it into my wallet. Under emergency cash and old photo of my mother.

Insurance against doubt. Against guilt. Against the voice that says "you're giving up."

I'm not giving up. I'm choosing up.

Sleep surprisingly well. The sleep of decision made. Of burden lifted. Of woman who remembered she could walk away.

MONDAY MORNING. 6:47 AM.

Alarm 5:30 AM. Wake before dawn. Before courage can waver.

Dress. Black pants. White blouse. Minimal makeup—not performing, just present.

Gather my things:

- Resignation letters (two copies, crisp, perfect)
- Handover document (professional, complete)
- Work laptop, badge, company phone
- Personal items (photo, plant, nothing else—traveled light, leaving lighter)

Taxi to office. 6:15 AM. Empty streets. Shanghai still sleeping.

Arrive 6:47 AM. Security guard surprised—"早，沈小姐。"
Early, Miss Shen.

Elevator alone. Ascending. Each floor a countdown to freedom.

CHEN'S OFFICE. 6:54 AM.

His floor. Executive row. Dark. Silent. Empty.

His office door closed. Lights off. He's not here—good. This

needs to be on my terms.

Try the door. Unlocked—Lin Rui's doing? Cleaning staff? Fate? Step inside. His space. His domain. Last time I'll be here uninvited.

The office immaculate. Cold. Designed for control:

- Desk (massive, empty except for laptop and single pen)
- Chair (ergonomic, expensive, lonely)
- Windows (floor-to-ceiling, Shanghai skyline, empire view)
- Bookshelves (business titles, no fiction, no softness)

This is who he became. Marcus Chen. All efficiency, no vulnerability.

I don't belong here. I never did.

Place resignation letter center of his desk. Aligned perfectly. Impossible to miss.

Stand for a moment. Goodbye to what could have been. Hello to what will be.

Leave. Close door quietly. Respectfully. Finally.

MY OFFICE. 7:15 AM.

My floor. Junior level. Glass-walled offices. Mine in corner—small but mine for five more hours.

Unlock my door. Badge still works. Security hasn't been notified yet.

Turn on light. Fluorescent. Harsh. Familiar.

Begin packing:

STEP ONE: Personal items

- Photo of shelter kids (tape it to box edge, faces smiling at me—remember why)
- Plant (small pothos, thrived despite neglect, resilient like me)
- Mug (brought from home, chipped, mine)

- Sweater (hung on back of chair for cold AC days)

STEP TWO: Company property inventory

- Laptop (wiped of personal files, professional to the end)
- Badge (clip it to laptop—return together)
- Company phone (all messages deleted, clean slate)
- Office supplies (return to supply closet—leave nothing ambiguous)

STEP THREE: Handover

- Print handover document (three copies: HR, Lin Rui, Chen)
- Organize files (digital and physical, labeled clearly)
- Leave passwords (in sealed envelope, professional)

Work methodically. 7:15 to 8:45. Ninety minutes of careful dismantling of five months of life.

8:45 AM. My office is packed:

- Two boxes (personal items, small life)
- Laptop and badge (on desk, ready to return)
- Handover documents (stacked neatly)
- Office (clean, empty, like I was never here)

Except I was here. I mattered here. I did good work here.

And now I'm leaving. On my terms.

8:47 AM. OFFICE WAKING.

Elevator dings. First employees arriving. Voices. Morning greetings. Coffee orders. Normal Monday.

Lin Rui passes my office. Stops dead. Sees boxes.

Walks in. Closes door. Urgent whisper.

"微琳——"

"你在做什么？" What are you doing?

Calm: "辞职。" Resigning.

"现在？今天？在会议之前？"

Now? Today? Before the meeting?

"在会议之前。我的条件，不是人力资源的。"

Before the meeting. My terms, not HR's.

He looks at boxes. At me. At door.

"老板知道吗？" Does boss know?

"他会。我把辞职信留在他桌上了。"

He will. I left resignation on his desk.

Lin Rui's eyes widen. Respect and fear mixing.

"你进了他的办公室？" You went in his office?

"它没锁。" It was unlocked.

"微琳，他.....他要来了。他今天早上7点离开医院。他父亲稳定了。他在路上。"

Weilin, he... he's coming. He left the hospital at 7 AM. His father is stable. He's on the way.

He's coming. He'll see the letter. He'll see me packing. This is it.

"好。" Good.

"好？就这样？你确定吗？"

Good? That's it? Are you sure?

"我从未如此确定过任何事情。"

I've never been more sure of anything.

He studies me. Seeing something he hasn't seen before—strength, clarity, self-possession.

"你变了。" You've changed.

"我想起了我是谁。" I remembered who I am.

Lin Rui nodding slowly. "他不会轻易接受这个。"

He's not going to take this well.

"那不是我的问题。" That's not my problem.

Simple truth. Revolutionary for me. His reaction isn't my responsibility.

Lin Rui, small smile: "好的。我会.....我会在附近。如果你需要"

我。"

Okay. I'll be... nearby. If you need me.

"谢谢。"

He leaves. Door open. Protective gesture—witness if needed.

8:57 AM. THE ARRIVAL.

Elevator ding. Familiar sound. I know his rhythm.

Footsteps fast. Urgent. His walk when he's on a mission.

I don't look. Continue organizing. Hands steady. Heart racing but body calm.

Hear him reaching his floor. Door opening. Silence—he's seen the letter.

Thirty seconds of silence. He's reading it. Absorbing it. Processing.

Then: footsteps. Faster now. Heading toward my floor. Here we go.

Elevator again. He's coming down—three floors, twenty seconds.

I stand behind my desk. Hands on desk edge. Grounded. Ready.

Elevator opens. His footsteps in corridor. Getting louder.

He appears in doorway. Suit rumpled. Tie loose. Eyes wild with something between anger and panic and confusion.

Sees me standing. Calm. Surrounded by boxes.

Sees my office empty. Stripped. Evidence of leaving.

Sees the badge and laptop on desk. Returned. Official.

Storms in. Letter in hand. Crumpled slightly. My words weaponized by his grip.

Chen, voice tight, controlled fury barely contained:

"这是什么？" What is this?

I don't flinch. Meet his eyes directly. Equal ground.

"我的辞职信。你读了。"

My resignation letter. You read it.

"即日起生效。没有解释。没有通知。"

Effective immediately. No explanation. No notice.

"正确。" Correct.

He stares like I'm speaking a language he doesn't recognize.

"你不能就这样辞职。"

You can't just resign.

Calm. So calm it's almost gentle.

"我可以。我刚才做了。"

I can. I just did.

"我们周一有一个人力资源会议——"

We have an HR meeting Monday—

"我知道。关于你终止我的合同。我正在为你节省时间。"

I know. About you terminating my contract. I'm saving you the time.

His jaw clenches. Muscle working.

"你读了那封电子邮件。" You read that email.

"我读了。'鉴于最近的事件。' '分道扬镳。' '遣散费。' '非常专业。'"

I read it. 'Given recent events.' 'Part ways.' 'Severance.' Very professional.

Bitterness in my voice. Just a trace. I earn it.

"那你为什么——" Then why—

"因为我不想被解雇。我想辞职。我的选择，不是你的。"

Because I don't want to be fired. I want to resign. My choice, not yours.

He steps forward. Anger and something else—desperation?

"微琳，等等——"

Raise my hand. Stop gesture. Gentle but firm.

"不要。" Don't.

His eyes wide. Seeing me—really seeing me—maybe for first time.

"不要让这变得更难。不要假装你想要我留下。你发了那封电子邮件。你在医院说了那些话。你一直很清楚。"

Don't make this harder. Don't pretend you want me to stay. You sent that email. You said those things at the hospital. You've been clear.

"我.....我很生气。我父亲——"

I... I was angry. My father—

"我知道。我理解。" I know. I understand.

Pause. Letting that land. Not dismissing his pain. Also not accepting it as excuse.

"但我不能继续这样。在这里工作，和你一起，假装它只是专业的，而实际上每一天都在杀死我一点点。"

But I can't keep doing this. Working here, with you, pretending it's just professional when really it's killing me a little bit every day.

His face crumpling slightly. Marcus Chen armor cracking.

"我不想杀死你——" I don't want to kill you—

"我知道。但你也不知道如何爱我而不惩罚我。所以我要离开。"

I know. But you also don't know how to love me without punishing me. So I'm leaving.

The words hanging between us. Truth too big for glass office.

Chen, voice breaking: "如果我道歉呢？如果我——"

What if I apologize? What if I—

"不是今天。也许不是永远。但不是今天。"

Not today. Maybe not ever. But not today.

Pick up my box. Personal items. Small life. Mine.

"我把笔记本电脑和徽章留在桌上。交接文件在那里。林瑞有一份副本。"

I left the laptop and badge on the desk. Handover documents are there. Lin Rui has a copy.

Start walking toward door. He's blocking it. Doesn't move.

"请让我过去。" Please let me pass.

He doesn't move. Frozen. Processing. Man who built empire on control losing control.

"你要去哪里？" Where are you going?

"回家。然后是避难所。然后找一份新工作。然后继续我的生活。"

Home. Then shelter. Then find a new job. Then live my life.

Simple. Revolutionary.

"没有我。" Without me.

"如果那是我需要的。是的。"

If that's what I need to do. Yes.

He steps aside. Finally. Slowly. Like movement costs everything.

I walk past. Can smell his cologne. Bergamot and cedar.

Memory and pain.

Don't look back. Learned that lesson already.

Chen's voice behind me. Raw.

"我爱你。" I love you.

I stop in doorway. Back to him. Box in arms.

He said it. Finally. Too late. Or exactly on time.

Without turning: "我知道。那就是为什么这这么痛苦。"

I know. That's why this hurts so much.

Turn just my head. Just enough to see his face in peripheral.

"但爱不够。不是没有尊重。不是没有信任。不是没有我们都愿意停止害怕。"

But love isn't enough. Not without respect. Not without trust.

Not without both of us willing to stop being scared.

His eyes filling. Marcus Chen crying? Yes. Tears. Silent.

Devastating.

"当你准备好那些其他的事情时——如果你准备好——你知道在哪里找到我。"

When you're ready for those other things—if you're ready—you know where to find me.

Walk away. Down corridor. To elevator. Box in arms. Dignity intact. Heart breaking and healing simultaneously.

Elevator doors opening. Empty car. Escape.

Step in. Turn around. One last look.

He's standing in my office doorway. Watching me leave. Not chasing. Finally respecting my choice.

Doors close.

END CHAPTER 26

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CHAPTER 27: THE TRUTH (SCENE 6 CONTINUED - THE CONFRONTATION PART 2)

Chen stood in Weilin's office doorway—resignation letter crushed in his fist, her boxes stacked like accusations, her calm devastation worse than screaming—and realized with the clarity of a man watching a car crash in slow motion that he'd spent six years building toward this exact moment: the moment she stopped begging for forgiveness and started demanding he give her permission to leave, the moment his cruelty finally exceeded her capacity to absorb it, the moment she looked at him with eyes that said "I loved you enough to destroy myself and now I'm choosing to survive" and every word he'd practiced on the drive from the hospital—apology, explanation, plea—died in his throat because she

was already gone and he was just watching her body leave.
Monday morning. 9:03 AM. Seconds after Weilin declared she's leaving. Chen blocking doorway.

Weilin's office—packed boxes, stripped walls, evidence of departure.

Her office stripped bare. Impersonal. Like she erased herself. Boxes small, pathetic. Five months reduced to two cardboard containers. Her face calm. Resolved. No tears—worse than tears. His reflection in glass wall. Desperate man he doesn't recognize. Employees outside. Watching through glass. Witnessing his unraveling.

Office sounds muted. Everyone pretending not to watch. His breathing ragged. Panicked. Her breathing steady.

Controlled. Infuriating composure. His heartbeat too loud. Fight-or-flight screaming "don't let her leave."

Resignation letter in his hand. Crumpled. Her words clear despite his grip. Doorframe—he's gripping it. Knuckles white. Physical anchor. His suit too tight. Too hot. Armor failing. Space between them two feet. Might as well be ocean. Her perfume—jasmine—faint. Already a memory. Office smell—recycled air, carpet cleaner, antiseptic professionalism. His own sweat. Fear-sweat. Not exertion. Chemical tang of panic.
CHEN'S POV:

Voice not cooperating. Coming out strangled.

"你要辞职？" You're quitting?

Stupid question. She just told me. Written it in clean professional prose. But I can't... I can't process it.

Weilin still calm. Still resolved. Picking up second box.

"是的。我要为我们俩省去人力资源解雇我的痛苦。"

Yes. I'm saving us both the pain of HR firing me.

The words like slap. Clarity arriving.

"我不会让他们解雇你。"

I wasn't going to let them fire you.

She laughs. Bitter. Small sound. Disbelieving.

"真的吗？那你的电子邮件呢？'提前终止讨论'？"

Really? What about your email? 'Early termination discussion'?

"我改变了主意——" I changed my mind—

Weilin cuts me off. First flash of anger.

"你什么时候改变的？在告诉我我没有权利在医院？在说我对你父亲的关心是虚假的之后？你什么时候决定我值得留下？"

When did you change it? After telling me I had no right to be at the hospital? After saying my care for your father was fake? When did you decide I was worth keeping?

Her eyes meeting mine. Accusation and pain and finality.

"让我猜猜。你妈妈和你说话了。或者林瑞。或者你的治疗师。有人告诉你你太残忍了，所以现在你感到内疚。"

Let me guess. Your mother talked to you. Or Lin Rui. Or your therapist. Someone told you that you were too cruel, so now you feel guilty.

She's right. All of it. My mother, my father, my own conscience finally waking up.

"我很生气。我父亲——" I was angry. My father—

Weilin steps closer. Box still in arms. Voice rising.

"你父亲几乎死了，我想在你身边，你把它扔在我脸上！"

Your father almost died and I wanted to be there for you and you threw it in my face!

The box. She sets it down. Hard. Needs hands free for this.

"我带了花。得体的。尊重的。我来是因为我关心。因为我知道失去父母是什么感觉，我不想你一个人。"

I brought flowers. Appropriate. Respectful. I came because I care. Because I know what losing a parent feels like and I didn't want you to be alone.

Her voice cracking now. Control slipping.

"你看着我，好像我是什么，讨厌的东西。你说我只是因为你有钱才关心。你说我羞愧你的家人——"

And you looked at me like I was something disgusting. You said I only cared because you have money now. You said I was ashamed of your family—

"你是！在我们的婚礼上——" You were! At our wedding—

Weilin explodes. Finally. Control shattering.

"我二十三岁！我被我父亲控制！我害怕，年轻，愚蠢！那是六年前！"

I was twenty-three! I was controlled by my father! I was scared and young and stupid! That was six years ago!

WEILIN'S POV:

I'm shouting. Don't care. Don't care who hears. Don't care about professionalism.

"我道歉了！我改变了！我放弃了一切！"

I've apologized! I've changed! I've given up everything!

Step toward him. He steps back. Intimidated? Good.

"我住在杨浦区一个可怕的公寓里，因为你付给我几乎不够的钱！我走路去志愿者庇护所因为我买不起地铁！我把我的薪水给需要它的家庭！"

I live in a horrible apartment in Yangpu because you paid me barely enough! I walk to volunteer at the shelter because I can't afford the subway! I give my salary to families who need it!

Chen shocked. "你把你的薪水——"

You give your salary—

"是的！因为我记得贫穷的感觉！因为你的惩罚教会了我同情！因为失去一切让我成为更好的人！"

Yes! Because I remember what poverty feels like! Because your punishment taught me compassion! Because losing everything made me a better person!

My hands shaking now. Fists. Years of restraint breaking.

"我做了你想要的一切。我受苦了。我改变了。我证明了我不是那个特权的女孩了。"

I did everything you wanted. I suffered. I changed. I proved I'm not that privileged girl anymore.

Tears. Finally. Hot and furious. Not sad—angry.

"那还不够！对你来说，永远不够！因为你不想原谅我——你想让我永远受苦！"

And it's still not enough! For you, it's never enough! Because you don't want to forgive me—you want me to suffer forever! Chen's face white. Stricken.

"那不是真的——" That's not true—

Voice breaking. Question I've needed to ask.

"那你想从我这里得到什么？！告诉我！我会做！更多的道歉？更多的贫困？我应该在街上乞讨吗？那会让你满意吗？！"

Then what do you want from me?! Tell me! I'll do it! More apologies? More poverty? Should I beg on the street? Would that satisfy you?!

Silence. Office outside dead quiet. Everyone definitely hearing this. Don't care.

Chen opens his mouth. Closes it. No words.

"告诉我！因为我不知道如何赢得你的原谅！我做了一切，你仍然看着我，就像我是毁了你生活的女人！"

Tell me! Because I don't know how to earn your forgiveness! I've done everything and you still look at me like I'm the

woman who ruined your life!

Sob escaping. Can't hold it. Six years of trying collapsing.

"我厌倦了乞求你永远不会给的原谅。"

I'm tired of begging for forgiveness you'll never give.

CHEN'S POV:

She's crying. Shouting and crying and asking what I want.

What do I want?

The question I've avoided for six years. Now unavoidable.

Voice rising. Matching her intensity.

"你想知道我想要什么？"

You want to know what I want?

Step toward her. She doesn't back down.

"我想停止爱你！"

I want to stop loving you!

The words ripped out. Raw. True.

"我想要一天，我不会醒来伸手去找你！我想停止看到每个黑发女人并希望是你！我想停止开车经过面条店并记得我们的第一次约会！"

I want one day where I don't wake up reaching for you! I want to stop seeing every black-haired woman and hoping it's you! I want to stop driving past noodle shops and remembering our first date!

Weilin frozen. Tears streaming.

Can't stop now. Six years pouring out.

"我想原谅你而不感觉像我在背叛我自己！因为原谅你意味着承认我花了六年建立一个帝国只是为了证明我足够让你留下！"

I want to forgive you without feeling like I'm betraying myself! Because forgiving you means admitting I spent six years building an empire just to prove I was enough for you to stay! Shouting now. Matching her. Both of us breaking.

"而事实是——事实是我不够！因为如果我够了，你就不会离开！
你的父亲不会威胁到我，因为我会有资源对抗他！"

And the truth is—the truth is I wasn't enough! Because if I was enough, you wouldn't have left! Your father couldn't have threatened me because I would have had resources to fight him!

Punch the wall beside door. Not hard. Just need to hit something.

"我恨我自己六年来不够！我恨你让我感觉到那样！我恨我仍然爱你，即使你摧毁了我！"

I've hated myself for six years for not being enough! I hate that you made me feel that way! I hate that I still love you even though you destroyed me!

Both of us breathing hard. Facing each other. Years of silence shattered.

WEILIN'S POV:

Silence after the explosion. Smoke settling. Damage visible.

He said he loves me. Present tense. "I still love you."

And he hates himself for it.

Voice hoarse from shouting. "你爱我。"

You love me.

Not a question. Statement. He said it.

Chen slumps against wall. Exhausted.

"是的。我爱你。我恨这个，但我爱你。"

Yes. I love you. I hate it, but I love you.

Sit on my desk. Legs won't hold me anymore.

"六年。你花了六年恨我，你整个时间都爱我？"

Six years. You spent six years hating me and you loved me the whole time?

"我不恨你。我恨我自己。" I didn't hate you. I hated myself.

Looks up. Eyes red. Tears he's fighting.

"我恨我不能保护你。我恨我不能对抗你的父亲。我恨我让你走因为我太骄傲而不能承认我需要你多过你需要我。"

I hated that I couldn't protect you. I hated that I couldn't fight your father. I hated that I let you go because I was too proud to admit I needed you more than you needed me.

The honesty. Brutal. Beautiful. Six years late.

"那你为什么惩罚我？如果你知道真相——如果你读了信——为什么雇用我只是为了让我受苦？"

Then why punish me? If you knew the truth—if you read the letter—why hire me just to make me suffer?

Chen laughs. Bitter. Self-loathing.

"因为如果我让你受苦，也许我会停止受苦。因为如果你在我身边但痛苦，也许我能够停止想念你。"

Because if I made you suffer, maybe I'd stop suffering.

Because if you were near me but miserable, maybe I could stop missing you.

Pause. Brutal self-awareness.

"这没有奏效。它让我们都更加痛苦。"

It didn't work. It just made us both more miserable.

Truth. Simple. Devastating.

Stand. Both of us need to move. Energy too much for stillness.

"那我们现在做什么？" So what do we do now?

"我不知道。" I don't know.

"我们不能继续这样。" We can't keep doing this.

"我知道。"

Walk to window. Need space. Need air. Glass office suffocating.

"我爱你。你知道吗？" I love you. You know that?

Behind me, his breathing stops.

Continue. Back to him. "我从未停止过。即使在离婚时。即使在你残忍的时候。即使现在。"

I never stopped. Not during the divorce. Not when you were cruel. Not now.

Turn. Face him.

"但爱不够。不是没有信任。不是没有原谅。不是没有我们都愿意停止惩罚彼此。"

But love isn't enough. Not without trust. Not without forgiveness. Not without both of us willing to stop punishing each other.

Chen standing too. Facing me across office.

"你想要什么？告诉我你想要什么，我会给你。"

What do you want? Tell me what you want and I'll give it to you.

The offer. Desperate. He's bargaining. Still thinks he can fix with resources.

"我不想要你的钱。我不想要你的帝国。我想要墨轩。"

I don't want your money. I don't want your empire. I want Moxuan.

His face crumpling. Because he doesn't know if that person still exists.

"那个在我们狗屎公寓里给我做饭的男人。那个梦想并让我相信梦想的男人。那个爱我只是因为我是我的男人，不是因为我完美或足够或赎罪了。"

The man who cooked for me in our shitty apartment. The man who dreamed and made me believe in dreams. The man who loved me just for being me, not because I was perfect or enough or had atoned.

Tears streaming now. Both of us.

"我不知道你是否仍然是那个人。"

I don't know if you're still that person.

CHEN'S POV:

Am I still that person? 墨轩?

The man who cooked instant noodles and called it a feast?

The man who loved her with nothing to offer but love?

"我不知道。" I don't know.

Honesty. The only thing left.

"我.....我建造了Marcus Chen取代墨轩。因为墨轩失去了你。墨轩不够。"

I... I built Marcus Chen to replace Moxuan. Because Moxuan lost you. Moxuan wasn't enough.

Weilin wiping tears.

"墨轩够了。是世界太残酷了。我太虚弱了。我父亲太强大了。但墨轩够了。"

Moxuan was enough. It was the world that was too cruel. I was too weak. My father was too powerful. But Moxuan was enough.

The absolution I've needed for six years. From her lips. Too late.

"我不知道如何成为他了。"

I don't know how to be him anymore.

Weilin, small sad smile.

"我知道。那就是为什么我要离开。"

I know. That's why I'm leaving.

Panic surging again. She's still leaving. This conversation didn't fix anything.

"微琳，等等——"

She shakes her head. Picks up box again. Resolved.

"让我走。签署终止。让我继续前进。因为这——我们——它正在杀

死我们两个。"

Let me go. Sign the termination. Let me move on. Because this—us—it's killing us both.

The request. Reasonable. Merciful. Impossible.

"我不能。" I can't.

"为什么不能？" Why not?

"因为如果你离开，如果我让你走，那意味着我放弃了。我花了六年建立这个生活，这个帝国，证明我足够，如果你离开，那意味着这一切都毫无意义。"

Because if you leave, if I let you go, it means I gave up. I spent six years building this life, this empire, proving I was enough, and if you leave it means it was all for nothing.

Weilin sets box down again. Faces me directly.

"它已经毫无意义了，墨轩。你建造了它为了错误的原因。不是为了梦想。为了报复。为了证明一点。"

It was already for nothing, Moxuan. You built it for the wrong reasons. Not for dreams. For revenge. To prove a point.

She steps closer. One foot away. Close enough to touch.

Neither of us touching.

"你想知道你还是不是墨轩？墨轩会让我走。因为墨轩爱我足以想要我快乐，即使那意味着没有他。"

You want to know if you're still Moxuan? Moxuan would let me go. Because Moxuan loved me enough to want me happy, even if that meant without him.

The test. Brutal. Clear. Pass/fail.

"如果我让你走，你会快乐吗？"

If I let you go, will you be happy?

Weilin considering. Honest.

"我不知道。但我会有机会。而现在，这里，和你在一起在这个办公室，在这个工作，我没有机会。我只是.....慢慢消失。"

I don't know. But I'll have a chance. And right now, here, with you in this office, in this job, I don't have a chance. I'm just... slowly disappearing.

The truth. I see it. She's thinner. Paler. Dimmed.

"我正在杀死你。" I'm killing you.

"我们正在杀死彼此。" We're killing each other.

WEILIN'S POV:

We're standing. Too close. Not close enough. Everything wrong.

"我要走了。" I'm going to leave.

"我知道。" I know.

"你不会阻止我。" You won't stop me.

"我不能。" I can't.

Pick up box. Again. Third time. Maybe this time I'll make it out.

"人力资源仍然有那个会议安排好了。周一早上10点。"

HR still has that meeting scheduled. Monday morning 10 AM.

"我会取消它。" I'll cancel it.

"不。去。正式化。让它干净。"

No. Go. Make it official. Make it clean.

He nods. Understanding—we need closure. Paperwork. The ritual of ending.

Walk to door. He's not blocking it anymore. Standing aside. Letting me choose.

Pause in doorway. Last moment. Last chance.

"我希望你找到他。墨轩。我希望你记得他是谁。"

I hope you find him. Moxuan. I hope you remember who he is.

Chen, tears on his face now. Not hiding.

"我希望你找到快乐。真正的快乐。你值得。"

I hope you find happiness. Real happiness. You deserve it.

The blessing. Mutual. Grief-filled. Love-filled.

"也许在另一个生活中，我们会做对。"

Maybe in another life, we'll get it right.

"也许在这个生活中。只是.....还没有。"

Maybe in this life. Just... not yet.

The hope. Tiny. Fragile. Door left ajar.

"还没有。" Not yet.

Leave. This time for real. Down corridor. To elevator.

Everyone watching. Don't care.

Lin Rui appears beside me at elevator.

"你真的要离开了。" You're really leaving.

"是的。"

"他会追你吗？" Will he chase you?

"我不知道。我不认为他知道。"

I don't know. I don't think he knows.

Elevator arrives. Doors open. Freedom or void. Hard to tell.

"对于记录，你做了正确的事。"

For the record, you did the right thing.

"感觉不像。" Doesn't feel like it.

"它永远不会。" It never does.

Step into elevator. Doors start to close.

Last glimpse of Chen standing in my office doorway.

Watching. Not chasing.

Gone.

CHEN'S POV:

I stand in her empty office. Boxes gone. She's gone. I let her go.

Lin Rui returns. Standing in doorway.

"你刚才让她离开。" You just let her leave.

"我知道。"

"你爱她。" You love her.

"我知道。"

"那你为什么——" Then why—

Cut him off.

"因为她是对的。我正在杀死她。我们正在杀死彼此。"

Because she's right. I'm killing her. We're killing each other.

Sit in her chair. Still warm. She was just here. Ghost of jasmine.

"我需要弄清楚我是谁。墨轩还是Marcus Chen还是某种混合。在我.....在我能够成为她应得的人之前。"

I need to figure out who I am. Moxuan or Marcus Chen or some hybrid. Before I... before I can be what she deserves.

"如果到那时她已经继续前进了呢？"

What if by then she's moved on?

"那她应该。那意味着她找到了快乐。"

Then she should. It means she found happiness.

Pause. Brutal truth.

"即使不是和我在一起。" Even if it's not with me.

Lin Rui studies me.

"你变了。刚刚。在这次对话中。"

You've changed. Just now. In this conversation.

"怎么？" How?

"你把她放在你之前。老板，Marcus Chen，从不把任何人放在他之前。"

You put her before yourself. Boss, Marcus Chen, never puts anyone before himself.

He's right. Marcus Chen wouldn't let her leave. Would fight, bargain, use resources.

But 墨轩... 墨轩 would love her enough to let her go.

"人力资源会议。周一10点。" HR meeting. Monday 10 AM.

"你要去吗？ " Are you going?

"是的。 "

"要做什么？ " To do what?

"正式化。给她干净的分手。好的推荐信。她想要的一切。 "

Make it official. Give her clean break. Good reference.

Everything she asked for.

Stand. Leaving her office. Can't stay here. Ghost too strong.

"然后我要打电话给宋医生。我要.....我要弄清楚如何成为两者。墨轩和Marcus。梦想家和建设者。 "

Then I'm calling Dr. Song. I'm going to... I'm going to figure out how to be both. Moxuan and Marcus. The dreamer and the builder.

Lin Rui nods. "需要多长时间？ "

How long will it take?

"我不知道。但她说'还没有'。那意味着也许有一天。 "

I don't know. But she said 'not yet.' That means maybe someday.

"如果没有呢？ " What if there isn't?

Look back at her empty office. Her ghost.

"那至少我会成为一个值得她曾经爱过的人。 "

Then at least I'll be someone worthy of having been loved by her.

END CHAPTER 27

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CHAPTER 28: THE THERAPY BREAKTHROUGH (CHEN'S REALIZATION)

Chen sat in Dr. Song's office for the first time in three months

—he'd cancelled every appointment since hiring Weilin, told himself he was "too busy" when really he was too afraid of what Dr. Song would say about his revenge employment scheme—and the words that came out of his mouth surprised him: not "she quit" or "she left" but "I let her go" because that was the truth, wasn't it, he'd stood in that doorway and let her walk away and now he was sitting in this beige therapy office at 2:47 PM on a Monday when he should be running his empire, crying like he was twenty-five again and divorce papers were being served and his world was ending except this time he was the one who ended it.

Monday afternoon. 2:47 PM. Five hours after Weilin left. After watching elevator doors close on her. After standing in her empty office unable to move.

Dr. Song's office—neutral space, safe space, last refuge. Beige walls. Intentionally neutral. Calming blues. Plants that actually thrive—unlike his. Tissue box on coffee table. He's already used three. Dr. Song, fifty-something, kind eyes. Pen poised but not writing—just present. Window showing Shanghai afternoon. Life continuing. Indifferent.

White noise machine subtle. Blocking office sounds. His breathing ragged. Post-cry breathing. Trying to stabilize. Clock ticking. Or is that his heartbeat? Dr. Song's silence intentional. Therapeutic. Letting him find words.

Couch leather. Expensive. He paid for it—this practice caters to executives who need therapy but can afford mahogany and discretion. Tissue rough against his face. Evidence of breakdown. His hands shaking. Can't stop shaking.

Lavender diffuser meant to calm. Not working. Coffee—Dr. Song offered, he declined. Stomach can't handle it. His own

sweat. Stress-sweat. Different from exercise. Chemical panic.

CHEN'S POV:

Dr. Song, voice calm, clinical warmth:

"让我们从基础开始。她走了。你感觉如何？"

Let's start with basics. She left. How do you feel?

The question deceptively simple. Impossibly complex.

"我不知道。" I don't know.

Pause. She waits. Technique I recognize—silence as invitation to elaborate.

"那是谎言。我知道。我只是.....我同时感受到一切。"

That's a lie. I know. I just... I'm feeling everything at once.

"试着分开它们。一次一个感觉。"

Try to separate them. One feeling at a time.

Close my eyes. Easier to speak without seeing her professional compassion.

"解脱。" Relief.

Say it. First one. Easiest one.

"我松了一口气。那很糟糕吗？她离开了，我松了一口气，因为现在我不必每天看着她并记得我失去的一切。"

I'm relieved. Is that terrible? She left and I'm relieved because now I don't have to see her every day and remember everything I lost.

"这不糟糕。这是人类。什么其他感觉？"

It's not terrible. It's human. What other feelings?

Open eyes. Look at her directly.

"毁灭。完全毁灭。好像我.....好像我花了六年建造一些东西，在一个早上我摧毁了它。"

Devastated. Completely devastated. Like I... like I spent six years building something and in one morning I destroyed it. My voice breaking. Third tissue needed.

"她带着花来。去医院。白百合。尊重的，适当的。她想在那里支持我。"

She came with flowers. To the hospital. White lilies.
Respectful, appropriate. She wanted to be there for me.
Wipe eyes. Useless. Tears keep coming.

"我把它扔在她脸上。我告诉她她没有权利在那里。我.....我很残忍。"

And I threw it in her face. I told her she had no right to be there. I... I was cruel.

"为什么？" Why?

"因为我很生气。" Because I was angry.

"对什么生气？" Angry at what?

"对她。对她出现。对她关心。"

At her. At her showing up. At her caring.

Dr. Song leans forward slightly—technique when she's homing in on something.

"你对她关心感到生气。"

You were angry that she cared.

"是的。"

"为什么她的关心让你生气？"

Why did her caring make you angry?

The question. Scalpel-precise. Cutting to infected wound.

"因为.....因为这不公平。"

Because... because it's not fair.

Lean forward. Elbows on knees. Head in hands.

"她六年前不关心。她离开了我。她选择了她的父亲而不是我。她决定我不值得为之战斗。"

She didn't care six years ago. She left me. She chose her father over me. She decided I wasn't worth fighting for.
Voice rising. Anger returning. Easier than pain.

"现在她出现，现在我有钱，现在我建造了这个帝国，现在她关心？这太方便了。"

And now she shows up, now that I have money, now that I built this empire, now she cares? It's too convenient.

Dr. Song calm. Unwavering.

"你真的相信吗？" Do you really believe that?

Pause. Do I? Do I really believe she only cares because I'm successful?

"我.....我想相信。更容易相信。"

I... I want to believe it. It's easier to believe.

"为什么更容易？" Why is it easier?

"因为如果她只关心钱，那我可以恨她。我可以是对的。我可以是受害者。"

Because if she only cares about money, then I can hate her. I can be right. I can be the victim.

"但如果她真正关心——" But if she genuinely cares—

"那我必须原谅她。那我必须承认我错了。"

Then I have to forgive her. Then I have to admit I was wrong. The truth. Landing like stone in water. Ripples spreading.

"那是你真正害怕的吗？承认你错了？"

Is that what you're really afraid of? Admitting you were wrong?

Look up. Meet her eyes. Therapist-as-mirror.

"不。" No.

Breathe. Finding it. The real fear. The core wound.

"我害怕如果我原谅她，我是在说她做的事情是好的。我是在说我不值得为之战斗。"

I'm afraid if I forgive her, I'm saying what she did was okay.

I'm saying I wasn't worth fighting for.

There it is. Six years. Core wound. "I wasn't worth fighting for."

Dr. Song sits back. Letting that sit between us.

"或者。" Or.

Wait. She does this. One-word provocations. Forcing me to ask.

"或者什么？" Or what?

"或者你是在说你值得为之战斗。你已经治愈得足以原谅。"
Or you're saying you're worth fighting for now. That you've healed enough to forgive.

The reframe. Entire perspective shifting. Dizzy with it.

"我.....我没想过那样。"

I... I didn't think of it that way.

"墨轩，我们已经工作三年了。你建造了什么？"

Moxuan, we've been working together three years. What have you built?

"一家公司。帝国——" A company. An empire—

"在那之前。你为什么建造它？"

Before that. Why did you build it?

"证明我够了。证明我值得。"

To prove I was enough. To prove I was worthy.

"对谁？" To whom?

"对她。对.....对我自己。"

To her. To... to myself.

Dr. Song leans forward again. Going for the kill—therapeutic kill. Precision strike.

"你需要一个价值数十亿的公司来证明你的价值吗？"

Do you need a multi-billion dollar company to prove your worth?

Silence. The question hanging. Impossible to answer without confronting absurdity.

"当你这样说的时候，听起来很荒谬。"

When you put it that way, it sounds ridiculous.

"确实。所以让我问一个不同的问题。"

It does. So let me ask a different question.

She stands. Walks to window. Technique—movement as disruption. Forcing new perspective.

"你想要对还是想要快乐？"

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?

The question. Stark. Binary. No middle ground.

"那是假二分法——" That's a false dichotomy—

"是吗？你过去六年一直是对的。她离开了你。她做出了错误的选择。你有权利愤怒。"

Is it? You've been right for six years. She left you. She made the wrong choice. You're entitled to your anger.

Pause. Letting that sit.

"你也一直很痛苦。对六年。建造帝国，赢得战争，你仍然痛苦。" You've also been miserable. For six years. Building empires, winning wars, and you're still miserable.

Turn away. Can't look at her. Truth too naked.

"所以我再问一次。你想要对吗？或者你想要快乐吗？"

So I ask again. Do you want to be right? Or do you want to be happy?

Long silence. Thirty seconds. Minute. Eternity.

Whispered: "我想要快乐。"

I want to be happy.

Louder. Admitting it. Claiming it.

"上帝，我想要快乐。"

God, I want to be happy.

Turn back. Face her. Tears streaming. Don't care.

"我厌倦了对。我厌倦了愤怒。我厌倦了建造东西来证明一些东西。我只想.....我只想要和平。"

I'm tired of being right. I'm tired of being angry. I'm tired of building things to prove something. I just want... I just want peace.

Dr. Song returns to her chair. Voice gentle but firm.

"那你需要原谅她吗？" Then do you need to forgive her?

"我.....是的。我认为是的。"

I... yes. I think so.

"那不是你需要开始的地方。"

That's not where you need to start.

Confused. Wipe eyes. Look at her.

"什么意思？" What do you mean?

"原谅她是第二步。第一步？原谅你自己。"

Forgiving her is step two. Step one? Forgive yourself.

"为什么？" For what?

Dr. Song counts on fingers. Precise. Clear.

"为了相信她。为了让她的话定义你。为了花费六年建造帝国而不是建造快乐。"

For believing her. For letting her words define you. For spending six years building an empire instead of building happiness.

Each word landing like stone. Building cairn of self-blame.

"原谅陈墨轩，那个年轻人，为了不够。为了让她离开。为了保护她。"

Forgive Chen Moxuan, that young man, for not being enough. For letting her leave. For not being able to protect her.

The name. 墨轩. Haven't heard it from her. Always "Chen" in therapy.

"我不知道如何原谅他。"

I don't know how to forgive him.

"从真相开始。他够了吗？"

Start with the truth. Was he enough?

Silence. Heavy. Six years heavy.

"世界说不。她的父亲说不。她的离开说不。"

The world said no. Her father said no. Her leaving said no.

"那不是我问的。我问你。墨轩够了吗？"

That's not what I asked. I asked you. Was Moxuan enough?

Close my eyes. See him. Twenty-five-year-old Chen Moxuan:

- Making instant noodles fancy with egg and vegetables
- Dreaming about startup while she listened
- Loving her with everything despite having nothing
- Believing in tomorrow even when today was hard

Voice breaking: "他够了。"

He was enough.

Sob escaping. Six years of denial cracking.

"他一直够。他只是.....他周围的世界不够。她的父亲不够。他们的环境不够。但他.....他够了。"

He was always enough. He just... the world around him wasn't enough. Her father wasn't enough. Their circumstances weren't enough. But he... he was enough.

Dr. Song, voice soft, almost whisper:

"告诉他那个。" Tell him that.

"什么？"

"告诉陈墨轩他够了。大声说。"

Tell Chen Moxuan he was enough. Say it out loud.

The exercise. Ridiculous. Therapeutic. Necessary.

Look at empty chair she gestures to—classic therapy technique. I've resisted for three years.

"我不能——" I can't—

"你可以。你需要。告诉他。"

You can. You need to. Tell him.

Stare at empty chair. Seeing him. Twenty-five-year-old me.

Scared and in love and trying.

Voice shaking: "墨轩....."

Pause. This is insane. This is therapy. This is necessary.

"你够了。" You were enough.

Tears full flow now. No stopping.

"你一直够。你爱她。你梦想了。你努力工作了。你尽你所能地做到了最好。"

You were always enough. You loved her. You dreamed. You worked hard. You did your best with what you had.

Lean forward. Talking to myself. To past self. To wounded boy who became armored man.

"不是你的错她离开了。不是因为你不夠。是因为世界太残酷了。她的父亲太强大了。你.....你够了。"

It wasn't your fault she left. It wasn't because you weren't enough. It was because the world was too cruel. Her father was too powerful. You... you were enough.

My voice rising. Believing it. Maybe for first time.

"你值得为之战斗。你值得爱。你够了。"

You were worth fighting for. You were worth loving. You were enough.

Collapse back in chair. Crying. Full breakdown. Six years of armor melting.

Minutes pass. Five? Ten? Time weird in therapy after breakthrough.

Dr. Song offers water. I take it. Drink. Grounding.

"你感觉如何?" How do you feel?

"筋疲力尽。轻松。清晰。"

Exhausted. Lighter. Clear.

"清晰关于什么?" Clear about what?

"我需要告诉她。" I need to tell her.

"告诉她什么？" Tell her what?

"我原谅她。我原谅我自己。我.....我想尝试。不是陈墨轩和微琳从六年前。而是我们现在是谁。"

I forgive her. I forgive myself. I... I want to try. Not Chen Moxuan and Weilin from six years ago. But who we are now.

"你认为她想要那个吗？"

Do you think she wants that?

Pause. The question. The doubt. The fear.

"我不知道。今天早上她说.....她说当我准备好其他事情时——尊重，信任，停止害怕——我知道在哪里找到她。"

I don't know. This morning she said... she said when I was ready for other things—respect, trust, stop being scared—I'd know where to find her.

"你准备好那些事情了吗？"

Are you ready for those things?

Long pause. Honest assessment.

"我不知道。但我想尝试。我想.....我想尝试成为墨轩和Marcus Chen。梦想家和建设者。爱她的人和尊重她的人。"

I don't know. But I want to try. I want... I want to try being Moxuan and Marcus Chen. The dreamer and the builder. The man who loves her and the man who respects her.

Dr. Song, small smile—rare, she's pleased.

"那是好的开始。" That's a good start.

Stand suddenly. Urgent. Need to move. Need to act.

"我需要去找她。" I need to go find her.

"现在？" Now?

"是的。现在。在我失去勇气之前。在她.....在她真的继续前进之前。"

Yes. Now. Before I lose courage. Before she... before she

really moves on.

"墨轩。一个建议。" Moxuan. One suggestion.

Stop. Hand on door. Turn back.

"不要去道歉。去告诉她真相。"

Don't go to apologize. Go to tell her the truth.

"区别是什么？" What's the difference?

"道歉是关于过去。真相是关于未来。告诉她你想要什么。不是你对你做的事感到抱歉。"

Apology is about past. Truth is about future. Tell her what you want. Not what you're sorry for.

The distinction. Clear. Important.

"我想要她。我想要我们。"

I want her. I want us.

"那告诉她那个。" Then tell her that.

Leave therapy. Elevator. Underground parking. My car.

Drive to her address—杨浦区. I know it from HR file. Never went. Now racing there.

Traffic. Monday afternoon. Shanghai slow. Every red light torture.

My phone. Call her—straight to voicemail. Company phone I gave her. She probably left it in my office.

Text Lin Rui:

你有微琳的私人号码吗？—MC

Do you have Weilin's personal number? —MC

Lin Rui immediate:

没有。她从不分享它。老板，她需要空间。—LR

No. She never shared it. Boss, she needs space. —LR

我知道。但我需要告诉她一些事情。—MC

I know. But I need to tell her something. —MC

什么？—LR

What? —LR

真相。—MC

The truth. —MC

No response. Just:

她的地址：杨浦区平凉路2247号，6楼。祝你好运。—LR

Her address: 2247 Pingliang Road, Yangpu District, 6th floor.

Good luck. —LR

Already driving there. Traffic crawling. 4:27 PM. Rush hour starting.

Text my mother:

妈妈，我要去找她。我准备好了。—M

Mom, I'm going to find her. I'm ready. —M

Immediate:

好。告诉她真相。不要害怕。爱，妈妈

Good. Tell her the truth. Don't be afraid. Love, Mom

Finally. Her street. Parking impossible. Leave car illegally.

Don't care. Run.

Building old. Six floors. No elevator. Stairs narrow. Climb.

Two at a time. Heart pounding. Breathless.

Sixth floor. Her door—602. Paint peeling. Cheap lock.

Knock. Hard. Urgent.

"微琳！是我！我们需要谈谈！"

Weilin! It's me! We need to talk!

Silence.

Knock again.

"微琳！求你了！我知道你在那里！"

Weilin! Please! I know you're there!

Silence.

Try door. Locked.

Neighbor appears—老太太, elderly woman, suspicious:

"你在找谁？ " Who are you looking for?

"沈微琳。她住在这里吗？ "

Shen Weilin. Does she live here?

"她走了。 " She left.

My chest. Tight. "什么意思'走了'？ "

What do you mean 'left'?

"今天下午。带着她的箱子。说她搬出去了。 "

This afternoon. With her boxes. Said she was moving out.

"她去哪里了？！ " Where did she go?!

Neighbor shrugs. "没说。只是离开了。 "

Didn't say. Just left.

Pull out phone. Text Lin Rui:

她搬出了她的公寓。你知道她去哪里了吗？ —MC

She moved out of her apartment. Do you know where she went? —MC

Lin Rui:

不。但我知道她周六去哪里。 —LR

No. But I know where she goes on Saturdays. —LR

现在是周一。 —MC

It's Monday. —MC

试试避难所。你妈妈的避难所。杨浦区。她每天都在那里。 —LR

Try the shelter. Your mother's shelter. Yangpu District. She's there every day. —LR

The shelter. Of course. Where she volunteers. Where my mother knows her.

Run back down stairs. To car. Drive to shelter—ten minutes, traffic terrible, every second agony.

Pull up. Shelter small building. Sign: 杨浦社区避难所.

Run inside.

Receptionist: "你在找谁？ "

Who are you looking for?

"沈微琳。她在这里吗？"

Shen Weilin. Is she here?

Receptionist checks schedule. Shakes head.

"她今天打电话请病假了。"

She called in sick today.

"她去哪里了？" Where did she go?

"我不知道。对不起。"

I don't know. Sorry.

Stand in shelter. Lost. She's gone. Moved out. Not at shelter.

Not answering phone.

Where is she?

END CHAPTER 28

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CHAPTER 29: THE SEARCH (PARALLEL JOURNEYS)

Chen stood outside Weilin's apartment building in Yangpu—six floors of crumbling concrete and laundry hanging from windows like surrender flags, so different from his penthouse it might as well be another planet—pressing her buzzer for the third time with no answer and realizing with creeping dread that transformation means nothing if you're transformed alone, that he'd spent forty-five minutes in Shanghai traffic rehearsing what he'd say ("I forgive you, I forgive myself, I want to try") only to arrive at an empty building because she was out living her life and he'd spent six years assuming she'd be waiting, hoping, pinning her

existence to his forgiveness like that's all she needed to be whole.

Monday afternoon. 4:17 PM. Thirty minutes after therapy. Racing across Shanghai.

Chen's car → Weilin's apartment building → desperation. Her building old. Poor. Paint peeling. Nothing like his world. Buzzer broken. Taped over. He's been pressing useless button. Neighborhood working-class. Real. People staring at his Mercedes. His reflection in building's dirty glass door. Expensive suit in poverty zone. Out of place.

No answer. Just static from broken buzzer. Street sounds—vendors, children, life happening without him. His breathing anxious. Rapid. Panic edge. His phone ringing—Lin Rui calling back.

Buzzer button sticky. Broken. Mechanical failure matching his desperation. Phone vibrating in hand. Lifeline. Car keys gripped too tight. Metal cutting into palm. Sweat despite November cold. Fear-sweat.

Street food—fried dough, cooking oil, poverty smells rich. Exhaust—buses, scooters, Shanghai pollution. Nothing of her. No jasmine. No trace. She's not here.

CHEN'S POV:

Answer Lin Rui's call. Putting phone to ear. Still staring at building.

"她在哪里？" Where is she?

No greeting. No preamble. Just: where is she?

Lin Rui, voice careful, like approaching wounded animal:

"你去了她的公寓？" You went to her apartment?

"她不在这里。她的电话不接。林瑞，她在哪里？"

She's not here. Her phone doesn't answer. Lin Rui, where is

she?

Silence. He's deciding something. Weighing loyalties.

"老板，也许给她空间——"

Boss, maybe give her space—

"我不想控制她。我想告诉她真相。我去了治疗。我.....我明白了一些事情。求你了。"

I don't want to control her. I want to tell her the truth. I went to therapy. I... I understand some things. Please.

The "please." Foreign word in my vocabulary. Lin Rui notices.

"你去了治疗？今天？" You went to therapy? Today?

"是的。紧急会议。我.....我弄明白了。我需要告诉她。"

Yes. Emergency session. I... I figured something out. I need to tell her.

Another pause. Can hear him thinking. Then decision.

"尝试流动移民庇护所。在杨浦区。她每周六都在那里，但她也可能在那里。"

Try the migrant workers' shelter. In Yangpu District. She's there every Saturday, but she might be there today too.

The shelter. Where his mother volunteers. Where Weilin has been going for months. Of course.

"地址？" Address?

"我发送给你。老板？" I'm sending it to you. Boss?

"是？"

"别搞砸了。" Don't fuck this up.

Hang up. Address incoming. GPS loading. Back in car.

Twenty minutes away. Twenty minutes to figure out what to say. Twenty minutes to become someone worth her time.

WEILIN'S POV:

4:23 PM. SAME AFTERNOON.

流动工人庇护所—MIGRANT WORKERS' SHELTER.

I sit on floor. Linoleum. Clean but worn. Surrounded by six children ages 5-9.

小明, seven years old, missing front tooth, clutching math homework:

"微琳姐姐, 这个不对吗? 七加五等于....."

Sister Weilin, this is wrong? Seven plus five equals...

Looking at his work. Twelve written. Circled correct.

"不, 看! 你做对了! 七加五是十二。你很聪明! "

No, look! You got it right! Seven plus five is twelve. You're so smart!

His face lighting up. Proud. Believing in himself because I believe in him.

This. This is what matters.

Not glass offices. Not proximity to Chen. This.

小美, six years old, tugging my sleeve:

"姐姐, 你今天为什么在这里? 通常你是星期六。"

Sister, why are you here today? Usually you're Saturday.

Good question. Why am I here on Monday afternoon?

"因为我今天有自由。我想来看望你们。"

Because I had freedom today. I wanted to come see you all.

Freedom. That's what I have.

I quit my job. Left Chen. And instead of going home to cry, I came here. Because this is where I'm happy.

Chen's mother appears with snacks—apples sliced, cookies, juice boxes.

"孩子们, 休息时间。吃点东西。"

Children, break time. Eat something.

The children scatter. Grabbing snacks. Energy shift.

Mrs. Chen sits beside me. Slow descent. Her knees not what they used to be.

"你今天在这里。我没想到会看到你直到星期六。"

You're here today. I didn't expect to see you until Saturday.

"我.....我今天不需要在办公室。"

I... I didn't need to be at the office today.

She looks at me. Knowing look. Mother's intuition.

"你辞职了。" You quit.

Not a question.

"我辞职了。" I quit.

"因为我儿子。" Because of my son.

"因为我。因为我需要。"

Because of me. Because I needed to.

Important distinction. She hears it.

Nodding. Approving. "好。你应该。"

Good. You should have.

We sit. Watching children eat. Comfortable silence.

"他很像他的父亲，你知道。我的丈夫。当他年轻的时候。"

He's so much like his father, you know. My husband. When he was young.

"墨轩？"

"是的。我丈夫也.....他也不得不学习他够了。没有大学学位。没有钱。只有爱和梦想。"

Yes. My husband too... he also had to learn he was enough.

No college degree. No money. Just love and dreams.

She smiles. Distant. Remembering.

"我的家人不赞成。他们想要我嫁给一个医生。一个律师。不是一个工厂工人。"

My family disapproved. They wanted me to marry a doctor. A lawyer. Not a factory worker.

Surprised. "我不知道。" I didn't know.

"我们从不谈论它。但是是的。我家人威胁要断绝我。说我浪费了"

我的生活。"

We never talk about it. But yes. My family threatened to disown me. Said I was wasting my life.

Look at her. This elegant woman. Simple clothes. Worn hands. Choosing love.

"你留下了。" You stayed.

"我留下了。因为他够了。我们在贫困中建立了生活。但我们快乐。"

I stayed. Because he was enough. We built a life in poverty. But we were happy.

Pause. Letting that land.

"墨轩看到了一切。贫困。挣扎。他发誓他会不同。他会成功。他会.....他会证明我们值得。"

Moxuan saw it all. The poverty. The struggle. He swore he'd be different. He'd succeed. He'd... he'd prove we were worthy. Her voice sad. Proud. Complicated.

"他成功了。但他忘记了课程。不是成功使你值得。是爱。是你如何对待人们。"

He succeeded. But he forgot the lesson. It's not success that makes you worthy. It's love. It's how you treat people.

"我不认为他忘记了。我认为他.....他害怕记住。"

I don't think he forgot. I think he... he was afraid to remember. Mrs. Chen looks at me directly.

"你爱他。仍然。" You love him. Still.

"是的。" Yes.

No point lying. Not to his mother. Not to myself.

"但你离开了。" But you left.

"因为爱不够。不是没有尊重。不是当它伤害更多于治愈。"

Because love isn't enough. Not without respect. Not when it hurts more than it heals.

She nods. Understanding. Lived experience.

"他会明白的。最终。或者他不会。无论哪种方式，你做对了。"
He'll understand. Eventually. Or he won't. Either way, you did right.

Look at the children. 小明 showing 小美 his math. Both laughing.

"你说我在这里做得好。无论他是否原谅我。无论他是否看到我改变了。"

You said I'm doing good work here. Whether he forgives me or not. Whether he sees I've changed.

"我是对的。" I was right.

"我意识到一些事情。今天。当我辞职时。"

I realized something. Today. When I quit.

She waits. Patient. Present.

"我没有为他做这个。这个志愿服务。这个改变。我想我是。我想我是在证明我值得被原谅。"

I wasn't doing this for him. This volunteering. This changing. I thought I was. I thought I was proving I deserve to be forgiven.

Pause. Clarity arriving.

"但我是为我做的。因为它让我感觉有目的。因为这些孩子.....他们不关心我曾经有钱。他们不关心我犯了错误。他们只是.....他们只是需要帮助，我可以提供。"

But I was doing it for me. Because it makes me feel purposeful. Because these children... they don't care that I used to have money. They don't care that I made mistakes. They just... they just need help and I can give it.

Tears. Not sad tears. Clarity tears.

"这是我第一次.....我第一次感到够了。不是因为别人说我够了。因为我知道我够了。"

This is the first time... the first time I felt enough. Not because someone else said I was enough. Because I know I'm enough.

Mrs. Chen's hand on my shoulder. Warm. Maternal.

"那你已经找到了它。你自己。"

Then you've found it. Yourself.

"我想我有。" I think I have.

小明 runs back. Homework done.

"姐姐！你看！我完成了所有！"

Sister! Look! I finished everything!

Wiping tears. Smiling—genuine smile.

"让我看看！哇，小明，你真棒！"

Let me see! Wow, Xiao Ming, you're amazing!

His pride uncomplicated. Pure. Reflected in my joy.

This. This is who I am.

Not Chen's ex-wife. Not the privileged girl who made mistakes.

This. Woman who helps children with homework. Woman who volunteers. Woman who knows she's enough.

CHEN'S POV:

OUTSIDE THE SHELTER.

Arrive. Shelter building. Community center. Poor neighborhood. My Mercedes out of place again.

Park across street. Engine off. Sitting.

She's in there. Lin Rui confirmed.

Now what? Walk in? Interrupt her volunteering to declare my feelings? That's Marcus Chen move—me me me.

No. Wait. See. Understand what I'm walking into.

Get out of car. Cross street. Approach building.

Windows large. Community center design. Can see inside.

See her.

THE VISION.

Weilin sitting on floor. Surrounded by children. Laughing. She's laughing. Genuinely laughing. Not performing. Not professional. Just... happy.

A little boy showing her something. Homework? She's praising him. He's beaming.

My mother sitting beside her. Both of them at ease. Natural. Other children clustered around. Drawn to her. She's magnetic here.

She's in her element. Comfortable. Purposeful. Alive.

Watch. Frozen outside window. Can't move. Can't interrupt this.

She doesn't see me. Too focused on children. Too present in moment. Too happy to notice man watching through window. The realization hitting like physical force:

She doesn't need me.

Not: she doesn't need me (angry, hurt).

But: she doesn't need me (awed, respectful, true).

She's whole. Without me. Without my forgiveness. Without my permission.

She found herself.

Another child tugs her sleeve. She turns. Gives full attention. Like that child is most important person in world.

That's who she is. Present. Caring. Enough.

My chest tight. Not pain. Something else—pride? Love? Grief for time wasted?

Six years. Six years I spent thinking she needed to earn her way back. Thinking she needed to prove she changed.

Thinking she needed my approval to be whole.

And she doesn't. She never did. She just needed to find herself.

And she did. Without me.

Still standing outside. Window becoming mirror. Seeing myself.

Marcus Chen—CEO, suit, Mercedes, success.

Versus:

Weilin—volunteer, floor-sitting, children-loving, purpose.

Which of us found what we were looking for?

My phone buzzes. Dr. Song.

Answer. Stepping away from window. Privacy.

"喂？"

"你找到她了吗？" Did you find her?

"是的。" Yes.

"你告诉她了吗？" Did you tell her?

"没有。我.....我在看她。通过窗户。她和孩子们在一起。她在笑。"

No. I'm... I'm watching her. Through a window. She's with children. She's laughing.

Pause. Dr. Song processing.

"她看起来快乐吗？" Does she look happy?

"是的。真正快乐。她不需要我。"

Yes. Genuinely happy. She doesn't need me.

Say it out loud. Testing truth.

"那让你感觉如何？" How does that make you feel?

The question expected. Still difficult.

"恐惧。如果她不需要我，为什么她会想要我？"

Scared. If she doesn't need me, why would she want me?

"那就是问题，墨轩。" That's the question, Moxuan.

Wait. She's leading somewhere.

"你想要被需要还是被想要？需要来自匮乏。想要来自选择。"

Do you want to be needed or wanted? Need comes from lack. Want comes from choice.

The distinction. Clear. Profound.

"她不需要我。但她可能.....她可能想要我？"

She doesn't need me. But she might... she might want me?

"如果你给她理由。如果你成为值得想要的人。不是因为你可以帮助她。因为你可以和她一起建造一些东西。"

If you give her a reason. If you become someone worth wanting. Not because you can save her. Because you can build something with her.

Look back at window. Weilin still there. Still laughing. Still whole.

"她已经整个了。" She's already whole.

"那你明白了。那就是为什么她值得。"

Then you understand. That's why she's worth it.

Hang up. Dr. Song's work done. Rest is mine.

Stand outside shelter. Watching. Deciding. Understanding.

She doesn't need me to be whole. She's already whole.

And that's exactly why I want her.

Not because she's broken and I can fix her. Not because she's incomplete and I can complete her.

Because she's whole and strong and purposeful. And I want to be with someone like that.

Someone who chose themselves. So maybe she'll choose me. Not from need. From want.

Walk toward entrance. Slow. Deliberate. Giving myself time.

What do I say?

"I'm sorry"? No—Dr. Song said no apology, just truth.

"I forgive you"? No—she doesn't need my forgiveness to be

whole.

"I want you"? Yes. But more.

"I see you."

"I see who you became."

"I see you're whole without me."

"And I want to be with you anyway."

"Not to fix you."

"To build with you."

Hand on door. Shelter entrance. Moment before everything changes.

Pause. Last second doubt.

What if she says no? What if she's done? What if watching me be cruel was enough? What if she wants her wholeness without me in it?

Dr. Song's voice in memory: "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?"

I want to be happy. With her. If she'll have me.

Push door. Opens. Bell rings. Heads turn.

Weilin looks up from floor. Sees me in doorway.

Her face—shock, confusion, guarded.

Children staring. Stranger in nice suit.

My mother standing. Protective of Weilin? Yes.

I stand in doorway. Expensive suit in community center. Out of place but present.

Weilin stands slowly. Leaving children.

"墨轩？你在这里做什么？"

Moxuan? What are you doing here?

She called me 墨轩. Not Chen. Not Mr. Chen. 墨轩.

Voice steady. Clear. Honest.

"我来看你。我需要告诉你一些事情。"

I came to see you. I need to tell you something.
Weilin glances at children. At my mother. At audience.
"现在？ 这里？ " Now? Here?
"如果你允许。或者我可以等。 "
If you'll allow it. Or I can wait.
The offer. Her choice. Her timing. Her terms.
She looks at my mother. Asking permission? Solidarity?
My mother nods. "去吧。 孩子们会没事的。 "
Go. The children will be fine.
Weilin to children: "我马上回来。 和陈奶奶一起练习你的写作。 "
I'll be right back. Practice your writing with Grandma Chen.
Walks toward me. To door. Steps outside. Creating privacy.
We stand outside shelter. Shanghai street. November cold.
Everything hanging.
"你想告诉我什么？ "
What did you want to tell me?

END CHAPTER 29

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CHAPTER 30: THE PURPOSE (WEILIN'S INDEPENDENCE)

Weilin was teaching eight-year-old 小芳 the English word for "dream"—"D-R-E-A-M, it sounds like this: dreem, say it with me"—when she caught movement in her peripheral vision, someone outside the window watching, and when she looked up expecting a parent picking up their child she saw Chen Moxuan standing on the sidewalk in his thousand-dollar suit staring at her through glass with an expression she couldn't name (shock? wonder? grief?) and the word

"dream" caught in her throat because here he was, the man she'd quit to escape, the man she'd loved enough to destroy herself for, watching her teach English to migrant children in a community center that probably cost less to build than his car, and she realized: he's seeing who I am now, really am, not performing for him but being myself, and I don't know if that terrifies me or frees me.

Monday afternoon. 4:47 PM. Moments before Chen entered shelter.

Inside shelter—children's learning area. Weilin in her element. The children clustered around her. Eager faces. Trust in their eyes. Her clothes simple—jeans, old sweater, no designer labels, real. The shelter worn but clean. Colorful posters. Love evident in curation. Chen through window. Frozen. Watching. Out of place in expensive suit. His face unreadable. Intense. Seeing her.

Children's voices practicing English. Giggling at pronunciations. Alive. Street sounds muffled through window. Shanghai evening starting. Her heartbeat sudden acceleration when she sees him. Panic edge. Silence when their eyes meet. Everything stopping.

Flashcard in her hand. "DREAM" written in marker.

Homemade. 小芳's hand tugging her sleeve. Trying to get attention back. Floor hard beneath her. Grounding. Real. Her chest tight. Seeing him. Old wounds and new strength colliding.

Children smell—soap and sweat, innocence. Shelter smell—cooking in background, home-like. Nothing expensive. No perfume today. No armor. Just her. Through window—can't smell him but remembers. Bergamot. Cedar. Dangerous

nostalgia.

WEILIN'S POV:

小芳 tugs my sleeve. Oblivious to drama.

"姐姐？梦的英语是什么？你说了一半。"

Sister? What's the English for dream? You said it halfway.
My eyes still locked on Chen's through window. Can't look away.

Voice automatic. Teacher-mode despite crisis.

"Dream. D-R-E-A-M. 梦想。"

Dream. D-R-E-A-M. Mengxiang.

"Dream。我有梦想！"

Dream. I have dream!

Finally tear eyes away from Chen. Look at 小芳. Smile despite everything.

"你有什么梦想？"

What is your dream?

"我想成为老师。像你！"

I want to be teacher. Like you!

My heart breaking and healing simultaneously.

Like me. She wants to be like me.

Not like the privileged girl I was. Not like Chen's ex-wife. Like this. This woman teaching English in a shelter.

"那是一个美丽的梦想。你会成为一个很棒的老师。"

That's a beautiful dream. You'll be a wonderful teacher.

Look back at window. Chen still there. Hasn't moved.

Watching.

He sees this. Sees me being told I'm worth emulating. Sees me being someone's dream.

Good. Let him see. This is who I am.

Try to focus on children. On lesson. On purpose that brought

me here.

"好的，谁能告诉我'hope'的中文？"

Okay, who can tell me the Chinese for 'hope'?

小明's hand shoots up. "希望！"

"对！很好！现在英语：Hope. H-O-P-E. 再说一次。"

Right! Very good! Now English: Hope. H-O-P-E. Say it again.

Children chorus: "Hope! Hope! Hope!"

Their voices filling space. Joy in learning. Purpose in teaching.

This is what matters. Not the man watching through window.

These children. This work. This purpose.

Mrs. Chen appears beside me. Kneeling. Voice low.

"他在外面。" He's outside.

"我知道。" I know.

"你想让我让他离开吗？"

Do you want me to make him leave?

The offer protective. Maternal. Fierce.

"不。让他看。" No. Let him watch.

Look at her directly. Sure.

"让他看到我是谁。如果那还不够，那我无能为力。"

Let him see who I am. If that's not enough, then there's nothing I can do.

Mrs. Chen, small smile, proud.

"你变得强大了。" You've become strong.

"我不得不。" I had to.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES.

I teach. He watches. Children learn. Time strange and elastic.

Lessons:

- English words: dream, hope, future, strong, brave
- Numbers: counting, adding, building confidence

• Writing: their names in English letters, pride in new skill
Throughout, aware of him watching. But not performing. Just
—being.

小美 struggling with letter "R." Getting frustrated.

"姐姐，这太难了！我做不到！"

Sister, this is too hard! I can't do it!

Kneel beside her. Gentle.

"你能。看。一起。"

You can. Look. Together.

Guide her hand through the letter. Patient. Present.

"看？你做到了。你比你想象的更强大。"

See? You did it. You're stronger than you think.

小美 beaming. Trying again. Succeeding.

This. This is who I am. Patient. Present. Believing in people
even when they don't believe in themselves.

Glance at window. Chen still there. Has he been there entire
time? Yes.

His face different now. Softer. Seeing something.

Does he understand? Does he see? This is not the woman he
married. This is better.

5:30 PM. CLASS ENDS.

Children packing up. Parents arriving. Hugs goodbye.

小芳: "姐姐，你星期六会来吗？"

Sister, will you come Saturday?

"是的。我总是来星期六。"

Yes. I always come Saturday.

"即使你没有工作？"

Even if you don't have job?

The question innocent. Cutting. She heard somehow?

"特别是因为我没有工作。现在我有更多时间给你们。"

Especially because I don't have job. Now I have more time for you all.

She hugs me. Tight. Trusting. Unconditional.

This. Worth more than any salary.

Mrs. Chen after last child leaves:

"他还在外面。" He's still outside.

Look through window. Yes. Still there. Patient or stubborn?

"我应该和他谈谈。" I should talk to him.

"你想要我和你一起来吗？"

Do you want me to come with you?

Tempting. Safety in witness. But no.

"不。这个.....这个是我们之间的。"

No. This... this is between us.

She nods. Understanding. Squeezes my hand.

"你够了。记住那个。"

You're enough. Remember that.

"我知道。" I know.

And I do. For the first time, I actually do.

OUTSIDE.

Step outside. November cold. Darkness falling. Chen still there.

He sees me. Turns. Full attention. Intense.

We stand five feet apart. Entire relationship between us.

Long silence. Who speaks first? What is there to say?

Chen finally: "你在这里做什么？"

What are you doing here?

"志愿服务。教孩子们英语。"

Volunteering. Teaching children English.

"我的意思是.....为什么今天？你辞职了。我以为你会....."

I mean... why today? You quit. I thought you'd...

"什么？回家哭？等你决定原谅我？"

What? Go home and cry? Wait for you to decide to forgive me?

Not bitter. Just honest. Factual.

"我来这里是因为这是我快乐的地方。因为这些孩子不关心我犯的
错误或我曾经是谁。他们只是需要帮助，我可以提供。"

I came here because this is where I'm happy. Because these
children don't care about mistakes I made or who I used to
be. They just need help and I can give it.

Chen steps closer. But not too close. Respecting space.

"你在寻找我。" You were looking for me.

The statement. From his perspective. True.

"是的。"

"你找到我了。" You found me.

Acknowledgment. Simple. Loaded.

Silence. Both processing. What now?

"你不同了。" You're different.

"我知道。" I know.

Meet his eyes. Direct. Unashamed.

"我喜欢我现在是谁。"

I like who I am now.

The declaration. Not defensive. Just true.

Chen, voice soft, almost whisper:

"我也喜欢。" So do I.

His words hanging in cold air. Unexpected.

"那不会改变任何事情。"

That doesn't change anything.

Say it gentle but firm. Truth without cruelty.

"你喜欢我现在是谁不能撤销你在医院说的话。或者你雇用我的原因。
或者.....或者我们之间所

His words hanging in cold air. Unexpected.

"那不会改变任何事情。"

That doesn't change anything.

Say it gentle but firm. Truth without cruelty.

"你喜欢我现在是谁不能撤销你在医院说的话。或者你雇用我的原因。或者.....或者我们之间所有的伤害。"

You liking who I am now doesn't undo what you said at the hospital. Or why you hired me. Or... or all the hurt between us.

Chen nods. Accepting.

"我知道。" I know.

Pause. He's not arguing. Not negotiating. Just—present.

"但我需要你知道。我看到了你。真正的你。不是我记忆中的女孩。不是我想惩罚的女人。你。"

But I needed you to know. I saw you. Really you. Not the girl from my memory. Not the woman I wanted to punish. You.

His voice raw. Honest. No armor.

"和那些孩子在一起。教学。耐心。存在。那.....那很美。"

With those children. Teaching. Patient. Present. That... that was beautiful.

My throat tight. Wasn't expecting this.

"谢谢。" Thank you.

What else can I say? Accept compliment. Don't minimize.

Don't perform.

"你不需要我。" You don't need me.

The observation. True. Wonder in his voice.

"不。我不需要。" No. I don't.

Stand taller. Owning it. Proud of it.

"我曾经需要。当我二十三岁和害怕时。当我相信我父亲说我需要某种生活才能有价值时。"

I used to. When I was twenty-three and scared. When I believed my father that I needed a certain kind of life to have value.

Pause. Finding words.

"但我不再相信了。我在这个狗屎公寓里有价值。在这个志愿者庇护所。和这些孩子在一起。我不需要你或任何人告诉我我够了。"

But I don't believe that anymore. I have value in my shitty apartment. At this volunteer shelter. With these children. I don't need you or anyone to tell me I'm enough.

Chen, something like pain and pride mixed on his face:

"我知道。那就是为什么....."

I know. That's why...

Stops. Struggling with words.

"为什么什么？" Why what?

"那就是为什么我想要你。不是因为你需要我。因为你不需要。"

That's why I want you. Not because you need me. Because you don't.

The words landing different than expected. Not possessive. Something else.

"我不明白。" I don't understand.

Chen steps closer. Still respecting space.

"六年前，你需要我，你离开了。因为需要不够。需要脆弱。"

Six years ago, you needed me and you left. Because need isn't enough. Need is fragile.

His eyes intense. Clear. Present.

"但想要。选择。那不同。你不需要我。但也许你.....也许你想要我？"

But want. Choice. That's different. You don't need me. But maybe you... maybe you want me?

The question vulnerable. Offering. Not demanding.

"我不知道。" I don't know.

Honest. Painfully. Refreshingly honest.

"我爱你。我想我总是会。但爱和想要不同。"

I love you. I think I always will. But love and want are different.

"告诉我区别。" Tell me the difference.

"爱是.....爱是我在心里带着的。即使我们分开。即使我们伤害彼此。"

Love is... love is what I carry in my heart. Even when we're apart. Even when we hurt each other.

Pause. Finding it.

"想要是选择每天醒来在你身边。选择建造一些东西在一起。那需要.....那需要的不仅仅是爱。"

Want is choosing to wake up next to you every day. Choosing to build something together. That requires... that requires more than love.

"需要什么?" Requires what?

"信任。尊重。平等。"

Trust. Respect. Equality.

The list. Clear. Non-negotiable.

"我不能再当你的员工。在你之下。被你支付。那.....那不是平等。"

I can't be your employee anymore. Below you. Paid by you. That... that's not equality.

Chen pulls something from pocket—my resignation letter.

"我不会签署你的辞职。"

I'm not signing your resignation.

My stomach drops. Here we go. Control move.

"那不是你的选择。我辞职了。生效立即——"

That's not your choice. I quit. Effective immediately—

Chen holds up hand. Gentle stop gesture.

"让我说完。" Let me finish.

Pause. Okay. Listening. Arms crossed.

"我不会签署它不是因为我想折磨你。不是因为我想控制你。"

I'm not signing it not because I want to torture you. Not because I want to control you.

Breathe. Waiting for other shoe.

"因为你在这份工作上很出色，新加坡需要你。客户爱你。你的工作无可挑剔。"

Because you're brilliant at this job and Singapore needs you. Clients love you. Your work is impeccable.

Professional recognition. Unexpected. Genuine.

"那.....那不重要。我不能为你工作。不是在你之后——"

That... that doesn't matter. I can't work for you. Not after you—

"那和我一起工作。" Then work with me.

The words. Simple. Revolutionary.

"什么？" What?

"作为平等的人。不是我的员工。我的.....合作伙伴。"

As equals. Not my employee. My... partner.

Stare at him. Processing. Is this real?

"合作伙伴。" Partner.

"是的。在晨曦。在新加坡项目上。平等股权，平等决策权，平等一切。"

Yes. At Chénxī. On Singapore project. Equal equity, equal decision-making power, equal everything.

He's pulling out phone. Showing something—documents?

"我让法律部起草了。合伙协议。新加坡分部。你，我，林瑞。三个平等的合作伙伴。"

I had Legal draft it. Partnership agreement. Singapore division. You, me, Lin Rui. Three equal partners.

Shows me phone screen. Actual legal document. Dated

today.

"你什么时候....." When did you...

"今天。在治疗之后。在我来找你之前。"

Today. After therapy. Before I came looking for you.

Therapy. He went to therapy.

"你去了治疗？" You went to therapy?

"紧急会议。和宋医生。我.....我明白了一些事情。"

Emergency session. With Dr. Song. I... I understood some things.

His voice vulnerable. Open.

"我明白我一直想被需要。因为那感觉像权力。像控制。但那不是爱。"

I understood I've been wanting to be needed. Because that felt like power. Like control. But that's not love.

Pause. Gathering courage.

"爱是.....爱是想和一个不需要你的人在一起。因为他们选择你。"

Love is... love is wanting to be with someone who doesn't need you. Because they choose you.

My heart. Something shifting. Crack of light in armor.

"墨轩——"

"我不是要求你和我约会。或原谅我。或.....或任何个人的。"

I'm not asking you to date me. Or forgive me. Or... or anything personal.

Clear. Setting boundaries. Healthy boundaries.

"我要求你考虑合作伙伴关系。专业的。因为你应得的。因为你工作出色。因为新加坡需要你。"

I'm asking you to consider the partnership. Professional. Because you deserve it. Because you do excellent work. Because Singapore needs you.

Pause. Then softer.

"如果，有一天，你想要更多.....那我们可以谈论。作为平等的人。不是老板和员工。"

If, someday, you want more... then we can talk. As equals. Not boss and employee.

Hold the phone. Partnership agreement. Real. Detailed. Genuine offer.

"我需要思考。" I need to think.

"当然。没有压力。" Of course. No pressure.

But there's pressure. Just different kind. Pressure of possibility.

Stand in cold. Partnership agreement on phone screen between us. Everything uncertain.

"为什么？为什么现在提供这个？"

Why? Why offer this now?

"因为我在窗户外看着你。和那些孩子。我看到你快乐。真正快乐。不是表演，不是试图证明任何事情。只是.....你。"

Because I watched you through that window. With those children. I saw you happy. Genuinely happy. Not performing, not trying to prove anything. Just... you.

His eyes clear. Honest. No games.

"我意识到我一直试图让你成为我记得的女孩。或者我想惩罚的女人。但你都不是。"

I realized I was trying to make you the girl I remembered. Or the woman I wanted to punish. But you're neither.

Pause. Voice dropping. Intimate.

"你是和八岁孩子坐在地板上教他们梦想的人。你是小芳想成为的人。你.....你是我想与之建造一些东西的人。"

You're the person who sits on the floor with eight-year-olds teaching them to dream. You're the person Xiao Fang wants to become. You're... you're someone I want to build

something with.

My throat tight. Words perfect and terrifying.

"建造什么？" Build what?

"我不知道。也许只是一个好公司。也许更多。但作为平等的人。作为合作伙伴。"

I don't know. Maybe just a good company. Maybe more. But as equals. As partners.

The offer hanging. Real. Possible.

"我.....我需要时间。" I... I need time.

"拿你需要的时间。" Take what you need.

He's turning to leave. Respecting space. Then pauses.

"微琳？"

Turn. Look at him.

"我原谅你。为了离开。为了选择你的父亲。为了六年前的一切。"

I forgive you. For leaving. For choosing your father. For everything six years ago.

The absolution I've wanted for six years. Arriving when I no longer need it.

"但更重要的是，我原谅我自己。为了不够。为了让你走。为了成为Marcus Chen而忘记墨轩。"

But more importantly, I forgive myself. For not being enough. For letting you go. For becoming Marcus Chen and forgetting Moxuan.

Tears in his eyes. Mine too.

"我想要变成两者。梦想家和建设者。墨轩和Marcus。我认为.....我认为你已经是两者。那个女孩和这个女人。"

I want to become both. The dreamer and the builder. Moxuan and Marcus. I think... I think you're already both. That girl and this woman.

Walks away. Toward his car. Leaving me with phone. With

partnership agreement. With possibility.

Call after him: "墨轩！"

He stops. Turns. Hopeful.

"我会考虑。合作伙伴关系。我会.....我会思考。"

I'll consider it. The partnership. I'll... I'll think.

His smile small. Genuine. Not expecting more.

"那是我能要求的一切。"

That's all I can ask.

Watch him drive away. Mercedes. Expensive. But the man inside—changed. Maybe. Really changed.

My phone buzzes. Email notification—partnership agreement. Sent formally. With note:

无论你决定什么，你够了。你一直够。—M

Whatever you decide, you're enough. You've always been enough. —M

Stand outside shelter. November cold. Partnership agreement on screen. Everything possible.

Mrs. Chen appears in doorway.

"你还好吗？" Are you okay?

"我不知道。他.....他提供我合作伙伴关系。平等的。在新加坡项目上。"

I don't know. He... he offered me a partnership. Equal. On Singapore project.

"你想要什么？" What do you want?

The question. Dr. Song asked Chen. Now asked to me.

"我不知道。" I don't know.

Look at shelter. Children inside. My purpose. My joy.

"我想要这个。这个工作。这些孩子。这个目的。"

I want this. This work. These children. This purpose.

"合作伙伴关系阻止那个吗？"

Does partnership stop that?

Pause. Does it? Or does it enable it?

"不。实际上.....它给我资源做更多。如果我是合作伙伴，我可以资助这个庇护所。扩大。雇用真正的老师。"

No. Actually... it gives me resources to do more. If I'm a partner, I could fund this shelter. Expand. Hire real teachers. The realization. Partnership isn't selling out. It's scaling up.

"那这听起来像是好提议。"

Then it sounds like a good offer.

"但和他一起工作....."

But working with him...

"会很难。会很复杂。但也许.....也许那是你们都需要的。学习如何作为平等的人在一起。"

Will be hard. Will be complicated. But maybe... maybe that's what you both need. To learn how to be together as equals. Look at phone. Partnership agreement. Legal. Real. Choice.

"我需要睡在上面。" I need to sleep on it.

"那是明智的。"

That's wise.

Mrs. Chen squeezes my shoulder.

"但微琳？无论你决定什么，你已经赢了。因为你找到了你自己。那比任何合作伙伴关系更重要。"

But Weilin? Whatever you decide, you've already won.

Because you found yourself. That's more important than any partnership.

"我知道。" I know.

And I do. Finally. Completely. I know.

LATER THAT NIGHT. MY APARTMENT.

Sit on IKEA bed. Partnership agreement open on laptop.

Reading. Really reading.

晨曦科技新加坡分部合伙协议

Chénxī Technologies Singapore Division Partnership Agreement

合作伙伴：

陈墨轩（33.3%股权）

沈微琳（33.3%股权）

林瑞（33.3%股权）

Partners:

Chen Moxuan (33.3% equity)

Shen Weilin (33.3% equity)

Lin Rui (33.3% equity)

Equal. Actually equal. Not just words.

Details:

- Equal decision-making power
- Equal salary (substantial, more than I've ever made)
- Equal title: Managing Partner
- Independent authority over Singapore operations
- Profit sharing: equal thirds
- No hierarchy: decisions by majority vote

It's real. It's generous. It's...

My phone rings. Lin Rui.

Answer: "你知道了？"

You know?

"老板——墨轩——他今天打电话给我。提供同样的合作伙伴关系。"

Boss—Moxuan—he called me today. Offered same partnership.

Lin Rui's voice careful.

"你说了什么？" What did you say?

"我说的是。新加坡项目需要领导力。我们三个.....我们可以建造一

些特别的东西。"

I said yes. Singapore project needs leadership. The three of us... we could build something special.

Pause.

"如果你加入。"

If you join.

The weight of that. Lin Rui already committed. Chen offering. Just me left to decide.

"我不知道如果我能和他一起工作。在所有之后。"

I don't know if I can work with him. After everything.

"你不会为他工作。你会和他一起工作。区别很重要。"

You wouldn't work for him. You'd work with him. The distinction matters.

Lin Rui's voice grows intense.

"微琳，我看到了你的工作。在新加坡。和客户在一起。你很出色。你应得这个。不是因为你曾经嫁给他。因为你该死的好。"

Weilin, I've seen your work. In Singapore. With clients. You're brilliant. You deserve this. Not because you were married to him. Because you're damn good.

The validation. From colleague. Not ex-husband. Not charity.

"而且老实说？他也需要你。他建造帝国但忘记了人性。你.....你记得。"

And honestly? He needs you too. He builds empires but forgets humanity. You... you remember.

After we hang up, sit with laptop. Agreement still open.

Three equal partners. Building something together. Not hierarchy. Not control. Collaboration.

What do I want?

Open another window. Search shelter funding. How much would it cost to expand? To hire real teachers? To create

programs?

Numbers appear. Large numbers. More than I have. More than I could earn in years as regular employee.

But as partner? With profit sharing? With equity?

I could fund this. And more. Could create real change.

Close laptop. Look around apartment. Small. Poor. Mine.

But partnership doesn't mean losing this. Means choosing addition. Not replacement.

I can be both. Woman in IKEA apartment. And Managing Partner. Woman who teaches children. And woman who builds companies.

Just like he's learning to be both. Moxuan and Marcus.

Maybe that's the point. Not choosing one identity. Integrating both.

My phone buzzes. Text from Chen:

无压力。无期限。当你准备好了，让我知道。或者不要。选择是你的。—M

No pressure. No deadline. When you're ready, let me know. Or don't. Choice is yours. —M

The respect in that. Acknowledging my autonomy. Not pushing. Not manipulating. Just—offering.

Type response. Delete it. Type again. Delete again.

Finally:

我需要一个条件。—W

I need one condition. —W

His response immediate:

任何事情。—M

Anything. —M

我继续志愿服务。每周六，不可协商。庇护所是我的优先事项。

—W

I continue volunteering. Every Saturday, non-negotiable.

Shelter is my priority. —W

Wait. Three minutes. Five. Is it too much? Is he—

协议。事实上，晨曦将成为庇护所的企业赞助商。每年50万元。

你的志愿服务是我们公司价值观的一部分。—M

Agreed. In fact, Chénxī will become corporate sponsor of shelter. 500,000 yuan annually. Your volunteering is part of our company values. —M

Stare at phone. Half a million yuan. For shelter. Annually.

那太多了。—W

That's too much. —W

那是我们能负担得起的。而且这是正确的事情。所以？你会接受合作伙伴关系吗？—M

It's what we can afford. And it's the right thing. So? Will you accept the partnership? —W

Sit with question. Real question. Do I want this?

Professional success with personal history. Building something with man who hurt me. Who I hurt. Who we both became through pain.

Can we do this? As equals? As partners?

Don't know. But maybe that's okay. Maybe not knowing is the point. Maybe trying is enough.

Type slowly:

是的。我接受。但慢慢地。专业第一。我们学习作为合作伙伴。然后.....我们看看。—W

Yes. I accept. But slowly. Professional first. We learn to be partners. Then... we see. —W

His response:

慢慢地。我可以做慢慢地。谢谢，微琳。为了给我机会。—M

Slowly. I can do slowly. Thank you, Weilin. For giving me a

chance. —M

Not "giving us a chance." "Giving me a chance."

The humility in that. The recognition. He's earning this. Not entitled to it.

谢谢你为了看到我。—W

Thank you for seeing me. —W

我应该早就看到了。—M

I should have seen sooner. —M

Put phone down. Look around apartment. Tomorrow I become Managing Partner. Equal owner of Singapore division.

But tonight? Tonight I'm still just Weilin. In small apartment. With big dreams.

And maybe that's the best part. I'm not waiting for partnership to make me whole. I'm already whole. Partnership is just—addition. Not completion.

Open email. Draft message to shelter director:

亲爱的王主任，

我很高兴地通知您，晨曦科技已承诺成为年度企业赞助商，年度捐款50万元。此外，我想讨论扩展计划.....

Dear Director Wang,

I'm pleased to inform you that Chénxī Technologies has committed to annual corporate sponsorship with 500,000 yuan yearly donation. Additionally, I'd like to discuss expansion plans...

This. This is what partnership means. Resources to do more good. Platform to create change. Voice that matters.

Not selling out. Scaling up.

One more text to Chen:

周一。我们开始。作为合作伙伴。—W

Monday. We start. As partners. —W

周一。作为合作伙伴。作为平等的人。 —M

Monday. As partners. As equals. —M

Put phone away. Lie back on IKEA bed. Look at ceiling.

Made a choice. Don't know if it's right choice. But it's my choice.

And that's enough.

END CHAPTER 30

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CHAPTER 31: THE COLLABORATION (PROFESSIONAL RESPECT)

Weilin sat across the table from Chen at the Singapore celebration dinner—team of twelve between them, champagne flowing, everyone toasting their brilliant presentation, and when their eyes met over the rim of her glass she saw something that hadn't been there two weeks ago: respect, not resentment; peace, not punishment; and underneath it all, still there like bedrock, love—but different love, quieter love, love that had survived fire and emerged tempered instead of destroyed—and she realized that the past fourteen days of working together (professional, boundaried, him deferring to her expertise, her acknowledging his vision, both of them building something instead of destroying something) had done what six years of separation couldn't: shown them who they could be together when neither was trying to win.

Two weeks later. Singapore. Marina Bay Sands. Celebration dinner after successful presentation.

High-end restaurant. Team celebration. Chen and Weilin across table from each other.

Floor-to-ceiling windows. Singapore skyline glittering. Marina Bay below like liquid jewels. Table—twelve people. Success radiating. Team cohesion visible. Chen across table. Suit impeccable. But different somehow—looser, present, less armored. Their eyes meeting across distance. Conversation. Noise—finding each other.

Celebration sounds—laughter, toasts, clinking glasses, team joy. Lin Rui giving speech about "unprecedented partnership." Background music—jazz, sophisticated, muted. Her heartbeat steady. Calm. Not panicked when looking at him. Champagne glass cool. Elegant. Success tastes like bubbles and relief. Her dress professional but feminine. She chose for herself not for him. Napkin twisted in lap. Nervous habit despite calm exterior. Phone in purse. Partnership agreement signed three days ago. Making it real.

Restaurant smell—expensive food, wealth, achievement. His cologne across table. Faint. Bergamot and cedar. Memory and present mixing. Champagne crisp. Celebratory. Earned.

WEILIN'S POV:

Lin Rui stands. Glass raised. Speech mode.

"敬我们辉煌的团队！特别是微琳和墨轩，他们的合作使这个项目从好变成传奇！"

To our brilliant team! Especially Weilin and Moxuan, whose partnership turned this project from good to legendary!

Everyone cheers. Clinking glasses. Looking at us.

Chen raises glass to me. Across table. Small smile.

I raise mine back. Professional. Appropriate. But something in the eye contact—acknowledgment. Respect. More?

The team drunk enough to be bold.

Zhang Wei: "什么时候你们两个会承认你们是完美的一对？"

When are you two going to admit you're a perfect pair?

Awkward laughter. Some people know our history. Some don't. Tension spike.

Chen smooth. Diplomatic. "专业上，我们是一个很好的团队。那就是重要的。"

Professionally, we're a good team. That's what matters.

The boundary clear. Public. Protecting me from gossip.

"同意。这个项目的成功是关于整个团队。不仅仅是我们两个。"

Agreed. This project's success is about the whole team. Not just us two.

Redirect away from personal. Back to professional. Grateful for his lead.

Lin Rui reads room. Helps. "确切地！现在，谁想要甜点？"

Exactly! Now, who wants dessert?

Moment passes. Crisis averted. Back to celebration.

But our eyes meet again. Across table. Quick glance.

Understanding passing: thank you for not making this weird.

THE PAST TWO WEEKS.

Flash through my mind while dessert is ordered.

Day One after accepting partnership:

- Walked into office. Everyone staring.
- Lin Rui introduced me as "Partner, Singapore Division."
- Chen wasn't there. Gave me space to settle in.
- New office. Not on his floor. Equal floor. Equal view.
- Contract: report to Lin Rui, equal equity, equal decision-making.

Day Three—first meeting together:

- Conference room. Singapore client brief.
- Professional: "Ms. Shen, your thoughts on market entry?"
- Not "Weilin," not "微琳," not personal.
- I responded in kind: "Mr. Chen, I recommend phased approach."
- Entire team watching. Waiting for explosion.
- None came.
- Just work.

Day Seven—disagreement:

- Strategy session. We argued. I wanted aggressive timeline. He wanted cautious.
- Old Chen would have pulled rank.
- New Chen: "Lin Rui, you're tiebreaker. What do you think?"
- Lin Rui sided with me.
- Chen accepted it: "Okay. We go with Weilin's timeline."
- No ego.
- Just results.

Day Ten—late night:

- Office. 11 PM. Both working.
- He brought coffee to my office. Didn't enter. Just left it on desk.
- Note: "You were right about timeline. Client loves it. —M"
- Simple.
- Professional.
- Respectful.

Day Fourteen—presentation:

- Singapore partners. High stakes.
- We presented together. Tag-team. Seamless.
- He set up. I closed.

- I explained tech. He explained vision.
- Perfect balance.
- Client signed immediately.
- "You two are magic together," they said.

Magic. Professional magic. Maybe that's enough.

AFTER DINNER. 10:47 PM.

CHEN'S POV:

Team dispersing. Drunk. Happy. Heading to hotels or bars.

Lin Rui to me. Conspiratorial whisper. "和她谈谈。适当地。你们俩一直在互相跳舞两周。"

Talk to her. Properly. You two have been dancing around each other for two weeks.

"我们一直很专业——"

We've been professional—

"专业很好。但你也需要清理个人的事情。去。走走。谈谈。"

Professional is good. But you also need to clear personal air. Go. Walk. Talk.

Weilin stands. Gets purse. Preparing to leave.

Approach her. Casual. Trying for casual.

"你想沿着水边走走吗？谈论.....项目？"

Would you like to walk along the waterfront? Talk about... the project?

She sees through me. Small smile. Knowing.

"项目。当然。" The project. Sure.

Both know it's not about the project.

MARINA BAY WATERFRONT.

Walk side by side. Careful distance. November breeze.

Singapore warm even at night.

Silence. Thirty seconds. Minute. Comfortable silence—when did silence become comfortable?

"这不是关于项目的。"

This isn't about the project.

"我知道。" I know.

More silence. Finding words. Real words. Not professional script.

"过去两周.....它们很好。和你一起工作。真正一起工作，不是.....不是以前的样子。"

The past two weeks... they've been good. Working with you. Really working together, not... not how it was before.

"同意。你.....你不同。在会议中。你听。"

Agreed. You're... you're different. In meetings. You listen.

"我应该一直听。" I should have always listened.

Stop walking. Turn to face her. Marina Bay behind her. City lights reflecting in water.

"微琳，我很抱歉。为了医院。为了你带着花来而我把它扔在你脸上。为了六年的一切。"

Weilin, I'm sorry. For the hospital. For you coming with flowers and me throwing it in your face. For everything for six years.

Her eyes filling. Moonlight catching tears.

"我很抱歉雇用你只是为了惩罚你。支付你几乎不够的钱。让你挣扎。我.....我很残忍。"

I'm sorry I hired you just to punish you. Paid you barely enough. Made you struggle. I... I was cruel.

Voice shaking: "你是。你很残忍。"

You were. You were cruel.

Not denying. Accepting. Acknowledging.

"但我也理解为什么。我伤害了你。深深地。我离开时你什么都没有。我选择了我的父亲而不是你。"

But I also understand why. I hurt you. Deeply. I left you with

nothing. I chose my father over you.

Tears streaming now. Both of us.

"我也很抱歉。为了一切。为了婚礼。为了我的沉默。为了离婚。为了.....为了不够勇敢去战斗。"

I'm sorry too. For everything. For the wedding. For my silence. For the divorce. For... for not being brave enough to fight.

Step closer. One step. Closing distance slightly.

"我原谅你。" I forgive you.

The words I've said before. But different now—mean them now. Fully. Completely.

"为了离开。为了选择你的父亲。为了相信他的威胁。你很年轻，你很害怕。我原谅你。"

For leaving. For choosing your father. For believing his threats. You were young, you were scared. I forgive you.

Sobbing now. Full cry. "谢谢。谢谢。"

Thank you. Thank you.

She's breaking. Relief. Grief. Six years of carrying guilt releasing.

Let her cry. Not touching. Respecting space. But present. After minutes, she wipes eyes. Composes.

"你呢？你原谅你自己了吗？"

What about you? Did you forgive yourself?

The question hits deeper than expected.

"我.....我正在学习。治疗帮助。你.....看到你在庇护所帮助。"

I... I'm learning. Therapy helps. You... seeing you at the shelter helped.

"怎么帮助？" How helped?

"你找到了你自己。没有我。没有我的原谅。你只是.....你变成了你需要成为的人。那让我意识到我也可以。"

You found yourself. Without me. Without my forgiveness.
You just... you became who you needed to be. That made me realize I could too.

Her turn to step closer.

"你原谅你自己了吗？为了不够？"

Did you forgive yourself? For not being enough?

The core wound. She remembers. She listened.

"大部分。有些日子比其他日子更好。但是.....是的。我够了。我一直够。"

Mostly. Some days better than others. But... yes. I was enough. I always was.

Stand facing each other. Two feet apart. Six years apart.

Now closer than ever.

"你原谅我了。我原谅我自己了。但.....你原谅你自己了吗？不只是为了不够。为了你对我做的事情？"

You forgave me. I forgave myself. But... did you forgive yourself? Not just for not being enough. For what you did to me?

The harder question. The one I've been avoiding.

CHEN'S POV:

The question hanging. Honest. Hard.

"我.....我不知道。我为它道歉了。但原谅我自己？"

I... I don't know. I apologized for it. But forgive myself?

Look away. At water. At city. Anywhere but her eyes.

"我很残忍。我让你受苦。我知道你在挣扎，我.....我喜欢它。那让我感觉有权力。"

I was cruel. I made you suffer. I knew you were struggling and I... I enjoyed it. It made me feel powerful.

The confession ugly. True. Shameful.

"那不是爱。那是报复。那是.....那是虐待。"

That wasn't love. That was revenge. That was... that was abuse.

Say it. The word I've been avoiding. Therapist used it. I denied it. But it's true.

Quiet: "是的。那是。"

Yes. It was.

Not flinching. She's right. Agreeing. Holding me accountable. Turn back to her. Face her. Own it.

"你原谅我吗？" Do you forgive me?

Her face processing. Considering. Not automatic absolution—real consideration.

"为什么？" For what?

"为了惩罚你。为了让你为我的痛苦付出代价。为了.....为了虐待你。用金钱，用权力，用残忍。"

For punishing you. For making you pay for my pain. For... for abusing you. With money, with power, with cruelty.

The full accounting. Every sin listed. No minimizing.

Eyes closed. Breathing. Deciding.

Long silence. Thirty seconds. Minute. My heart pounding.

Opens eyes. "为什么你想要我的原谅？"

Why do you want my forgiveness?

Good question. Why?

"因为我不能向前走带着它。我的罪恶感。我的羞耻。为了成为那个人。"

Because I can't move forward carrying it. My guilt. My shame. For being that person.

Pause. Finding deeper truth.

"因为我想成为值得你尊重的人。不是你的爱——我知道那需要时间，也许永远不会。但你的尊重。"

Because I want to be someone worthy of your respect. Not

your love—I know that takes time, maybe never. But your respect.

Small sad smile.

"你已经有了我的尊重。过去两周。你展示了你可以改变。"

You already have my respect. These past two weeks. You showed you can change.

"那你的原谅呢？" What about your forgiveness?

She steps closer. Now one foot apart. Close enough to touch. Neither touching.

"我原谅你。" I forgive you.

The words. Simple. Profound. Liberating.

"为了雇用我来惩罚我。为了付给我几乎不够的钱。为了残忍。为了虐待。我原谅你。"

For hiring me to punish me. For paying me barely enough. For the cruelty. For the abuse. I forgive you.

Tears. Mine now. Full flow. Relief and shame and gratitude mixed.

"但原谅不是忘记。我不会忘记。我不会.....我不会回到那个动态。"

But forgiveness isn't forgetting. I won't forget. I won't... I won't go back to that dynamic.

"我不会要求你。我不想那个动态。我想.....我想平等。尊重。合作伙伴关系。"

I wouldn't ask you to. I don't want that dynamic. I want... I want equality. Respect. Partnership.

"专业的？" Professional?

Pause. The question underlying: only professional?

"现在。是的。专业的。因为我们需要学习如何作为平等的人在一起。"

For now. Yes. Professional. Because we need to learn how to

be together as equals.

Honest. Not promising romance. Not promising future. Just—honesty.

"也许有一天.....但现在，我只是想和你做好工作。作为合作伙伴。作为.....作为朋友？"

Maybe someday... but for now, I just want to do good work with you. As partners. As... as friends?

The offer. Smaller than romance. Bigger than professional. Exactly right.

WEILIN'S POV:

He's crying. Marcus Chen. CEO. Powerful man. Crying on Singapore waterfront.

He's vulnerable. Asking forgiveness. Not demanding. Asking. He's changed. Really changed. Therapy and time and self-work changed him.

And I've changed too. Strong enough to forgive. Clear enough to maintain boundaries.

Open my arms. Invitation. Not demand.

He steps forward. Into embrace. First physical contact in—months? Since hospital? Longer?

Hug tight. Desperate. Healing.

Not romantic. Not sexual. Just—

Two people who hurt each other.

Two people who survived.

Two people who forgave.

Holding each other while wounds close.

He's shaking. Crying into my shoulder. Letting go of six years. I'm crying too. Soaking his suit. Letting go of guilt and shame and not-enough.

Stand like that. Minutes. People walking past. Don't care.

This is necessary.

Eventually pull apart. Not far. Just enough to see faces.
Both tear-stained. Snotty. Human. Beautiful.

"现在怎么办？" What now?

The question. Practical. Profound. Open.

"我不知道。但我知道我不再恨你了。"

I don't know. But I know I don't hate you anymore.

"我不再恨我自己了。" I don't hate myself anymore.

Both saying it simultaneously. Then laughing—crying—
laughing. Messy-laughing.

"那是进步。" That's progress.

"那是进步。"

Stand in aftermath of forgiveness. Singapore behind us.
Future ahead. Undefined.

Walk back toward hotel. Side by side. Closer than before.
Comfortable.

"明天我们回上海。" Tomorrow we go back to Shanghai.

"是的。回到办公室。回到现实。"

Yes. Back to the office. Back to reality.

"你.....你想继续合作伙伴关系吗？即使在——"

You... you want to continue the partnership? Even after—

"是的。今晚不改变那个。如果有的话，它让它更强大。"

Yes. Tonight doesn't change that. If anything, it makes it
stronger.

He nods. Relieved. Grateful.

"但我仍然需要边界。仍然报告给林瑞。仍然有我自己的办公室。
仍然.....仍然独立。"

But I still need boundaries. Still report to Lin Rui. Still have my
own office. Still... still independence.

"当然。我不想改变那个。你的独立是.....那是我尊重的。"

Of course. I don't want to change that. Your independence is... that's what I respect.

Pause. Finding courage.

"我仍然会志愿服务。每周六。在庇护所。那.....那是我的。"

I still volunteer. Every Saturday. At the shelter. That... that's mine.

"我知道。我看到它让你快乐。我永远不会要求你停止。"

I know. I saw it makes you happy. I would never ask you to stop.

Then softer: "我可以.....我可以有时候加入你吗？不是和你约会。只是.....帮忙？"

Could I... could I join you sometimes? Not as a date. Just... to help?

The request surprising. Genuine. Vulnerable.

"你想在庇护所志愿服务？"

You want to volunteer at the shelter?

"我想记住我是谁。在我建造这一切之前。墨轩会帮助。他会.....他会关心。"

I want to remember who I was. Before I built all this. Moxuan would help. He would... he would care.

Consider. Is this healthy? Is this boundary-crossing? Or is this —growth?

"从12月开始。给我们一个月的专业空间。然后.....然后你可以来。如果你想。"

Starting in December. Give us a month of professional space. Then... then you can come. If you want.

"我想。" I want.

Hotel appears ahead. Team probably at bar. Back to normal soon.

Stop outside entrance.

"今晚.....今晚很好。必要的。谢谢你为了道歉。为了听。"

Tonight... tonight was good. Necessary. Thank you for apologizing. For listening.

"谢谢你为了原谅。我不配得到它。"

Thank you for forgiving. I didn't deserve it.

"也许不是。但我需要给它。为了我，不是为了你。"

Maybe not. But I needed to give it. For me, not for you.

The truth. Forgiveness as self-care. Not gift to him.

"那让它更有价值。" That makes it more valuable.

Awkward moment. How to end this? Hug again? Handshake?

What's appropriate?

Chen solves it. "晚安，合作伙伴。"

Goodnight, partner.

Professional. Safe. Appropriate. With warmth underneath.

"晚安，墨轩。" Goodnight, Moxuan.

His name. Using it deliberately. Acknowledging who he's becoming.

His smile small. Genuine. Hopeful.

"晚安，微琳。"

Walk into hotel. Separate elevators. Separate floors.

Separate rooms.

But something changed. Something healed. Something possible.

IN MY ROOM.

Text from Lin Rui:

你们两个解决了吗？—LR

Did you two work it out? —LR

Reply:

我们正在解决中。这是进步。—W

We're working on it. It's progress. —W

His response:

进步很好。我为你们骄傲。两个都。—LR

Progress is good. I'm proud of you both. Both of you. —LR

Lie in bed. Singapore lights through window. Forgiveness settling in chest.

We forgave each other.

We're partners.

We're friends.

Maybe.

Is that enough?

For now?

Yes.

For now, it's perfect.

My phone buzzes. Text from Chen:

谢谢你。为了今晚。为了原谅。为了看到我。—M

Thank you. For tonight. For forgiving. For seeing me. —M

Reply:

谢谢你为了看到我。真正的我。不是你记得的女孩。—W

Thank you for seeing me. Really me. Not the girl you remembered. —W

His response immediate:

我喜欢真正的你。晚安。—M

I like the real you. Goodnight. —M

Smile in darkness. Phone lighting face.

Progress. We're making progress.

END CHAPTER 31

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CHAPTER 32: THE GALA

Weilin stood in the Grand Hyatt ballroom wearing a simple black dress she'd bought with her first partner distribution check—not Chanel, not designer, just elegant and hers—watching Chen Moxuan give the opening speech for his foundation's annual gala, and the man at the podium was neither Marcus Chen the cruel CEO nor Chen Moxuan the wounded boy but something integrated, someone whole: confident without arrogance, successful without shame, speaking about helping underprivileged students with genuine passion not performative charity, and when his eyes found hers in the crowd of three hundred people and held for three seconds (not long enough to be obvious, long enough to matter) she felt—peace, not longing; closure, not hope; and underneath both, quiet affection for who he'd become, who they'd both become, separately and perhaps together but differently now.

Three months. It had been three months since Singapore. Three months since forgiveness on a waterfront. Three months of partnership that actually worked.

The ballroom glittered around her like a jewel box—crystal chandeliers casting prismatic light across marble floors, floor-to-ceiling windows framing Shanghai's skyline like a painting, the kind of wealth that used to intimidate her but now just felt like background noise. She'd earned her place here. Partner. Consultant. Equal.

Her dress was simple—black silk that skimmed her knees, pearl earrings that had been her mother's, comfortable heels she could actually walk in. No armor tonight. No performance. Just Weilin, successful and whole and here because she wanted to be, not because she needed to be.

Chen's voice carried through the sound system, warm and genuine in a way that would have seemed impossible six months ago. He stood at the podium in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, but something about him was looser now—his shoulders, his expression, the way he held himself. Like he'd finally stopped carrying the weight of proving something.

"这个基金会的存在是因为有人曾经告诉我我不够。"

This foundation exists because someone once told me I wasn't enough.

His voice steady. Clear. No shame in the admission.

"我相信了他们。我花了数年试图证明他们错了。"

I believed them. I spent years trying to prove them wrong.

His eyes swept the audience—three hundred people, Shanghai's elite mixed with scholarship recipients, donors and dreamers in the same room—and found hers. Held.

Three seconds that felt like three years and three heartbeats all at once.

"但真正的胜利不是变得富有。"

But the real victory wasn't becoming rich.

A pause. Deliberate. Meaningful.

"真正的胜利是帮助其他人现在就相信他们够了。"

The real victory is helping others believe they're enough, right now.

The ballroom erupted in applause—thunderous, genuine, people moved by words that probably cost him years of therapy to be able to say out loud. Several guests dabbed at their eyes. A scholarship recipient in the front row was openly crying.

Lin Rui leaned close, his whisper barely audible over the applause. "他为你写了那个演讲。"

He wrote that speech for you.

Weilin kept her eyes on Chen as he bowed slightly, humble in his success. "他为每个人写的。"

He wrote it for everyone.

"也为你。" Also for you.

Maybe Lin Rui was right. Maybe the speech was for her. For himself. For every person in this room who'd ever been told they weren't enough. Maybe it could be all three.

She watched Chen step down from the podium and immediately get swallowed by donors—wealthy Shanghai elite in designer gowns and expensive watches, all wanting a piece of his attention, his success, his foundation's halo. He handled it gracefully, that CEO charm she'd once found so cold now just seeming like—competence. Presence. A man who knew himself well enough to be generous with others. Her phone buzzed in her clutch. Lin Rui, texting while standing right next to her:

You look stunning.

Then: Boss can't stop looking at you.

And finally: This is healthy, right?

She smiled, typing back one-handed while holding her champagne: Very healthy. We're adults. It's fine.

"你在给谁发短信?" Zhang Wei appeared on her other side, grinning. "Let me guess. The boss?"

Who are you texting?

"Lin Rui," Weilin said, which was technically true. "Being inappropriate."

Zhang Wei laughed. "He's changed. Chen, I mean. 过去三个月。你注意到了吗?"

The past three months. Have you noticed?

Had she noticed? Of course she'd noticed. Three months of partnership meetings where he actually listened to her ideas instead of dismissing them. Three months of coffee runs where he asked about her shelter work without making it about him. Three months of watching him slowly integrate the wounded boy and the powerful CEO into someone who could be both without apology.

"是的。我注意到了。" Yes. I've noticed.

"因为你。" Because of you.

The assumption made her bristle slightly. "不。因为他自己。因为治疗。因为工作。我只是.....我只是在那里。"

No. Because of himself. Because of therapy. Because of work. I just... I was just there.

Lin Rui interjected, still texting even though he was literally beside her. "你在那里很重要。"

You being there matters.

Maybe. She watched Chen laugh at something a donor said, his whole face lighting up in a way it never used to. Genuine joy. Not performance. Maybe her being there mattered. Or maybe he'd just finally done the work to find himself again.

"Excuse me? 你是沈微琳吗?"

Are you Shen Weilin?

Weilin turned to find a young woman—nineteen, maybe twenty—in a simple dress that had clearly been bought for tonight specifically. Scholarship recipient, Weilin guessed, noting the careful makeup and nervous hands.

"是的。你好。" Yes. Hello.

The girl's face lit up like sunrise. "我是王小美。我是新加坡项目的受益人之一。"

I'm Wang Xiaomei. I'm one of the Singapore project

beneficiaries.

Pride flickered in Weilin's chest—the Singapore expansion had been her idea, her research, her presentation that won the board over. "我很高兴见到你。项目进展如何？"

I'm so glad to meet you. How is the project going?

"Amazing! 陈先生说你帮助让它发生。他还说你教移民工人的孩子英语。志愿者。"

Mr. Chen said you helped make it happen. He also said you teach migrant workers' children English. Volunteer.

Surprise rippled through her. Chen had talked about her work to the scholarship recipients? Promoted her volunteering to people who'd never met her?

"我.....我做了我的部分。这是团队努力。" I... I did my part. It was a team effort.

But Xiaomei was already pulling out her phone, eyes bright with determination. "我也想做那个。志愿服务。你怎么开始的？"

I want to do that too. Volunteer. How did you start?

And so Weilin found herself standing in a ballroom full of Shanghai's elite, champagne in hand, explaining to a scholarship recipient how to find purpose in helping others. How the shelter had become her refuge. How teaching English to children who looked at her like she hung the moon made her feel more valuable than any corporate title ever could.

Xiaomei took notes in her phone, nodding eagerly, asking questions about schedules and training and how to balance university with volunteering. When they finally finished, the girl's eyes were shining.

"谢谢你。你和陈先生.....你们是我想成为的那种人。"

Thank you. You and Mr. Chen... you're the kind of people I want to become.

The words hit Weilin square in the chest. Not "you're successful" or "you're rich." But "you're the kind of person I want to become."

Purpose. That's what she'd found. That's what mattered.

"去做吧，" Weilin said, squeezing the girl's hand. "世界需要更多像你这样的人。"

Go do it. The world needs more people like you.

After Xiaomei left, Weilin excused herself from Lin Rui and Zhang Wei's speculation about her and Chen ("There's nothing to speculate about," she insisted, which made them speculate more) and slipped out onto the balcony.

February in Shanghai was cold but not unbearable—winter still clinging to the air but spring lurking underneath. The balcony was empty, everyone else inside chasing champagne and conversation and connections. She stood at the railing, looking out at the city that had broken her and rebuilt her all at once.

The Bund glittered across the water. Pudong's towers stabbed at the sky. Somewhere out there was her Yangpu apartment—small and shabby and perfect. Somewhere out there was the shelter where she'd found herself. Two worlds. Both hers now.

"我可以加入你吗？"

May I join you?

Chen's voice. Soft. Asking permission instead of assuming it. She turned, found him standing in the doorway with two champagne flutes, tuxedo jacket unbuttoned, bow tie slightly loosened. Human. Approachable. Real.

"你的晚会。你的阳台。" Your party. Your balcony.

He smiled—small, genuine—and crossed to stand beside her at the railing. Careful distance between them. Respectful space. He handed her a fresh champagne flute and she accepted it, their fingers not quite touching.

For a full minute they just stood there, looking out at Shanghai, comfortable in silence in a way they'd never been before. No pressure to fill the space. No tension crackling between them. Just—two people who'd survived each other, standing in the aftermath.

"你遇到了王小美。" You met Wang Xiaomei.

"我遇到了。" I did. Weilin glanced at him. "她说你告诉她关于我的志愿工作。"

She said you told her about my volunteer work.

"我希望那没问题。" His jaw tightened slightly—nervous tell she'd learned to read over three months of partnership. "我.....我为你感到骄傲。为了你建造的。"

I hope that was okay. I... I'm proud of you. For what you've built.

The compliment landed different than it would have six months ago. Not patronizing. Not possessive. Just—peer to peer. Partner to partner. One person acknowledging another's success.

"谢谢。" She turned back to the skyline. "你的演讲很美。关于够了。那.....那很重要。"

Thank you. Your speech was beautiful. About being enough. That... that mattered.

"我是认真的。" He shifted to face her fully. "关于你。"

I meant that. About you.

She met his eyes—brown and clear and present in a way they

hadn't been in their entire marriage. No walls. No games. Just—honesty.

"我知道。" I know.

Simple. True. No need for elaboration.

They fell back into silence, but it was weighted now.

Expectant. Like standing on a cliff edge, wind pushing at your back, one foot already in the air.

"过去三个月....." Chen started, then paused, reconsidering his words. "它们很好。和你一起工作。"

The past three months... they've been good. Working with you.

"对我来说也是。" For me too.

And it had been. Good. Surprisingly, uncomplicatedly good.

They'd fallen into a rhythm—partnership meetings where they challenged each other professionally, coffee runs with the team where they joked like colleagues, strategy sessions where her expertise and his vision combined into something neither could create alone.

Boundaries. That's what made it work. Clear, healthy, respected boundaries.

But tonight felt different. Social instead of professional.

Personal instead of boundaried. Dangerous.

Chen took a breath, like bracing for impact. "你在约会吗？"

Are you seeing anyone?

The question hung in the cold air between them—first personal question in three months, crossing the careful line they'd drawn, impossible to take back now that it was out there.

Weilin's heart kicked against her ribs. Not panic. Just—awareness. This mattered. Her answer mattered.

"不。" She kept her voice steady. "我一直.....忙。工作。志愿服务。找到我自己。"

No. I've been... busy. Work. Volunteering. Finding myself. She turned the question back on him, needing to know, afraid to know. "你呢？"

What about you?

His smile was self-deprecating. "不。但我.....我对它持开放态度。最终。"

No. But I'm... open to it. Finally.

Finally. The word carried weight—therapy and healing and three months of learning to be whole without needing someone else to complete him.

"我也是。" Me too.

The admission felt huge. Terrifying. Liberating.

They stood there, words hanging between them like smoke, and neither of them clarified what "open to it" meant. Open to dating? Open to romance? Open to each other? Open to other people?

Maybe the ambiguity was the point.

"你的基金会....." Weilin gestured vaguely toward the ballroom behind them. "它很美。你帮助的学生。这不仅仅是钱。这是信念。"

Your foundation... it's beautiful. The students you help. It's not just money. It's belief.

Chen's expression softened into something bittersweet. "我记得需要那个。信念。当我在大学时，挣扎，想知道我是否属于那里。"

I remember needing that. Belief. When I was in university, struggling, wondering if I belonged.

He paused, and she could see him traveling back in time—

twenty years old and poor and brilliant and terrified.

"你相信我。" His voice dropped, intimate. "当我们第一次相遇时。我告诉你我的梦想，你从不怀疑我。"

You believed in me. When we first met. I told you my dreams and you never doubted me.

The memory rose between them—young and in love and stupid with hope. Chen in their tiny apartment, talking about building something that mattered, and her believing every word because she'd never met anyone who dreamed as big as he did.

"我仍然相信你。" The words came out softer than she intended. "你成为了你说你会成为的一切。"

I still believe in you. You became everything you said you'd be.

"但我失去了我自己在这个过程中。" His knuckles went white around his champagne flute. "直到.....直到你离开。直到我不得不找到我自己再次。"

But I lost myself in the process. Until... until you left. Until I had to find myself again.

Raw honesty. The kind that only came from years of therapy and hard internal work.

"我也失去了我自己。" Weilin met his eyes directly. "在婚姻中。在离婚中。在.....在试图赚得你的原谅中。"

I lost myself too. In the marriage. In the divorce. In... in trying to earn your forgiveness.

She let the words settle, then continued with the part that mattered more. "但我找到了我自己。最终。在庇护所。在孩子们身边。在成为合作伙伴而不是员工中。"

But I found myself. Finally. At the shelter. With the children. In being partner not employee.

Chen's smile was genuine. "我看到了。当我通过窗户看你时。"

那天。你.....你发光了。"

I saw. When I watched you through the window. That day. You... you glowed.

The memory of that afternoon—him standing outside the shelter, watching her teach children, seeing her really seeing her for the first time in years—felt sacred somehow.

"我很快乐。" I was happy. She hadn't realized it until she said it out loud. "第一次，很长时间以来。"

First time in a long time.

"我也是。" He turned back to the skyline. "现在。最终。"

Me too. Now. Finally.

A waiter materialized on the balcony, silver tray balanced perfectly, champagne flutes catching the light. Chen selected two fresh glasses and handed one to Weilin, their fingers brushing this time—brief contact that sent electricity up her arm.

He raised his glass. "敬什么？"

Toast to what?

Good question. What were they toasting? The past? The present? The uncertain future?

"向前进。" To moving forward.

Perfect. Ambiguous enough to mean anything and everything.

Chen's eyes held hers as he added one word. "一起？"

Together?

The question—small word, massive implications—hung between them like a bridge neither was sure they wanted to cross yet.

"也许。" Weilin chose careful honesty. "以某种形式。作为合作伙伴。作为.....朋友。"

Maybe. In some form. As partners. As... friends.

Not committing to romance. Not promising forever. Just—acknowledging connection.

"我喜欢那样。" I like that.

They clinked glasses—crystal singing in the cold air—and drank. The champagne tasted like possibility and caution and something that might be hope if either of them was brave enough to name it.

The silence after the toast was comfortable. No pressure. No expectation. Just two people standing on a balcony, drinking champagne, existing in each other's space without needing to fill it with words.

Finally, Weilin spoke. "这不像我想的那样。"

This isn't how I thought it would be.

"什么不是？" What isn't?

"我们。" She gestured between them with her champagne flute. "当我第一次回来时。当你雇用我时。我想我们会.....爆炸。或者和解。或者.....某种大结局。"

Us. When I first came back. When you hired me. I thought we'd... explode. Or reconcile. Or... some big ending.

Chen considered this, head tilting slightly. "这不是结局。"

This isn't an ending.

"不是吗？" Isn't it?

"我不知道。" His honesty was refreshing. "感觉更像.....重新开始。"

I don't know. It feels more like... a beginning.

The reframe shifted something in Weilin's chest. Not an ending. A beginning. Same story, different lens.

"一个我们都整个的开始。" A beginning where we're both whole.

"确切地。" Exactly.

Music drifted from inside—something classical and elegant, people probably dancing now, the gala hitting its social peak. Chen glanced back toward the ballroom.

"你要留下来跳舞吗？" Are you staying to dance?

The invitation was casual. Friendly. No pressure underlying it. Weilin shook her head. "不。我想我要走了。早上我在庇护所志愿服务。"

No. I think I'll leave. I volunteer at the shelter in the morning.

"仍然每周六？" Still every Saturday?

"总是。" Always.

Some things didn't change. Some things shouldn't change. Chen nodded, respecting her boundary, not pushing for more. But Weilin found herself wanting to offer something. To open the door just slightly. To test if they could exist in each other's worlds without destroying them.

"你....." She hesitated, then pushed through. "你说过你想加入。有时候。"

You... you said you wanted to join. Sometimes.

Hope flashed across his face—brief and bright before he controlled it. "我做了。我做。但只有当你准备好时。"

I did. I do. But only when you're ready.

Was she ready? To let him into her world? To see if the changes were real outside corporate walls?

"也许下周？" Maybe next week?

His whole face transformed—controlled excitement, careful joy, not wanting to seem too eager but unable to completely hide how much it mattered.

"我会喜欢那样。" I'd like that.

"星期六。上午9点。" She smiled, teasing just slightly. "别穿西装。"

Saturday. 9 AM. Don't wear a suit.

His laugh was genuine. "记下了。没有西装。"

Noted. No suit.

They walked back inside together, the warmth of the ballroom hitting them after the cold balcony. The gala was in full swing—people dancing, donors networking, scholarship recipients taking photos with volunteers. Success everywhere. Hope everywhere.

Chen walked her to coat check, a gentleman escort without being possessive about it. When the attendant brought her coat, he helped her into it—hands briefly on her shoulders, fingers pressing through wool and silk to skin beneath—and they both felt it. That spark. That possibility. That dangerous, beautiful maybe.

She turned to face him, coat on, ready to leave, both of them aware this was goodbye for tonight but also—something else. A door opening. A bridge being built.

"谢谢你邀请我。" Her voice was steady. "晚会很美。"

Thank you for inviting me. The gala was beautiful.

"谢谢你来。" His voice roughened slightly. "意味着.....它意味着很多。"

Thank you for coming. It meant... it means a lot.

Awkward moment—how do you say goodbye to your ex-husband who's also your business partner who you maybe might possibly want to date again someday? Hug?

Handshake? Kiss on the cheek?

They settled on a brief hug—three seconds, professional, friendly, appropriate—but even that sent electricity through Weilin's system. His cologne. His warmth. His solidity. All familiar and foreign at once.

They pulled apart, both smiling, both a little flushed.

"晚安，墨轩。" Goodnight, Moxuan.

"晚安，微琳。星期六见。" Goodnight, Weilin. See you Saturday.

She walked toward the exit, aware of him watching, fighting the urge to turn back. At the door she gave in—glanced over her shoulder. He was still there. Still watching. She raised her hand in a small wave. He waved back.

In the taxi heading home, Weilin leaned her head against the cold window and let herself process. Tonight had been—good. Surprisingly, uncomplicatedly good. Comfortable in a way they'd never been, even when they were married and supposedly in love.

Maybe that was the difference. They didn't need each other anymore. Which meant if they chose each other—if they eventually, carefully, slowly chose each other—it would be real. Want instead of need. Choice instead of desperation.

Her phone buzzed. Mrs. Chen:

我听说你在晚会上。墨轩说你下周六来？

I heard you were at the gala. Moxuan said you're coming next Saturday?

Weilin smiled, typing back: 是的。他要志愿服务。我们会看看它如何进行。

Yes. He's going to volunteer. We'll see how it goes.

The response was immediate: 给他一个机会。他变了。你也变了。也许现在你们可以建造一些东西。

Give him a chance. He's changed. You've changed too.

Maybe now you can build something.

Another text, this one from Chen:

谢谢你今晚。为了来。为了邀请我星期六。睡个好觉。

Thank you for tonight. For coming. For inviting me Saturday. Sleep well.

She stared at the message for a long moment. So normal. So healthy. A man texting after a nice evening, saying goodnight, not demanding anything. Just—being human.

谢谢你有我。你的演讲很美。星期六见。9AM。不要迟到。

Thank you for having me. Your speech was beautiful. See you Saturday. 9 AM. Don't be late.

His response: 我不会。晚安，微琳。

I won't. Goodnight, Weilin.

In her Yangpu apartment—small and shabby and perfect—Weilin changed into pajamas and washed off her makeup and brushed her teeth, all the mundane rituals of being human. She climbed into her IKEA bed and stared at the ceiling, processing the evening.

Tonight had felt like—possibility. Not promise. Not commitment. Just possibility.

They were both whole now. Both healed. Both successful in their own right. If they came back together—if they carefully, slowly, healthily came back together—it would be different. Better. Real.

But she was okay if they didn't. That was the crucial part. She was okay without him. Which meant maybe, possibly, she could be okay with him too.

Saturday. He'd be at the shelter. They'd see how it went. No expectations. No pressure. Just—two people testing if they could coexist in each other's worlds.

Her phone lit up one more time. Lin Rui:

You two are disgustingly healthy. I'm proud and also annoyed. Get some sleep. Big week ahead.

She smiled, typing back: Goodnight, 林瑞.

Then she turned off her phone, pulled her blankets up, and let herself sleep.

Peaceful. Whole. Ready for whatever came next.

Meanwhile, across Shanghai in his penthouse, Chen Moxuan stood at his floor-to-ceiling windows, still in his tuxedo, bow tie discarded, looking out at the city he'd conquered.

Lin Rui had found him on the balcony after Weilin left, after the last donors had been schmoozed and the last scholarship recipients had been photographed.

"她离开了？" She left?

"是的。她明天早上在庇护所。" Yes. She's at the shelter tomorrow morning.

"你去吗？" Are you going?

"不是明天。下周六。她邀请我。" Not tomorrow. Next Saturday. She invited me.

Lin Rui's eyebrows had shot up. "进展。"

Progress.

"进展。" Progress.

The word felt right. Not romance. Not reconciliation. Just—progress. Movement. Forward motion.

Lin Rui had studied him for a long moment, then asked the question Chen had been asking himself for three months. "你爱她吗？仍然？"

Do you love her? Still?

No hesitation. "是的。" Yes.

Because he did. He loved her. Maybe he'd never stopped. But it was different now—quieter, healthier, not desperate or possessive or needy. Just—love. Pure and simple and honest.

"但不同地。" He'd tried to explain. "不是.....不是拼命地。不是需

要她。只是.....爱她。她是谁。她成为的人。"

But differently. Not... not desperately. Not needing her. Just... loving her. Who she is. Who she became.

Lin Rui had nodded. "那是好的种类。"

That's the good kind.

"我知道。" I know.

Now, alone in his penthouse, Chen let himself acknowledge the truth: he didn't know where this was going. Didn't know if Saturday would be good or awkward. Didn't know if they'd ever be more than professional partners and careful friends. But for the first time in six years, he was okay with not knowing.

He'd spent so long trying to control outcomes—building empires, executing revenge, proving his worth—that he'd forgotten how to just... be. To exist in uncertainty. To let things unfold organically.

Therapy had taught him that. Dr. Song's voice in his head: You can't control other people. You can only control yourself. Your reactions. Your choices. Your healing.

He'd healed. She'd healed. Maybe that was enough. And if it wasn't—if they slowly, carefully, healthily built something more—that would be enough too.

His phone buzzed. Text from his mother:

她来了？

She came?

是的。我们谈了。她下周六来庇护所。

Yes. We talked. She's coming to the shelter next Saturday.

好。慢慢来。你们都值得幸福。

Good. Take it slow. You both deserve happiness.

He smiled, typing back: 我知道。我在努力。

I know. I'm trying.

One more text, checking his messages one more time even though he knew she'd already said goodnight. But—there it was. Her message. Simple. Perfect.

He read it again, then put his phone away and went to bed. Saturday. The shelter. Her world. No corporate structure. No professional boundaries. Just—them. As people. Helping children. Existing in the same space without needing to perform.

He was terrified. He was hopeful. He was ready.

Chen Moxuan fell asleep thinking of white lilies and children laughing and a woman who'd survived him and become someone better because of it—and despite it—and entirely independent of it.

Tomorrow would come. Saturday would come. The future would unfold whether he tried to control it or not.

For the first time in his life, that felt okay.

END CHAPTER 32

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