

默

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2

Silent Reading / Priest

默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Book 2

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CHAPTER 33 - Reading Aloud

Having passed through a weekend's fermentation, early on Monday morning the unsuccessful attempt to jump off a building above the Skyscreen exploded into pandemonium. Fei Du had not yet left the parking lot before he met with two raiding parties and discovered that with the wave of a hand he'd become internet famous.

Holding half a cup of already cooled London Fog, President Fei mulled it over in his office. He felt that the money couldn't be thrown away, and neither could his fame. Therefore he waved over his secretary and told her to go to the marketing department and have them put together a special plan in the company's name concerning corporate social responsibility, using this event as a pretext to make a fuss.

The secretary click-clacked away at her laptop, recording his sudden inspiration. Before she left, she hung on the point of speaking for a while, the rims of her eyes reddening, and at last cautiously asked, "President Fei, was everything you said on the Skyscreen true?" "Hm?" Fei Du was flipping through his daily schedule. Hearing this, he looked up with a somewhat ridiculing, half indulgent smile. "Of course not, there was a suicide intervention expert behind me feeding me lines. They wouldn't let me say whatever I wanted in a situation like that.—How can you take everything so seriously? It's too cute."

The red flush spread from the secretary's eye-rims to her whole face. She made a scornful noise and turned to go.

"Hey, wait a second." Fei Du called her to a halt with a bright smile. "Does the company need me to peddle sex appeal at a dinner party today?"

Full of thwarted maternal feelings, the secretary rolled her eyes. "No, for the moment we have no use for that valuable intangible asset."

“That’s all right, then.” Fei Du immediately peeled off his suit jacket and shut his laptop.

Half an hour later, he had picked up Mother He from the hospital and was heading towards the City Bureau with her.

Wang Xiujuan was after all seriously ill and no longer young. Having undergone a great grief, she’d been kept under observation at the hospital for a weekend, and was only released to collect He Zhongyi’s remains.

The death of a young man from far away having brought with it a case of corruption and drug trafficking that shook the nation, Yan City’s City Bureau had no choice but to form a cooperative task force with a discipline inspection committee and work around the clock.

By comparison, the murder of He Zhongyi wasn’t attended so closely. Luo Wenzhou, Tao Ran, Lang Qiao, and the others who had taken on the case from the start were responsible for the follow-up work.

The appearance of He Zhongyi’s body had been taken care of. It no longer looked as dreadful as when he had been found by the side of the road. His face wore a look of serenity painstakingly crafted by the mortician.

Zhao Yulong and some of He Zhongyi’s former coworkers spontaneously came to help, and Ma Xiaowei put in an appearance under the supervision of Xiao Haiyang and a civil policeman.

Zhang Donglai, having been pressured or something, entered the stage midway. He saw Fei Du supporting Wang Xiujuan from afar and went over, his movements unnatural and uncoordinated, then rigidly nodded to Wang Xiujuan. He said, “Auntie, I really wasn’t the one who killed your son.”

He was tall and sturdy; Wang Xiujian fearfully backed up half a step.

Zhang Donglai again searched his guts and belly for thoughts. “Although I actually did hit him...”

Fei Du’s chilly look scraped over him, and Zhang Donglai rubbed his nose awkwardly, shut his mouth, and didn’t dare to say anything else. He made a gesture excusing himself to Mother He.

He Zhongyi’s mother Wang Xiujian was very small and skinny. Every time Fei Du spoke to her, he had to bend down slightly, looking unusually gentle. He dispatched Zhang Donglai with a look, then spoke into Wang Xiujian’s ear. “If you really can’t take it, I can handle the remaining formalities in your place.”

Wang Xiujian shook her head. Then she shook off Fei Du’s hand and staggered a few steps forward. Suddenly seeming to remember something, she turned back and asked, “Did my Zhongyi do something wrong? Some bad thing he shouldn’t have done?”

Fei Du lowered his eyes and met her gaze. After a while, he said quietly but firmly, “No, auntie.”

Zhao Haochang was very crafty. He could shirk and tell sob stories, quibble and confuse the issue to the highest degree. Having heard his declarations, you would think that all of society was a great morass, and he alone was a white lotus growing unsullied from the mud, blooming in the midst of persecution.

Only relying on the traces Lang Qiao and the others had pulled together off-site, as well as Luo Wenzhou’s traps and cheats, could they draw the least bit of truth from his mouth and assemble a ragged sequence of events.

Bearing hope and pressure, He Zhongyi had come from a remote little mountain village to turbulent Yan City; his eyes had been filled

with the rush of traffic and the glamorous young men and women, the boys and girls his own age brimming with youth as they entered their campuses, each one of them camera ready.

But he had just arrived, without friends or connections. He could only live in the most run-down of apartments, stepping in dirt daily. He went back and forth between his job and apartment, accompanied by the smell of the sewers. Aside from an apathetic middle-aged man, the people around him were ill-taught little devils, pornographers, gamblers, druggies, all kinds of wretches.

But he wore his fingers down keeping track of the accounts in his notebook, scrimped and saved, unwilling to waste a single minute, always wanting to do a little more, so he could hurry and clear his debt, return the money, pay for his ailing mother's treatment; occasionally he fantasized that one day he would be able to establish a foothold in this city.

Ever since he was little, there had been someone he'd worshipped. Though he rigorously observed the arrangements and didn't tell anyone about his existence, he still couldn't resist wanting to get closer to him. Fengnian-dage avoided him, was unreachable; He Zhongyi turned it over in his mind and thought maybe it was because he himself was too poor. In this enormous Yan City, each day was a rush; who had it easy? Of course he wouldn't want a poor relation sponging on him day in and day out. He could only carefully maintain a basic link with that person, occasionally paying his respects, and desperately save money.

He needed to pay respects, even if that person had no time for him—he had borrowed his money, so it would have been unprincipled to break off the connection now.

With difficulty he had saved the first installment. 20,000 yuan, not enough for the young masters to throw away on a bottle of wine, but still the most he had ever saved in his life. He had to collect it very

carefully, didn't dare to brag, didn't dare to let anyone see, because next to him there was always a sticky-fingered roommate. He had no peace of mind holding on to the money. He Zhongyi wanted to hurry and return it so he could feel at ease, but Fengnian-dage was hard to reach. He had no other choice; he had to go find Zhang Ting—he had occasionally seen her with Fengnian-dage.

He Zhongyi gathered up his courage and spoke to her, stuttering and hoping she could tell him where dage had gone; he hadn't expected that he would scare the girl instead.

It wasn't that an ingratiating stranger was frightening; what was frightening was poverty and indignity.

The girl's acute reaction had brought a beating down on him, but that was nothing. That person had been there watching, had calmly intervened, ended the alternation without looking up, as if he'd never seen him. At that moment He Zhongyi belatedly realized that Fengnian-dage perhaps didn't want a fellow-provincial like him at all.

They weren't relatives, and they weren't friends. It turned out that he was like a speck of dirt flung onto a stainless white shirt that couldn't be washed off. Even if this person had afterwards perfunctorily tossed him a new model phone.

He Zhongyi thought, once he'd returned all the money, he wouldn't contact him again.

Once while delivering goods, he'd seen Fengnian-dage from afar, talking and laughing happily with his friends. He deliberately avoided them, didn't go make a nuisance of himself, and fortuitously heard them say they were planning to go to a place called the "Chengguang Mansion" for an opening event.

He Zhongyi's body was covered with a white cloth and lifted. The rims of Wang Xiujuan's eyes filled with blood at once. Her knees gave

out, and she sank to the ground. Everyone rushed over all at once wanting to pick her up.

Her cloudy tears welled out of the corners of her eyes, seeping into the white hair at her temples. She grabbed the sleeve cuff of a person next to her. “I taught him to treat people well, to do everything properly. Did I teach him wrong?”

No one could answer this question. They could only fall silent.

Wang Xiujuan’s education level was limited; she basically couldn’t read the testimonial. Tao Ran had to wait for her mood to steady a little, then ask her to sit down. He read it to her line by line, explaining each word and each sentence. When he had finished explaining a sentence, Wang Xiujuan would nod dazedly.

She wasn’t wailing, only sitting quietly to one side, tears flowing continuously down her face.

Head down, Zhang Donglai shuffled over to Fei Du, kicking at a pebble on the ground with the tip of his foot. Squirming awkwardly, he said, “Master Fei, Tingting sent me to ask...uh, what the fuck is all this! My Uncle Two had to change his post because of this, resign from active duty ahead of time. Did my family offend Tai Sui¹ this year?”

Fei Du was looking towards Wang Xiujuan from several steps away. Suddenly he said, “Did you find that striped gray tie?”

Zhang Donglai stared. “What?”

“No need to keep looking. That tie is in the City Bureau,” said Fei Du. “The victim He Zhongyi’s blood is on it, and your fingerprints. Someone picked it up from your car and turned it in.”

Zhang Donglai opened his mouth and stared, tongue-tied, for an age. His rusted brain finally rumbled through its reflex arc, and he faintly understood what Fei Du had said. He dumbly reached out a hand, swept the projecting hair back off his forehead, and pronounced a brief and deeply felt, “Fuck!”

Fei Du patted his shoulder. “You should tell Tingting to stop asking and promptly cut her losses.”

“Slow down, wait.” Zhang Donglai waved his hand dizzily. “You’re saying...someone, someone stole my tie and killed him, *and* wanted to put it on me? Is that what you mean?”

Fei Du looked at him, making no comment.

“No, that couldn’t be? Haven’t I been really kind to him—to Zhao Haochang? Would your project have come his way just based on his position at Rongshun? I was the one who made the introduction! When Tingting brought him home, my mom and dad didn’t object, either! They received him like a new son-in-law, as considerately as you could want.—What did I do to bother him?”

Fei Du thought about it and answered, “Breathe.”

Zhang Donglai was speechless.

Using his limited brains, Zhang Donglai considered for an age. He was still disbelieving. He whispered, “That couldn’t be, I feel like... Is that Luo Wenzhou reliable or not? How could he...”

“If that Luo Wenzhou weren’t reliable, the murderer sitting in there and waiting for public prosecution would be you.” Luo Wenzhou himself had at some point strolled over next to them. He pointed at Zhang Donglai. “Young master, wise up a little.”

Zhang Donglai was a little scared of him. As soon as he saw Luo Wenzhou, his calf muscles cramped. This time, having been overheard talking about him behind his back, he didn't dare to make a peep; he took fright and ran.

Luo Wenzhou slowly walked over to Fei Du and stood with his hands clasped behind his back, focusing on the eternal parting taking place not far from them. "What will happen to her afterwards?"

"The Economy and Trade Building's boss took this opportunity to work up some enthusiasm," said Fei Du. "He wants to take the lead in sponsoring an 'Elderly Bereaved Villagers Foundation.' The wire copy has already been sent out. It should be able to shoulder her future medical and living expenses. Although..."

Although money could be given, but a person couldn't be brought back.

Others could care for her materially, but there was no one who could bring back her son.

"Right." Luo Wenzhou took some photographs from a folder he had. "I have something to give you."

In one photograph was a fountain pen in an evidence bag. Through the camera lens you could still sense the quality of the pen. The character "Fei" was carved on the cap. "From Zhao Haochang's collection. Look familiar? Is it yours?"

He had hoped to see some astonishment on President Fei's face, but Fei Du only glanced at it and, perfectly unsurprised, said, "So he had it! I lost it on Christmas last year."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

The date was the exactly the same as Zhao Haochang's record. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought Fei Du had given it as a gift.

"When I can't find something, I usually recall my state of mind before and after, and then I'll more or less know where I put it." Fei Du shrugged. "If I still can't find it, then someone must have taken it—although that day there were many employees and clients who'd come into my office. To avoid kicking up a fuss, I didn't make it public."

"You don't want to know what the label was?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du shrugged, his gaze falling on what was behind the fountain pen—the camera lens had been a little distant and had caught a corner of the lamp in Zhao Haochang's basement. The tree lamp that looked like a biological specimen glowed quietly, like a distant gaze thrown out from beyond space and time, forever following the young villager who had one year changed his name.

"Not especially," said Fei Du. "There's no need to return it to me when the case is over, either. It's picked up the smell of burning. I don't want it anymore."

Having made arrangements for Wang Xiujuan, Fei Du didn't say a word to anyone else. He quietly left on his own and drove straight out to the outskirts.

It was just past dusk and a touch overcast. In the cemetery the shadows of the stones flickered, crows and sparrows flew low, the smell of damp soil breathed up from the ground, and the deeply slumbering dead gazed at the living as they came and went.

Carrying a bouquet of lilies, Fei Du familiarly traced his steps for a seventh year and came to a somewhat old-fashioned tombstone. The countenance of the woman on the tombstone was pale, her

expression melancholy, covered with a layer of fragile beauty, forever looking at him without fading.

Fei Du looked back at her for a while. He rolled up his sleeves and meticulously wiped the tombstone with a soft cloth. He held up two fingers, lightly kissed them, then pressed them onto the tombstone, for the first time showing a trace of a relieved smile in her presence.

It seemed as if he had finally pushed away the coffin pressing down on his heart and put it into the grave standing unoccupied, things coming to their due course.

Luo Wenzhou watched him leave from afar, then went over like a thief, put down a bunch of small white chrysanthemums, and bowed to the woman on the tombstone.

For a while he silently communed with the occupant of the tomb. He was just getting ready to leave when suddenly he felt a chill on his face. Without any portents, it had begun to rain in the outskirts.

Luo Wenzhou had no umbrella. He clicked his tongue and was about to run through the rain using his arm to shield his head. He had just raised his hand when a dark shadow opened over his head.

Luo Wenzhou was startled. He turned his head swiftly—Fei Du had at some point returned, and was holding up an umbrella, looking at him with a rather complicated expression.

CHAPTER 34 - Humbert Humbert I

To draw a somewhat unsuitable comparison, Luo Wenzhou's mental state at this moment was roughly the same as Zhao Haochang's the first time he heard that his secret in the "Fengqing Winery" had been discovered.

Like being struck by lightning, he had been caught red-handed with the goods—the round little white flowers were stretching their stems out in the rain.

Luo Wenzhou stammeringly defended himself. "I... Uh... Well... In fact, I just came to have a look on my way."

Tracing his route, one fears that the mighty Captain Luo had been on his way to abscond to North Korea.

There was no need for Fei Du's ridicule; Luo Wenzhou himself had already realized that this bit of idiocy had a strong "Air of Zhang Donglai" to it.

At this moment, never mind if his skin had been only the thickness of an ordinary human body's, even if he'd borrowed the Great Wall to shield his face, he still wouldn't have been able to block Fei Du's inescapable gaze. Flustered, Luo Wenzhou avoided his line of sight, gabbled some words at random, and intended to grease his steps and slip clean away.

"You two go ahead and chat," said Luo Wenzhou. "I have work tomorrow, I'll be going."

Saying so, he stepped away, ready to charge into the rain, but he had yet to experience the moisture of the great outdoors when the large black umbrella followed him like a shadow.

Fei Du hadn't taken a step. He had only stretched out the arm holding the umbrella; one shoulder was quickly soaked by the rain, forming a faint mist around him.

Then he quietly asked, "So you were the one who left these flowers?"

For seven years Fei Du had come to the cemetery around the anniversary of her death. Sometimes when he had delayed coming a little, he would unexpectedly encounter a bunch of small white flowers, rather lacking in taste. People came and went in the cemetery each day, and the manager was a sloppy incompetent from whom it was impossible to get any answers.

There seemed to be no malice in it, so Fei Du didn't mean to take too much note. He only considered several possibilities, without once thinking that it would be Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou very awkwardly assented, and then, dodging around the subject, said, "Since I was already here I figured I'd bring something.—You... Well, didn't you leave already?"

Fei Du fixed him with a look that was even harder to read and asked in turn, "How do you know I already left?"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Very good, he felt his mental state limitlessly drawing closer to Zhao Haochang making a slip of the tongue.

Fei Du grandly shoved the heavy umbrella into his hand and bent down to pick up a silk cloth left beside the tombstone. "I forgot to bring this with me."

Entrusted by the young master with the important task of holding the umbrella, Luo Wenzhou couldn't leave but felt awkward staying. He

could only follow Fei Du, pretending to glance all around admiring the scenery.

The dignified or serene portraits of the occupants of the tombs neatly lined up all around gave him glances of salutation one after another. The distant curtain of rain had tied the little mountain on the outskirts together with the gray sky. The mountain's squirrels had gone back into their tree hollows and were not at home to callers.—Luo Wenzhou's gaze swirled around for an age without finding anywhere to settle; finally, as he accepted his fate, it returned to the small space under the black umbrella, falling on Fei Du, the only living creature.

Luo Wenzhou discovered in wonder that provided the above-mentioned living creature wasn't spouting off and deprecating justice, righteousness, and the law, he turned out to be a tall and slender, level-shouldered, attractive man. His dark gray shirt was well-fitting and well-ironed. A small part of it was wet, clinging to his waist; in the eyes of someone oriented towards men, it could almost be called sexually appealing, very pleasing to both eye and mind.

Suddenly, Fei Du turned around. Luo Wenzhou had no time to dodge, and their gazes lightly bumped together. Luo Wenzhou's breath caught in spite of himself. But he very quickly came around and pulled back his mind, which had temporarily wandered onto the wrong road. He coughed lightly. "Is it all right if ge says a few words to you?"

Fei Du's face finally displayed the false smile familiar to Luo Wenzhou. "Captain Luo, who are you being so familiar with?"

This long-absent taunt finally broke through the tense atmosphere. Luo Wenzhou inexplicably breathed in relief. He pointed to some small steps beneath a tombstone. "Let's wait. We have to go down the mountain on the way back. With the rain this heavy, it could easily be dangerous."

Fei Du noncommittally sat down on the steps.

Holding up the carbon fiber umbrella, Luo Wenzhou felt the appearance he presented was of a flourishing mushroom. He turned to bow slightly to the woman on the gravestone, then sat down beside Fei Du.

Fei Du gave people—gave Luo Wenzhou, at least—the feeling that he was like the metal-framed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, seeming very exquisite, but in fact silently giving off a feeling of inhuman cold.

But now, trapped under an umbrella, he was surprised to find that this person's body temperature wasn't cold at all.

The sudden rain intensified, and the summer heat laid down its arms and went to ground; a damp coolness assaulted the senses, increasingly setting off the warmth of the person next to him.

“I come over here to have a look once in a while.” Luo Wenzhou spoke first. “After all, it was the first case I handled that involved a death.”

“So it made a deep impression?” said Fei Du.

“Yes.” After Luo Wenzhou's terse nod, he was silent for a while. Then he said, “Although it wasn't your mom that left a deep impression.”

Fei Du carelessly said, “Captain Luo has seen all kinds of corpses, of course...”

“I could never forget you,” said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du's words stopped at once; he almost choked at this statement. He turned his head and gave Luo Wenzhou a stunned look,

suspecting that he had eaten something funny.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't noticed that he had said something rather open to interpretation. His lightly calloused hands slowly rubbed the carbon fiber umbrella handle, and he stared fixedly at the bluestone slab in front of him, saying, "I remember the weather that day was also pretty bad. Tao Ran and I were phoning our elders to ask for instructions while we rushed desperately towards your house. Because the circumstances were unclear, we were afraid that if it had been a murder as part of a robbery, the killer could still be nearby, and you weren't willing to leave. What kind of danger would a child run into like that?"

Fei Du seemed somewhat moved. He restrained his provoking smile that wasn't quite a smile.

"When we arrived, you were sitting on the stone step at your house's gate just like this," said Luo Wenzhou. "Then you heard footsteps coming and raised your head to look at us. I've never forgotten your expression then."

It had been a gaze so clear it had been nearly wild; it had seemed to be stifling never before uttered cries for help and ardent hopes—even though the boy's manner then had been controlled and introverted.

"It made me remember a story my shifu² had told me.

"It was something that happened when he was young. You wouldn't even have been born then.—It was a missing child case; several children went missing in a row, all of them little girls around ten years old. They got out of school and should have gone home, but they never made it home, disappearing without anyone being the wiser. Our criminal investigation techniques were limited then; they basically didn't know what DNA was. To determine the victim's identity, they had to rely on clumsy means like blood groups and

special characteristics provided by the victim's family. In the end that case remained unsolved. None of the six missing girls were found. The father of one of the victims couldn't bear the shock. He fell apart, and he was never entirely stable afterwards."

Fei Du didn't interrupt; he sat quietly beside him, listening.

"He came to the bureau a hundred times without any outcome. That wasn't the only case going on; when there were no breakthroughs, everyone's eyes would have to turn away eventually. They sent a criminal policeman who was fairly good at talking to people to deal with that father who wouldn't stop pestering them. That was my shifu. As they had more contact, my shifu took pity on him, sometimes counseled him to go forward; if he really couldn't get past the mental rut of the child, then he should have another one while he was still young. He didn't listen. No one helped him investigate, so he went to investigate himself. Several months later, he popped up one day, cornered my shifu and said that he'd found a suspect."

At this point, Luo Wenzhou paused and turned his head to look at Fei Du's eyes.

The corners of Fei Du's eyes had thoroughly developed; their shape still vaguely followed the mold of when he had been younger, but what was inside them was not at all the same. At some point his gaze had become indolent, his eyes frequently half-closed. Sometimes he would smile urbanely at someone, but his expression would be unfocused, full of abstraction. Of that stubborn, clear, even somewhat paranoid look from back then, not a trace remained.

All of that seemed only to exist only in Luo Wenzhou's mind, an illusion he had concocted for himself.

As the time he spent staring dumbly at Fei Du drew on too long, Fei Du couldn't resist putting in a word to disgust him. Harboring ill-intent, his gaze swept over Luo Wenzhou's nose bridge and lips. Fei

Du lowered his voice and said, “Captain Luo, please don’t pretend to be innocent at your age. Don’t you know that this conduct of staring into someone’s eyes usually means you’re asking to be kissed?”

Luo Wenzhou was a veteran of a hundred battles and not at all easy to disgust. He came around at once and unflappably returned fire. “Don’t worry. If I was asking anyone, it wouldn’t be you, whelp.”

The two of them at the same time acutely felt that another battle was fermenting, and this time there was no Tao Ran to intervene. All around them there was only the curtain of rain covering the sky, and the two of them had only one umbrella. There was nowhere to hide. They could only use their intellects, each forebear and retreat a step—they turned their heads away and closed their mouths at the same time.

After a long time, Fei Du’s brows lifted lightly. “What does the missing child case have to do with me?” he asked impatiently.

“My shifu described his expression back then. He said the father’s eyes were like ice-cold grottoes with two fiercely blazing points of longing in them, burning his soul—when I saw you, for some reason I thought of what he’d said.”

Having heard this, Fei Du raised his long, slanting brows high and snorted. “Really. You have problems with your vision, or else your imagination is too abundant. And then what?”

“He identified a middle school teacher with a rather good reputation. That teacher was known far and wide as a good person. He had won a prize for public-spiritedness, and he’d been taken as a model worker,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Even though my shifu thought he had lost his mind a little, he still went to investigate according to what the father said.”

“Privately?” said Fei Du.

“He was a teacher. If rumors got out, even if he was innocent, he’d never hear the end of it, so my shifu only dared to investigate privately. He investigated for a long time without finding anything to the purpose. My shifu’s suspicion that the father had a mental problem became even stronger. Then two of them parted on bad terms and my shifu left it alone. But not long after that...there was a homicide. The father had taken a melon knife and stabbed the teacher he suspected.”

Fei Du let out a short, breathy laugh. “Set your mind at ease, I definitely wouldn’t stab anybody. Contract killers are more our style.”

Luo Wenzhou ignored his provocation. “The scariest thing was that while they were in the process of investigating the victim, they found the clothes of the missing girls in his basement, along with another unconscious girl.”

Luo Wenzhou paused slightly, letting out a light and slow breath under the mask of the rain, remembering the old criminal policeman repeatedly urging him, “If someone looks at you like that, it shows that he has expectations of you, and no matter what the outcome, you absolutely cannot fail to live up to those expectations.”

Having listened to this story that was like an urban legend, Fei Du wasn’t at all stirred. He only curiously asked, “You have a shifu?”

“An elder who took us around when we just started working,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I don’t know whether Tao Ran ever mentioned him to you.—A few years ago he gave up his life while arresting an offender.”

Fei Du hesitated for a while, thinking with his brow knitted. “This was three years ago?”

“How do you know?”

“Because I have no memory of it,” said Fei Du. “Three years ago my dad had just had his accident, and I was tied up with all kinds of things. That was the only time I didn’t contact Tao Ran at all.”

When Luo Wenzhou heard this, some sinew in his heart twinged wrong, and he blurted out a question: “Do you really like Tao Ran?”

Fei Du’s posture was very relaxed, legs crossed and fingers laying on his knee. At these words the corners of his eyes curved and he mockingly asked, “What, Tao Ran’s all ready to find someone to marry, and you still want to fight it out with me?”

Luo Wenzhou was rather helpless; then he shook his head and laughed, suddenly thinking the two of them were a little like survivors of the same disaster, who could smile on meeting and forget their past enmities. He unconsciously felt around for his cigarettes, then forced himself to put them back. Next to him, Fei Du said, “Go ahead and smoke.”

“Didn’t you have pharyngitis?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du shrugged. “No, I was just nitpicking to make you uncomfortable.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He was still a scoundrel, after all!

He couldn’t resist giving Fei Du a light punch on the shoulder; but Fei Du turned out to be a true gentleman, pursuing the policy of “use your mouth and not your fists.” Suffering a surprise attack to his shoulder, his relaxed and elegant posture became unbalanced, his raised leg dropped, and Fei Du hurriedly reached out a hand to support himself, ending up with a handful of mud.

Not only did Luo Wenzhou not apologize, he actually thought it was pretty funny. Next to Fei Du, he heartlessly laughed out loud.

Fei Du: "..."

Barbarian!

The two of them for once managed to coexist in peace for a long time. The force of the rain gradually slackened, and Luo Wenzhou returned the umbrella to Fei Du. "Tao Ran has finished fixing up his new apartment. He'll be moving in this week. In a little while we'll go over there and sit a while."

Fei Du didn't answer. Expressionless, he looked askance at him, and Luo Wenzhou oddly felt that he was like Luo Yiguo, both of them having that "the world is full of mad dogs and I alone am elevated" sort of "scorn for the mortal world." Having found a new source of entertainment, he charged into the drizzle, covering his head, unable to suppress his laughter.

At this stage, it was as if the smoke and dust of their deep resentment had dispersed, and the true state of affairs had come to light.

The tail-end of the follow-up work was proceeding busily but without agitation. It included synthesizing the testimony of Wang Hongliang and other such people, as well as the police thoroughly eliminating any possibility that He Zhongyi had been involved with drugs. In the end they were unable to pinpoint the origin of that mysterious text message, and put it down, along with the two pinhole cameras found nearby, to the "superstar" Zhao Haochang's performance.

Although he steadfastly refused to acknowledge it.

Ma Xiaowei was detained for several days, then sent to a drug rehabilitation center along with Wu Xuechun and some others, preparing to struggle to build a new life.

Luo Wenzhou personally escorted the two of them into a car. Before leaving, Wu Xuechun looked deeply at him, and Luo Wenzhou nodded to her; he also patted Ma Xiaowei on his head, which had been shaved so that it resembled a kiwi fruit. “You’ve escaped from calamity. Be careful in the future.”

The car drove off, and Luo Wenzhou smoked a cigarette by the road, sighing to himself and for the moment swallowing down two thorns that were like fish bones in his throat.—Had Chen Zhen’s death really been an accident, as Huang Jinglian had said?

And how had the mistrustful black cab driver, faced with Wang Hongliang’s desperately strict precautions, been able to get his slipshod report to the City Bureau?

Hadn’t he been afraid that the City Bureau and those people were a snake and a rat sharing the same burrow?

With Chen Zhen’s death, there was in the end no way to pursue these issues.

His scalp still carrying the warmth of the young policeman’s hand, Ma Xiaowei silently sat in the car, watching the billboards quickly falling back on both sides of the road.

At a red light, an unprepossessing sedan stopped next to them. The car’s window glinted, slowly rolling down, and in a crack the width of two fingers, the screen of a phone appeared. There was a privacy screen stuck onto it, so only from Ma Xiaowei’s point of view could the words on it be seen clearly. It said: *You did well.*

Ma Xiaowei’s eyes opened wide, and he shuddered. Before he’d had a clear look at the hand holding the phone, the sedan’s window had already shut, and it parted ways with them up ahead.

A week later, Fei Du had bid goodbye to his psychiatrist of many years, and Tao Ran finally had a foundation in the city; he had moved into his new apartment, and a big crowd of rowdy friends and colleagues came for a housewarming.

The new apartment looked quite respectable, but in fact it was pushing thirty. It was an overaged building, attractive on the outside but shabby within.

“Deputy Tao, let me tell you, right where you come in the door, you should put a retro clock, one of those kinds in European train stations. You can see the time, and it’ll have a special feel. In that corner there you can hang a terrarium, and in the kitchen you can have a whole new set of kitchen utensils...” Lang Qiao was an armchair interior decorator; from the moment she walked in, she was running around everywhere, setting the world to rights. When she stuck her head into the kitchen and saw Luo Wenzhou with his back to her, holding a pot of well-blended sauce in one hand, Lang Qiao was wholly shocked. “Goodness, boss, why are you here?”

“Who would it be, if not me? Your Deputy Tao? You want noodles for the whole meal?” Luo Wenzhou looked at her distastefully. “Move over. If you’re not helping, then don’t get in the way.”

Lang Qiao hurried out of the way, watching him pour the sauce onto a plate of braised choy sum, the scent immediately steaming up. She swallowed a mouthful of saliva and wanted to pinch a piece to taste but had her paw knocked away by Luo Wenzhou, who seemed to have grown eyes on the back of his head.

“Why do you always go over to the dining hall to eat?” said Lang Qiao.

“What else would I do?” Luo Wenzhou took up a vegetable knife, quickly and evenly cut an onion into thin slices, then tossed all of it

into a pot of cooking curry chicken. “Go home by myself and make a sumptuous banquet to eat with the cat? Am I crazy?”

Lang Qiao’s eyes lit up. “Right, you have a cat! Boss, you’re a very dear colleague; hurry up and let me have a look at your little kitty!”

“Straighten out your tongue when you talk.” Luo Wenzhou couldn’t stand her pestering; he impatiently put the pot of curry on simmer, then got his phone out of his pocket and opened a pet surveillance app. “Look for yourself. It may not be in its bed. Listen, can your village change its totem? You can’t worship something else? Worshipping a cat is so vulgar!”

Lang Qiao devoutly received the phone in both hands. As soon as the camera connected, an enormous cat’s face appeared on the screen.

Luo Yiguo loomed at the camera for a while. Then, having seen something, Master Cat leapt onto the windowsill. Right in front of Luo Wenzhou and Lang Qiao, it performed an act of cruel and infelicitous harm towards a potted spider plant hanging over the windowsill.

With his own eyes, Luo Wenzhou watched it snatch and bite, extend its murderous claws against the spider plant’s hanging basket, and pull the flowerpot down to the ground, the beauty of the bone china flowerpot and the plant passing away together.

Lang Qiao: “...”

This cat’s style was pretty intense.

She hesitantly handed back the phone. “So... My condolences?”

As a head of household, Luo Wenzhou rather wanted to leave home.

Just then, Tao Ran stuck his head in. “What time did Fei Du say he was coming? Will he be able to find the place?”

Luo Wenzhou looked out of the kitchen window and saw an enormous, garish SUV—the other “Yiguo” had already arrived. His head hurt briefly. “He’s downstairs. I see his car.”

It was the local custom to bring an article of cookware or a small kitchen appliance as a present when congratulating someone on an advancement. Fei Du, remembering the City Bureau’s office smelling strongly of sesame oil, had simply bought a fully automatic espresso machine.

The weight of the big cardboard box, fully a meter high, really wasn’t light. For Tao Ran’s sake, Fei Du for once did a bit of manual labor, carrying the appliance over his shoulder to the elevator...

He was then faced with an elevator that had gone on strike. He exchanged helpless looks with some dog-walking old men who couldn’t manage the stairs.

After quite some time, he belatedly thought of something, got out his phone and called Tao Ran. “Ge, what floor do you live on?”

“The twelfth,” said Tao Ran happily over the phone. “The elevator’s broken today, you could walk a couple of steps.”

Fei Du: “...”

He looked down at the cardboard box, feeling that he seemed to have screwed Luo Wenzhou.

CHAPTER 35 - Humbert Humbert II

The repairman took his sweet time and arrived yawning his head off; he seemed very unlikely to return the elevator to full-blooded life immediately. The people who had been waiting gradually lost patience and left.

The coffeemaker's net weight was 12 kg. Adding in the packaging, it was close to 30 kg, quite a bit of weight.

But while Fei Du neglected to exercise, he was after all a young man of appropriate age who could do whatever was needed; carrying twenty or thirty kilograms upstairs actually wasn't much of a problem. The problem was what position he should use—

The cube-shaped cardboard box is perhaps one of the most inhuman of inventions. Whether he carried it on his back, in his arms, or over his shoulder, the appearance would still be rather unsightly. President Fei envisaged a few positions, none of which he could reconcile with his aesthetic sensibilities. But even if it tore his shirt, he still had to carry the burden he had bought himself. Fei Du helplessly stared at the cardboard box, which stared back at him, then decided to see the matter through despite the cost, lifting the box up onto his spotless shoulder—luckily there was no one around but a few foul-mouthed retired old farts and some mangy dogs.

Just as he was resignedly walking towards the stairwell, someone suddenly spoke behind him. “How many flights are you going up? Do you need me to help out?”

Fei Du turned his head and saw a great beauty and a little beauty.

The great beauty was in her twenties and looked like a certain actress, very easy on the eyes. She was leading a little girl around ten years old by the hand. The little girl's hair was done in a princess

hairstyle, and she was wearing a pretty floral-patterned dress. Slowly licking the ice cream she was holding, she curiously examined Fei Du.

In only half a second, Fei Du came to a prompt decision and put down the box. Then he instantly took up a theatrical floating manner. He nodded and smiled at the others. "I must be in your way? I'm truly sorry."

"It's all right, I wasn't going that way. I just saw you carrying something that looked pretty heavy," said the great beauty; she hesitated, then turned her head to look at the elevator. "It's such a hot day, and the elevator suddenly broke. The property management really is something else.—How about waiting for the elevator? It may be fixed soon."

Famed playboy President Fei could have asked for nothing better. He happily forgot the time, let the little girl sit on his box, stood in the corridor with its mottled walls, and began to chat with the great beauty.

"It can't take five minutes to climb the stairs." Watching Luo Wenzhou ladling out exotically-scented curry chicken, Tao Ran looked at his watch. "Why isn't Fei Du up here yet?"

Luo Wenzhou was directing his subordinate grunts to set out the dishes; he lifted the lid of a casserole that was slowly stewing ham hocks. "I don't know, maybe he's put down roots downstairs and started to sprout."

Saying so, he scooped up half a tablespoon of broth and sipped it gently; he felt the flavor was all right, but it was still missing something. "Do you have crystal sugar in the house?"

"No," said Tao Ran, changing his shoes as he answered. "I'll go down and have a look for him and go buy a bag on my way. What kind do you want?"

Luo Wenzhou frowned. “He even needs someone to come pick him up when he’s going up some stairs. He’s a true spoiled young master.”

Tao Ran gave a good-natured smile. But when he had just walked out, he saw Luo Wenzhou, making a face, following after him.

“...” Curiously, Tao Ran asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to buy crystal sugar,” said Luo Wenzhou. “You don’t know what kind to buy.”

Tao Ran inexplicably saw a trace of a conspicuous cover-up on his face.

“What are you looking at?” said Luo Wenzhou.

Tao Ran thought about it. “You seem to be getting on a lot better with Xiao Fei lately?”

Luo Wenzhou’s steps paused. Then, tossing his slippers, he pompously waved a hand. “Who’s getting on better with him? I just have better things to do than bother with that disgraceful piece of work.”

Amidst the furious banging of the repairman, the “disgraceful piece of work” President Fei was freely rolling out his long-practiced elegance and ease towards an attractive young lady.

Smelling strongly of curry, Luo Wenzhou, while still in the stairwell, already had his eyes stung by the sight of this source-of-all-evils bourgeois; he couldn’t stand this behavior of Fei Du’s, thinking to himself that this bit of goods did nothing of value from morning to night; if he wasn’t flirting, then he was teasing. Fortunately his family had some money, because otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to find a job to support himself.

Luo Wenzhou walked over irritably, a taunting “Are your legs there just to vent air? Would you die of exhaustion climbing the stairs?” just rising to his lips when he suddenly heard Tao Ran, behind him, sharply draw in a breath and nearly stand at attention on the spot. In a slightly trembling voice, he said, “Chang... Uh, Chang Ning?”

The great beauty turned at once; first she stared, and then she smiled. “Oh, Tao Ran, what are you doing here, too?”

Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou, without prearrangement, stopped where they were, their gazes simultaneously sweeping back and forth between the two of them, sniffing out a trace of something unusual from the way these two had called each other by name.

The roots of Tao Ran’s ears reddened, and in an instant he forgot heaven and earth, forgot his limbs and his brethren.

His swaying hands and feet stiffened into an uncoordinated set. He shifted over in front of the girl as if half-paralyzed and stammeringly said, “I, I’m going to be living here, I just, just moved in. Why...why are you...”

“Really? I live here, too!” Chang Ning smiled at him, displaying a pair of small dimples. “We really are destined to meet! You see, I didn’t lie to you, did I? Our estate really is a step away from the subway, very convenient.”

First Tao Ran’s head was set spinning by the words “destined to meet”; then he was forced to recall the failed date. He at once began to babble incoherently as if he wanted to find a hole to crawl into. “Yes... Uh, no, um, well, I’m truly sorry, last time I didn’t see you home...”

Having heard this much, the forgotten Captain Luo and President Fei already knew this girl’s identity.

Knowing was one thing, and seeing it with your own eyes was another thing. The two of them subconsciously exchanged a look, their thoughts and emotions complicated.

The person they had had a lengthy rivalry over and sulked about for an age was as straight as Sun Wukong's staff.

And right now this "golden cudgel," faced with his dream partner, was having an attack of Straight Guy Stupidity.

The two specially invited veteran rivals in love stood beside each other, silently looking on, with an affectingly heavy small household appliance between them.

Outside the green trees cast lush shade, the summer heat beat down, the song of the cicadas clamored incessantly—

This scene could be described as "two rivals gazing on a green willow were sent up to the sky with a wooden club."

Only the little girl sitting on the cardboard box felt no impact. She finished crunching on her ice cream cone and reached out a little paw towards Fei Du. "Dagege, do you have a paper towel?"

Three minutes later, Tao Ran had finally succeeded in issuing an invitation to his dream partner to come visit him. Chang Ning hesitated slightly, then nodded. Seeming to have attained the proper next step, Deputy-Captain Tao was so overjoyed he was about to forget how to find north; he joyfully forgot the other two and solicitously took Chang Ning up the stairs.

The two men left behind, having been mocked by ice-cold reality, looked at each other helplessly.

Luo Wenzhou said, "My feelings are a little complicated."

Fei Du collected his gaze and in a very presidential manner gestured to the box next to him with his chin, indicating that the late-coming “grunt” should pick it up. He himself stuck his hands into his pockets and unhurriedly walked off.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

It may have been his mistake, but he felt that Fei Du was acting more and more familiar with him.

In the end Luo Wenzhou picked up the coffeemaker without complaint; though while his body was honest, his mouth was still saying “no.” He snorted towards Fei Du’s back. “You can’t even lift this little thing? Do you have a renal deficiency³, young man?”

Hearing this, Fei Du turned and looked loftily down upon him from several steps up. “What, you want to try me?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Perhaps he had been so provoked by the preceding scene that he urgently needed to change his target; anyway, Fei Du suddenly felt that this speechless expression of Luo Wenzhou’s was pretty funny. He considered Luo Wenzhou, who was holding the heavy object in his arms, and a trace of mischief rose in his heart. He looked into Luo Wenzhou’s eyes; with his slightly light-colored irises holding Luo Wenzhou’s shrunken image, he suddenly drew near.

Luo Wenzhou’s interest in men was inborn; he instinctively backed up, putting his foot down on the step below him.

Fei Du laughed lightly and said nothing. He only reached out a finger and tapped gently on the coffeemaker’s cardboard box, two knocks that seemed to reach the pit of one’s stomach, incomparably

unmentionable, unspeakably ambiguous. A small electric current went up Luo Wenzhou's spine, producing a thin layer of warm sweat.

Meanwhile the main culprit, having finished his teasing, had already put his hands in his sleeves and sauntered up the stairs.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Asshole!

Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou had gone downstairs and picked up a goddess and a domineering director-general with "renal deficiency."

A certain person had in the end forgotten to buy crystal sugar, so the crystal sugar ham hocks had to be made with plain sugar as a substitute.

The "goddess" Chang Ning was an office worker who had recently been transferred to the Yan City branch of her company. She was single and temporarily living with her aunt. The girl with her was her cousin, named "Chenchen." Chenchen's parents weren't home, so the child had been entrusted to Chang Ning's care.

Once the new guests arrived, the lazing young people in Tao Ran's living room at once boiled over with excitement. Some of them played with the child, and some of them jeered at Tao Ran. Under these jeers Tao Ran's face and ears turned red, and he hit upon the strange idea of a source of calamity; pointing to Lang Qiao, he said, "Right, didn't you bring the silk banner? He's here now, hurry up and present it."

Having been reminded, Lang Qiao immediately dashed to the entrance hall and held up a bright red rolled silk banner with both hands. It unfurled, and the whole living room was at once dazzlingly enveloped by its advancing radiance.

Fei Du: "..."

But it wasn't over yet. With care and respect, Lang Qiao handed the silk banner to him, then took out a gold and red certificate of merit. "Comrade Fei Du, our Director Lu said that I should give this to you and let Captain Luo say a few words in his place. When he's finished handling Wang Hongliang's case, he'll be sure to hold a commendation ceremony himself.—Captain Luo, do you want to say it, or should I say it?"

Luo Wenzhou was just engaged in culinary battle and had no time to divide his attention. Amid the bubbling sounds of the kitchen he yelled, "What did you say?—Tao Ran, why has the range hood stopped working? Did your electricity go out?"

Fei Du was afraid that the policewoman would deliver a lengthy speech about "core values" at him. He quickly made his getaway, using the circuit breaker as an excuse. "I'll go have a look."

The unfulfilled Lang Qiao blinked. "Domineering director-generals know how to do that kind of thing?"

When he was a teenager, Fei Du had often hung out at Tao Ran's rental apartment, accompanied by a host of broken-down second-hand appliances. Tao Ran lived roughly and frugally, never throwing away anything that could be repaired, not permitting Fei Du to buy him anything new. As time went on, for his sake, Fei Du had mastered all the skills of a repairman.

The old building's electrical system hadn't been converted. Inside were only elderly fuses; as soon as the power box was opened, a faint scorched smell came from inside—a fuse had burnt out.

Tao Ran, having just moved in, definitely wasn't prepared; Fei Du had to go downstairs and find a hardware store.

When he was about to go out, he was stopped by Chang Ning's little sister Chenchen. "Dagege, I forgot to buy a homework notebook before. Can I come with you?"

Taking the little girl along, Fei Du avoided a roomful of rowdy young people and took a turn downstairs. In one fell swoop he bought everything he needed, and bought two cream puffs at a small shop on the street. He sat down on a stone bench in the estate and split the cream puffs with Chenchen.

"Grown-ups are too noisy," Chenchen commented, like a little grown-up. "Let's wait a while before going back up."

Fei Du was about to joke with her when he had a sudden, inexplicable feeling that something was off; for no reason, he felt that he was being spied on.

CHAPTER 36 - Humbert Humbert III

I loved you. I was a monster, but I loved you.—Lolita⁴

The stone benches were arranged around a long-dried-out lotus pond. Among the mud and withered foliage stood a bronze statue. The bronze statue was in an abstract style; the naked eye basically couldn't distinguish what on earth it had been sculpted to represent. But it had one very brightly polished surface on which distorted reflections could be seen.

Just now, Fei Du had carelessly looked up and met the reflection of a pair of eyes on the sculpture.

The bronze sculpture wasn't a mirror, after all. The light and shade were blurred; the person's age and sex weren't even clear. But for some reason, as soon as he saw those eyes, Fei Du's heart tightened, and the vanilla cream puff he'd just swallowed seemed to stick in his chest. He subconsciously lifted his head and, going off the image on the sculpture, searched all around—

The elderly estate didn't have walls around it. It was a few buildings crowded together into a group, the boundary between them and the rush of traffic vague. There was a nearby bus stop which, because earlier plans had been mishandled, had made inroads into the estate. A number of people were lined up outside the shrubberies, group after group coming and going. The shops along the street did fairly brisk business. It was closing on midday now, and there were already people standing and waiting in front of some small food stands.

The crowds bustled around. There were residents of the small estate who'd come out in their pajamas, there were passersby who had things to do in the surrounding neighborhood, there were owners of private cars who had taken the estate's roads as a shortcut; there

were people eating and people standing and waiting, as well as people delivering packages and food coming and going...

The owner of the pair of eyes was on high alert; they had already concealed themselves among the sea of people. Fei Du didn't find a sign of anything suspicious.

He immediately stood up and said to Chenchen, "Come on. We're going home."

Chenchen had absolutely no sense of crisis. She gave a long-drawn-out, disappointed "oh" and looked longingly towards the food shops lined up along the street. She licked the leftover cream from her fingers. Her eyes turned, and she issued a request on strong grounds towards Fei Du. "I still have some spending money. You just treated me to a cream puff, so why don't I treat you? I want a matcha-flavored one, too."

"Another day." Fei Du gently but uncompromisingly pushed at the back of her head. "We're going to eat lunch."

Chenchen was forced to stand up and follow him. "But I don't like eating lunch. There's lots of dishes I don't like to eat."

"Oh, actually, I'm the same." Fei Du very frankly acknowledged his prince's disease in front of the little girl. Then he continued in a different line. "Although it'll be better when you're older. When you're older you can buy whatever you want to eat, and no one will know you're a picky eater."

Chenchen stared at him speechlessly, feeling that these adults were all very shameless. Just then, she suddenly got a clear look at Fei Du's expression and froze on the spot.

Adolescent children are half-grown; they already have some sense of precaution and can basically read adults' facial expressions.

Chenchen had thought that Fei Du had just been joking with her; as soon as she looked up, she found that he was frowning slightly, his face excessively serious.

In spite of herself she became nervous at this and reached out a hand to tug at Fei Du's clothing. "Dagege, what's wrong?"

As they spoke, the two of them were passing a residential building. A window on the first floor corridor was just swinging open, its arc unfolding. Fei Du had calmly let the little girl walk in front of him, talking to her with his head lowered. At this point, without warning, he suddenly looked up.

In the bright and clear window he caught a gaze following them like a shadow!

The person was wearing sunglasses and a face mask, firmly covering up their whole face. Fei Du put a hand on Chenchen's shoulder and quickly turned his head. At the same time, about two hundred meters behind them, a person dove into the nearby shrubbery, immediately vanishing without a trace. Fei Du had only had a glimpse of the person's humped back and white hair.

An old man?

Chenchen didn't know what had happened. She watched him on tenterhooks.

Fei Du's chilly gaze went through the lenses perched on his nose, sweeping over the crowd not far from them. He asked, "Does someone usually take you home from school?"

"Y-yes," said Chenchen quietly. "When my mom and dad are home, they come to pick me up. If they aren't there, jiejie takes me on the subway. If she's working overtime, then I wait at school for a while. There's a teacher there especially to look after us."

Fei Du nodded thoughtfully and asked, “Have you seen any strange grandpas around?”

Chenchen thought about it for a moment and shook her head at him, full of misgivings.

The two of them quickly entered the residential building’s corridor. The old light gray building cut off the gaze from the shadows. Some time after, an old man with a stooped back slowly came out from behind the bus stop’s sign.

His face was covered, he wore a giant pair of sunglasses, and he held a cane in his hand, like a person with impaired vision, knocking against the ground to feel his way.

The surrounding people had earbuds stuck in their ears, most of them indifferently fiddling with their phones. They didn’t notice his hobbling steps.

The dark lenses were the ideal shield for him; sunlight couldn’t pass through, but his greedy gaze could.

His gaze made an arduous journey, piercing through time and space; without moving a muscle, he stared fixedly at the place where the little girl had just been.

Her floral-patterned dress seemed to be pulsating with light, a quartz hairpin setting off her clear, bright little face. In all his field of vision, in all the world, it seemed to be the only light. Its childish and awkward outlines entered his eyes and in an instant burst into flame, leaving a well-arranged and coherent contour on his retinas.

But there was a snake monster guarding the forbidden fruit. Thinking of the gaze of the man beside the little girl, he fearfully retreated towards the shadows again. His terror and longing assembled into a unique trepidation; he thirstily licked his lips and leaned heavily back

against a tree trunk, his chest rising and falling violently; he was captivated by this trepidation.

Like a person drowning or poisoned.

In the time it took to eat a cream puff, the elevator had been fixed. Fei Du pressed the button for the twelfth floor and went into the elevator with Chenchen.

Chenchen carefully asked, “Dagege, what happened just now?”

Fei Du paused. He didn’t comfort the girl. “I saw a very suspicious person.—In the future, remember to look after yourself when you’re alone with a grown-up.”

“I know. I’ll be in the graduating class when school starts. I’m not a little first grader.” Mimicking the tone of an adult, Chenchen counted off on her fingers: “Keep a distance from strangers. Don’t eat anything strangers give you. If strangers ask you for something, politely tell them to go to the police...”

“You have to be even more careful around people who aren’t strangers.” Fei Du tapped on her forehead. “Don’t get into a grown-up’s car on your own, and don’t be alone with a grown-up where there aren’t any other people—for example, right now. It’s very unsafe for you to be with me. What if I was a bad guy?”

Chenchen covered her forehead, looking at the man who had called himself a bad guy with wide eyes. “Huh?”

“Including the teachers at your school, and also including old grandpas and grandmas who seem like they can’t move very well. Have you got that?”

Chenchen gave an involuntary shudder. Just then, the elevator reached the twelfth floor and the grille opened. She said quietly,

“Why? Gege, I’m a little scared.”

“Being scared is a good thing. Fine things are like porcelain.” Fei Du blocked the elevator door with his hand, indicating that the girl should get out first. “For them, the most dangerous thing often isn’t the cat running around inside the room.”

“Then what is?”

Fei Du looked attentively into the girl’s eyes and quietly said, “It’s that the porcelain itself doesn’t realize it’s breakable.”

Luo Wenzhou was in front of the power box, a cigarette in his mouth, leaning against the wall and waiting for them.

“Does it take you half a year to buy fuse wire?” Luo Wenzhou got out a flashlight and a screwdriver and put them aside. “If you’d taken any longer, the fish in the refrigerator would have made a break for it.”

As if she was looking for a sense of security, Chenchen moved her little legs and quickly ran into the apartment.

Fei Du accepted a screwdriver from Luo Wenzhou’s hand and very familiarly opened up the power box. He took out the burnt-out fuse, then went around the two ends of the circuit with fuse wire several times and pinched gently. He didn’t need pliers, using only the head of the screwdriver. He blocked off a small section of the fuse, pulled a couple of times to ensure it was securely installed, then replaced the circuit breaker.

There was a beep in the room behind him—the refrigerator and the air-conditioning came back to life at the same time. The whole process hadn’t taken more than a minute. Next to him, Luo Wenzhou hadn’t had time to light the cigarette in his mouth.

Looking at him, Luo Wenzhou suddenly realized that Fei Du had entirely left the teenage category; he was a man.

Looking at Fei Du, his view was usually split—when they were at bitter odds with each other, Luo Wenzhou felt that Fei Du was a dangerous calamity with a wretched disposition and no regard for law or discipline, who could explode at any time, and as soon as he opened his mouth he was asking for a beating, particularly unreasonable.

But when for once he was calm and good-tempered, he would remember the frail teenager curled up at the gate of the villa. He would sometimes worry about him, sometimes excessively take care of him in spite of himself—it was an older brother's care, without distracting thoughts.

But perhaps because of Fei Du's over-the-line provocation in the stairwell earlier, Luo Wenzhou's split point of view suddenly showed a tendency to come together, error and falsehood canceling each other out, finally producing a sliver of objective clarity—Fei Du wasn't a dangerous anti-social element; neither was he a pitiful little boy. First of all he was a man, and a very attractive young man at that, knowledgeable and tactful, with a brazen false propriety. Written all over him, like someone blocking half their face with a pipa⁵, were the words "you're welcome to come to bed any time."

Luo Wenzhou thought that if he weren't Fei Du, if he were only a stranger he'd brushed shoulders with on the street or in a bar, he would be the type to cause more than a few passing thoughts.

But...why did there have to be the precondition of "if he weren't Fei Du?"

Luo Wenzhou fell into deep contemplation of the human condition, even being somewhat absent during the meal.—Tao Ran's dining

table wasn't big enough; many of the dishes couldn't be put down. They had to be passed around and divided up. Luo Wenzhou accidentally ladled out a big piece of "plain sugar ham hock" into the small plate by Fei Du's hand; having put it in, he only then remembered that this belonged to "from the knee down"; the young master didn't eat it.

Luo Wenzhou's movements paused. He had yet to speak when Fei Du, poking gently with the tips of his chopsticks, exchanged a look with the pig's leg; then, with a distasteful look on his face, he picked it up and put it into his own bowl, his expression resembling the patriotic cat Luo Yiguo smelling imported cat food.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Of course. All this garbage about "from the knee down" and "sore throat" was just something this bastard had made up.

Outside of the crowd from the City Bureau, Fei Du and Chang Ning both belonged to the outgoing and well-spoken category; they quickly entered into the atmosphere, not seeming at all like outsiders. Lang Qiao, putting on airs, had brought along two bottles of red wine. Aside from the minor, she poured everyone a glass, and they enthusiastically congratulated Deputy Tao on entering the ranks of the mortgage slaves.

Lang Qiao cleverly noticed the large one-way arrow pointing from Tao Ran to Chang Ning. Right in front of Chang Ning, Lang Qiao recited an extemporaneously composed "In Praise of Deputy Tao"; from Tao Ran's dedication to his profession, his love of life and love of small animals, she went on to enumerate all the unsurpassed struggles Deputy-Captain Tao had undertaken against the ghost-botherer Captain Luo for the sake of protecting the numerous "lackeys." Finally, under Luo Wenzhou's falsely smiling fixed attention, she veered the subject away, out of nowhere fabricating a beautiful woman in pursuit of Tao Ran, scaring Tao Ran into hastily

giving a small bow and entreating the patroness not to impugn a person's purity without provocation.

“Tao-ge is truly very patient.” Fei Du put in a timely word to alleviate the awkwardness. “In the future, when he has children himself, he'll definitely be a model dad. I caused a lot of trouble for him when I was little.”

Face and ears red, Tao Ran repeatedly waved his hand.

Chang Ning looked at him curiously.

Fei Du sipped a mouthful of red wine. “My mom died young, and Tao-ge was the policeman who handled her case. My father had no attention to spare to look after me, and he voluntarily took care of me for a long time.—Actually, I was in my teens then. Even if there'd been no one to look after me, I wouldn't have starved to death on my own. But only with him did I find out what ‘living life seriously’ was. Jiejie, don't look at the miserable way he scrapes by on his own. When he's taking care of others, there's nothing he won't think of.”

Having listened to this crowd marketing Tao Ran one after another, Chang Ning didn't feel anything but how well Deputy Tao got on with others; she couldn't resist turning her head and smiling at him.

Tao Ran's alcohol tolerance wasn't much better than getting knocked down by one glass to start with. Having drunk most of a glass of red wine, he was already dizzy; with the ambivalent smile of his dream partner trained on him, he forfeited his cognitive functions entirely. Hard-pressed, he began to rave. “No, no, it's really...really not like that. I wasn't the only one taking care of little Fei Du, everyone was very concerned about you, even my shifu heard about it afterwards and often asked about you... And who else—Wenzhou, if you didn't see it he wouldn't say, but actually he sneakily went to look at you several times, and that game machine of yours, he gave it to me to...”

Luo Wenzhou, hearing something wrong with his words, hurriedly kicked him under the table, but it was already too late.

Tao Ran's small remaining sense of balance went up in smoke at his kick, and he toppled sideways, knocking over a nearby cardboard box of odds and ends that he hadn't had time to put away yet.

All kinds of professional books, leisure books, folders, and notebooks went clattering to the ground.

Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou, each holding down one corner of the table, were motionless.

Lang Qiao heartlessly jabbed Luo Wenzhou with her elbow. "Is that true? Boss, did you really do that? That's pretty embarrassing..."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

You know it's embarrassing, and you're still broadcasting it in public!

Under Fei Du's heavy gaze, he braced himself and gave a dry cough; then, in an obvious attempt at a cover-up, he stood and went to gather up the cardboard box Tao Ran had knocked over.

"Good-for-nothing. A drop too much wine and you start blabbing." Luo Wenzhou wrenched the subject away, picking up a yellowed notebook and flipping through it, stirring up dust. "Hey, why do you have shifu's old notebook here?"

Before he'd finished speaking, a portrait sketched in pencil fell out of the notebook. The drawing was of a refined man with regular features, but in his eyes, which looked straight out of the picture, there were faint signs of something heavy being repressed.

There was a date noted on the paper, over twenty years ago. There was also an annotation written in a corner.

“Wu Guangchuan—six girls’ bodies not yet found.”

CHAPTER 37 - Humbert Humbert IV

Lang Qiao hadn't had her fun yet; she was planning to follow on the heels of her victory, ganging up with her colleagues to continue encircling Luo Wenzhou. But unexpectedly she looked up and met the eyes of the portrait that had fallen on the ground and was so startled the alcohol flew out of her pores.

The public security system had people who specialized in making composite drawings. There was no lack of experts among them. Comparatively speaking, this portrait's execution belonged to a beginner level. But the odd thing was that the person in the drawing had an uncommonly lifelike charm; this face seemed to have been traced over countless times in the artist's mind, until the artist could resist no longer and had just applied their awkward technique to the paper.

"What is that?" said Lang Qiao.

Having been kicked over by Luo Wenzhou, Tao Ran had sobered up a little and noticed he had said something wrong. He stood up, leaning on the couch, and went out of the room to wash his face. When he returned, he and Luo Wenzhou cleaned up the stuff. "It must be Lotus Mountain. The old man went on about it all his life."

"Lotus Mountain" wasn't a mountain; it was the name of a place on the northern outskirts of Yan City. Earlier, it had fallen under the county seat administered by Yan City; over a decade ago it had been absorbed into Yan City and become a development zone.

On the page in the notebook, aside from the vivid portrait, there were several yellowed old photographs, stuck to the page with clear tape. It had been too long; they fell at a touch.

There were blurry casual snapshots, and there were photographic studio products typical of the era—all Dutch windmill backdrops and exaggerated lighting, the smiles of the young girls in them a little stiff, as in a staged photograph with too long an exposure period.

There were six photographs altogether.

There's a very strange thing about old photographs. All photo paper will fade and yellow just the same when put away for a couple of decades. If the person in the photograph is happy and well, the yellowing marks of age will call to mind long recollections, the quiet passage of time; but if the person in the photograph later met with some mishap, then when others look back on their earlier appearance, they'll get a strange, somber flavor from it, as if the person in the photograph's anger and dissatisfaction are possessing the static image, declaring something from the unseen realm.

“It's the Venerable Yang's?” asked Lang Qiao. “What was he doing looking after a development zone?”

“The City Bureau had a policy back then, those who were under thirty-five all had to get basic experience—either go to a local police station or go to one of the counties. My shifu and some others went to Lotus Mountain and stayed there half a year or more.” Luo Wenzhou carefully pinched the edges of the photographs and stuck them back into the notebook. “They hadn't been there long when they ran into this case—you may never have heard of it. I wasn't old enough to attend school then.”

“At the beginning, there was a man who came to report a case. He said his child had gone missing.” Tao Ran flipped through the notebook. Aside from the photographs and the portrait, most of the notebook's contents were purely handwritten. The old criminal policeman's writing was quite beautiful, delicate, firm, and well-shaped. On the page before the photographs the characters “Guo Heng” were written; there was a triple-underline under the name.

“Right, the person who reported the case was this Guo Heng. His eleven-year-old daughter had gone missing. Her nickname was ‘Feifei.’”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou’s hand paused on a thick sheaf of teaching materials, and he raised his head to give Tao Ran a puzzled look. “You’re this drunk and you still remember what the girl was called?”

Tao Ran looked down and avoided his gaze. “After hearing the old man go on and on about it for so many years, I could recite the whole history from memory.”

Chang Ning was usually busy at work and had little time to watch TV. For once she was in close proximity to people from the Criminal Investigation Team telling stories; in spite of herself, she very curiously asked, “And then what?”

“Back then it was common for parents not to be as careful with their children as now. An eleven- or twelve-year-old was already an older child. Going to school or to a classmate’s house to play, they’d usually just say a word at home and then run off. The grown-ups wouldn’t hover around them day and night.

“But Guo Fei was an especially well-behaved little girl. She went to school and went home at fixed times. If she came home five minutes late in the evening, she’d have a proper reason for it. Her family never had to worry about her studies. There was nothing special about the day she disappeared. Her classmates said, that day after getting out of school, Guo Fei didn’t stay on. She promptly went home. It was about a fifteen-minute walk; the child had gone missing during those fifteen minutes. My shifu and the others followed her usual route, going back and forth over it dozens of times. At that time there weren’t as many security cameras by the road as now, but there also weren’t any especially out-of-the-way places along the route the child took to go home. It was summer then, and not very dark in the

late afternoon. There were plenty of people coming and going outside. Reasonably speaking, if a girl that age had been grabbed off the street, even if there had been just a trace of something wrong. It's impossible that no one at all would have noticed.

“But when they had gone all over, they came up empty-handed. They turned everything upside down near the school without finding even a hair from the girl's head.—Sherlock Holmes has a famous saying, ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’⁶ So someone said, either an acquaintance had taken her, or the child had left home herself.

“Following the line of thinking that it had been an acquaintance, the police investigated the school's teachers and staff, the Guo family's friends and relatives, and even the stationery store and little supermarket the child usually went to... They summoned over a hundred people altogether, but they still came up empty-handed.”

At this point, Tao Ran paused. “Just as their investigation had hit a wall, the girl's father suddenly received a phone call. No one spoke when he picked up, there was only the sound of a little girl shouting herself hoarse. The child's mother fainted when she heard it. The police immediately traced the phone number and found the location of the phone—it was a very remote telephone booth.”

“There was no security camera?” Lang Qiao asked in surprise.

“No,” said Luo Wenzhou. “The phone booth was at a waste transfer station and looked abandoned. Many people didn't even know the phone still worked. They found a bit of blood next to the phone booth; it matched Guo Fei's blood group, but they couldn't test the DNA then and had no way to determine whether it had actually been her. There were no fingerprints.”

In Tao Ran's living room, no one spoke.

After a good while, Fei Du, who hadn't spoken all this time, put in a question. "There wasn't another phone call? No extortion, no ransom demand?"

"No," said Tao Ran. "After that phone call, the kidnapper didn't contact the girl's family again. They didn't want money, and they didn't make any requests."

Fei Du lightly shook his wineglass, sniffing its aroma now and then, as if the glass contained not a dry red picked up from the supermarket but Romanée-Conti.

"That's pretty strange," he said. "It sounds like the kidnapper wasn't aiming at the child, but wanted to torment the grown-ups—what did the girl's parents do?"

"Guo Heng himself was a middle school teacher, and the child's mother was a civil servant. The family's financial situation was pretty good for the time, but they were still only comfortably off, both ordinary wage workers. You couldn't really call them rich. The couple had both gone to school, they were both well-educated and reasonable, neither wildly ambitious in their careers. They got on well with their coworkers, there were no disputed interests, and the possibility of extramarital affairs had been eliminated."

An ordinary family, ordinary parents, an ordinary girl—not even a very pretty child—all living conventional lives. Just as unremarkable as a random passerby on the street. The police had dug down deep without digging up any unusual stories.

There's a proverb that says "a fly won't sting a seamless egg⁷", but the police had repeatedly combed through everyone connected with the Guo family, even analyzed all their private affairs with a magnifying

glass; they had found that the girl Guo Fei and her family were in fact “a seamless egg.”

Time elapsed and the silent kidnapper didn't speak again. Both the police and the girl's family knew that the chances of getting the child back had become remote; the best fate was that she had been sold to some place with out-of-the-way predilections, but the greatest likelihood was...

The police didn't have the first idea why the kidnapper had chosen this girl.

It was as if someone had tossed a die in the street and randomly grabbed whoever it landed on.

There was no apparent reason.

No one was safe in this world.

Lang Qiao asked, “And...the other five?”

“All the leads in Guo Fei's disappearance were cut short. There was nothing to be done but leave it unsolved. Later my shifu was recalled to the city—he was with the Xitai District Sub-Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team then. There was another missing child case in the jurisdiction. Another girl, twelve years old, also disappeared without a trace on her way home from school. The kidnappers were also silent. The most frightening thing was that two days after the girl went missing, her family received a phone call with a wailing child.

“My shifu immediately felt something was off and made the situation known to his superiors. The head of the Xitai District at the time decided to report up to the City Bureau. In the end they found that in all of Yan City, including the surrounding counties, there had been six missing child cases of this kind.”

“Seven,” Luo Wenzhou added. “The last surviving girl’s home situation was special. She had no father, and her mother was a drunk, fooling around morning to night. The child went missing for several days and she didn’t know. She never called the police. The City Bureau took the lead on this, transferred people over from all the districts, established a special investigation team. Lao Yang later transferred to the City Bureau because of that opportunity.—But there were no developments. There were no points of intersection between the missing girls except...”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou suddenly remembered something. His gaze fell on Chenchen, chewing a drinking straw as she listened attentively. After pausing, he steered his words onto another direction. “Except that the means of kidnapping were about the same.”

“After Guo Fei’s father heard about it, he took a long term unpaid leave and came over to the City Bureau to wait for a result from the special investigation team, but, unfortunately, in the end he lost hope.” Tao Ran very respectfully stowed the old criminal policeman’s notebook in the cardboard box. “Later the special investigation team dispersed. The only remaining people who still thought about the case were the victims’s families, and my shifu, who had dealt with the case from the beginning. After another half a year, Guo Heng suddenly found my shifu and said he’d found a suspect. It was a teacher, named Wu Guangchuan—the person in the drawing. Wu Guangchuan was a teacher at ‘Jinxu⁸ Middle School’. Jinxu was the earliest private middle school of the time, a boarding school, recruiting students from the whole city. The school fees were high, the education quality was high. Quite a few parents in distant suburbs thought that the local middle schools wouldn’t do and sent their children to Jinxu. When Guo Fei went missing, Wu Guangchuan just happened to have come with a team to the Lotus Mountain area to recruit new students.”

Chang Ning held her breath. “Was it him?”

“Wu Guangchuan was thirty-six years old then, he was divorced and lived alone. He did meet the requirements for the offender. Lao Yang privately went to shadow him and performed some illegal moves, but he didn’t turn anything up. This Wu Guangchuan’s temper was mild, he got on well with people, he was known far and wide as a good person. He regularly came into contact with children at work and had never crossed any lines. Lao Yang shadowed him for a while and thought it wasn’t him, but Guo Heng was like someone possessed. He was simply positive that Wu Guangchuan was the kidnapper. Later Lao Yang withdrew, and Guo Heng went with a melon knife to find Wu Guangchuan. He stabbed him.”

Lang Qiao cried out. “Did he die?”

“Yes, by the time they got him to the hospital, he wasn’t breathing. In Wu Guangchuan’s basement, they found the seventh missing girl, as well as the clothes of the six previous girls—the clothes had been cut into strips and had bloodstains matching the blood groups of the victims. That was how the serial child kidnapping case was resolved. But while the clothes were there, they couldn’t find the girls themselves, dead or alive, and the suspect had died without giving testimony.” Luo Wenzhou stood up and stretched. “Guo Heng had deliberately killed someone and was sentenced. Lao Yang could never let it go. He always thought that it was his error of judgement that had led to the later tragedy. He went on and on about it all his life.—Let’s not mention it anymore. The suspect’s ashes are cold. Eat.”

Everyone enjoyed themselves at Tao Ran’s house until the afternoon. The ones who had taken a taxi or the subway all scattered, and the ones who had driven their own cars stayed back to help Tao Ran clean up his new home while sobering up. Chang Ning and Chenchen went home, too.

Tao Ran had downed a few more glasses afterwards and couldn't quite stand up straight while washing the dishes. He nearly broke a dish, saving it at the last moment, and got chased away by Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou washed all the dishes and put them away in a twinkling. When he returned to the living room, he saw Fei Du with his back to him, casually flipping through the old criminal policeman's notes.

He seemed to have eyes on the back of his head. He said to Luo Wenzhou, "Didn't you leave something out just now? The missing girls definitely had a point in common—was it the clothes?"

Luo Wenzhou leaned back against the wall and laughed in spite of himself. "How do you know? You aren't the killer's reincarnation?"

"You looked at Chenchen, then bit back your words." Fei Du turned around. "The clothes found in this Wu Guangchuan's basement, were they all floral-patterned dresses?"

As soon as Luo Wenzhou saw him, he remembered that unfortunate game machine and rather uncomfortably avoided his gaze. "You can teach a child to be careful of strangers, to be vigilant, but you can't make her scared of wearing floral-patterned dresses. Otherwise, what's the point of us?"

"Oh." Fei Du nodded lightly. "Captain Luo is right."

Having for once heard a few nice words out of his mouth and had his liver set tingling by his nod, Luo Wenzhou's inauspicious premonition came true the next second.

Fei Du quietly asked, "Aside from the little white flowers and the game machine...what else is there?"

CHAPTER 38 - Humbert Humbert V

The guests had left, and Tao Ran had presumably already slept his way to an alternate dimension.

A faint aroma of wine floated through the brightly sunlit living room, sour-sweet and clinging. Fei Du turned off the air-conditioning and opened a window. He used the newly arrived coffeemaker to make a cup of espresso; the thick fragrance steamed up from the corner of the table.

The summer day's warm breeze met Luo Wenzhou head-on. For a moment he was silent. Then he shook the water droplets off his hands and pressed the heel of his ice-cold palm to his forehead, sighing in utter helplessness. "Youngster, can you be a little more tactful? The red neckerchief teaches us from the time we're little that we shouldn't leave our names when doing good deeds. Where's the beauty in you bringing it up like this, huh?"

Fei Du didn't respond. He seemed to have frozen, his "false propriety" nearly becoming the truth.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him and suddenly realized that he wasn't alone in being embarrassed—considering President Fei's precise memory, he definitely recalled the scene of himself parading around at the City Bureau playing games, attacking Luo Wenzhou with frigid wit and scorching irony.

Luo Wenzhou earnestly imagined what it would be like to be in Fei Du's shoes now; imagining such a scene, he felt his hair standing up in alarm.

As soon as he thought of this, his vision took on an awkwardness filter; when he looked at Fei Du again, he thought that his flatly pursed lips, his fingers held unnaturally at his sides, and the evasive

gaze behind his lenses all made him look incomparably uncomfortable.

When he was uncomfortable himself, it would often go from bad to worse; the more he spoke, the more he would babble. But if he noticed that the other person was also uncomfortable, then the symptoms would instantly heal on their own.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly smiled and slowly stuck his hands in his pockets.

He lowered his head and put a cigarette in his mouth, dropping and then raising his eyelids, looking Fei Du over from bottom to top. Because his mouth was occupied, the voice coming from between his teeth was a touch nasal. “What? You’ve finally discovered that the Uncle Dongbin⁹ you’ve bitten all these years is a good person? It’s all right, darling, you don’t have to be so nervous. We living Lei Feng¹⁰ don’t ask for single-minded devotion from just anyone.”

Fei Du’s features were like a painted mask, impenetrable as a fortress. Especially when he was agitated, his control over his own expression and body language was nearly perfect, not a trace of emotion leaking out.

Compared to him, the lie-spouting Zhao Haochang and his ilk could simply be considered ingenuous.

Fei Du didn’t answer Luo Wenzhou’s half-joking words. He muttered silently to himself for a moment, turned and picked up the cup of freshly-ground coffee. A thin layer of oil floated on top, forming small ripples as he moved. Fei Du didn’t add a grain of sugar; as if he had lost his sense of taste, he silently drank over half the cup.

Fei Du had drunk a few glasses of wine earlier, and he hadn’t eaten properly at all; his stomach was half empty now. The unhealthy

assembly of alcohol and highly concentrated coffee immediately formed into a “blood pressure supercharger,” luring his heart into pumping great quantities of blood into his veins. His disordered and suddenly accelerated heart rate made him feel a little unwell; cold sweat formed in the palms of his hands.

Luo Wenzhou frowned. “Don’t drink any more of that...”

Fei Du curved his palms around the warmth of the bone china cup, and the corner of his mouth twitched. He interrupted him with a false smile. “Actually, it’s very rare for someone like me, who would casually hire a contract killer to do away with my own dad, to be able to preserve my current position so long without going astray. Captain Luo’s long years of care are a contribution that can’t go unnoticed.”

Luo Wenzhou felt a certain indescribable tension in these words, but before he could carefully sample it, Fei Du had drained the rest of the coffee in one gulp. It must have been too bitter; he frowned, his raised chin and neck forming a sharply curving arc.

Then he put the cup down, nodded, and turned to leave. “I’ll be going, then. Say a word to Tao Ran for me.”

“Hey,” Luo Wenzhou subconsciously ordered, “don’t drive after drinking.”

Fei Du ignored him.

“Did you hear me?” said Luo Wenzhou.

With an indifferent look, Fei Du put his hand on the doorknob, seeming not to have heard.

Luo Wenzhou saw that speaking had twice failed; he had to act. He grabbed Fei Du’s arm and skillfully pulled it backwards. Using the

grip he normally used to arrest criminals, he twisted Fei Du's hand behind his back and pulled him away from the door.

Fei Du: "..."

"You weren't listening." Under Fei Du's shocked gaze, one hand pressed to the back of his neck, one hand trapping his arm, Luo Wenzhou "escorted" him to an armchair three steps away. "Sit down and wait. I'll call you a driver."

Fei Du only then recovered, immediately struggling out of his grip. He spoke rather quickly. "Captain Luo, could you evolve a little from the basic *Homo sapiens* condition towards the level of civilized people?"

Luo Wenzhou ignored him, the fingers laying on the back of Fei Du's neck inching slightly over to his pulse. "I think you aren't feeling well. As I was saying, I seem to remember reading somewhere that you shouldn't drink coffee and wine together."

Fei Du: "..."

He was so "shocked" by Luo Wenzhou's belated advice that his ears hurt.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him. "I didn't think it over that much.—Not being nice to you won't do, being nice to you won't do either. You're harder to satisfy than Her Holiness the Empress Dowager Cixi."

Fei Du said, "...Excuse my lack of manners, I didn't know your surname was actually Li."

Luo Wenzhou tapped on the side of his neck, then picked up his phone and went to call a driver.

Tao Ran, the master of the house, knew nothing of this quarrel full of surging undercurrents. He had been knocked down by a few glasses of red wine and lay until the setting sun had suffused the surface of the earth. Only then did he get up, his mouth parched.

Unsurprisingly, the guests had all left; before leaving, they had neatly tidied his disorderly apartment.

In his new residence, Tao Ran washed his face and looked at the two notes stuck to the refrigerator. One had been left by Luo Wenzhou, telling him that the uneaten food was all in the refrigerator and he should heat it up himself when he got up. The other note had been left by Fei Du; it was comparatively long. Tao Ran rubbed his eyes for an age before he could clearly read what was written on it.

Fei Du said that when he had taken Chenchen out to buy a notebook, he'd had the feeling that they were being followed. He wasn't sure that it had been aimed at Chenchen; he could have been being oversensitive. But just in case, he asked Tao Ran, if he had time in the evening, to go to apartment 1101 in his building to pay a visit to Chenchen's parents and remind them to be careful of their child's safety during the summer vacation. He also told Tao Ran not to forget to bring something to thank the great beauty for "honoring his humble abode with her presence" that day.

The busybody. He'd even gotten the apartment number.

Tao Ran laughed in spite of himself.

Then, his smile gradually congealed. He read over Fei Du's description of the suspected stalker again and subconsciously looked out the window—the vegetation on the old estate was plentiful, the dense conifers and shrubs crowding together; looking down from upstairs there was nothing to see.

It was quiet and still.

Tao Ran went over to the small cabinet and once again opened the old criminal policeman's notes.

On the title page there was a tiny old photograph, taken of the notebook's previous owner during his youth, crewcut, square-faced, soberly facing the camera. His name was written next to the photograph in flourishing cursive—Yang Zhengfeng.

The pages concerning the "Lotus Mountain Serial Child Kidnapping Case" had been circled in red by the Venerable Yang. Tao Ran knew that this indicated that in shifu's mind, the case hadn't been solved. In these pages was a record of the old criminal policeman's notes on his illegal surveillance of Wu Guangchuan, spanning half a month; each day it amounted to "nothing abnormal."

There were also a few lines of small writing: "According to Wu Guangchuan's colleagues, while recruiting students at Lotus Mountain, he stayed in the hospital two days due to a severe cold; this just happened to be the time the victim Guo Fei went missing. I have confirmed the pertinent circumstances with the hospital; Wu Guangchuan's opportunity to commit the crime is an open question."

Tao Ran poured himself a cup of warm water and slowly combed his chaotic thoughts into order—Wu Guangchuan was supposed to be over 1.7 meters in height, a tall man; a little girl would have had to lift her head to look at his face. Adolescent children had already begun to develop and could distinguish gender, and they were beginning to be sensitive; a strange adult man, even if he was a teacher, would need several meetings or a long period of contact to gain a girl's trust.

Would the hospitalized Wu Guangchuan have had the time and opportunity?

While Tao Ran was lost in thought, his fingers loosened, and the notebook fell and shut, revealing a strip of paper stuck among the last pages. It was in Tao Ran's own handwriting; an FM radio frequency was written on it, followed by the note "midnight, Zero Hour Reading."

Yang Zhengfeng had died three years earlier, knifed by a wanted criminal.

He'd been gradually getting older and his rank gradually higher; several years ago he had been moved from the front lines of criminal policing to a management position. Luo Wenzhou had heard a hint then that said he would soon be promoted to Deputy Director, and they had been eagerly looking forward to eating a meal at his expense.

When the business happened, it hadn't even been on his working time—in order to send his child off to attend university out of town, Yang Zhengfeng had taken two weeks of his annual leave. When the child had been sent off, he'd planned to use his last day of vacation to act as house husband, going to the market first thing in the morning. While going through an underpass, he'd seen a vagrant who looked on edge. The vagrant was fretful, glaring viciously at any passerby who looked at him too long. Yang Zhengfeng had acutely felt that this person's little gestures looked like the he was preparing to attack and therefore took careful note. Looking more closely, he recognized the vagrant as an A Level wanted criminal, who had brutally stabbed his four neighbors to death and then run off.

The suspect's mental state was evidently unstable. Yang Zhengfeng didn't dare to act rashly. He furtively contacted his colleagues, but all it took was a little push: an old lady walking a dog went by. Perhaps the little dog sensed danger; it started to bark wildly at the wanted criminal, provoking him at once. He yelled and pulled out a knife from somewhere, throwing himself at the old lady. Yang Zhengfeng had no choice but to put himself forward—

Yang Zhengfeng was stabbed a dozen times by the deranged killer.

Tao Ran had been on duty that day and was the earliest to arrive on the scene, coming just in time to see the Venerable Yang one last time.

But the strange thing was, Yang Zhengfeng's last words weren't to ask whether the criminal had been caught, nor to recommend his wife and child to Tao Ran's care. Gripping Tao Ran's hand, he'd repeatedly said, "88.6 FM...12:05...88.6..."

The 12:05 program on 88.6 FM was "Zero Hour Reading"; afterwards the program had stopped broadcasting and become a very non-mainstream phone app, every day mildly playing an audiobook, the contents exceedingly dull. Fei Du had happened to hear it once and had jokingly called it a weapon of hypnosis.

Working the night shift, turning your days and nights upside down, would sometimes cause trouble sleeping. At these times, Tao Ran would listen to the peculiar audiobooks for a while. He had always suspected that he'd failed to grasp shifu's last words, until one time when he'd heard the ID "The Reciter."

Tao Ran got out his phone, which was nearly out of battery, opened the "Zero Hour Reading" app, and went to the saved commentary on *The Red and the Black*, authored by The Reciter.

The first sentence of the article was: "*But with whom shall I have my meals?*"—This question is all the character's fears."

And in an incomparable coincidence, Zhao Haochang, the killer in the '520' case, having used his connection to the Zhang family to take a colleague's place and obtain an excellent opportunity, had then relied on these resources to ascend to the rank of second level partner; in order to commemorate this, he had stolen the fountain pen of Fei Du,

the head of the company that had collaborated on the project. He had put a commemorative label on it, which just happened to say, “With whom shall I have my meals?”

There was no way to explain this to others. If he’d said it, people would only think he had been immersed in the case too long, to the point of becoming a little neurotic, seeing something and feeling a sense of déjà vu. But the problem was that Tao Ran thought he’d had the same sense of déjà vu more than once, and each time it was the same ID.

When shifu had clutched his hand at the end, had he really said the name of a boring reading program?

Could he have heard wrong, and, under the self-suggestion that “there was something wrong with that program” had over time begun to see each bush as an enemy soldier, suspecting every coincidence?

Tao Ran had been a criminal policeman for over seven years; he knew this kind of thing was very common. If a person was overly suspicious, their memory would trick them—how many eyewitnesses were there who had run into a violent crime but afterwards couldn’t say clearly whether the suspect had been male or female, tall or short?

Over the years, he’d gone through the old criminal policeman’s notebook from cover to cover countless times, attempting to find some trace in it, to understand what shifu’s true last words had been after all. But though he had all the notes memorized, he still hadn’t found any traces apart from that radio program.

Tao Ran took a deep breath and shook his head in self-mockery, feeling that perhaps he needed to go have a chat with the bureau’s psychological counselor.

Just then, an update notice appeared in the app's top righthand corner. Tao Ran carelessly looked down at it, and his pupils contracted. The subject of the update was: "Wanderer, have you found your lost pearl?—rereading *Lolita*; contributor: The Reciter."

CHAPTER 39 - Humbert Humbert VI

The house was too big. The limited human energy couldn't soak through, and it sent out a smell of deep lifelessness.

It was a lifelessness that sunlight, fresh flowers, and lamps were all powerless to dispel.

He stood in the vestibule, hesitating.

Reasonably speaking, this ought to have been his home. But every time he set foot in the spotless vestibule and faced the room filled with sunlight coming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, there was dread in his heart.

Faint music came from upstairs, a melodious female voice repeatedly reciting the refrain. He stood for a moment in a trance, as if he dimly knew that something was about to happen. He slowly began to walk, heading inside.

The sensation of the sunlight falling on him became strange, clammy and chill, not like sunlight, but like the wind during a rainstorm. It blew over his forearms, left bare by his summer uniform, raising a layer of fine gooseflesh.

He went up to the second floor. The music became louder and louder, the familiar melody sticking in his chest like a fishbone caught in the throat. His breathing became labored, and he halted, wanting to run away.

But when he looked back, he discovered that everything behind him had dissolved into darkness; everything seemed to be fixed, written and rehearsed. Before him there was only one road, one direction.

The all-encompassing darkness enveloped him from all sides, compelling him to go up the narrow stairs, compelling him to push open that door—

A loud roar. He thought that something had exploded beside his ear. Then he looked down and saw the woman fallen onto the ground.

Her neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, and her body was suffused with a rigid pallor. But her eyes were open—it seemed that while her body was dead, her spirit still lived.

The woman stared straight at him, two trails of bloody tears flowing from her eyes. She coldly asked, “Why didn’t you save me?”

His breath tightened, and he backed away.

The woman staggered to her feet and reached out a death-mottled hand. “You can feel everything. Why were you avoiding me? Why didn’t you save me?”

The hand was surrounded by the consuming darkness. The dark seemed to be alive, heartlessly swallowing her up. She let out ceaseless screams and questions, struggling with all her might to reach out her hand to grab him, but she was ceaselessly pulled into the darkness.

He instinctively took that icy and livid hand, heard the screams, felt that he was falling unstoppably. Suddenly, something pulled him from behind. His back pressed against a warm and solid body, and a pair of hands came around him, traveled up, and covered his eyes.

He smelled the faint scent of cigarettes on those clear-knuckled hands. Then, in the cracks between the fingers, there was a burst of light—

Fei Du started awake.

He was sitting in his own study. Going through a dull project plan, he'd read halfway through and fallen asleep.

It was afternoon. A cool wind full of humidity was pouring in from outside the window. At some point the wind and clouds had risen outside, and a storm was brewing. The roaring sounds and flashing lights in his dream had been thunder and lightning. His phone was ringing interminably, displaying three missed calls—no wonder he had heard that music in his dream.

Fei Du took a deep breath. As he got up to close the window, he answered the phone. "Hello?"

Zhang Donglai's shouts crashed into his ear. "It's the middle of the day, Master Fei. Which beauty's body were you reluctant to climb off of? I've called you so many times, and you haven't picked up!"

"The thunder is too loud. I didn't hear." Fei Du's head was still rather heavy. He rubbed the center of his brow. "What do you want?"

"The wind is great, the rain is great, the sun is great! Darling, come out and play!"

Fei Du came up to the window and felt that the water vapor in the air was about to start drizzling. The plants by the window were drooping their heads. "Where are you having fun on a lousy day like this?"

Zhang Donglai said, "There's a new cross-country racing field in the West Ridge Ecological District, it's super cool. They've developed a special 'death course,' only open when the weather's bad. The stronger the tempest, the more stimulating—how do the words go? Storm petrel, let the tempest strike harder¹¹!"

Having heard this, Fei Du felt that mud had splashed onto his outer ear along with these words. Indifferently, he said, “You’re courting death?”

“Listen to yourself, how elderly is that! It doesn’t sound anything like the liveliness of a modern young man. In a person’s life, once he’s eaten things and seen things, what else can he do? Isn’t playing around courting death the only thing left to do?” Zhang Donglai said volubly, “If you don’t want to drive, then don’t drive, just show up. Let me tell you, they have an accompanying club at the racing field, they’ve brought over a little artistic troupe. There’s all types and temperaments of beauties in it, tall, dark-haired, lovely great girls, qin-playing little artists, a whole other class from those snake spirits, completely in accordance with your troublesome taste. It’s a rare opportunity. Hurry up and come here, don’t sit around at home nursing your infatuation with an old man—hasn’t he already found someone, anyway?”

“You’re pretty well-informed.” Fei Du snorted. He was a director-general who had grown up in comfort; he had no interest in playing around courting death in the rain in front of a lively stupid little cunt. He meant to refuse and hang up; the words of the refusal had already risen to his lips. “I’m not...”

Just then, Fei Du leaned beside the window and suddenly saw his own dimly lit study and somehow remembered his disordered dream just now...as well as those tobacco-scented hands.

More than a month had passed since Tao Ran’s housewarming feast. Fei Du, who had previously harassed Officer Tao nearly every day, hadn’t even called him. First, it was that he knew there was someone Tao Ran liked and it wouldn’t be proper to disturb him; second, it was that every time he saw that miserable game machine, he felt wrong all over.

Today was even worse; he was being plagued by nightmares.

“All right.” Fei Du changed his answer at the last second. “Send me the address.”

Nearing the end of July, Yan City’s rainy season was also coming to its tail-end, but the uninterrupted rain not only showed no sign of laying down its arms, it was instead growing even more demented.

Two hours after getting off work, Luo Wenzhou retraced his steps. He left his car at the City Bureau’s gates and didn’t even take an umbrella, just put a hood over his head and charged into the building through the rain.

“Captain Luo, second floor conference room, hurry!”

Luo Wenzhou shook out his dripping jacket, displaying three bloody scratches on the back of his hand. He raced up to the second floor and finally released the breath caught in his chest. “So what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. I also just got here.” Tao Ran carelessly rolled up his umbrella. “What happened to your hand?”

Luo Wenzhou irritably scratched at the wounds on the back of his hand, which had already stopped bleeding. “A lightbulb blew out at home. I was just changing it in the dark when the venerable old man called to urge me on to death, and I was so urged that I accidentally stepped on the ancestor’s tail—Director Lu!”

Speak of the venerable old man and the venerable old man will appear.

Lu Youliang quickly gestured at the two of them, blowing towards the conference room like the wind. Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran hurriedly followed.

“Today is the last day of the city’s 16th Middle School’s recruitment summer camp. The school organized a visit for the students participating in the summer camp to West Ridge’s Paleolithic Man’s Ruins Memorial Museum. They rented a mid-sized bus. On it, aside from the driver, were a chaperoning teacher and eighteen elementary school students who’ll be entering the graduating class when school starts. Around five in the afternoon, the visit ended and they departed on their way back, originally planning to return to the school at seven. Now they’ve lost contact with the bus and everyone on it.”

To disturb the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team late at night, it took only a thought to be sure this wasn’t a car accident. Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran exchanged a look, neither of them speaking. Director Lu opened the door of the conference room. The people inside the conference room were about to stand; Lu Youliang raised his hand and pressed it down. “Don’t mind me, keep talking!”

The conference room’s projector changed at this, a huge realistic map spreading over it.

“The missing bus’s license plate number is Yan NLXXXX. It comes from the Heng Tong Leasing Company. The driver is Han Jiang, male, forty-one, fifteen years’ driving experience. The chaperoning teacher is Hu Lingling, thirty-two, teacher at the 16th Middle School, Yan City native. At 5:05, the bus set out from the back entrance of the West Ridge museum and drove onto the national road. Around six, some of the students’ parents learned that there had been a sudden outbreak of extreme weather and a portion of the road had been sealed off. They called the teacher to confirm and received the information that they had already detoured, but the road conditions were poor, and they estimated that they would arrive an hour to two hours later than planned.

“Around 7:40, the parents called again to ask where they had gotten to, but the chaperoning teacher Hu Lingling’s phone had been turned

off. At this time the parents hadn't realized there was a problem and quickly called a child's phone. When it connected, they heard the sounds of children crying and screaming, and a man's voice shouting and swearing. Before they could ask what had happened, after four seconds, the call was hung up.

"The parents then called the police. There were several children on the bus whose phones had child tracking monitors, but when they were traced they showed up as having been scattered at the foot of a hill; the conjecture is that they'd been forced to throw them out. But there's also a child wearing sneakers with a GPS chip in them, which shows that their position has already diverged from the planned route and reached West Ridge County's southern mountain district and is still advancing."

"Was the kidnapper on the bus, or a hijacker encountered along the way?" asked Luo Wenzhou. "Have they made contact with the outside world of their own accord, raised any requests?"

"Not at present."

"Luo Wenzhou." Director Lu raised his head. "This matter involves several of the city's districts and counties. All departments, as well as a special police team, need to cooperate closely. You'll take the lead in making arrangements and report directly to me. Can you do it?"

Luo Wenzhou stared. For a moment he could clearly feel several gazes falling on him; fortunately his psychological quality was extremely good. His expression didn't flicker, and he nodded as though nothing were the matter. "Yes."

"Everything must be done to ensure the safety of the children. Quickly!"

The rain fell heavier and heavier, showing no sign of stopping.

The girl sat beside the chaperoning teacher. Her floral-patterned dress was already dampened by the threads of rain floating in through the bus's window, but she didn't dare to go close it.

She heard Teacher Hu's pleading voice. "Dage, what do you want? The things on the bus, the money, you can take all of them, we won't say anything at all, we definitely won't tell anyone else... I have the contact information for some parents here, if you're in some difficulty, you can contact them immediately..."

"Be quiet." The man sitting next to the driver coldly interrupted her. The knife in his hand flashed. "You do whatever I tell you to do and keep your mouth shut! Keep driving ahead!"

The young teacher looked up imploringly and exchanged a look with the bus driver through the rearview mirror, expecting the middle-aged man holding the steering wheel to think of something.

But the driver only gave her an alarmed look, then avoided her gaze, closely following the thug's orders.

After the bus loaded with students had changed its route, it had run into a car broken down by the side of a muddy little road.

That stretch of road was narrow, and it was firmly blocked by the other car. The bus couldn't quite get by. The driver and the teacher had to get off the bus and negotiate with the car's owner. The car's owner was a young man who cut a sorry figure, but he was well-spoken. The three adults combined their forces to shift the broken-down car aside a little. When they had, with difficulty, cleared the road, Teacher Hu hadn't yet straightened her spine when a knife was held to her back.

The windshield wipers creaked as if they were overloaded. The bus had thoroughly driven into the West Ridge mountain district; near

and far, all was deserted and lifeless. A flash of lightning came down, lighting up the thug's ashen face.

“Drive to that empty space up ahead,” he said. “Then stop the bus.”

The bus obediently stopped at the indicated place. The sound of the engine cut out. All around was increasing stillness, and the atmosphere was increasingly terrifying.

The teacher's heart was in her throat. She heard the girl next to her give an uncontrollable sob and hastily covered her mouth. She desperately shook her head at the children around her, telling them to keep quiet and not enrage the thug. Then she secretly took a deep breath, tried to force down her panic and fear, and quietly reached her hand into her bag.

“You.” Holding a chopper to the driver's neck, the thug pointed to Hu Lingling. The teacher's hand froze inside her bag. The thug's cold gaze fixed on her. “Don't hide in the back getting up to little tricks. Come to the front.”

In this perilous moment, Hu Lingling felt what she'd been looking for and pulled out her hand. She surreptitiously put the thing in the hand of the student she was holding, then stroked the girl's hair.

The girl's eyes opened wide. The teacher didn't speak, only used her eyes to signal in the direction of the window. Then she slowly stood up, flashed her empty hands, and, following the thug's request, walked to the front.

The girl wearing the floral-patterned dress tightly squeezed the self-protection alarm device the teacher had put in her hand. She held it behind her.

Not three kilometers away, the rich kids who had lost their minds wreaking havoc came brainlessly back indoors. At first they'd said

they were going to play with off-road cars, but halfway through they'd felt it wasn't satisfying their craving, so they'd changed to cross-country motorcycles and gone a lap, howling, getting soaked and frozen to the marrow.

Fei Du unbuttoned his collar button and threw his helmet aside. He accepted a towel and pushed back his soaking wet hair. He was forced to admit that the entertainment of courting death really did relieve one's mood.

"President Fei won't be leaving today?" The beautiful young lady who'd passed him the towel looked at him. Her Cheetah perfume mixed with the smell of damp to assault the senses, strong but severe, according perfectly with blood that was boiling after driving wildly on a rainy day. Accompanying the young lady's refined manners, it was a contrasting allure simply tailor-made to suit his taste.

Next to him, Zhang Donglai was grinning like a dog. Even using his toe to think, Fei Du would have known who had arranged this.

In fact, staying for a night would be no great matter, but Fei Du looked at the girl and inexplicably couldn't work up the interest. He thought the wildness of the Cheetah was missing something, as if a person craving hell's tabasco peppers had been served a plate of steak sprinkled with black pepper.

His heart itched a little; he wanted a certain stronger flavor, and if it wasn't there he wasn't planning to make do. So he suavely smiled at the young lady. "No, I have something to do at the office tomorrow morning and have to get back early. I'll be going back to the city in a while."

The young lady was a little disappointed. "It was so hard to get you out here, and it's so dark out and the roads are bad. Going back now is very unsafe."

“More unsafe than fooling around in the mud racing cross-country motorcycles during a thunderstorm? I actually wasn’t planning on coming today, but I had some mystical premonition that if I didn’t come I would regret it all my life.” Fei Du looked down at the young lady and said, distributing honeyed words for free, “Having seen you, I know that my premonition was accurate. The trip has been worthwhile. It would be worth it even if I had to go under the knife today.”

The young lady blushed at his look and didn’t answer at once.

Fei Du picked up a bowl of ginger tea and was planning to finish drinking it and go when the club’s owner came out. “Master Fei, if you want to leave, you’ll still have to wait. I just heard that the road is closed. There’s a lunatic who kidnapped a bus of school kids on a field trip nearby, they don’t know where he’s headed. The special police have been dispatched.”

Fei Du froze at once.

The lunatic who had kidnapped the school kids was keeping watch at the bus’s only door, holding a knife in each hand. Safe in the knowledge that he had nothing to fear, he looked at the only two other adults on the bus and tossed an old model dumb phone at Teacher Hu. “Now I want you to call them.”

Teacher Hu looked at the girl in the floral-patterned dress, then turned her head and looked at the bus driver curled up feebly to one side. She slowly accepted the phone and a hard copy of the student roster. She dialed one of the parents. “Hello... I...I’m the chaperoning teacher Hu Lingling, we were on our way when a hijacker... Ah!”

The thug had jabbed at the back of her neck with the tip of his knife. The sharp pain mixed with cold sweat tore at the teacher’s nerves.

“Don’t say anything extra. Tell them. Say I want money, whether they pool their resources or whatever, collect five million yuan, as quickly as they can. Before it gets light, deliver it to the place I indicate. When they’re ready I’ll call again to tell them where to deliver the money. If they want to call the police, I don’t care. These little whelps are in my hands, anyway. If I see police cars, I’ll strike. For each police car I see, I’ll slaughter one whelp. If I can’t get away, then I’ll blow up the bus and give them a taste of scorched sparrow.”

The phone disconnected with a click. Luo Wenzhou looked up.

“Boss, we can approximately locate it. The position is basically identical with the GPS information from the child’s shoes. How do we go over there?”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a moment. “How is the investigation into the driver and teacher’s personal lives going?”

Lang Qiao paused. “Didn’t she say they met a hijacker on the way...”

Luo Wenzhou said, “How would a single hijacker know that the bus was full of children? Even if he did know, even provided he was armed, how could he be confident in dealing with two adults on his own?”

Lang Qiao was startled. Just then, a call came from Tao Ran. “Captain Luo, we’re at the driver Han Jiang’s residence. He’s sold off a good deal of his furniture. The people around here say that he may have a gambling addiction.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

Hu Lingling’s heart was beating very fast. The kidnapper was making a wild display of arms in front of her, the blades in his hands flying up and down before her eyes.

This can't go on, she thought, her eyes again meeting those of the girl in the floral-patterned dress. The girl seemed to understand her expression. She curled her small body up next to the window and swiftly pulled on the alarm device and threw it outside.

The sharp sound of police sirens exploded beside the bus. The knife-wielding thug froze on the spot; in that instant, Hu Lingling suddenly stood and threw herself at him. The two of them rolled out of the half-open bus door. She ignored the pain of the cold blade slicing into her body, loudly calling to the driver, "Drive! Drive quickly!"

CHAPTER 40 - Humbert Humbert VII

The children on the bus formed into a ball of panic, some screaming, “Teacher, drive quickly!” and others crying and calling out, “Teacher Hu!” The knife-wielding thug’s eyes filled with blood, and he stabbed Hu Lingling in the underbelly. Hu Lingling’s life thus far had been smooth and peaceful, without calamity or illness; she had never known that this kind of pain existed in the world. Her limbs became powerless, and she instinctively curled up. She only looked towards the bus parked beside her, ardently hoping that during this time the bus door could close and it could safely decamp.

The keys were in the ignition, swaying without a breeze. The thug seemed to have forgotten to snatch them away. The driver’s hand was on the gear shift. He had only to press a button to close the door. He had lengthy driving experience, and he was a highly skilled driver. In a second he could put the bus in gear and drive away along the wide open mountain road.

But he didn’t.

The driver Han Jiang looked frightened, but he only sat without moving in the driver’s cockpit, roaring towards the thug, “Stop it!”

Hu Lingling could no longer speak. She was so anxious the rims of her eyes were all red. She desperately shook her head towards Han Jiang, wanting to tell him not to mind her; then she heard this honest and kind-hearted man’s next words: “Didn’t we agree we only wanted money? What’ll this come to if you kill someone!”

Hu Lingling finally realized something, and a bone-deep chill went up her spine.

No one noticed a curtain in the corner stirring. The girl wearing the floral-patterned dress had just taken advantage of the chaos to dodge

behind the curtain. Under its cover, she climbed up onto the open window and silently slipped out, like a thin-limbed little cat, jumping onto the ground.

The thug's murder attempt had been interrupted by Han Jiang; rather unsatisfied, he tossed the knife to the driver, bent down and grabbed Hu Lingling by the hair. As if venting his anger, he began to beat her.

Everyone's eyes were pulled in by this ruthless scene. The girl's footsteps were covered by the whistling wind and rain and the woman's shrieks. The starless and moonless black night became her friend; the girl avoided the bus's headlights and heedlessly rushed away.

The mountain district's roads were rugged. There were no road signs, no lights, no living creatures. The flickering boulders and bent-necked trees all looked like monsters hiding in the dark. The girl couldn't distinguish direction and didn't dare to turn her head. The sound of her footsteps made her quake with terror, thinking the knife-holding monster was chasing after her.

No one had taught her what to do when out in the wild open country. She could only ceaselessly run forward—

Suddenly, headlights flashed in front of her. She was panic-stricken; at this moment, humans and ghosts were equally frightening to her. Trying to flee by any means, the girl hit a rock with her foot and went sprawling, finally letting out an accidental cry.

The sound of a car braking came from one side. The girl's ears roared, and her muscles tensed into a ball.

Then she heard a very clear and tender voice say, "Dad, is it a small animal? Is it a sheep?"

This immature voice startled her awake from her grotesque nightmare. The runaway girl's heart, so panicked it was going numb, gave a fierce leap. She heard rustling footsteps, opened her eyes wide, and saw a man holding an umbrella arriving in front of her.

He was tidy and refined. He certainly didn't look like a bad guy.

"Uncle, help me!" the girl said tearfully.

Her dress, covered in a floral print, was mottled with mud stains. Her knees had been scraped open, and her little toenail had been pried up by the stone, leaking fresh blood. The man scrutinized her, then very gently picked her up.

The girl's firm sense of caution was broken in front of another child. In this extreme of terror, she irrationally trusted this stranger suddenly appearing in the middle of the wilderness.

"A bad guy hijacked our bus, he has a knife, and he stabbed our teacher, just up ahead, uncle..."

The man's steps were very gentle, as if he was afraid of disturbing something. He put up the index finger of the hand holding the umbrella.

"Hush," he said. "Be good. Don't be afraid. Let my daughter keep you company."

The girl followed his line of sight. The half-open car window revealed the face of a young girl, around twelve or thirteen years old. Her hair was done in two braids, her cheeks were plump, she had crafty and beautiful eyes, and her lips were sparkling cherry red, as if she'd been secretly using a grown-up's lipstick.

Her smiling face was like a flower.

In the brightly lit cross-country vehicle club, a big crowd of rich kids were on their phones, starting to pick up the gossip.

“I’m not familiar with the area.” Fei Du stood in front of a map of West Ridge district and turned his head to the “courting death” club’s owner. “Aside from this place, what inhabited villages or places for activities are there around here?”

“There was a plan back then for West Ridge to be Yan City’s backyard, with all the leading up-scale leisure entertainment,” said the owner. “All that’s left are the projects that managed to take up space. Aside from us, there’s a winery with a golf course nearby, and an equestrian club. The original natural villages were all moved into the county city so they could ‘move up a step’—although with today’s weather, there might not be any people at either of those places.”

“Oh.” Fei Du nodded. “If the police call in a while, let me take it.”

The club owner’s forehead filled with question marks. “Call? Why would the police call...”

He hadn’t finished speaking when the phone at the front desk rang. A young lady playing the piano next to it freed up one hand, picked up the phone, and lazily put it to her ear. “Hello, West Mountain Cross-Country Club... Boss, this person says he’s with the police!”

The police moved very quickly; at this time they had already drawn near to the kidnapper’s location.

Seen from a satellite position, the location the kidnapper had chosen was very apt. There was empty ground all around; if the special police team approached, they would very quickly be detected. Meanwhile the bus had curtains on all its windows, and the hijacker had a crowd of children in his hands. He was entrenched on the bus. All he had to do was close the curtains and a sniper wouldn’t be able to do anything.

Time passed minute by minute and second by second. The police tried dialing the number from before, but the phone had been turned off. The hijacker had a strong desire for control; they needed him to take the initiative and contact them.

After ten at night, the storm finally laid down its arms and calmed down. Tao Ran and the others had hurried through the night to the residence of one of the suspects, the driver Han Jiang; they turned his life upside-down investigating.

“Han Jiang used to be a truck driver, but he contracted a mahjong-playing habit and lost several thousand yuan in one year. Because he was wasting time at work, he was fired by the trucking team, and in the end his wife and child left him. Later he cleaned up his act for a while and found a job at a car rental company. He behaved for several years, then for some reason started playing mahjong again. A cheating ring got their eyes on him. He lost so much he wasn’t only ruined, he also worked up a debt with a loan shark of over a million yuan.”

“No wonder he’d do something so desperate.” Lang Qiao held down her earbud. “What about the other one, any clues? Aside from being a gambling addict, Han Jiang doesn’t even seem to have had a stay in the ‘little dark room.’ Even if he’d wanted to resort to dishonest means, he still wouldn’t have dared to do something this thrilling right from the start. The mastermind who plotted this must have a record.”

“There is one,” said Tao Ran. “I’ve already sent you the photograph. This person is called Han Chengzheng, male, twenty-nine years old, a distant relative of Han Jiang’s. He went to prison twice for armed robbery and deliberate bodily harm. He got out recently and came to Yan City to look for work. He frequently comes to Han Jiang’s place to scrounge food and drink. He said he was looking for work, but actually after he came he was completely idle, got into some fights,

and frequently went around waving a chopper. All the neighbors go in fear of him.—Yesterday evening, Han Chengzheng went to rent a sedan that was falling apart. He set off first thing this morning. They don't know where he was headed. In all likelihood, he's the kidnapper.”

“This doesn't seem like any kindred spirits or birds of a fucking feather.” Luo Wenzhou's voice came through the earbuds. “Han Jiang was married? Did he have a child? How old is the child, boy or girl?”

“A boy, nine years old. He went out of town with the ex-wife. Because of Han Jiang's gambling addiction, the ex-wife doesn't let the child contact him. The car rental company has a long-term agreement with the 16th Middle School, he goes over every time they have any activity. He's very familiar with the teachers who regularly organize events, and the teachers all take him as halfway to staff. He's normally honest and kind-hearted, his disposition gentle, and he likes children. No one expected he'd do something like this.”

“Got it, negotiation group take note.” After a pause, Luo Wenzhou quickly sorted out his arrangements. “When we got the first call from the kidnapper, judging from the chaperoning teacher's reactions, she must not have known that Han Jiang was colluding with the kidnapper. There's a certain level of trust between her and the driver. Therefore, except under certain conditions, Han Jiang perhaps doesn't want to reveal himself. He was likely forced by his usurious loan into doing this, and he must have a certain sympathy for the children. But the other kidnapper must be the leading planner behind this kidnapping and extortion. He has a record, he's an incorrigible habitual offender. There's nothing he wouldn't do. Their interests are currently aligned, but their relationship can't be very secure. We can split them up...”

“Boss,” Lang Qiao suddenly interrupted him, “a phone call! The kidnapper's calling!”

“All departments be on the alert,” said Luo Wenzhou.

At his words, everyone stood at the ready, all of them picking up their earbuds. The negotiation group was already in position.

The second phone call came an hour after the first. But when the negotiator answered the phone, the person speaking wasn't the female teacher from before; it was a very vicious male voice. “Is the money ready?”

Everyone's hearts sank.

The negotiator paused. “Where's the female teacher from before?”

The man's heavy breathing came over the phone. The negotiator added, “Some of us parents have gathered over three million yuan in cash already. My wife is just bringing the money over here. We'll definitely raise the rest as soon as possible. If we don't have it, we'll borrow it. But you can't go back on your word and harm someone!”

The man on the phone laughed. “Oh, you obediently raised the money? You didn't call the police?”

The officer from the negotiation group looked up, silently using his eyes to ask for instructions. Next to him, Lang Qiao held down her earbud and quickly relayed Luo Wenzhou's orders on a notepad: “Habitual offender; tell the truth.”

“We... e called them,” the negotiating officer said in a somewhat panicked voice. “We'd already called them before you contacted us... You...you didn't say we couldn't...”

“Oh, so where are the police?”

“West Ridge Country's Public Security Bureau said they had to ask for instruction from the City Bureau, and the City Bureau said they can't

get here in under an hour. We truly can't wait, we raised the money to prepare on both fronts, you...you absolutely must not hurt the children."

Listening to this, the thug on the phone was rather complacent. "I told you before, you won't get any use out of those good-for-nothings."

Presumably because he'd heard the money was quickly on its way, the hijacker thought for a moment, and his tone relaxed. "All right, I'll let you say a few words to your little whelp. What's his name?"

Someone passed over a strip of paper, which the negotiator quickly scanned. "Chen Hao, I'm Chen Hao's dad, I beg you, let me speak to him."

There was a sneer on the phone, and after a moment, a boy's voice with a sobbing note in it came through. "Dad, dad!"

The policemen from the negotiating team exchanged hand gestures—the child was scared out of his wits, but it sounded as if for the moment he hadn't sustained any physical harm.

"Haohao, don't be scared. Are you with the other children?" The negotiator on the line was trying to determine the safety of the other hostages. "You have to be brave, set an example for the other children, isn't that right?"

The boy made an indistinct noise of agreement, but before he could answer, the kidnapper snatched the phone away. "No nonsense. You heard him all right, don't fucking do anything unnecessary. We don't need food or water. Don't expect the police will be able to use that opportunity to get over here. Hurry up and raise the money. If you have the money, you'll have your son's life."

The negotiator frowned and shook his head at his colleagues around him. Lang Qiao dismissed Plan 1, “think of a way to send people over there,” and gestured “Plan 2” at him.

“Slow down, can...can you let me speak to a teacher on the bus? The child is too scared.—Any teacher will do!”

Hearing the words “any teacher will do,” the person on the phone gave a peculiar cold laugh.

Then a low and somewhat flinching male voice came on. “Hello.”

It was Han Jiang!

“Teacher, I...I’m Chen Hao’s dad.” The negotiator lowered his voice, making his words sound like an appeal dug up from the bottom of his heart. “Teacher, I know it’s very selfish of me, but...do you have a child of your own? Can you understand?”

The other end was silent for a while. “...I do.”

“Teacher, please, no matter what, take good care of the children. We’ll do everything we can about the money, even if it means financial ruin for our families, just as long as the children are all right. We’re all parents, you must know what our feelings are, being heads of households. I know your position is also very difficult... I suppose your child is around the same age as Haohao? Think about him. We can’t be on the scene, we can only beg you to look after them in our place. It’s all right if they’re a little frightened, but they absolutely must not get hurt. I’m begging you!”

This time, Han Jiang was silent for a longer time, and his speech suddenly became unsteady. “I...I’ll do my best...”

He had just spoken when from halfway up a far off hillside came an enormous sound of thunder. Like an explosion, heavy metal music

spread unchecked through the tranquil night. Dazzling lights came on, followed closely by the sounds of whistling and screaming.

The kidnapper flared up at once. Raising his knife, he snatched the phone. “Who’s that, is it the police? You cheats! Don’t you want the little whelps’ lives?”

The person on the phone explained in a panic, “No, we didn’t...”

At the same time, a sickly sweet female voice came through a megaphone. “Darlings, don’t be afraid, get in! We’ve just completed the ‘Road of Death,’ what else could happen to you, handsome men?”

The sound of a whistle passed through the megaphone, nearly raising the ground for ten kilometers around. Colorful lasers flashed over the whole mountain. Among the lights, several aggressive souped-up sports cars put in appearances on the mountain. The enormous shadows of the car doors, looking like they were about to take flight, were skillfully projected onto the nearby hillside.

Han Jiang grabbed the kidnapper’s hand holding the knife. “There’s a cross-country club nearby, didn’t we look into it before we came? Settle down!”

The kidnapper was furious. “Let go! How could they just have happened to come here by coincidence?”

The negotiator on the phone loudly said, “We really don’t know. You can change the place, the money will be here soon. Don’t hurt the children, teacher! Teacher! Teacher!”

The three successive cries of “teacher” were like a sharp needle, pricking at Han Jiang’s nerves.

The children at the school sometimes couldn’t clearly distinguish between the school’s staff and contract workers, especially the little

ones. If they met an adult at school, they would say “teacher.” These children usually called him that, too.

Han Jiang held his accomplice down with both hands, rapidly speaking into his ear. “Did you hear that? The money will be here soon, there’s only one step to go, do you have to go complicating things now? Look up, do those look like police cars? They’re racing on the mountain road, they’re not planning to come here at all. Some shadows and suddenly you’re pissing yourself. What can they do!”

The kidnapper followed his gaze and looked over. He seemed to be convinced; the hand holding the knife relaxed slightly.

Han Jiang said, “A little whelp just ran off, it’s not safe here anymore. I’ll drive, change our location.”

The demonic voices of the racing rich kids had a strong presence, following them like a shadow. The huge engines of the howling sports cars roared unceasingly as they went around the mountain road. Though the distance was great and they weren’t getting any closer, they still seemed to have the bus nearly surrounded. The dance music’s rhythm stamped beat by beat on the two kidnappers’ chests. They had no choice but to move away from their original empty place, driving in the only direction that took them further from the noise.

Luo Wenzhou’s voice came over Lang Qiao’s earbud. “The target bus has been forced into sniper range. Think of a way to get them to stop.”

On the bus, the phone in the kidnapper’s hand, which he hadn’t had time to turn off, suddenly rang. The parent from before babbled over the phone, “The money’s here, cash, but it’s only three million plus, we’re still thinking of a way to raise the rest...”

The music was getting further and further away, but the tempo was speeding up, ruffling up the nerves bit by bit, making the listeners more and more panicked.

The knife-wielding hijacker roared, “No, it can’t be a bit short!”

Han Jiang slammed his foot on the brakes. “It’s close enough. We split it fifty-fifty and each of us takes over a million, that’s plenty. Don’t delay until the police come!”

“I want five million!”

The negotiator on the phone said, “We’ve really done all we can. Teacher, think of your own child. They’re all children, teacher, I’m begging you!”

The veins at the corners of Han Jiang’s forehead stood out.

“If I don’t have five million, I’ll kill off all these little whelps. I’ve been in jail, anyway, what’s the big deal if I take another turn.”

Han Jiang took up the chopper his accomplice had tossed to him earlier. “I’m not going to jail!”

The two men breathed heavily, like fighting bulls. The kidnapper glared, coldly fixing his eyes on Han Jiang. “Uncle, are you having regrets?”

Han Jiang stiffened his face and didn’t answer; he really was regretting it.

The kidnapper suddenly gave a sinister laugh and passed him the phone. “Fine, whatever you say. If we see the money, we’ll take it.”

Han Jiang hesitated for a moment, then expressionlessly took the phone. “It’s like this. Find someone to come over. It has to be one

person, it's best if it's a woman. The location is..."

He hadn't finished when cold light suddenly flashed in front of his eyes and the shrieking of the children exploded by his ears. Han Jiang turned aside subconsciously, but he couldn't entirely dodge. His accomplice's blade was already stuck into his underbelly.

Han Jiang roared, instinctively resisting under the influence of the fierce pain. He swiftly leapt on the other, and the kidnapper backed up a step, his back hitting the bus's door. He struggled for the handle of the knife. In that instant, he was exposed in the uncurtained glass door, firmly pressed against it by Han Jiang's body.

A bullet broke through the window and entered the back of the kidnapper's head—

The hidden police and ambulance sirens reverberated throughout the night.

Half an hour later, Luo Wenzhou had cleaned up the scene and came to the hillside that had just shaken the sky with music. From far off, he saw Fei Du leaning against a car. His shirt was unbuttoned from his chest down to his lower abdomen, the black tattoo contrasting sharply with his white skin. The ends of his hair were still dripping behind him.

No need for props or scenery; just standing there on his own, he brought along an unwarranted feeling of lakes of wine and forests of meat.

Luo Wenzhou's original reason for coming had been open and aboveboard. Now, his gaze sweeping over Fei Du's half-bare chest, he suddenly felt awkward out of nowhere. His throat itched a little, and he gave a dry cough. "Thank you all for today."

Fei Du accepted half a glass of champagne from the hand of a girl next to him and raised the glass towards Luo Wenzhou. “No need for thanks, we were playing up our natural qualities.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Somehow he was once again displeasing to the eye.

“Captain Luo.” Just then, Lang Qiao’s call came through, interrupting the peculiar atmosphere. She breathlessly said, “There’s a child missing!”

CHAPTER 41 - Humbert Humbert VIII

“The missing girl is Qu Tong, eleven years old. She was originally on the bus. Attempting to help the teacher distract the thug’s attention, she threw an alarm device out the window, then in the commotion climbed out the window and ran away. We don’t know where she’s run off to.”

“Have some police dogs transferred over from West Ridge County.” When he’d heard, Luo Wenzhou’s reaction was fairly composed. “It’s all right. A small child can’t run far. Find some well-spoken people and have them reassure the parents. To tell you the truth, if she hadn’t run, when the kidnapper had come around and realized that she’d been the one to throw the alarm device, the outcome doesn’t bear thinking about. Seems to me the child is pretty sharp.”

Fei Du turned his head and whistled towards his far-off disreputable companions. In this society of idlers, he could rally a hundred at a single call. The rich kids had first raced motorbikes in the rain; then, when the water on them hadn’t fully dried, they’d participated in a hostage rescue operation. Though they’d only been props and hadn’t even gotten to see whether the kidnapper had been fat or thin, it still counted as enough stimulus to last them for the rest of the year. Hearing Fei Du’s call, they rushed up in a crowd. “Master Fei, what else is there?”

“From the City Bureau.” In a few words, Fei Du gave a high-level summary of the entire glorious life of the handsome man in front of him. Then he said, “An eleven-year-old little girl went missing from that bus. I’ll send a photograph to my friends group in a while. If you don’t have anything going on tonight, help search.”

“All right, no problem!” Zhang Donglai could for once stand up straight in front of Luo Wenzhou. He grinned cheekily and nodded to

him. “Hello, Captain Luo. If you need anything, Captain Luo, give a shout, we’re all family!”

Luo Wenzhou coldly looked this person over. He’d heard that after getting into trouble, Young Master Zhang had been shut up in a little dark room at home for a couple of months. Here and now, he had perhaps just been “released upon completion of his sentence.” He was wearing a vest that left his arms bare and pants with a big hole on each side. He had a new haircut, shaved into the form of a rooster’s crest, with a line of multicolored long hairs sticking up every which way from the top of his head. On the back of his head some character had been carved.

Curiously, Luo Wenzhou said, “What’s that on your head?”

Zhang Donglai at once stood at attention and reported, “The character ‘endure.’”

In spite of himself Luo Wenzhou felt some deep veneration—it turned out that Young Master Zhang’s august countenance was the result of endurance.

“Captain Luo, set your mind at ease, I’m familiar with this place,” said Zhang Donglai. “We bourgeoisie are the great pollutant over here. Aside from the extravagant and corrupt, there aren’t any other scourges at all. For fifty kilometers around, the most aggressive wild animal is a little squirrel. There’s definitely no danger!”

This was actually true. In this era, West Ridge was elite and remote to start with, and the rainstorm would have emptied it even more thoroughly. How far could a panicked little girl run?

Upon first hearing the news, no one got very agitated. All the work was carried out methodically.—The deranged Han Chengzheng was carried away in a body bag; an ambulance took away the seriously injured Teacher Hu and the still-breathing kidnapper Han Jiang. The

crowd of frightened students left in groups, accompanied by parents, to collectively undergo physical examination and psychological counseling. The transferred police dogs were soon in position.

Several small search and rescue teams split up to operate. Zhang Donglai scared up a pile of brightly colored convertibles from somewhere, which, collectively broadcasting the theme song to *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf*¹², quickly arrived on the nearby large and small roads to search.

The professionals and the counterfeit goods each went their own way, neither bothering the other, complimenting each other very well... even though the sound of “Don’t Look at Me, I’m Only a Sheep” playing everywhere in waves was a little nauseating.

Fei Du put his hand on the car door and nodded to Luo Wenzhou. “Come on, let’s go have a look at the place the child ran from.”

Luo Wenzhou inconsiderately hitched a ride, and meanwhile pointed at his shirtfront. He spoke in very “feudal lord” tones: “Dress properly. —What kind of mass hell-raising were you getting up to out here?”

Fei Du lazily gathered up his shirtfront; without looking to see whether the buttons were aligned, he carelessly did up a few—the result wasn’t any better than having it open, because his drenched shirt still hadn’t dried all the way. “Racing.”

“Racing convertibles?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Motorcycles. Two of them overturned, too. Before you guys closed off the road, there was an ambulance that took away someone who’d fallen and fractured a bone.” Fei Du gently put the car in motion. Using a rare cheerful tone without disparagement in it, he teased, “Of course, it really may be a little stimulating for the middle-aged and elderly.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down at the mud-splattered boots on his feet and, to his sorrow, suddenly realized that he perhaps really was quickly approaching middle age—because he couldn't comprehend how these youngsters could be so vacant.

“What happened to your hand?” Fei Du carelessly darted a look at the three stripes on him. “Who was so fiery?”

Luo Wenzhou was focusing on listening to each search and rescue team's progress report. He inattentively answered, “Your little brother.”

Fei Du was bewildered.

“Got it, pay attention to the difficult to reach places. A child would be under some psychological stress after an experience like that, perhaps she'll have hidden herself somewhere.” Having spoken, Luo Wenzhou put down the walkie-talkie and turned to Fei Du. “Do these look like a primate's claw-marks to you? No common sense.—That trash mixed-breed cat Tao Ran gave you, did you forget? You little whelps. Whatever you do, it's two and a half days of novelty, and then we have to follow picking up after you.”

At first Fei Du paused. Then he seemed to remember something, and his initially half-closed peach blossom eyes suddenly opened wide.

The night was hurtling past the car windows on both sides. For a long while he didn't answer, until they saw bright lights up ahead, already drawing near to the scene where the girl had initially run from. Then Fei Du finally spoke, in a tone that was hard to read. “After so many years, you still have it?”

“Oh, what else would I do? Give it to you? If you want it, hurry up and take it away, just don't come bringing it back to me.” Remembering Luo Yiguo, Luo Wenzhou's hand hurt, and he

involuntarily scratched it again. “Stop the car a little farther away. The child may have left footprints, don’t disturb them.”

Fei Du accordingly stopped the car at some distance. “Do you...uh, need to get vaccinated?”

Hearing this ordinary inquiry, Luo Wenzhou was very shaken—more shaken than if Luo Yiguo had run over to him for a cuddle. He was even a little tongue-tied. “N-no...no need, the last one hasn’t expired yet.”

Out of the twelve months of the year, Captain Luo was in an “unconquerable condition” for eleven and a half of them. The doctor who gave him the vaccine had proposed to get him a “yearly card,” moving from retail to wholesale.

When Luo Wenzhou’s shock had passed, he couldn’t resist taking a cheap hit. “You being so filial all of a sudden makes me a little panicked.”

Fei Du reined in the unusual expression on his face and once again put on his obnoxious drawl. With a smile that wasn’t quite a smile, he said, “Caring for lonely elders is everyone’s responsibility. Tsk, keeping company with a cat in the endless night seems very desolate.”

Perhaps because Fei Du was so improperly dressed, and perhaps because Luo Wenzhou’s good opinion of himself had gone to his head, he felt that Fei Du’s glance, floating over as he talked nonsense, had a touch of seduction to it. Accompanying the hummed “in the endless night,” it truly did inspire reverie. Thereupon his mouth accidentally went a little over the line.

“What,” said Luo Wenzhou, casually taking a liberty, “you’re offering oral consolation?”

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

As soon as this joke that had gone too far was spoken, the two of them became silent at the same time. Inside the small and narrow sports car, the atmosphere was so unusual as to defy description.

Luo Wenzhou would have loved nothing better than to somehow put those words, which had somehow slipped out, back into his mouth. He was dumbstruck for a moment, then gave a dry cough and not very brilliantly backtracked. “At the end of the year, don’t forget to bring dad a box of snacks.”

Fei Du forced out a laugh. “Should I also burn three incense sticks?”

After this, the two of them simultaneously climbed out, in tacit agreement, planning to forget the preceding awkwardness inside the innocent sports car.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly remembered something. He turned to Fei Du. “On the subject, I remember you quite liked that cat. Why were you unwilling to keep it no matter what afterwards?”

Fei Du put his hand on the car door. His movements paused. The distant lights fell on his exposed forehead and brows; the arcs seemed to have been carved that way, the outlines finely planned.

“A pet?” After his pause, Fei Du said, as if nothing had happened, “I don’t like having pets. They’re so much trouble. I didn’t feel comfortable saying so in front of Tao Ran. Also...”

He looked up, the tip of one eyebrow moving lightly. “What if I have a hobby of sadistically killing small animals? I couldn’t control myself, and I was afraid I wouldn’t have a way to account for myself to Tao

Ran, so I had to keep a safe distance. Captain Luo, do you think that's a reasonable explanation?"

Luo Wenzhou stared, intuitively sensing that these words of Fei Du's weren't a disgusting joke, but before he could read the meaning between the lines, the voice of a member of a search and rescue team came over his earbud. "Captain Luo, we've found the place where the girl threw the alarm device, as well as some footprints."

When Teacher Hu had been attacked, the rain had already slackened. The ruts where the bus had parked hadn't entirely been washed away by the water.—The driver had been at the front of the bus then, and the kidnapper had been pushed out of the bus's door by Teacher Hu. If the girl wanted to run, she had to jump out of the back of the bus and run in some direction where she could avoid the bus's headlights. Following this assumption, the searchers had quickly found some footprints left by a young girl.

The police dogs went off, following the track.

Everyone felt that their luck was good. In the place where the hijacker had chosen to stop, the road had fallen out of repair. There was a lot of bare earth. Qu Tong had left a good deal of marks; following the traces, the girl could definitely be found soon.

But by the latter half of the night, there had still been no news of Qu Tong.

Qu Tong's parents stared at the comings and goings of the police and the spontaneously searching drivers. The father's eyes were like sound-activated lamps—the least breeze or rustle of grass, and they'd light up; but when the searcher once again left, they'd go out time after time.

"Captain Luo, come here and have a look at this!"

Luo Wenzhou passed through the crowd. A few search dogs had stopped in the same place, crouching with their tongues hanging out. He casually petted one dog on the head and half-crouched. There were still faint traces of blood on a sharp stone, and a leather sandal strap was caught on it.

“Let the parents look at it, confirm this strap comes from Qu Tong’s sandal,” said a nearby search and rescue worker. “Behind this are a child’s footprints. There are some long gouges here; is the assumption that the little girl ran here, then tripped on a stone and fell? There’s also a grown-up’s footprints, and the ruts of a car. My guess is it’s a size forty-one or forty-two, most likely a male.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a moment. “You mean, someone just happened to drive by here and take the child away.”

“It’s very likely. The dogs can’t smell anything more.”

By the light in his colleague’s hand, Luo Wenzhou’s gaze roamed over the area.

Complex footprints, and the place where the girl had fallen, wildly overturning ground that was muddy after the rain. At a glance it was very hard to determine what had happened here.

“Captain Luo, I think this must be good news. After all, it had just rained, and this is the mountains. The earth is loose, there could be hidden dangers.—Since someone went by and saved the girl, then at any rate she won’t have to spend the night out in the wilderness.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression was still very grim. He didn’t make a sound. After a good while, he slowly nodded. “Fine, take care to preserve the scene. Notify the technicians to come see whether they can use the traces to determine whether the child went with this person willingly. Also...prepare to issue a missing person

announcement, and closely monitor whether anyone around here has called the police after picking up a child.”

“Right!”

“Go contact the museum the students visited today.” With a heavy heart, Luo Wenzhou put a cigarette in his mouth and carefully thought over whether he’d omitted anything, then added, “Investigate the museum’s visitors, and the cameras at the nearby highway exits.”

The search and rescue worker next to him was perplexed. “Hm?”

“See what cars passed by,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “Pay special attention to ones with single male drivers. I have a sudden feeling this thing isn’t very sanguine.”

In deserted open country, a distressed little girl suddenly appears in the middle of the road and tells you that nearby a thug has hijacked their bus; what would an ordinary person’s reaction be?

A regular person presumably wouldn’t have the guts to valiantly do battle against a knife-wielding thug. Perhaps he wouldn’t even dare to let the child get into the car without confirmation; after all, stories regularly circulate through society about criminals using children. So either he would indifferently pretend not to have seen her and leave, or, after carefully inquiring into the circumstances, he would call the police right away.

After the police had determined that the bus had been hijacked within West Ridge County, all calls to the police in the county had been put through to him. Why had several hours passed since the girl had run away without any news?

The missing girl cast a shadow over the whole rescue operation.

Three days passed in a flash, and the police came up empty-handed. From start to finish, there was no news about the mysterious person who had picked the girl up; and whether from the investigation at the museum or from the nearby businesses that had agreed to help keep an eye out, there was still no useful information.

In the early evening on the third day, Qu Tong's parents came to the City Bureau, bringing a flash drive.

“We don't know who left it, and we don't know when... It was in the milk box. With the child not found, we haven't had the attention to spare to get it these last few days,” said Qu Tong's father with reddened eyes. “It built up for a few days, and this morning the milk delivery person knocked on the door to ask. We only remembered to open the milk box then...and this thing fell out.”

Wearing gloves, Lang Qiao accepted the little flash drive. “What's on it?”

When she'd spoken, Qu Tong's mother suddenly fell apart, beginning to cry bitterly.

“On it...there's a sound recording.”

Fifteen minutes later, Lu Youliang, frowning, finished listening to the recording. The recording was less than a minute long. At first there was the sound of a girl's frightened screams, then a violent struggle. After several dozen seconds, the screams and sounds of struggle gradually became weaker, until all was silent. Finally there was a ringing noise, as if a metal box full of small bells had been forcefully shaken; the trembling buzzing sound seemed to knock on one's heart, drawing out long—then the recording abruptly cut off.

The corner of Lu Youliang's eye twitched, and he slowly lit a cigarette.

“Director Lu.” Luo Wenzhou spoke first. “We have too few clues on hand now, we shouldn’t speculate wildly, but I spent half my life listening to Lao Yang go on about Lotus Mountain, and the impression is really too deeply carved. I had to find you to confirm. The case was over twenty years ago, and we only know about it from hearsay. You’re the only one who had personal experience with it. Do you think that this recording resembles the phone calls the kidnapper made to the victims’ families then? Could it be a copycat of that case?”

Lu Youliang slowly exhaled a smoke ring and didn’t speak for an age.

When a long time had passed, he dismally spoke. “This business made a huge fuss at the time. You can still find newspapers from the time with long and tedious articles about it. We lacked awareness of secrecy then, details like ‘the victim’s family received a frightening phone call’ got out, but...”

The assembled group had very rarely seen such a grave expression on the old director-general’s face.

“I remember the first girl who went missing—the one in the Lotus Mountain case. There was a detail,” said Lu Youliang, “a detail that the victim’s father in the case supplied while cooperating with the investigation. He said that he’d heard the sound of a pencil box over the phone. Metal pencil boxes were popular at one time. The missing girl’s parent said, the little girl collected a kind of small round bell and put them in the metal pencil box. Sometimes she took it out and shook it to listen. The adults in the house didn’t like the noise and chastised her... The sound that came over the phone was definitely the sound of a pencil box. That’s why he was certain that the voice was definitely his daughter’s.”

Lang Qiao, taking down the minutes of the meeting to one side, gave a little shudder.

This detail was too small, and because they couldn't get recorded evidence at the time, there was only the victim's father's testimony. He was anxious and frightened, his psychological state was unsteady; there was a strong possibility that he had heard wrong. It was truly hard to determine the authenticity. Therefore it had only been used as a reference.

It hadn't been referred to in Yang Zhengfeng's notes; even Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran hadn't known about it.

The police of course wouldn't have made such a dubious small detail known to the public, so...

CHAPTER 42 - Humbert Humbert IX

“According to this inference,” Lang Qiao, sporting dark circles about the same size as her eyes, said faintly, “either Wu Guangchuan climbed up out of the morgue, or we got the wrong person back then and over twenty years later the real killer has resurfaced to offend again.”

“If a person succeeds in committing six crimes, with the police unable to catch a shadow and even helpfully finding someone to take the blame for him, an ordinary person would already be self-satisfied enough to go insane. If he’s a real psycho, would he have stopped for so many years?” Luo Wenzhou said. “If we really got the killer wrong back then, the last twenty years and more are long enough for him to have filled up a mass grave.”

Lang Qiao turned her head. “Captain Luo, what you’re saying is appalling.”

“What you’re saying is pretty appalling, too.” Luo Wenzhou rolled the shaft of his pen around in his hand. “However it is, I’ve already sent people to stake out Qu Tong’s house to look into the person who left the flash drive.”

“Don’t quote me on it, but they’re unlikely to turn anything up,” said Lang Qiao. “I just got through asking the parents. Qu Tong’s house is on an old estate, and the property management doesn’t do anything thirty days out of the month. It’s basically an open-door policy over there. Just last month they had some things stolen. Think about it, someone takes something from your house and they don’t get caught; forget about someone leaving something.”

Tao Ran asked, “What about other leads?”

“The flash drive is one of those ordinary cheap kinds, you can find exactly the same thing on hundreds of sites online. It’s been wiped very clean, not half a fingerprint on it. The techs are stepping up their analysis of the contents of the recording, but the suspect’s anti-reconnaissance awareness is evident.” Luo Wenzhou paused and shook his head. “The outlook isn’t optimistic.”

The possibility of leads was very small, and the possibility that the girl was still alive was also very small.

The golden seventy-two hours had passed; the recording sent to the girl’s parents seemed like some kind of preening “summing up”—I’m still here, I’m the victor again, you can’t catch me.

“There’s actually another line of thought,” Tao Ran said after quietly muttering to himself for a moment. “On the night this happened, who would have been passing by? At the time, we investigated the security camera records of some nearby scenic spots, industrial parks, and major roads. If the person who took the girl had been driving past by coincidence, it would have been very hard for him not to leave any traces. But thus far, we haven’t found any traces along that route. So is it possible that someone had been following Qu Tong all along—or perhaps his aim was another girl on that bus similar to Qu Tong, and he just happened to run into the hijacking?”

Having heard this, Lang Qiao already grasped his meaning. “You’re saying that the stalker didn’t succeed on his first try!”

On the last day of summer camp, the students had gone to the outskirts, but before that their activities had always been in the city, near the school. If this mysterious kidnapper had been tailing one of the students, then it would have been far more difficult for him to hide his tracks in the city. The traffic cameras and the surrounding residents may have noticed him!

Lang Qiao stood immediately. “I’ll go arrange it.”

“I’ve arranged it.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand towards her. “Sit down for now. After we finished investigating the scene that day without finding any suspicious individuals, I had people investigate following the tracks of some of the girls in their class. Of the eighteen students, eleven were girls, all around the same age as Qu Tong, with six of them who resembled her in stature and appearance. Even focusing our attention on those six, investigating everywhere they went, what people they passed by, it would still involve over a hundred people. After conducting a survey of the scene, we only know that this person wears size forty-two shoes. It’s too little information; we can’t even be sure of the person’s age or sex. We have nothing to go on, unless his appearance is very suspicious, which at present it seems evident that it isn’t.”

Listening from beside him, Lu Youliang couldn’t resist sighing. He acknowledged to himself that even if he had personally been in charge, he couldn’t have been more thorough. But sometimes opportunity and luck were both indispensable.

“Back then the kidnapper called the victims’s families directly. Now that he knows we can trace calls, he’s changed to an untraceable means of delivery. He’s really advancing with the times.” Lang Qiao sighed. “Isn’t this what you call good advances a chi and evil advances a zhang¹³?”

In a different tone, Luo Wenzhou said, “I remember the victims back then were never found, dead or alive. In the end, why did we think that Wu Guangchuan was the culprit behind the serial kidnappings? Just because he had the children’s bloody clothes on him?”

“No, we handled cases somewhat irregularly back then, but not that irregularly,” said Director Lu. “Aside from the cut-apart clothes, the primary reason we determined that Wu Guangchuan was the culprit was the seventh girl. There were signs of sexual assault on her, and

after she woke up, she named Wu Guangchuan. What was the child's name, now? I think she was surnamed Su, Su..."

"Su Xiaolan," said Tao Ran. "She's mentioned in my shifu's notebook. She was Wu Guangchuan's student."

"Right, that was it." Having thought for an age, Director Lu truly hadn't been able to come up with it. He had to sigh. "Ah, it's been too long, my old brain isn't any good. There's a lot of things I can't recall clearly anymore. You go ahead and request the files be transferred over."

Luo Wenzhou kicked the inattentive Lang Qiao with the tip of his foot, and she reacted, hastily agreeing and running off to start the procedures.

With Director Lu's name on the request, the old case's records were transferred over very quickly. Twenty years of dust was finally brushed off of notes more detailed and objective than the Venerable Yang's, once more revealing them to the light of day.

"Right, it must have been this girl." Director Lu pulled out a photograph.

Because she had still been alive then and wouldn't have wanted to be disturbed, the Venerable Yang hadn't kept her photograph in his personal notes.

The seventh victim, Su Xiaolan, was a very good-looking young girl. She had apricot stone eyes with long corners extending towards her temples. When the photograph was taken, she'd put on a little makeup, looking red-lipped and white-toothed, with her chin in her hand; she had an odd precocious look.

"Su Xiaolan was a student at Jinxiu Middle School then. When the crime occurred, she was in Year 2 of junior middle school."

Lang Qiao asked, “Didn’t I hear that the girl’s family background was very bad? She was missing for days without her mother knowing. How could she have afforded to attend a private school of the time?”

“She was a specially enrolled dance student. Her elementary school dance troupe teacher liked her very much and recommended her to Jinxiu. Jinxiu had a policy of waiving tuition fees for all specially enrolled students. Although because of her unusual family background, and because she was always practicing with the dance troupe, Su Xiaolan often missed class. As time went on, she didn’t fit in with students her own age, and she didn’t have any friends. Wu Guangchuan was her Year 1 homeroom teacher and used that to lure her in and compel her, carry out a violation against her.”

“That’s strange.” Tao Ran couldn’t resist putting in a word. “If Wu Guangchuan kidnapped and murdered six girls, why did he leave this girl alive?”

“I had only just started working then. I was doing legwork for the investigation team and didn’t participate in much.” Director Lu thought back for a moment. “The killer was already dead. We couldn’t force his motive out of him. All of this is my elders’ conjectures at the time they wrote the concluding report after the fact. There were two presumed reasons—first, many people around them knew that Su Xiaolan and Wu Guangchuan were regularly in close contact. If anything had happened to Su Xiaolan, it would have been very easy for the police to find him. So Su Xiaolan was a very dangerous target for a murderer. There was even an elder who concluded at the time that the other six girls could have been substitutes for Su Xiaolan.

“The second one is pure supposition on our part—unlike the other victims, Su Xiaolan’s family background was particular. The killer couldn’t use a phone call to torment Su Xiaolan’s family. If the process of making the phone call had some special meaning and purpose for

him, then he would have been unable to obtain a sense of satisfaction from Su Xiaolan.”

It sounded like there were no problems anywhere in this course of events; the human testimony and material evidence were all there, the logical and psychological motives all made sense. The only problem was, if the murderer from twenty years ago had already passed on, then who had taken Qu Tong?

Who would have known the details about the metal pencil box and the little bells?

There could only be the relatives of Guo Fei, the victim in the first case...as well as the old criminal policemen who had handled the case at the time, including Director Lu.

In front of Director Lu’s face, the people in the small conference room all fell silent for a time.

Director Lu, however, rather calmly broke the silence himself. He stood and patted Luo Wenzhou on the shoulder. “You take the lead on this. If there are any questions, report to Lao Ceng. I’ll step back for the time being to avoid suspicion. In a while, I’ll do a clear write-up of my whereabouts for the past few days. I’m afraid it won’t be very easy to investigate the others who handled the case. I’ll go ahead and say a few words for you, to forestall them feeling insulted and not cooperating when the time comes.”

“We also have to question the victim’s relatives in the Lotus Mountain case. They may have said something to someone.” Luo Wenzhou raised this awkward point lightly. “There’s also Su Xiaolan. She was around Wu Guangchuan the longest, it’s likely she knows something—we’ll split up along three lines. Tao Ran, continue following the tracks of those eighteen children before the crime occurred; just in case, don’t overlook the boys. Xiao-Lang will be responsible for leading the people investigating the area around Qu Tong’s house;

don't overlook the security cameras of any of the miscellaneous little shops around there. I'll think of a way to handle the rest."

The rest were all the things likely to offend people—investigating the elders within their own system and making inquiries about the victims.

Tao Ran wanted to say something but was cut off by Luo Wenzhou's raised hand. "Hurry up, don't waste words. It's been over twenty years. The evidence has disappeared and the witnesses are gone. The hopes for a result are remote. Your investigations are of the highest priority, in case the child is still alive."

With this being brought up, Tao Ran didn't dare to tarry; he had to file out along with Lang Qiao.

Lu Youliang tore open the packaging of a new pack of cigarettes and pushed it across the table towards Luo Wenzhou. "You've left all the glorious but arduous tasks for yourself. You're keeping up a pretty good style."

"If I go," said Luo Wenzhou, "at most I'll get a telling off. The two of them, if they mess it up, it may come to a fight.—Of course, whether I can find anything out when the telling off is over will depend on borrowing your venerable face."

"Of the old boys from back then, some have left, some have passed away. The ones who worked from beginning to end have mostly retired. And now Lao Zhang has been transferred away." As he spoke, Director Lu inexplicably felt rather melancholy. "I'm the only one left to lead you passel of monkeys. It won't be many years now."

"Is retirement a bad thing?" Luo Wenzhou smiled at him. "My dreams are all about retiring. Waking up naturally every day, going wherever I want, collecting my pension every month, taking my old spouse

around everywhere, having all the little brats give up their seats for me when I get on the subway.”

Lu Youliang very much wanted to foster his development; although Luo Wenzhou was a little too young, luckily the old man wouldn't be retiring immediately. There were still some years left; if he pushed him along, it was possible he would amount to something. Hearing this feckless discourse, Director Lu filled with anger; then he once again thought of some gossip concerning Young Lord Luo that couldn't be mentioned in polite society and became even more vexed. Pointing at Luo Wenzhou, he said, “You don't even have a ‘young spouse.’ Shut up. If you won't talk sense, get the hell out of my face.”

Luo Wenzhou put a cigarette in his mouth, tucked the old case file under his arm, and duly prepared to get the hell out. But when he reached the door, Director Lu called him to a halt.

“Do you have any rough ideas about this case?”

With one hand on the conference room door, Luo Wenzhou's steps paused. “There are two unresolved questions from back then. First, where the missing girls' bodies went. Second, Wu Guangchuan's motive for calling the victims' families. I talked this case over with some people, and a friend said that it sounded like he wasn't aiming at the children, but at the grown-ups—that doesn't seem much like the average psychological characteristic of a pedophile... Also, while I think the two cases are connected, they weren't necessarily committed by the same person.”

“How do you figure?”

“Making a phone call and going in person to the victim's house are two different things. One is hiding behind the curtain, the other is being unable to resist personally taking the stage. The latter runs a much greater risk, and the criminal has to be more arrogant, too. It's not just the anti-reconnaissance methods Lang Qiao mentioned.”

All of Yan City was like a river; after decades of waste management, you could see through to the silt on the riverbed, almost comprehend it all at a glance. It was clear and safe; but there were still rapids, and there were still undercurrents.

The odds of the missing girl Qu Tong being found alive were growing increasingly remote, but for the countless other children her age, this was just an ordinary summer vacation, crammed with unremarkable make-up classes and extracurriculars, accompanied by the listless humming of cicadas and the drowsiness of waiting adolescents.

Chenchen had her portfolio on her back and was waiting for her tardy parents at a bus stop by the Children's Palace's back gate. Bored, she took out her tablet to play. Suddenly, a shadow fell in front of her. Chenchen looked up and saw a blind, humpbacked old man arrive near her, his face unwittingly turning towards her.

Chenchen felt oddly uneasy. She remembered what the dagege who had treated her to a cream puff had said that day, and hastily moved a few cautious steps away, drawing closer to the crowd waiting for the bus nearby while stealthily keeping an eye on the stranger.

Just then, the bus pulled up to the stop, and the tight-packed crowd boarded one after another. The area around the bus stop's sign emptied; only she and the "blind old man" were left.

Suddenly, the blind old man tapped the ground and stepped over towards her. In an instant the hairs rose on the back of Chenchen's neck, and she turned and ran towards the Children's Palace. Turning a corner, she accidentally bumped into someone. The other person cried "Ow!" and the things she was holding fell and scattered over the ground.

This person was a girl a little older than her, wearing a floral-patterned dress, her hair done in two braids.

Chenchen hurriedly apologized. “I, I’m sorry.”

The girl looked at her and didn’t get angry. As she crouched to pick up her books, she asked, “Why were you running?”

Chenchen hurriedly helped her. “There’s a weird person over there, I was a little scared.”

Hearing this, the girl looked over to where she was pointing. “There’s no one there. Where?”

Chenchen turned her head. The bus stop was deserted; there wasn’t a single person.

The girl looked at Chenchen. “What grade are you in?”

“I’ll be in sixth grade when school starts.”

“Oh, then I’m a year older than you.” With her books under one arm, the girl naturally took Chenchen by the hand with the other hand. “Are you scared? How about I wait with you for a while.”

Chenchen couldn’t have asked for better.

“I’m attending the summer photography class here.” The girl’s long lashes drooped, and she looked at Chenchen and smiled. “I’m called Su Luozhan.”

CHAPTER 43 - Humbert Humbert X

In twenty years, Lotus Mountain had undergone a bone-flattening, skin-swapping renovation; its face now presented an entirely different appearance. The streets and buildings were seamlessly joined together, their style identically “modern,” more dignified even than in the city. Only the roadside trees had not yet had time to develop their shade, dimly revealing the haste beneath the heavy makeup.

Luo Wenzhou drove a few circles before finding the nondescript newsstand.

A man wearing reading glasses was sitting inside, his back stooped, minding the stand. You could have said he was middle-aged, or you could have said he was old. Looking at his face alone, he looked like he hadn't yet reached retirement age; but his whole body was permeated with a heavy lethargy, as if he was lingering at death's door.

It was the hottest part of the afternoon. The surface of the street had been baked by the sun until oil was coming out of it. Luo Wenzhou pushed his sunglasses up to the top of his head and walked in front of the newsstand. “I'll have an iced soda water.”

The newsstand's owner heard him and put aside the book he was reading. He bent down and chose a cold drink thickly covered with frost, then handed it over.

Luo Wenzhou stepped under the newsstand's sunshade, twisted open the bottle cap, and downed half the bottle in one go.

Already having worked overtime, he'd spent all day engaging in battles of wits with all kinds of his fellow professionals. Relying on Director Lu's face and carrying the banner of inquiring about the old

case, he'd attacked by innuendo, trying to determine whether there was anything suspicious about the other party. They all belonged to the same system, their tricks all followed the same lines; they went back and forth, each scene comparable to a scene of palace intrigue in a television drama, severely fatiguing.

Now Luo Wenzhou's head was wooden inside. His gaze dull, he drank until he was chilled all the way through, then leaned under the sunshade, relaxing entirely.

The newsstand owner saw that he had no intention of leaving immediately and stuck out his head to say, "Hey, young fellow, I have popsicles, too. Do you want one?"

Luo Wenzhou waved a hand. "I've drunk my belly full of gas. I won't be able to eat. I'll rest here a while."

The newsstand owner said an "all right" and moved over a long-legged plastic stool for him. "Sit down, then. On a hot day like this, no one has it easy.—What kind of work do you do?"

Luo Wenzhou put the soda water bottle on his knee and lightly shook it a couple of times. "I'm with the police."

The newsstand owner had one foot up on the stand's small threshold. Hearing the word "police," he froze in place. After a long time he turned his head. He took off his reading glasses and folded them away. His lips trembling faintly, he lowered his voice. "I've applied to have the charge withdrawn. The government approved it, too."

"I know," said Luo Wenzhou. "Uncle Guo, I don't mean anything by it, I just want to talk with you about Feifei's case from twenty years ago."

The newsstand owner was Guo Heng.

Guo Heng had killed Wu Guangchuan, then had been sentenced to prison for deliberate killing. Later his sentence had been reduced, and he had been released upon completion of the term two years earlier. Naturally he had lost his job. Twenty years had passed; everything had changed. His parents and relatives had died or left. His wife had divorced him before the killing. He had no relatives or connections, alone in the world. Returned to the wholly changed Lotus Mountain...District, he was doing a bit of business to make his living.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Guo Heng’s face hardened. “She’s been dead over twenty years, and I personally sent her killer on his way. I was sentenced, I went to jail. There it is. What else do you want to know?”

Luo Wenzhou tried to soften his voice. “It’s like this. You see, I haven’t come here to tear up your scars for no good reason. We’ve encountered a case, also involving a missing little girl. There’s evidence that shows there may be a link with the old case...”

“What link?” Guo Heng asked coldly.

“A girl, eleven years old, wearing a floral-patterned dress when she disappeared. Three days after she disappeared, the criminal sent her parents a recording. Aside from a girl’s crying and screaming, it contained another noise, like someone shaking a metal box full of small bells.” Luo Wenzhou knew that the other was fully on his guard. Therefore he looked directly into Guo Heng’s eyes as sincerely as he could, rejecting all irrelevant description, using the shortest phrases to explain the matter clearly. “The elders who had experience dealing with the old case said, the circumstances were exactly the same as when Feifei was murdered, so I wanted to ask you a little...”

He hadn’t finished when Guo Heng cynically interrupted him: “You mean interrogate a little? The killer is dead, the only people left who remember this are the police and me. Of course, if something bad’s

been done, it couldn't possibly be the police, it can only be me, with my record."

"It isn't only you; I've already been through the policemen who handled the case," said Luo Wenzhou. "I don't suspect anything, I only want to understand in detail what happened..."

Without warning, Guo Heng's mood suddenly erupted. He roared at Luo Wenzhou, "Back then I looked everywhere for someone to talk to about this case, none of you listened, no one wanted to understand. Now I've stabbed him and gone to jail, and here you come again! My daughter has been dead over twenty years, I don't want to talk about her, I don't want to! What the fuck have you been doing all this time!"

Luo Wenzhou opened his mouth, bit back the justifications he'd nearly blurted out, then in a low voice said, "I'm sorry."

"Go away, go! Scram!" Guo Heng grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him out. "I don't have anything to say. If you think I'm suspicious, you're welcome to come and arrest me, I've been through it all before, anyway. For the rest of it, no comment. The next time you come, remember to flash your ID. If I'd known before you were the police, I wouldn't have sold you a drop of spit."

"Uncle Guo..." said Luo Wenzhou.

Guo Heng's eyes were red, and the veins at the corners of his forehead stood out. "Scram!"

Luo Wenzhou's mood really couldn't be called gentle, but at this time, even if his rage had towered to the heavens, he still wouldn't have been able to let it out.

The scorching sun directly overhead spurted its flames towards him. He shut his mouth and used the tip of his tongue to count each and

every one of his teeth. Then he looked down and got out his wallet, pulled out a photograph from it, and held it in front of Guo Heng.

“This child is called Qu Tong,” said Luo Wenzhou. “When school starts, she’ll be attending sixth grade. Her studies are good. She was attending the 16th Middle School’s recruitment summer camp a year early. She’s normally very sensible, always taking the lead. It’s already the fifth day since she went missing. Uncle Guo, you know what five days means? I heard that back then you made an intense study of child kidnapping cases, so you should understand that the chances of finding this child are already remote.”

Guo Heng’s gaze slowly fell on Qu Tong’s photograph.

With twenty years between them, the two men stood opposed to each other on the street in high summer. After a long time, Guo Heng’s fiercely undulating chest gradually calmed.

“But each day we don’t find a body is another day we can’t abandon the search,” said Luo Wenzhou. “It’s too sad about the children who vanished without a trace back then. We can’t let what happened to Guo Fei happen again. But now we really don’t have any other leads. We can only beg for your help. Do we have to wait until this asshole finishes a seventh offense and leaves traces before this can end?”

Guo Heng’s expression altered slightly.

The girl in the photograph was smiling at him with her head tilted, revealing a slightly crooked canine tooth. It may have been coincidence, but looking closely, Qu Tong actually had some similarities to Guo Fei.

Luo Wenzhou’s tone relaxed. “I just have a few questions. I’ll finish asking, and then I’ll go. I won’t bother you.”

Guo Heng looked at him, silently pursed his lips for a moment, then turned and went into the newsstand. Luo Wenzhou hastily followed. “Did you mention the fact about the bells in the pencil box to anyone back then?”

“I did.” Guo Heng had become over-agitated just now; his voice was still somewhat hoarse. “I mentioned it to the police working the case. After you abandoned it, my friends and family who were helping me keep investigating all knew some details.”

“Could you give me a list of names?” said Luo Wenzhou.

Guo Heng looked at him. When Luo Wenzhou thought he was about to flare up again, the man only curled up on his chair and wearily rubbed his face. “Feifei’s homeroom teacher, a relative who worked at the telephone exchange back then... Oh, some sanitation workers near the waste transfer station the phone call came from, they may have understood some of it. It’s too confused. There are things I repeated so many times to so many people. I can’t recall clearly.”

“Then we’ll pass on to something else.” Luo Wenzhou got out a palm-sized notebook and sat on the long-legged stool from before. “Where did you start your investigation from then? How did you find Wu Guangchuan?”

Guo Heng’s gaze went past him, falling on a small mirror hanging on the news-stand’s door. The mirror reflected the man’s withered face and white hair, making him in a flash feel the passage of time. He looked at Luo Wenzhou—if the young girl from back then were still alive, maybe she would be a few years older than this young man.

“The police investigation wasn’t making any progress. I felt anxious, I couldn’t resist going to search for myself. I went over to that waste management station a few times—the place where the killer made the phone call. Back then, garbage often wasn’t taken care of quickly. It smelled awful. No one lived nearby, and no buses went past. You

had to drive a car if you wanted to go there. And coming from the county town, you'd have to pass a toll road. There weren't so many people on the roads then, the police could tell where all the cars had come from. If there'd been a problem with any of them, they would have found it. So I thought then, could the person who kidnapped my daughter have come from outside? Because there was a highway from the city to Lotus Mountain that made a half-circle to avoid the mountain, and it passed nearby. Although there wasn't a road, there was a large slope. I went to look myself. A car couldn't get down, but an ordinary adult could walk down."

Luo Wenzhou said, "You're saying that the person who kidnapped Guo Fei left Lotus Mountain with the child, and on the way, for some reason stopped his car on the highway, climbed halfway down the mountain carrying the child he'd kidnapped, and went to make a phone call next to a garbage dump—why would he do that?"

Guo Heng gave a slightly taunting smile. "When I told the police working the case my idea, they asked why in exactly that tone of voice."

"No." Luo Wenzhou adjusted his emotional state. "According to your inferences, the kidnapper came from out of town—Wu Guangchuan really did come from out of town, and per the investigation, neither did he spend much time in Lotus Mountain. Then how would he be familiar with a transfer station that even the locals didn't go to? He'd kidnapped a half-grown girl, not a baby weighing a few kilograms. To leave his car in the middle of the highway and climb down a mountain carrying such a big child to an unfamiliar place to commit an offense against her—the danger is too great. How would he know there wouldn't be workers passing by to collect the waste from the transfer station? That isn't logical."

Guo Heng said, "Has your logic caught the criminal?"

Luo Wenzhou was temporarily at a loss for words.

“The police also told me it was impossible, and they established a special investigation team. I thought, a special investigation team definitely has more expertise than me, let them investigate. I only needed to wait. And in the end... Ha! There really was nothing I could do, I had to keep investigating along that ‘impossible’ line of thought. I went to the area around Feifei’s school and asked around at all the guesthouses and hotels one after another. Their teacher helped me a lot—that teacher had come back to work after retiring. She was very old; she’s already passed on. She wouldn’t be the one you’re after.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “During this process, you found Wu Guangchuan, who’d gone to Lotus Mountain to recruit students. I heard that he stayed in the hospital at the time. Why did you suspect him?”

“Jinxu had money and flashed it around. The teachers who came to recruit students drove over in several cars. They came together, and when they were done with their business, some went back early because they had things to do at home, and some stayed on to play around in Lotus Mountain’s limestone caves. Some had left midway because they got sick. They left in several groups. I found the cheapest guesthouse around Jinxu and followed each of them in turn.” Guo Heng said, “At first I didn’t suspect Wu Guangchuan, but once when I was wandering around the area, I saw a child furtively following him.”

Luo Wenzhou sat up straight at once.

“A little boy wearing Jinxu’s uniform. He said there was a girl in his class who was always missing class for no reason. He was the class leader, and the homeroom teacher told him to find out what was going on. The girl hadn’t gone to class, and she hadn’t gone home, either. He’d clearly seen the girl go find this Teacher Wu after getting out of school before, but when he went to ask the teacher about it, he wouldn’t admit it.

“I thought at once something was off. Can you understand that? If you had a daughter of your own that age who’d gone missing just like that, you’d also be sensitive about everything.”

“You told a policeman who had transferred to the City Bureau about this.”

“Surnamed Yang, he’d been at the Lotus Mountain Public Security Bureau. He was the only one I knew,” said Guo Heng. “But he didn’t believe me.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t make explanations for his shifu. He only followed up, “What happened then?”

“I could only investigate for myself. The boy from Jinxiu helped me quite a bit, too. One time, the boy suddenly paged me and I ran over to have a look. I just happened to see Wu Guangchuan leading a girl. The girl was struggling, and he dragged her away...” Separated from the event by many years, when Guo Heng spoke of it, his fist still clenched. It was a long while before he forced himself to keep going. “I made the child who’d passed on the information leave and I followed them to Wu Guangchuan’s house. I saw that asshole take the girl home. At his door, I saw him do some...nauseating things. I...”

According to the record in the case files, Guo Heng had pretended to be collecting the electricity bill, knocked on Wu Guangchuan’s door, then stabbed him.

Luo Wenzhou said, “What was the boy’s name?”

“His surname was Xu.” Guo Heng thought for a while. “I think he was called...Xu Wenchao.”

Luo Wenzhou said goodbye to Guo Heng. Before he’d even driven away, he hastily passed on the information to Tao Ran, telling him to

summon Su Xiaolan and Xu Wenchao from that year's junior middle Year 2 class at Jinxiu Middle School; then he raced back to the city.

Meanwhile, that same day, Fei Du also happened to leave the city.

“Did you make an appointment yesterday, Mr. Fei?” The receptionist flipped through the record, sneakily looking over the attractive visitor.

This sanatorium was between the mountains and the sea and had a garden that could be described as tasteful; though it was a medical establishment, there wasn't a trace of hospital smell or the stink of illness in the reception hall. All around was brightness and cleanliness and the soft voices of pretty receptionists. The leisurely sound of the tide and a piano melody were playing.

At a glance, it simply looked like a seaside resort.

“Room 407 in the Acute Ward. Please come inside, a staff member will take you through.”

Fei Du nodded to her, pulled a dewy fragrant lily from the bouquet in the bag at his side, and stuck it into the vase on the front desk. “Thank you. I think this flower goes very well with you.”

Then he left behind the crimson-cheeked young lady and went inside.

The people in the Acute Ward were those who had lost the ability to move. It had a special kind of peacefulness. The steps of the medical personnel were hurried and the thick shade of trees spread everywhere. Following the signs, Fei Du came to Room 407. A doctor had been waiting for him there and greeted him familiarly: “President Fei, I guessed you would come today.”

“I just happened to have some time to spare.” Fei Du put the flowers at the man's bedside. “How is it?”

“Overall very smooth,” said the doctor. “Although it’s already been three years. The likelihood that he’ll wake up is small. His family needs to psychologically prepare.”

Fei Du responded without any expression. He tilted his head, examined the man in the hospital bed, and civilly answered, “I know. You’ve gone to a great deal of trouble all these years.”

The doctor met his gaze and without reason was startled. There was a moment where he thought this young man’s cold and withdrawn gaze didn’t look at all like he was looking at his father; it didn’t even look like he was looking at a living person—he seemed to be examining a not especially satisfactory ornament that he could just as well do without.

The doctor’s mind was already envisioning a complete set of “wealthy family drama” and “seizing the throne” plots. He didn’t dare to speak out of turn; he said goodbye to Fei Du and hurried away.

Fei Du urbanely watched the doctor leave, put his hands behind his back, and walked a few circles around the man’s hospital room. The middle-aged man in the hospital bed lay there wholly insensible, surrounded by a bewildering array of medical apparatus. He seemed to be well taken care of; there wasn’t a single white hair on his head. Looking closely, his features were very similar to Fei Du’s, but the temperament was completely different. Though he lay there entirely unmoving, he still gave off a keen and somber feeling, like cold marble.

Finally, Fei Du stopped in a corner of the room. There was a small calendar hanging there. The nurse must have been careless; the date was from a few days ago.

He flipped the calendar to the proper date—the last day of July. It was his birthday, and of the two people who have given life to him,

one lay in a sanatorium, and the other lay underground.

Fei Du turned and for a moment looked the man up and down with an indescribable expression. Suddenly, he reached out a hand towards the man's oxygen tube.

In the peaceful hospital room, the medical apparatus let out a regular rumble.

On the face of the young man who had just given a girl a flower, there wasn't a trace of warmth.

CHAPTER 44 - Humbert Humbert XI

Fei Du suddenly smiled, turning his head to blow a kiss to the hospital room's security camera. "Scared you."

He bent and picked up a card from a small table next to him—this was one of the characteristic services provided by a high-priced private sanatorium. For the relatives of patients who had no means of communicating, it could be hard to unburden themselves in unilateral jabber, so the sanatorium provided pens and small cards that the patients' relatives could write a few words on, passing along comparatively tangible emotions.

With a somewhat ironic look at the man in the hospital bed, Fei Du wrote without introduction or signature: "I hope you can hold out a few more years."

The private sanatorium's fees weren't cheap; the expense of him lying there on its own was enough to support several doctors and nurses.

After all, there were some people who, in their whole lifetimes, could only bring some benefit to the people around them during the years they spent lying insensate.

Outside the window the blazing sun burned like fire. In the hospital room, the central air-conditioning maintained a constant temperature year-round; under the drawn-out leafy shade, there was a chill in the air.

Having passed along the emotion of "seeing you unwell makes me feel better," Fei Du, seeming to have accomplished his yearly duty, drove back to the city alone.

Without any traffic, it was four hours from the seaside sanatorium to Yan City. Fei Du had arranged with Dr. Bai to come and borrow a

book from her in the evening—he had already formally concluded his lengthy years of regular counseling, but he still maintained his friendship with Dr. Bai; as before, he would often go borrow some books she recommended.

If nothing unexpected occurred, a day of long-distance driving, a visit to a human vegetable, borrowing a book concerning mental illness and taking it home to read halfway into the night before lying down to sleep were the sum total of his arrangements for his twenty-second birthday.

Fei Du ordinarily went where the fun was, but all the people who were comparatively familiar with him knew that on his birthday, the anniversary of his mother's death, and any happened-upon holiday, he would be out of sight and out of contact. Even a person as undiscerning as Zhang Donglai wouldn't bother him at these times—he wouldn't have been able to bother him even if he'd wanted to. President Fei's phone, normally on twenty-four hours a day, would be unreachable.

The traffic conditions on the way back to Yan City were poor. The highway leading into the city was jammed up into a mess; he would be an hour later than anticipated. Fei Du was rather exhausted. He could only wait, relying on the car's radio to keep awake. He happened to hear Yan City's police force collecting leads concerning the missing girl Qu Tong from all the city's residents.

“...especially around schools, Children's Palaces, and summer training courses and camps. If you discover any suspicious individuals, please notify the police at once. ...Also, we remind our friends who have families that it's summer vacation now, and you must look out for the safety of children in your household...”

“How come this program suddenly turned into a hazard notice about open-water swimming?” Luo Wenzhou only returned to the City Bureau around quitting time, feeling that his three immortal souls

and seven mortal forms were all about to evaporate out of the top of his head. Thereupon he rudely poured himself a cup from a pot of tea brewed by some unknown person and drank it.

However much Lang Qiao, running over, wanted to stop him, there wasn't time.

Lang Qiao's anguished wail: "Boss, that's the slimming tea I just brewed..."

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, then, without turning a hair, he downed the other half of the pot—at this moment, never mind slimming tea, provided that it was liquid, he wouldn't have passed up drinking insecticide. Having finished, he wiped his mouth. "What did the stake-out at Qu Tong's house turn up? Have Xu Wenchao and Su Xiaolan been found?"

"We reviewed all the security cameras from the shops around the estate. Counting package delivery, food delivery, milk delivery, and realtors, forty-some people come by every day. Luckily they all wear uniforms, and we were able to call each of their companies to confirm the employees' identities and whereabouts at the time of the crime. There were remaining questions about four of them, and we brought them back to the City Bureau to cooperate with the investigation," Lang Qiao said. "Apart from that, we made a list of all people coming into the estate during off-peak hours. There are over eighty altogether. We're just comparing them against the neighborhood committee's record of permanent residents."

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou's head, already about to explode from the heat, swelled up further.

It was fortunate that City Bureau could command a great deal of police manpower. Otherwise, would they be investigating until the end of time?

Lang Qiao continued, “We’ve already found Xu Wenchao. Tao Ran is inside having a talk with him. Su Xiaolan can’t come. She’s gone.”

Luo Wenzhou casually asked, “Out of town? Or did she go abroad?”

“No...” said Lang Qiao. “I don’t mean she’s not in the city. She’s not on this planet—she’s dead.”

Luo Wenzhou’s footsteps paused for a moment. “So young?”

“After that business, nothing went right for her. Her dancing came to nothing, and her grades were poor. She barely managed to get into a vocational college, then dropped out halfway through. She didn’t have any regular employment, relying on good looks and youth to go around with some rich people. Before she was twenty, she’d given birth out of wedlock, and afterwards she lived very chaotically. She became ill and passed away two months ago—here’s her information.”

Lang Qiao passed him a thin file pouch. Luo Wenzhou took it and flipped through it.

He had soon finished reading it, because her life had been too short, and because there really was nothing to say for it. Inside were her past addresses, contact information, two disciplinary actions from the time she was at school, a record of once being detained for drunk and disorderly conduct, and a death certificate.

Last of all was a photograph taken shortly before her death. The woman, only a little older than thirty, already showed the ravages of time. Her thin cheeks were stretched tightly over her cheekbones, her chin was razor sharp, and there were lines around her mouth. There was faded makeup on her face, as if it couldn’t be washed off. Looking very closely, it was just possible to see some vestiges of the little beauty she had been in her youth.

In the long corridor, Luo Wenzhou and Lang Qiao exchanged a helpless look—and this was the end of the last...surviving girl.

“You know what, Captain Luo,” said Lang Qiao, “sometimes when I see these things, I think that ‘surviving’ is an ugly thing.”

Luo Wenzhou hit Lang Qiao on the back of the head with the kraft-paper pouch. “Morning to night, you’re so full of ideas. Go write some books, what do you want to be a police officer for? The most important objective now is to find Qu Tong—tell me, what does Xu Wenchao do?”

Xu Wenchao was a freelance photographer.

He was very tall and refined; he could have been described as a man of striking appearance. Suddenly asked down to a public security bureau, it was hard to avoid being somewhat nervous; his hands moved back and forth under the table.

Tao Ran poured him a cup of water. “We don’t mean anything by it. We’d just like you to take time and remember some things.”

Xu Wenchao lowered his head and pursed his lips, avoiding Tao Ran’s gaze. He quietly thanked him.

Standing in front of the surveillance feed, Luo Wenzhou and Lang Qiao heard Tao Ran ask mildly, “Did you attend Jinxiu Middle School for junior middle?”

Xu Wenchao very elegantly sipped some water. “Yes.”

“Do you remember having a classmate back then called Su Xiaolan?”

Xu Wenchao’s fingers gave a tremble. He was silent for a long time, then spoke obscurely. “I remember.”

Tao Ran asked, "Could you tell me about her?"

There was nothing ambiguous about these words, but Xu Wenchao didn't seem to have understood. He stared for a moment. "Hm?"

Tao Ran said, "Tell me about Su Xiaolan."

The fingers laying on Xu Wenchao's knees suddenly tightened, clutching at his own knuckles. "Oh, I, I haven't been in touch with her for many years, she...she was a rather cheerful girl..."

"She wore her hair long, and she liked to wear all kinds of floral-patterned dresses."

Hearing these words, the faces of Tao Ran and those watching on the surveillance feed all tensed.

But Xu Wenchao's words had come to an abrupt stop. His gaze went back and forth between Tao Ran and the clerk several times. Suddenly, he said, "Did you bring me here because of that girl they were talking about on the radio? I heard on my way here."

"Then I won't go around in circles anymore," said Tao Ran. "How much do you know concerning the case of Wu Guangchuan kidnapping, killing, and sexually assaulting female children?"

Xu Wenchao thought with intense concentration. "Not much. I was little then. No one would tell a child about those things in detail, right?"

Tao Ran said, "But the father of one of the victims says that he found you, and the reason Su Xiaolan was rescued was that you told him she was in danger."

"Uh... It was over twenty years ago. I can't quite remember."

Tao Ran patiently said, “The father of one of the victims in the serial kidnapping case back then came to the area around Jinxiu to trail and investigate some of your teachers. He encountered you furtively following the male teacher Wu Guangchuan and went up to question you. The two of you suspected Wu Guangchuan of deviant behavior and investigated him together. Do you remember?”

Xu Wenchao still didn’t speak. This time, his blank silence lasted for a minute. Then at last he deigned to speak: “I guess so. I don’t remember clearly.”

Speaking with this person was especially strenuous. He wasn’t a criminal; the police couldn’t forcibly interrupt his lengthy periods of silence. They could only sit and wait for him to speak, like a person suffering from mental retardation. Asked a question, he thought about it for half a year, then at last gave an equivocal answer—it was all variations on “Seems like it.” or “Really?” or “I guess.” or “I don’t really recall.”

Tao Ran spent over an hour questioning him over and over again. Having drunk two whole bottles of water, Xu Wenchao maintained an empty, wandering dejection, demonstrating total ignorance.

Lang Qiao said, “I really want to punch him.—Boss, do you think he’s our suspect?”

“Just because he mentioned ‘floral-patterned dresses?’” Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “Middle schools were very strict back then. Students wore identical uniforms. The girls either had to have all their hair off their faces in a ponytail, or cut it to their earlobes. The restrictions were only relaxed for the specially enrolled students for the sake of appearances. If Su Xiaolan was the only special one in the class, it’s normal for him to remember. But...”

Tao Ran was saying to Xu Wenchao, “But I think it’s a little strange. Wu Guangchuan’s case must have caused a sensation at the time.

How could you, who personally played a part in it, not remember clearly?”

Xu Wenchao smiled mildly. “During junior middle school, I got very sick. I had a fever that wouldn’t go down and nearly died. Though I pulled through in the end, it’s possible it damaged my brain. My memory hasn’t been very good ever since, and my reactions are a little slow. Sorry, officer.”

This explanation sounded perfectly reasonable. Tao Ran could only nod helplessly. “Are you married, Mr. Xu?”

Xu Wenchao shook his head.

“On the night of the twenty-seventh of this month, where were you?”

This time, Xu Wenchao didn’t hesitate. He quickly answered, “At home.”

“Alone?”

“I’m a bachelor. Of course I was alone.”

“What were you doing at home?”

“Reading...a book about composition techniques.”

Tao Ran’s gaze sharpened slightly. “Mr. Xu, in order to cooperate with the investigation, could we request your vehicle’s location record?”

“Yes. It’s parked outside.” Xu Wenchao looked back at him calmly. “Do you have any other questions? Can I leave? I have work tomorrow, there are some things I need to prepare when I get back.”

Tao Ran’s eyes turned to the security camera. He heard Luo Wenzhou say to him over his earbud, “Let him leave. I’ve made arrangements.

From the time he leaves, there'll be people watching him twenty-four hours a day.”

Tao Ran stood and shook hands with Xu Wenchao. “You can leave. Thank you for your cooperation. I'll see you to the door.”

At this time, Xu Wenchao's body language finally relaxed slightly. At Tao Ran's gesture, he turned to leave. Just then, as if idly chatting, Tao Ran quietly said beside him, “Private schools must be very strict. I hear the teachers are all desperate to get a higher rate of enrollment in higher education.”

Xu Wenchao said, “We just had to study harder. It's a good habit.”

“You must not have had any time for young love. If you said one word to a girl, there would be eight teachers staring at you. Even if you liked someone, you'd have to hold back.” With one hand on the doorframe, Tao Ran looked meaningfully at Xu Wenchao. “Were there any girls you liked, Mr. Xu? A specially enrolled student like Su Xiaolan must have been very noticeable in your class?”

Xu Wenchao was taken unawares. His expression altered at once; the hands hanging at his sides nervily picked at the seams of his pants. After a while, he forced out a smile. “Who doesn't like pretty girls when they're young? But she's dead, there's no sense in talking about it... Officer, there's no need to see me out.”

Tao Ran frowned faintly—he had only discovered Su Xiaolan was dead when he'd wanted to summon her. Up to the present moment, he hadn't mentioned this fact to Xu Wenchao.

So had Xu Wenchao, who “hadn't been in touch with her for many years,” learned the sad news from a concerned classmate, or...

Having said these words, Xu Wenchao quickly walked away without a backwards look.

At the same time, the policemen ready to take turns watching Xu Wenchao arranged their shifts and left silently under cover of night to follow him.

When Luo Wenzhou left the City Bureau, dragging his steps somewhat, it was already past eight. He didn't go directly home.— Although Director Lu had stepped back to avoid suspicion, this situation wasn't like Director Zhang's. Zhang Donglai had been a close relative under serious suspicion; by comparison, Director Lu at most could be said to have some connection to the old case. He wasn't a major operator. Someone less scrupulous may not have made anything of the connection.

With a scrupulous leader, it wasn't proper for his subordinates to be too easygoing, especially after running around all day using up the old man's face. Luo Wenzhou planned to bring Director Lu a box of peaches brought back from Lotus Mountain, and in the process give him a simple progress report.

He called Director Lu, mentioning only the peaches, not the case.

Lu Youliang agreed at once and gave an address. "Your auntie's colleague is getting married. She only decided to go this evening and didn't tell me in advance. I've gone over to my little sister's place to scrounge a meal. You can come over here."

Luo Wenzhou turned on his GPS and entered the words "North City Chenguang Road."

Fei Du flashed his headlights and saw a road sign reading "Chenguang Road Exit 1.5 km."

He let out a slight breath. This return trip had taken over six hours. There was traffic everywhere, and no place to rest. His back was so sore that it was about to go numb. Only now did the road conditions

ease somewhat. Fei Du sped his car right up to the speed limit, considering how he should apologize to Dr. Bai.

But just as he had driven the last stretch and was planning to turn off onto the side-road, a car suddenly charged out up ahead. It came up right in front of him. Not only did it not brake, it accelerated, heading right for him. There was no time to make way. Fei Du slammed the brakes down to the floor—

Next, the whole car shook tremendously. His ears rang. The airbag pushed him back into his seat. Fei Du's eyes dimmed, his insides turned over, and there was a sharp pain in his left forearm.

His consciousness blurred for a second or two, but the sharp sounds of car alarms and human voices startled him awake.

A passerby quickly ran over, shouting, and pulled open the door of his car. The summer night's turbid warm wind hit him full in the face.

There was a moment where a thought slipped through his not very clear consciousness: "Retribution comes very quickly."

Luo Wenzhou was just thinking gratefully that the traffic situation was all right when he encountered an accident up ahead; the flow of traffic stopped.

He sighed heavily and, like the other drivers, stuck his head out to look. As soon as he looked up, from far off he saw a big SUV, a good bit taller than all the other cars, sprawled at the exit like a crane among chickens.

Luo Wenzhou's heart gave a jump—wasn't that car the same model as the one Fei Du had flashed around in front of Tao Ran?

CHAPTER 45 - Humbert Humbert XII

There was sweat at the corners of Fei Du's forehead, whether from the heat or from pain. His face was paper-white. From between his teeth he squeezed out the words, "Are you done?"

Luo Wenzhou stood to one side with a grave expression, as if he were observing a moment of silence. He was silent for two seconds. Then he really couldn't hold back any longer; he turned his head aside and howled with laughter.

"Young fellow, this won't do," said the old orthopedic physician who was taking care of Fei Du's injured arm as he delivered a long-winded speech. "I can see your lifestyle isn't good, right? You young people these days, staying up all night, not exercising, spending all day sitting there playing on your computers, can your health be any good? It baffles me. What's so fun about that stupid piece of junk? Don't think it's all right just because you're young, getting osteoporosis in your twenties and thirties can happen..."

President Fei, who had never stayed up late playing on the computer, was so wronged he couldn't speak.

Near the Chenguang Road exit, Fei Du's passenger's side door had been hit by a car suddenly coming from the right side. The driver responsible was a beginner who'd only gotten his license two months ago. The guy had been taken away in an ambulance. Apparently he wasn't familiar with road signs, had missed his turn, and then, realizing that he'd somehow gone the wrong way, had just happened to see Fei Du's rather tank-like SUV coming towards him. He'd panicked and hit the gas pedal instead of the brakes—that was the conclusion issued by the urgently dispatched traffic police.

In short, the causes of this accident were that driving schools were incompetent and Fei Du was unlucky.

Luckily, Fei Du had been driving a car with a highly advanced safety system today, and his own reaction had been very timely. Therefore it was the other party's car that had been more seriously damaged; he for the most part had been more scared than hurt—he hadn't even broken his glasses.

...Though while the glasses were staunch glasses, President Fei's precious flesh paled in comparison somewhat; his left forearm had been fractured by the airbag springing out.

Fei Du persisted in thinking that it had been because of the coincidence of his posture.

Even more unlucky, by some happenstance, this rare unfortunate predicament of Fei Du's had been seen by that wicked piece of work Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou had, while he was on his way, accompanied him on his day trip to the hospital. After learning the state of his injury, he had picked up President Fei's pair of firm-willed glasses and laughed uncontrollably; the depressed feelings caused by a whole day's stressful work were swept away at once.

“Doctor, this type of bourgeois delinquent doesn't play on the computer. They go out night after night for music and singing.” Luo Wenzhou, eager to watch the fur fly, supplied color and emphasis from the sidelines. “Look at that face. It's vacant, a testimony to a dissipated life.”

Through his reading glasses, his large eyes like a dragonfly's, the old physician scrutinized Fei Du's vampire-like face. “Oh, there is something of that.”

Fei Du: “...”

“I’ve set it for you. The fracture isn’t serious. Come get the cast off in a while. Remember not to engage in strenuous exercise. No smoking, no drinking, no sex,” the old physician urged seriously. “Also, you must be sure to take calcium supplements, young fellow, otherwise in another decade, you’ll just—‘snap!’”

The last sentence somehow hit Luo Wenzhou right in the funny bone. He was about to lose his mind, seeming prepared to live the rest of his life based on this joke. While taking Fei Du along to drive him home, he still from time to time let out a strange laugh.

Fei Du pitied him a little, thinking that Captain Luo’s life really was wretched, so lacking in interest that he had to gather up these low-grade delights to entertain himself with.

Of the two of them, one had originally arranged to meet Dr. Bai, and the other had arranged to meet Director Lu; after this, they both had to break their appointments.

“Turn left at that intersection up ahead...you’ve passed it.” Fei Du looked up irritably. “My good uncle, do you know how to read a GPS?”

“Haven’t you worked out yet that I’m planning to abduct and sell you? I’ve already contacted the buyer.” Luo Wenzhou continued directly along the wrong route, driving all the way to a shopping center. He parked the car and beckoned to Fei Du. “Come on, get out, the buyer’s waiting up ahead to inspect the goods.”

“Could I trouble you to wait until my packaging is in better condition before selling me?” Fei Du looked irritably at his wrinkled shirt. He tried to move and felt that his whole body was covered in bruises; everywhere hurt. So he sat in the car and didn’t move, feebly saying to Luo Wenzhou, “You’d better bring the buyer over. I can’t walk.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't insist. He only looked at his seeming paralysis and laughed, then walked away on his own, abandoning this man who wasn't as resilient as a pair of glasses in the car.

Fei Du thought that he was planning to take care of something on the way. He was hitching a ride and had no reason to request to be attended all the way home. Therefore he didn't pay it any mind.

He pushed the passenger seat further back, occupying half the territory inside the car. Nearly lying down, he leaned back with his eyes half-closed. Amidst the continuous pain, he recalled the car crash he'd just met with.

Read the road sign wrong, mistook the gas for the brakes... There was nothing new about this. Whether it had been done on purpose, or whether the responsible driver had gotten flustered and slipped up, no one could clearly say.

The only difference was that the former was a murder attempt, and the latter was only an accident.

Looked at like this, a car really was an ideal means of murder.

Thinking these things over, Fei Du had nearly thought himself to sleep when the car door next to him clicked open and Luo Wenzhou returned.

Fei Du carelessly turned his head and looked at him, then discovered in shock that he was actually holding a cake in his hands, with candles and stupid cartoon characters drawn all over its paper box.

Fei Du subconsciously dodged in the direction of the opposite car door, as if what Luo Wenzhou was holding wasn't a cake but a bomb.

"Haven't you ever seen a birthday cake? What are you dodging for, the cake isn't planning to violate you." Luo Wenzhou put the cake box

away. “Didn’t the guys dealing with the accident take down your information? Don’t tell me the date on your ID is wrong.”

Fei Du was stiffer than the cast on his arm. He had wholly entered into an unstable state, ready to jump out of the car and run.

But in the end, he didn’t. While Luo Wenzhou’s car stereo played a forced mix of ballads and folk songs, Fei Du sat there in this state until Luo Wenzhou had stopped the car downstairs at his own house.

“The doctor said no smoking, no drinking, and no sex for you. Look at that cast on your arm. You won’t be going out to parade yourself around today, so come experience a taste of elderly life with a ‘middle-aged-to-elderly’ person.” Luo Wenzhou lifted his chin at him. “Get out.”

Fei Du looked at him with an unreadable expression for a while, then, carefully holding his dully aching arm, awkwardly crawled out of the car.

He walked too slowly; Luo Wenzhou kept having to stop and wait for him. “That bad, young master? Luckily I live on the first floor, or else I’d have to carry you up on my back.”

Fei Du didn’t make a sound and didn’t retort.

He was like a cat brought to someone else’s domain for the first time. Each bone in his spinal column was full of vigilance. Like this, he reached Luo Wenzhou’s door a step and a shuffle at a time. As soon as Luo Wenzhou opened the door, the “master of the house” stuck out a long-prepared round little head and looked outside.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Get in, Luo Yiguo, don’t block the way!”

Luo Yiguo’s field of vision was blocked by the big paper box in his hands. It suspected that this was a new toy its litter box attendant

had brought for it as tribute. It rudely stretched out its neck and flung out its paws. When Luo Wenzhou deftly rapped it over the paws, Luo Yiguo irately fell back to the ground and yowled twice. Then it finally saw that there was also a stranger behind Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du and Luo Yiguo exchanged a look. Fei Du was rather reserved, only taking half a step back. Luo Yiguo, however, bristled on the spot and let out an un-catlike shriek. Simultaneously using all four paws, it executed a full turn in place, its claws and the slippery floor rubbing against each other. It opened its large, marble-like eyes wide and lowered its center of gravity, adopting a stance like it was ready to launch a desperate attack any time.

In this valorous posture, it exchanged another look with Fei Du. After a moment, Luo Yiguo came to a rapid decision. It abandoned the fight and charged into the crack under the couch without a look back. It didn't come out.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Having raised such a cowardly cat, he felt he'd rather lost face.

"No need to change your shoes." Luo Wenzhou pointed to the couch. "Sit where you like. Hey, this cat's never had a problem being shy of strangers before. Last time a colleague came over, it followed around after whining the whole time. Why is it only afraid of you?—Luo Yiguo, you get the hell out here. You're going to roll around under the couch getting covered in dust, then rub yourself all over my sheets, asshole!"

Luo Yiguo played dead, not budging.

Luo Wenzhou howled towards the couch, "Are you going to eat or not?"

This time, at his words, two raised whiskers cautiously stuck out from under the couch. Then it sniffed the stranger's scent and once again decisively retreated.

Comrade Luo Yiguo had been scared into a hunger strike.

Luo Wenzhou was helpless. He opened a can of cat food and put it next to the cat's food bowl, then opened a cupboard and rooted around, pulling out a box of candy and dropping it in front of Fei Du, who was sitting perfectly upright. "See if the stuff in there's expired. I'll go throw together some dishes. I'm telling you now, I'm not attending to a young master. You'll eat whatever I make, none of your fuss."

Fei Du for once didn't raise any objections. His posture was unbearably stiff, as if he wasn't sitting on a couch, but on the roof of the world.

A while after Luo Wenzhou had walked away, he at last strenuously used one hand to open the candy box in front him. Inside were all sorts of oddities; likely it was an assortment bought around New Year. The chocolates had already taken on very post-modern appearances that spoiled the appetite on sight... The very bottom layer, however, contained toffees, old-fashioned, with roughly manufactured packaging and irregularly shaped candies that glued your teeth together—he remembered how these things tasted.

Fei Du slowly picked out a toffee, used the tips of his teeth to rip open the package, and tossed the candy in his mouth. Then he oriented his gaze towards the kitchen, where the range hood was roaring, a vegetable knife and chopping board were rhythmically colliding, and Luo Wenzhou's back was appearing and disappearing.

What Luo Wenzhou had described as "throwing together some dishes" had actually been done conscientiously. In a very short time, he'd prepared several matching meat and vegetable dishes, and he

arranged them around the cake in the center. He thought about it, then stuck in a candle and lit it.

Luo Wenzhou looked up and met Fei Du's eyes. Then he dryly said, "What are you looking at, I'm not going to sing you 'Happy Birthday'. Are you planning to make a wish? It can be something like, 'May I not get hit by a car again on my next birthday.'"

"Oh," said Fei Du.

The two of them exchanged helpless looks with the cartoon character candle on the cake. The atmosphere was very peculiar, as if it were a moment of deep mourning for ages past.

Luo Wenzhou immediately regretted it. "Hurry and blow it out. This is silly."

Of all the cakes in all the world, there were few that Fei Du hadn't eaten. Only a birthday cake was very strange to him. It seemed that he'd tasted one when he was very little. There had been many guests in Fei Du's house then. His birthday had basically been put on for outsiders to see. He'd only gotten one small symbolic piece of the expensive cake before it had been carried away. The next day when he'd gone to look for it, it was already gone—because the cream was no longer fresh.

In fact, what was the difference between a birthday cake and an ordinary breakfast cake? At most there were only a few holes left behind by candles. But Fei Du had always thought the flavor wasn't the same.

Luo Wenzhou's handiwork was very praiseworthy. The only thing missing was wine. Strictly following the doctor's orders, Captain Luo only gave him a bag of high-calcium breakfast milk.

There were some middle-aged and elderly men who were always making speeches in the outside world; back home in front of their wives and children, they would unconsciously bring out this unhealthy mannerism. When Luo Wenzhou was little, he'd despised his dad's habit of delivering a lecture before a meal. But after twenty years of subtle influence, he'd been infected himself. Ordinarily he only had Luo Yiguo around, and the disease had been incubating; today there was a Fei Du added to the dining table, and the disease erupted.

"Another year gone by." Luo Wenzhou poured the warmed-up breakfast milk into a glass and pushed it in front of Fei Du, launching into a lengthy speech that came down in a direct line from his old dad. "I'm not only talking about you, but you should do something proper after this. How long can you fool around? The greatest benefit of material life should be to give a person more pursuits, not to let him lie like a salted fish on a mountain of riches. A young person's life can't be too empty; sooner or later, something is bound to go wrong."

Fei Du had never experienced this type of Chinese-style head of household culture. Putting a croquette in his mouth, he felt that it sounded very novel.

Luo Wenzhou continued to jabber. "Basic human nature is like this. First we pursue food and shelter, financial security, comfort of the senses. Then inevitably we seek higher types of satisfaction, for example a sense of achievement, for example self-realization. Continuing to lose yourself in low-level extravagance is in fact only self-numbing. As time goes on, the invisible worries involved in it will cause a person great pain. A Maybach today, a Bugatti tomorrow—you can buy it all, but can it relieve the deep pain of struggling against human nature?"

"It can't." Fei Du composedly swallowed the croquette. "Although not being able to afford them at all is obviously a type of pain closer to

the surface.”

“...” Luo Wenzhou glared at him, but found that the corners of Fei Du’s mouth held a trace of a smile. He was joking—even though the joke sounded like it was jabbing into the pit of one’s heart. Luo Wenzhou said, “You even dare to interrupt when the head of household is lecturing. If this were my family’s house, a little devil like you would have to move a bench to the door and sit there writing a self-reflection. You still want to eat?”

Hearing this, Fei Du thought of something, and his earlier smile gradually cooled. He was silent for a while, then suddenly said, “At my house, no one spoke during meals, unless there were guests. Otherwise my dad was rarely at the dining table. My mom’s emotions were unstable. Often, halfway through the meal, she’d burst out for no reason: sometimes looking upset, throwing down the plates and leaving, sometimes suddenly sitting down next to the table and starting to cry.”

Luo Wenzhou froze.

“Meals at my house were a very nerve-wracking thing.” Fei Du shrugged, seeming a little helpless. “If it was ever calm, it was simply like winning the lottery.”

Luo Wenzhou thought about it, didn’t comfort him, only lightly said, “That sounds pretty miserable. I don’t know whether it’s more or less comfortable than writing a self-reflection.”

Fei Du raised his brows.

“Seriously, imagine it. You’re squatting at the door, leaning on a bench, holding a piece of writing paper towards your house’s door. When it’s warm, everyone only closes the burglar-proof door. From outside you can see what’s happening inside your house. The neighbors all work with your parents, anyone who passes by looks

down at you and asks, ‘What have you done now, boy?’ It’s truly a humiliation towards a person’s honor and dignity.”

Fei Du couldn’t resist laughing.

Luo Wenzhou was going to say something else. Suddenly, his phone rang; the call came from the landline at the office. Luo Wenzhou froze, a thread of an ominous premonition rising in his heart.

“Hello.” Tao Ran’s voice was a little breathless. “Captain Luo, a call came from Chang Ning’s family to the police station in their jurisdiction. They say Chenchen’s disappeared!”

His phone volume was very loud. Fei Du heard it, too.

Luo Wenzhou said, “When? Where did she disappear? Don’t panic, it’s not necessarily the same thing.”

“She went for a drawing lesson at the Children’s Palace today. Chang Ning dropped her off at midday. In the evening the adults arranged it with her, told her to wait half an hour at the Children’s Palace and not come out. Her dad could only pick her up after he got out of work. Their class ended...around four-thirty. Her dad called her; she was still in the drawing classroom then. A little past five, when he came over, he couldn’t find her.”

CHAPTER 46 - Humbert Humbert XIII

“Impossible, impossible!”

It was after midnight. The Children’s Palace’s administrator had evidently been yanked out of dreams. His drowsy eyes were swollen up to his brow ridge, his shirt-buttons were unmatched, and he was shuffling along in a pair of slippers. “How many children pass through here all day? We have the strictest security, even parents have to sign in when they come in. We have 360 degree security camera coverage, no blindspots. You’re saying human traffickers are involved? Is that a joke? I guarantee it with my own head, it’s absolutely impossible! Unless the child picked up and left on her own, then even if aliens have invaded the earth, they still couldn’t get into our school!”

“Deputy Tao, we just used the tracking software on Zhang Yuchen’s cell phone to remotely turn on the device, and we’ve already located its approximate position. It’s near White Peach Lane!”

“White Peach Lane.” Tao Ran stared. “Why would it be White Peach Lane?”

White Peach Lane was approximately three stops away from the Children’s Palace. It was a well-known small commodities distribution center in the city. Quite a few online stores did business there, often working through the night. There were clothes wholesalers, those who sold small trinkets by the kilogram, wholesalers of large and small packages scattered all around. The street was full of pickpockets and swindlers. It was bustling and disordered.

For a child sneaking away to have fun, White Peach Lane was too disordered, and there was really nothing fun there; for a child-abducting pervert, White Peach Lane was too full of people and eyes, the risk too high.

Tao Ran pinched the bridge of his nose. “Slow down, let me think...”

Before he’d finished, Chenchen’s mother had pushed aside two criminal policemen and run over. “Officer Tao, I was listening, have they located Chenchen’s phone? Where is she?”

Lang Qiao, just arrived after racing through the night, quickly came over to block and quietly soothe her.

“I clearly said to her, I told her every day to be careful when she goes out, not to go along with strangers, not to go to unfamiliar places, to get word to an adult if anything goes wrong. I said it so much I thought I was being annoying myself. If my mouth were made of iron I’d have worn a layer off...”

Chang Ning wiped away tears with one hand and held her with the other. “Aunt, don’t be like that.”

Seeing Chang Ning wiping away tears, Tao Ran’s mild fretfulness rose sharply. “Xiao Qiao’er, you stay here to go through the security camera footage. You guys come with me to White Peach Lane.”

The police car set out through the night like a shooting star, its four wheels almost leaving the ground. In five or six minutes they’d covered the three stops worth of distance. The season was about to change, and the first collections of autumn clothes would soon be hitting the shelves; White Peach Lane was so crowded it was about to turn into “White Fur Lane,” the throngs of merchants creating a local heat island in the city with their breath.

Going back and forth among this crowd, within three minutes a person’s forehead would be covered in sweat.

Tao Ran looked around blankly and asked the technician, “Can you narrow the range a little?”

“It’s just approaching the west end of White Peach Lane,” came the technician’s voice over Tao Ran’s earbud. “They haven’t noticed that the phone is on yet. Deputy Tao, you have to hurry.”

Tao Ran gave his subordinates a look, and they immediately split up in a well-coordinated fashion, approaching the west side of White Peach Lane from different directions. Tao Ran ran over, gaze sweeping over every person who went past him. Garbage trucks, carts, human-sized bags... No place that could conceal a person was overlooked, they were all searched one by one. Although no one had sounded a police siren, the quick search still instantly raised a nervous atmosphere on White Peach Lane.

Suddenly, the technician’s alert came over Tao Ran’s earbud: “Deputy Tao, they’ve noticed something, the phone’s been turned off!”

Tao Ran’s strained gaze subconsciously swept his surroundings and happened to fall beside a garbage can. A small, skinny man inadvertently looked up. Their gazes met. The man paused for a second, then got a clear look at Tao Ran’s uniform. He threw down the thing in his hand, took to his heels, and ran.

What he’d thrown down had been a white cell phone, the back of it stuck full of stickers.

Tao Ran’s pupils contracted. “Stop!”

Up ahead a wholesaler was just pushing a cart past. The man familiarly stepped up on the side of the cart like a monkey; accompanied by the surprised cry of the woman pushing the cart, the clothes on the cart came falling down like a landslide. A motorcyclist moving with difficulty alongside immediately braked to avoid the stuff that had fallen under his wheels, then let out a torrent of abuse.

In the chaos, the man had already put a foot up on the guard rail around the road. He went over in a flash and was about to dart across the street when a tall and sturdy policeman leapt out from a nearby small street and grabbed the back of his collar as if lifting a chick. With a twist of his arm, he had the man pressed down to the ground. Tao Ran turned back and picked up the white cell phone. He turned it back on. The background was Chenchen's cat-faced selfie.

He let out a long breath and went over to the man, who was already under control. "Where is she?"

The man's nose had been injured when he went down. He raised his head, his face brightly colored. He looked at Tao Ran with an entreating expression and said on a sobbing note, "I-I-I was wrong, Mr. Government Man, I'll mend my ways this time, I won't do it again... Ow... *Hss*... Gently, please..."

Tao Ran grabbed him by the collar. "Where's the girl?"

"Huh?"

At this time, Luo Wenzhou had already driven to the gates of the Children's Palace.

Seeing the familiar license plate, Lang Qiao bounded over. "Boss!"

"What's happening, where's Tao Ran?" Saying so, Luo Wenzhou looked back and waved towards the car's interior. "Sit in the car for now."

The person in the car wasn't having this. He got out, hoisting his arm.

Lang Qiao stared in spite of herself. "Wow, President Fei, what... what's with the armor?"

“A little accident.” Fei Du looked at the buildings around the Children’s Palace. “Is there news?”

Before Lang Qiao could answer, a police car braked noisily at the Children’s Palace’s gates. Tao Ran and a few criminal policemen got out, their faces grim.

Seeing Luo Wenzhou throw him a questioning look, Tao Ran shook his head. “Chenchen’s phone was stolen. An old fox, a habitual offender. He’s just been released from detention. He says there was a girl tying her shoes by the road. She put her phone down on a street planter next to her. When her shoes were tied, she left and forgot the phone there. So he only ‘picked it up.’”

“Which street? When did he take it?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“It must be right around the Children’s Palace...” Tao Ran raked a hand through his hair, his forehead tightly furrowed. “We found seven or eight phones ready to be resold on that joker, all today’s accomplishments. He’s not sure of the concrete times and locations himself.”

“Ge,” Fei Du asked beside him, “what are you panicking about? What’s wrong?”

“I asked Chang Ning. Chenchen was wearing a floral-patterned dress today.” Tao Ran’s face looked awful, and his voice was quick and anxious. “If it really is... If the killer’s kidnapped two children within five days, the frequency is too high. It shows that there’s a hundred percent chance Qu Tong is... Chenchen was kidnapped around five, and now it’s already been over seven hours, she may very well also...”

“Hush.” Fei Du patted him on the arm. “Settle down a little.”

“What do I have to settle down about?” Tao Ran laughed bitterly. “I’m not the child’s parent.—I haven’t dared to tell Chenchen’s family my guesses yet... You said that the suspicious individual last time was an old man, right? Are you sure?”

“I’m not sure. I was too far away,” said Fei Du. “Chenchen is a sensitive girl. When I warned her to be careful last time, I scared her. She wouldn’t have forgotten so soon. I believe she wouldn’t let down her guard, even around old people and acquaintances. Even if someone had tricked her into leaving, she wouldn’t have forgotten to send word to her family.”

“Deputy Tao, we’ve found the child on the drawing classroom’s security camera!”

Tao Ran swiftly turned around and was about to go; Luo Wenzhou put a hand on his shoulder. “Leave it to me. You take responsibility for talking to the little girl’s parents. See if there’s been anything unusual about the child lately, whether the parents have offended anyone, how their family relationships stand—we can’t overlook any possibilities.”

Fei Du leaned to one side. “Do you need my help?”

Luo Wenzhou hesitated. “In what capacity?”

Fei Du very shamelessly answered, “Friends and family.”

Luo Wenzhou help up a finger and pointed at him with a trace of warning, but in the end he didn’t tell him to go cool his heels.

The drawing classroom’s security camera was very clear. Around four-thirty, the other children were successively picked up by their parents, and Chenchen sat in the classroom alone, indifferently flipping through an album the teacher had left. From time to time she looked

out the window; in ten minutes, she spent over five of them looking seriously towards the window.

Uncertainly, Luo Wenzhou said, “What’s she looking at?”

“A mirror,” said Lang Qiao.

Luo Wenzhou looked bewildered.

“Little girls use glass windowpanes as mirrors, you know. You can look at the scenery just by turning your head, no need to turn your whole body or come closer. She’s also using her pen to twist the ends of her hair,” Lang Qiao said. “All girls understand this... Huh?”

While she was speaking, she saw Chenchen suddenly sit up straight, slightly leaving her chair. Then she smiled, stood up, and quickly packed up her things and ran off—the timestamp in the corner of the recording was around 4:40.

Luo Wenzhou immediately looked up to check the drawing classroom’s position; the window was right across from the playground.

The security camera on the building closest to the playground was quickly searched. You could see Chenchen running quickly out of the classroom building towards a group of children gathered on the playground. The camera was a little distant; it only caught her lingering briefly among the crowd of children. Then she walked towards a camera blindspot with some other girls, quickly leaving the frame.

Judging from the scene, they were heading towards a row of red buildings at the Children’s Palace’s northwest corner.

“What’s this?” Luo Wenzhou asked, frowning. “Didn’t the administrator say there were no blindspots?”

“The row of buildings in the northwest corner are public toilets. There aren’t any cameras installed.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you say so earlier! Determine the identities of those children on the tape, question them immediately.—Bring the map.”

The Children’s Palace’s northwest corner adjoined a little park, very sloppily managed. The outer lawn had been crushed all out of sorts by residents taking walks, the footprints and dog shit evident. No one went to the depths of the park, however; the vegetation was overgrown, and the mosquitoes were like bombers. The police dogs were swiftly in position, flashlight beams and barks rising and falling.

Fei Du listened in as Tao Ran spoke with Chenchen’s father.

“I came around 5:05, I’d arranged it with her... First I called her from the door. When I heard her phone was off, I thought it had run out of battery and signed in with the caretaker and went in to look for her—but she wasn’t in the classroom. I didn’t think she could have gone missing. It was a Children’s Palace, no different from a school. I thought she’d gone to the bathroom or to play somewhere... I was pretty angry, too. I waited in their drawing classroom for a while. When the security guards started to inspecting the doors and windows and turning off the lights, I started to panic a little and went to ask around and have a female teacher check for her in the restrooms...”

Chenchen’s mom tugged on his shoulder, her face covered in tears. “Is she that kind of child? Running off without a word when she clearly knew a grown-up was waiting for her... Well? What kind of a dad are you? Anything goes wrong, and you want to blame my daughter right away. If anything at all happens to the child, I...”

Chenchen's dad was reeling from her pulling. He shut his mouth tightly and didn't make a sound. Tao Ran and Chang Ning, one to the left and one to the right, quickly separated the two of them.

Fei Du suddenly said, "I heard that child tracking systems on phones can be used to turn the device on remotely. The officers must have located Chenchen's phone like that earlier. Why didn't you think of turning her phone on then?"

"I thought of it." Chenchen's dad looked on the point of collapse; he resisted desperately, forcing down his shuddering breaths. "But there was something wrong with the software. It kept telling me that the remote function link had failed... I'm not used to using that thing..."

"We've found Chenchen's phone," said Tao Ran. "The battery is at least half full. It must have already been stolen by the pickpocket the first time you called. Could the child have discovered the phone was missing and gone to look for it?"

"The risk of stealing a phone in a Children's Palace is too high." Fei Du shook his head. "The likelihood isn't great. She must have left by herself for some reason. It was half an hour and more from the time class ended to the time you'd arranged to pick her up. She may have gone to buy snacks in the shops around here, or to play with her classmates... It's all possible, but ordinarily she would stay within a kilometer radius. That way, she could come back to the door of the children's palace as soon as she got your call.—Have you taught her what to do when she has something stolen outside?"

"Yes." Chang Ning looked at Tao Ran and quietly said, "I was just joking with her a few days ago, saying that from now on if anything happened she could go to Tao Ran-gege. She knows how to phone the police, and if that won't work, she knows to go back to school and find a security guard..."

Tao Ran patted the back of her hand and gave her a consoling look. He quietly said, "The Children's Palace is surrounded by crowded neighborhoods. It was the peak evening rush hour, it would have been fairly safe. Except for the depths of the little park at the northwest corner..."

"No, she wouldn't." As if seeking comfort, Chang Ning grabbed him by the wrist. "Chenchen is very timid. She doesn't dare to go to sleep alone after she's watched a thriller. She wouldn't have gone on her own where there weren't any people!"

Fei Du suddenly said, "What if it wasn't on her own, but with her classmates?"

All of them stared at him.

Fei Du walked up in front of Chenchen's father. "Around what time was it the first time you tried to remotely turn on her phone?"

"Six...after six," said Chenchen's dad. "Her teacher reminded me about it."

Fei Du said, "How did you operate it? Could you demonstrate it for me?"

"Boss, that teacher over there just contacted the children on the security camera footage for us!" Lang Qiao pushed aside a cluster of branches blocking her eyes and quickly went over to Luo Wenzhou. "They went to the restrooms to change their clothes, then went to the little park together to take photographs."

"Take photographs?"

"A student in the photography class had homework to hand in and arranged for some girls to model for her. Some children brought clothes especially to put on for the photographs. They did that for a

while. When they finished with the photographs, Zhang Yuchen had to go back to the Children's Palace. They parted at the gates of the park, and no one knows where Zhang Yuchen went after that."

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath—this was bad.

If Chenchen had discovered her phone was gone after parting from her friends, the child's first thought would have been of the place where they'd taken their photographs. She would have returned to the deserted depths of the little park—but the little park wasn't the street; it was hard to follow what had happened afterwards.

"Boss, what do we do?" said Lang Qiao.

Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment, then fished out his phone and called the person responsible for keeping an eye on Xu Wenchao.

"Report on Xu Wenchao's movements today."

"Xu Wenchao let Deputy Tao copy his vehicle location record. He only left the bureau at 5:45. He drove twenty-some minutes to a fast food restaurant, got takeaway, and went home. He hasn't moved since."

Luo Wenzhou quietly asked, "Are you sure he's been home the whole time?"

"I'm sure. He hasn't drawn the curtains. He's been sitting in his study and hasn't left our sight.—What's wrong, boss?"

"Boss, either we suspect the wrong person," said Lang Qiao, "or this case is unrelated to Qu Tong's disappearance.—What the hell, are there really this many perverts in the world?"

Before Luo Wenzhou had spoken, his phone rang; the caller ID said “Feishir¹⁴.”

“What is it?”

On the other end, Mr. “Feishir” calmly said, “The pilferer didn’t steal the phone directly from Chenchen; there’s a point to his sophistry. The girl who put the phone down really did ‘forget’ it.”

Luo Wenzhou quickly followed up, “How do you know?”

“Around six, Mr. Zhang tried to use the remote function the child’s phone on, but the remote link failed. I think there was no problem with the way he operated it. Under the circumstances, either one of them didn’t have a signal, or the battery had been removed from the child’s phone.” Fei Du paused briefly. “There was no need for the pilferer to remove the battery and put it back in, and he wouldn’t know what software was on the phone. I can only think of one possibility—while Chenchen was changing her clothes or posing, one of the children in that group hid her phone. When Chenchen noticed, the child suggested she go back to the little park to look for it, and volunteered to go with her.”

She would naturally have trusted her own friend, and also told that person that her phone had a remote system.

“You’re saying that a child—likely another girl—planned this thing.” Luo Wenzhou sucked in a breath. “She not only kidnapped her friend, she also deliberately tossed the phone to mislead the police? That’s too...”

Fei Du gave a light, unreadable laugh.

Luo Wenzhou immediately remembered that teenager back then with his dark, ice-cold gaze and bit back the rest of his words.

“Why are you thinking along those lines?”

“Because I warned her to be careful of grown-ups—familiar ones, strange ones, men and women, even old people,” said Fei Du. “The only thing I didn’t tell her was to be careful of children like her.”

Why couldn’t it be a child?

Little girls just over ten were like flower buds, beautiful and delicate, ignorant and fragile; the whole world saw them as potential victims, as if they were lacking in wit and intelligence, and however much you protected them it wouldn’t be enough. How could anyone suspect them of committing a crime?

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone with Fei Du and turned to Lang Qiao. “When the Children’s Palace teacher made those phone calls just now, was there a call where a parent didn’t pick up at first?”

Even when arresting a knife-wielding murderer bare-handed, Lang Qiao didn’t look so horrified. “I think...I think there was one...”

CHAPTER 47 - Humbert Humbert XIV

“Hello, is this Student Su Luozhan? I’m Teacher Wang from the Children’s Palace, the one who issued your registration cards when school started. Do you remember?”

“I remember, Teacher Wang.”

“It’s so late; you aren’t sleeping yet? Are your mom and dad nearby? I want to say a few words to you, but I need to have your mom and dad agree first.”

“Dad hasn’t come home yet. Mom is sick. She’s sleeping and I can’t wake her up. Why don’t you just tell me?”

“Oh...all right, I’ll just ask you a few questions. It’s like this: there’s a child in the art class called Zhang Yuchen. She went missing after school let out today. Someone said they saw you two playing together. Do you remember where you saw her for the last time?”

Silence.

“Hello, Student Su Luozhan, are you still there?”

“...I’m here. Sorry, teacher, the signal is bad here. You were saying the art class’s...”

“Student Zhang Yuchen. The one who’s very short, with her hair in a little braid.”

“Oh, we went to the little park to play together a while. There were lots of us, from other classes, too. Afterwards we all left. We didn’t know where she went.”

“Really? All right, then. You go to bed soon. Don’t be late for class tomorrow.”

“Okay, teacher. If you find her, don’t forget to call and tell us. I’m worried.”

Lang Qiao turned off the record of the phone call. “Because there was no guardian with this child, and because her explanations more or less matched with the others, the teacher didn’t ask any more. What do you think of this dialogue? I still think it’s hard to believe, but when I think about it, if the suspect is a child, that explains why Qu Tong would be willing to get into a stranger’s car in an extremely frightening situation, and why Deputy Tao and I couldn’t find anything on all of those security tapes. It’s...too horrifying.”

Luo Wenzhou pushed Su Luozhan’s personal information in front of her. “I’ll show you something more horrifying.”

The name filled in as Su Luozhan’s emergency contact was “Su Xiaolan”; the relationship was “mother and daughter.”

A few police cars arrived swift as the wind at Su Luozhan’s recorded address.—It was a fairly well-appointed estate. In the middle of the night, all was still. The dozing door guard was startled awake and looked blankly at the ID in Luo Wenzhou’s hand.

“Do you have a mother and daughter surnamed Su living here?”

The security guard stared so hard he went cross-eyed. “I, I-I don’t know, I-I-I just came...”

“Go to the property management and get the previously recorded register of owners,” Luo Wenzhou said quickly. “Everyone be careful. If this girl really is the suspect we’re looking for, the circumstances will be very unusual. She’ll be more unstable than the average adult. We absolutely must not provoke her. In case the victims are still alive,

our actions can't be allowed to lead to an unimaginable consequence.”

“Captain Luo, it's 401!”

“If everyone's got it, then let's go.”

In the fourth floor corridor, a crowd of people concealed themselves in a corner of the stairs. Luo Wenzhou lifted his chin, indicating for Lang Qiao to knock on the door.

Lang Qiao rubbed at her frosty face, which looked as if it had been injected with Botox, twisting it into the kindest and gentlest expression it had ever worn. She went up to the door and knocked. “Is there anyone home?”

No one answered her.

Lang Qiao felt rather harassed—she was used to acting the fiend; displaying a “kindly” aspect wasn't really in her line.

She squeezed a soft and gentle voice out of her throat. “Is there anyone home? I'm the tenant who just moved in upstairs. My apartment seems to have sprung a bit of a leak. I'm sorry, I hope it hasn't poured down?”

As before, there wasn't a sound.

An accompanying technician furtively passed her a reverse peephole. Lang Qiao attached it to the peephole, bent slightly, and peered inside.

There was no one at the entrance. She could see to the living room at the end of the entry hall. The apartment was dim. The only light was at the center of the living room. Looking closely, Lang Qiao found that source of the light was an incense altar; on each side were

electric red candles and altar lamps, laid out in front of a black and white photograph of the deceased.

The woman's somber face reflected a bit of the light from the incense altar, coldly exchanging a look with her. A shiver leapt up Lang Qiao's spine, and she subconsciously backed away.

Luo Wenzhou gave her a questioning look.

Lang Qiao gave a fierce shudder and hastily shook her head. She raised her hand and knocked on the door once again. "Anyone there? If you'd rather not open the door, you can just answer me. I just want to ask whether you have a leak."

The awkward silence stretched out in the small corridor. Luo Wenzhou suddenly reached out a hand and made Lang Qiao back away. "Open the door."

Lang Qiao stared. "Boss..."

There was no evidence and no witnesses; they hadn't even been able to obtain a warrant. All they had were subjective guesses...

"It's all right," Luo Wenzhou said heavily. "If there's a problem, I'll take responsibility. Open it."

Several criminal policemen and technicians swarmed up and had the door pried open in a flash.

An indescribable odor surged up and hit them full in the face—it was a grotesque combination of incense and candle scents mixed with the stuffiness of midsummer humidity and long-unopened windows, fermented so that the sense of smell somehow registered it as almost an odor of decay.

And there was no one in the apartment.

The apartment wasn't large, fifty or sixty square meters at most, a regulation one living room and one bedroom, but Su Xiaolan's black and white portrait keeping watch there alone gave it an odd sense of void.

The portrait of the deceased faced a double bed arranged in the living room. The silk bedspread was darkly colored; at the head of the bed were a bottle of dark nail polish and half a pack of cigarettes.

The bedroom next door was a little smaller and looked like a place where a little girl lived. A row of dull-eyed cheap Western dolls was arranged on the small single bed, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the door together; all of them wore floral-patterned dresses.

"Heavens." Lang Qiao pulled open the wardrobe in the girl's room. Inside, without exception, everything was floral-patterned dresses. Even stranger, the designs on these clothes matched the dresses on the dolls. Gooseflesh stood up on Lang Qiao's arms. "Is this a place for a person to live?"

Luo Wenzhou put on gloves and rooted around in the wardrobe. Suddenly, he found a small box among the pile of clothes.

He found the latch and snapped open the lid of the box. The sound of "Für Elise" was set free from the box's crevices. It was a music box; presumably the power was running low, making the piano music a little off key, seeming sluggish and weird.

Then the surrounding criminal policemen got a clear look at what was inside.

Lang Qiao covered her mouth—inside the box was a naked doll with one arm and one leg removed, the limbs laid out on strips of bloody cloth.

The strips of cloth were cotton, with a lively pattern of small white flowers opening cluster after cluster—

“This is Qu Tong’s dress. Her parents showed us a photograph of her wearing that dress at home. I remember the quality of the dress wasn’t very good, some of the pattern had gotten into the side seam. It looked very uneven...” With difficulty, Lang Qiao pointed at a strip of cloth with stitches on it. “Just...just like that.”

His face grim, Luo Wenzhou closed the box’s lid. “Take it back to be examined.”

Then he turned and went into the bathroom.

The damp bathroom had grown an abundance of mold, which was aggressively spreading everywhere. In front of the carved mirror missing a corner were two toothbrushes, a row of many-colored lipsticks, and some used cotton swabs that hadn’t been thrown away.

“What did she say to the teacher then?” Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself, walking around in a circle, “Mom is sick. She’s sleeping and I can’t wake her up. Dad hasn’t come home yet?’ But there are no signs of a man living here. What ‘dad’ was she talking about? Are you sure that the phone call earlier was taken around here?”

“Captain Luo, I’ve found the phone she took the call on.” A criminal policeman cautiously picked up an elderly, heavily scratched-up cell phone from under a small coffee table in the living room. After going through it, he reported, “The teacher’s phone call is in the recent calls!”

So the girl had just been there!

Luo Wenzhou swiftly turned and walked over. “But where is she now?”

Su Luozhan was a child, after all. She wouldn't have known how many security cameras the Children's Palace had. It was likely she hadn't expected she would be filmed at the playground. Then, having taken the teacher's phone call in the middle of the night, would she have realized in a panic that she had exposed herself?

What would she do?

And most importantly, where was Zhang Yuchen?

When Qu Tong had gone missing out in the wilderness, the person who'd taken her had worn size forty-two shoes and been able to drive a car. That couldn't have been such a small girl. This meant that Su Luozhan's mysterious "dad" was very likely her accomplice.

It was evident that Zhang Yuchen wasn't in this small apartment with its offerings to the dead. Then could she be with the accomplice? If that was the case, then would Su Luozhan have run over to find her accomplice when she'd been alerted by the phone call?

If Chenchen was still alive, would they act recklessly because of this, "freeing" themselves of Chenchen ahead of time?

Could the child live until daybreak?

The midsummer night was like a piece of caramel melting in the heat, thick and sticky. The girl ran quickly through the silent streets, the clattering of her own footsteps like a shadowing monster. Around her were the occasional movements of stray cats and dogs, all of them making her quiver with terror. The girl charged right into an old-fashioned "small two-story."

These so-called "small two-stories" were a type of building from twenty to thirty years ago, built in a row, usually only two or three floors high. Each small building had a yard in front of it, with just about enough space in each yard to plant a grapevine. At first glance

they looked something like villas, but in fact the space inside was very cramped, and the conditions were poor. A few families usually shared one little yard. Living there was very inconvenient, and once summer came there was every evil imaginable, the wind and rain seeping in. They were supposed to be torn down soon.

The girl tried twice before she succeeded in getting the key into the lock. She rushed in and grabbed the phone by the door, quickly dialing a number. The call connected. Lengthy dial tones sounded, each one knocking on the pit of her stomach. She unconsciously reached out her long nails and restlessly picked at the mottled wall.

But after a dozen rings, the call automatically disconnected.

The girl's eyes opened wide, as if she couldn't believe that the other person would actually dare not to take her call. She didn't give up, quickly dialing the number again; as before, no one picked up.

This girl was very pretty, with apricot stone eyes, round cheeks, and a sharp little chin. She looked more like a Western doll than those cheap goods did. Innocence and charm combined in her, perfectly complementing each other. But soon, a frightening hatred climbed up her little face. Without warning, she suddenly slammed the telephone against the wall and screamed hysterically.

Just then, there was a weeping sound in the dark room, like the sobs of a small animal.

The frantic girl swiftly twisted her head, expressionlessly turning on the wall light.

The person tied up in the corner curled away from the light. Through her tears, she gave a disbelieving look—

This was the vanished Chenchen.

At this time, Chenchen's family were still waiting in a state of anxiety at the Children's Palace.

Tao Ran went out to take a phone call. When he returned, he avoided Chenchen's family and whispered something to Fei Du.

"You're saying she had an adult male accomplice?" Fei Du frowned faintly. "You mean, first they used the girl to entice Chenchen into the little park, and then the man appeared, took her unawares, and carried her off?"

"What is it?" said Tao Ran.

"No...I was just thinking there was something strange." Fei Du hoisted his unfortunate arm and turned around in place, talking quietly to himself. "Too strange—when Mr. Zhang called his daughter just after five, the phone was off. That means that the kidnapping plot was already underway. In another hour, his attempt to use the remote software to turn on Chenchen's phone failed, which shows that Chenchen was already under the criminal's control. But the criminal hadn't started to deal with follow-up arrangements yet. When the girl lost the phone on purpose, it must have been at least after six. Why?"

"An adult man, even half-immobilized, definitely wouldn't need to spend an hour getting a child like Chenchen under control." Fei Du's steps paused. "And after all this was finished, the girl put the battery back into Chenchen's phone and left it on purpose for someone to take—why was that?"

Since she'd already removed the battery, taking the phone apart and dropping the pieces on her way would have been safe and convenient; the police dogs wouldn't have been able to find them.

And the explanation of temporarily turning away the police force's line of sight didn't work, because even a child would have seen

enough television dramas to know that more than one police officer would be handling the case; they wouldn't be so easily distracted.

And if the person who'd picked up...or stolen the phone had happened to see her, wouldn't that increase the risk?

"Is there a possibility that kidnapping the little girl in West Ridge was a cooperative crime, but this time, for some reason, the man wasn't there, only the girl, and she had to spend more time?"

Tao Ran stared, grabbing Fei Du's shoulder. "The girl's physical abilities are limited, she can't accomplish a sadistic killing on her own...and can't complete the recording. But she knows that Chenchen's phone has remote software and that her parents will definitely try to use it to find their child. She's covertly tormenting the parents, accomplishing the same end as the recording by other means!"

Give you hope, make you search desperately, then make you lose hope.

Only she hadn't expected that the timing would be a little off; the time she delayed was longer than she'd imagined.

"If that's how it is, she couldn't have dragged away a girl about the same size as her on her own. She could only have tricked her away." From far off, Fei Du looked at the mother, again crying bitterly. "When Chenchen clearly knew that her dad would be looking for her, why would she agree to go with her?"

Tao Ran took a deep breath and quietly said, "I didn't bring my phone today, but my house is closer than the Children's Palace. Your dad may already be at school looking for you, and it would be easy to miss each other if you're both looking. You can come to my house and call him."

“The distance must have been very short, much closer than the Children’s Palace. A distance a child would think was comfortable and convenient.”

Tao Ran pulled over the map. “A kilometer... No, within five-hundred meters...”

There was an old residential area about to be torn down less than one intersection away from the little park’s other gate.

“Wait a minute,” said Tao Ran, “why do I think I’ve heard this address somewhere?”

Luo Wenzhou and the others had turned Su Luozhan’s house upside down, primarily looking for any masculine products, searching for a trace of the mystery man.

Lang Qiao opened a drawer and turned it over, finding that among other things it contained residence certificates, ID cards, school entry notices, and other such documents and credentials. She only picked up a set of medical records and flipped through it, giving the rest of the items a rough look and quickly dropping them to one side, spreading them over the ground.

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze swept over them. After a moment, as if he’d suddenly thought of something, his gaze fixed, and he crouched down and picked up the certificates of property ownership—two of them.

One of them was for this one bedroom, one living room apartment, and the other was for a building in some factory’s residential quarters that had been converted to private ownership during the housing reforms. The house was older than Su Xiaolan.

“Xiao Qiao’er, check this for me,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Twenty years ago, when Su Xiaolan was little, was this the address recorded for

her?”

Lang Qiao didn't understand his reasons, but she instinctively complied and went to check at once. Before she'd found anything, a phone call came from the criminal policeman Luo Wenzhou had assigned to keep an eye on Xu Wenchao. “Captain Luo, we planted a listening device in Xu Wenchao's room. He just got two phone calls in a row, and he definitely heard them, but he didn't pick up—do you think he's noticed he's being watched? Oh, we've also found the phone number the calls came from. It's a landline, the address is...”

“Children's Road Trading Company Intersection, Unit 3,” said Luo Wenzhou.

The surveilling policeman was surprised. “Captain Luo, how did you know?”

At the same time, Lang Qiao charged in. “Boss, when Su Xiaolan cooperated with the investigation as a victim back then, that's the address she provided in her contact information!”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Come on!”

CHAPTER 48 - Humbert Humbert XV

Chenchen had been woken up by the press of the cold floor. At first she didn't understand what had happened. She only remembered going home with a little jiejie from the photography class—her house really was very close, just around the corner from the park. Though it looked rather destitute, it was still fairly tidy.

The telephone hadn't been very useful, the connection always bad. The little jiejie had sworn up and down that she only had to yank on the wire to fix it, and had also brought her a chilled drink in a bottle.

With the straw in her mouth, Chenchen had sipped mango juice and thought that she was perhaps being too much of a bother. She'd been wavering over whether she should say "I should go back to school instead," but before she could speak, she'd felt as though she'd been yanked out of her body, all her limbs losing control. She'd struggled a few times, and after that she didn't know anything.

Chenchen's braid had come unravelled, she was covered in dust, and her limbs were bound. She must have been violently dragged over the floor, because all her exposed skin had been scraped raw and ached sharply. The duct tape stuck over her lips had a rubbery taste. She curled up with difficulty, desperately trying to hide—Su Luozhan was a few steps away, looking loftily down on her!

Su Luozhan had her head tilted, one long strand of hair falling from her temple. She twisted it around one long, slim finger next to her cheek, her cold eyes like those of some dangerous cold-blooded animal.

Then she pursed the corners of her mouth, sneering at Chenchen. "You're really despicable."

Chenchen trembled violently.

“I despise your type of clueless toady the most. You’re all scheming sluts. At your age, relying on throwing tantrums, always needing someone to take you places, getting anything you want. At the least little thing, you act like you’re a little kid, like the whole world has to accommodate you.” As she spoke, Su Luozhan bent down and got a curved chopper out of the shoe cupboard at the door. The metal tool was a little too heavy for her thin hands; the knife scraped against the old wooden cupboard with a rustle.

Chenchen struggled violently. Her mouth was sealed; she produced weak little whimpering sounds like a small animal's, her face turning red from the strain as she fought to struggle free of her bonds.

“If he won’t come, I can do it myself!”

Su Luozhan suddenly flared up, lifting the knife and charging towards Chenchen.

Under extreme terror, a person’s latent strength can be limitless. In that moment, despite her bound condition, Chenchen somewhere found the strength to get the floor under her feet. Before she could stand, the knife had already drawn near. Chenchen closed her eyes and threw herself forward, scrambling out from under Su Luozhan’s knife, bumping her head into the corner of the coffee table and instantly splitting open the corner of her forehead.

Chenchen was disoriented and dizzy from the bump. All she wanted was to wail and call for someone to help her, but she knew there was no use crying. She had to press her shoulder against the coffee table, again trying to stand up.

The knife in Su Luozhan’s hand swung too fiercely; it stuck in a wooden cabinet in a corner. The knife was heavy, after all; using all her strength, she still couldn’t pull it out. Flustered and exasperated, Su Luozhan went up and grabbed Chenchen’s hair from behind.

Chenchen felt like her whole scalp had been torn off. She could only bend awkwardly under the draw. Her unstoppably flowing tears had already soaked the edge of the duct tape. She was like a little lamb being taken to slaughter.

But it only aroused the other's desire to torment.

Su Luozhan raised a hand and slapped her. Chenchen, who had never had a finger laid on her, was nearly knocked out of her senses.

“Slut,” said Su Luozhan, “you’re just a slut!”

Under the influence of movies and television, the word “slut” was in fact widely used in middle schools and the higher grades of elementary school. There were always some children, developing a little earlier than their contemporaries, who had this sort of adult-flavored strong vocabulary hanging off their lips—even if at home each one of them played dumb, as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths.

Su Luozhan fiercely pushed Chenchen towards the coffee table. Chenchen’s lower back bumped against the short table. The dead person in the old photograph under the table’s crystal top showed an intrigued not-quite-smile towards the two living, breathing girls. The duct tape on Chenchen’s mouth, soaked with her tears, fell away during this struggle. Right away she cried out, “Help me!”

The first cry was hoarse and weak. Then, as Chenchen quickly became accustomed to the feeling of speech, her voice became resounding. “Help me! Help me!”

Su Luozhan froze at her shout. She had just felt that something had been missing; it wasn’t quite “scratching the itch.” Now she found it was that she hadn’t heard screams. Chenchen’s tearful “help me” stimulated her; she was like a child who’d received a present, looking

at Chenchen with an expression of happy surprise. She stamped her foot, bringing it down on Chenchen's hand spread out on the floor.

At a certain point, the pain was so great Chenchen could no longer scream. She opened her mouth wide, silently sucking in air.

Su Luozhan said, "Scream! Why won't you keep screaming?"

Chenchen was crying so hard she couldn't breathe. Using her remaining strength she forced out some wavering words: "Su...uh... jiejie...I really...really like...envy you... You...you..."

At first Su Luozhan was indifferent; only the word "envy" made her pause slightly. Her hand, about to grab the girl's hair, stopped in midair, her large eyes like black beans staring at Chenchen.

Just then, someone pounded heavily on the door several times. A man's gruff voice said, "What's all that racket! Can't a guy get some sleep!"

Inside the room, Su Luozhan and Chenchen trembled simultaneously.

The man angrily said, "Open the door, or I'm calling the police! Are you watching horror movies at home in the middle of the night? All this shouting, do you think you're the only ones living here?"

Su Luozhan covered Chenchen's mouth. From a cardboard box near her, she pulled out some paper towels left over from who knew when, rolled them up, and stuffed them into Chenchen's mouth.

"Sorry, uncle." Su Luozhan took a deep breath. Her expression cooled. She spoke softly. "The grown-ups aren't here. I can't just open the door for a stranger. I'll turn the volume down."

The man at the door paused, then very severely said, "What's all this? A child? Get over here, I'll take your parents' place and teach you a

lesson!”

Su Luozhan frowned. Before she had answered, the mental case at the door was already carrying on. “Proper behavior means being public-spirited. Do you know what public spirit is? The very minimum requirement is not to bother people. And you! What school do you go to? I’ll have to give your teachers a call. What are they teaching you little devils!”

Seeing he hadn’t finished talking, Su Luozhan’s small, pretty face was cold. “Uncle, I’m sorry, is it all right if I apologize?”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you! Weren’t you plenty loud kicking up a fuss before?”

Su Luozhan only wanted to send this suddenly appearing weirdo away. She stuffed the paper towels more firmly into Chenchen’s mouth and stood up, walking towards the door.

One step, two steps... Suddenly, on her seventh step, Su Luozhan stopped in place.

Although that person always cleaned the old house and paid the fees regularly, the residents around it knew that no one lived here. It had stood empty for a long time. Why would the person at the door, on hearing there was a child without adults there in the middle of the night, be wholly unsurprised?

Su Luozhan abruptly turned to run. At the same time, the old wooden door was forcefully broken open from outside.

A few criminal policemen charged in shortly after. Su Luozhan grabbed up the chopper stuck in the cabinet. Under severe pressure, the chopper that she hadn’t been able to pull out no matter how hard she tried slipped easily from the crack in the cabinet. But the police were about to grab her—

Su Luozhan pointed the chopper at the back of Chenchen's neck. The point of the knife immediately tore open a cut on the girl's snow white neck. Su Luozhan screamed, "Stay away!"

The door that had been broken down was shaking restlessly along the wall; the atmosphere in the room had already congealed.

Su Luozhan immediately crouched down, hiding behind Chenchen, wielding the clumsy chopper as though about to drop it. It circled quickly, at last stopping at the side of Chenchen's neck.

Her hand was shaking uncontrollably. Her eyes stared up like those of a small wild beast fighting to the death, fierce and wrathful.

Tao Ran hastily stopped the approach of those beside him and stood cautiously some steps away. "Su...Su Luozhan, right?"

Su Luozhan didn't make a sound.

All kinds of thoughts spun through Tao Ran's mind. For a time he didn't know how he should negotiate with such a small suspect. Just then, Fei Du slowly appeared at the door.

He turned aside slightly, blocking his injured arm, his gaze absently sweeping a circle around the inside of the room. "Where's the person we want to arrest?"

Su Luozhan paused, involuntarily looking at him.

"Oh, there's a kid." Fei Du seemed to have just discovered her. Rather slightly, he asked, "Where did the kidnapping murderer who was with you go?"

Su Luozhan looked at the knife in her hand. She looked at the person under the knife. She raised her head and looked at Fei Du as if she

didn't know how to answer.

“Why don't you hurry and put the knife down? It's all right now, you don't have to be so nervous.” Fei Du looked around the room. While the previous generations of owners were already dearly departed, the traces of their chaotic lifestyle had been left behind. The walls were stained faint yellow with smoke, and there was still a pile of liquor bottles in a corner. “It's really all right. Forcing a child to act as bait and hiding himself—this is my first time seeing such an evasive criminal. Little lady, set your mind at ease. There's a whole crowd of policemen outside. He won't get away. The police uncles and the laws protecting minors will protect you... It's really unfair to make you hold such a big knife. Isn't it heavy?”

It had been all right before he'd said it. As soon as he mentioned it, Su Luozhan at once felt that her wrist couldn't stand the burden; it would soon be numb from the weight of the large chopper. At the same time, she consciously understood Fei Du's words—the police thought this had all been done by that person, and she was only the pitiful bait!

The complacency of duping others rose in Su Luozhan's heart. She blinked her eyes red, actually seeming rather more pathetic than Chenchen, abjectly staring towards Fei Du.

Tao Ran moved forward a step at Fei Du's words. Seeing Su Luozhan cower, he kept a close watch on her hand holding the knife and crouched down, spreading his hands towards her, bringing his gaze level with the girl's. His gaze passed as quickly as possible over Chenchen, concentrating on Su Luozhan. “Is that true? Did someone coerce you?”

Su Luozhan only hesitated a few seconds, then nodded resolutely.

Tao Ran's voice softened further. He slowly, bit by bit, reached one spread hand towards her. “Give uncle the knife now, and then you'll

take us to arrest the bad guy, is that all right?”

Su Luozhan stared at his hand, seeming undecided for a time. When Tao Ran’s hand reached too close, she rather nervously raised the knife again, the constantly quivering blade leaving several small cuts on Chenchen’s neck—she really wouldn’t be able to hold the knife much longer.

Tao Ran duly stopped his hand in midair. “Is the bad guy called ‘Xu Wenchao?’ Did he use you to catch Qu Tong? Did he do bad things to you?”

Fei Du said, “When your mother was alive, in order to get close to him, did she often dress you up like a Western doll and do your makeup?”

Su Luozhan took a thin breath, seeming to use all her power to hold back her agitated emotions.

“She’d gotten old herself and didn’t look like she had back then, so she used a child. She didn’t permit you to wear other clothes, didn’t permit you to cut your hair, right?” Fei Du fixed his gaze on her. “Did she abuse you? Did she hit you before?”

Su Luozhan’s tears, real or fake, flowed swiftly as he spoke, obscuring her field of vision. Suddenly, she felt a tightness on her wrist. Tao Ran had taken the opportunity to grab her hand holding the chopper. Su Luozhan struggled subconsciously. Tao Ran quietly said, “Don’t be afraid, it’s all right now, it’s all right. Uncle knows you’re a good child. The bad guy forced you to do all these things, you don’t have to worry...”

His voice was gentle and the strength he was using to hold her wrist was great. Su Luozhan had no way to resist. For a moment she didn’t budge. Then she finally relaxed her hold and allowed Tao Ran to snatch away her knife.

A criminal policeman came up at once and picked Chenchen up, taking her out of range of Su Luozhan.

Luo Wenzhou, who had just arrived, heard a colleague say over his earbud, “Captain Luo, one of the suspects has been captured. She accuses Xu Wenchao of being her accomplice. Can we request a warrant for his arrest?”

“Yes, notify the guys keeping an eye on him at once. Don’t let the joker get away.” Luo Wenzhou turned and helped lift Chenchen’s stretcher up into the ambulance. He turned to Su Luozhan, who had been contained by the police. “Where is Qu Tong? Is she still alive?”

Su Luozhan didn’t speak, only shook her head at him. She seemed to think of something; the delicate corners of her mouth turned up uncontrollably. Then she noticed it and very meekly lowered her head.

Even though he’d been mentally prepared after seeing the music box, Luo Wenzhou still felt stifled.

His gaze flitted over the girl’s slightly curled hair and long, thick eyelashes. Suddenly he felt a strain of hard-to-name, preposterous sadness.

He waved a hand, letting his colleagues escort Su Luozhan to a police car. He turned his head and looked towards the ambulance.

A few doctors were attending to the wound on Chenchen’s forehead as they asked her some questions. Chenchen’s family had already arrived as quickly as possible. The stifling loss and recovery caused Chenchen’s mom’s legs to give out; she nearly went to her knees. Beside her, her husband quickly helped her up. The temporary mutual accusations between the two of them had vanished in an instant. Supporting each other, they walked towards their daughter.

She had been missing for nearly eight hours. Although she'd had her fill of fright, aside from being covered in small wounds, Zhang Yuchen had been brought back safe and sound. It was already nearly a miracle.

After a night of bustle, at least they'd saved one.

Luo Wenzhou sighed, then raised a hand out of habit. But he waited an age, and the partner who normally would have given him a high five hadn't moved.

Luo Wenzhou turned awkwardly and saw that Tao Ran was circling Chang Ning. Chang Ning's tears were still flowing, and Tao Ran was quietly saying something comforting, getting a handkerchief out of his pocket and passing it to her. He'd entirely forgotten about having a partner.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

There was actually a man on earth who valued sex over friendship this much!

Just then, the palm he hadn't yet pulled back was lightly patted. Flabbergasted, Luo Wenzhou turned his head. He saw that the crippled president Fei Du, his arm hanging, had strolled over beside him, and furthermore from some unknown motive had condescended to do such a superfluous thing.

Having done it, he unhurriedly put his hand in his pocket and looked at Luo Wenzhou with a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "How childish, Captain Luo."

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. He stared wide-eyed as this temporary staff member, as a matter of course, got into his car and composedly crossed his legs, waiting to be driven.

He would vouch for his own well-travelled, well-tested ability to read people; he had absolutely read a flavor of improper flirtation from Fei Du's tone and expression.

Luo Wenzhou thought in disbelief, *Is he trying to climb all over me... No, climb up to the heavens?*

CHAPTER 49 - Humbert Humbert XVI

*The days of my youth, whenever I look back on them, seem like white snowflakes in a morning snow storm, blown away from me in a flurry. - Lolita*¹⁵

“You’re going to have to put in some work, comrades. I’ll reimburse you for midnight snacks and the ladies’ facial masks. The ones who have wives and children, I’ll send home letters of repentance in your place.—Even if we have to work all night, even if we have to dig all the way down in the old Su home, we must get to the bottom of this. I want to see that little girl Qu Tong, alive or dead.” Having finished speaking into the walkie-talkie, Luo Wenzhou turned to Fei Du, who was watching him, full of interest. “Youngster, I feel you may be the reincarnation of a bearer of ill fortune. This birthday of yours has truly been happy and blessed. I can’t take you all the way home. Should I call you a cab, or let you down at some hotel on the way to make do?”

Fei Du didn’t answer. Apropos of nothing, he said instead, “What do you guys normally eat for a midnight snack when you’re on duty?”

“Normally we eat luxurious set meals of illegally recycled cooking oil.” Luo Wenzhou’s expression was a little bitter. “An unreasonable person may sometimes eat something of a slightly higher grade, for example McDonald’s.”

Fei Du: “...”

“Nonsense.” Luo Wenzhou turned the steering wheel in the direction of the City Bureau. Irritably, he said, “If they were all as hard to please as you, could I afford to reimburse them? There’s a hotel up ahead, half a month’s wages for one night. Should I stop?”

“I won’t stay at that one,” Fei Du said unhurriedly towards the bitterly oppressed public servant who had fried chicken to fill his hunger and illegally recycled cooking oil to assuage his thirst. “The incense in their lobby is too strong, and the bathrooms don’t have tubs.” Next, disregarding the surges of enmity he’d attracted, he directed, “Just drive on. There’s a six-star service hotel near your bureau that I can make do with. I can stroll over there myself.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He resisted for an age but in the end couldn’t hold back. “President Fei, from morning to night, all you do is play around and raise hell. You don’t do any proper business. Is your family money enough to squander all your life? What’ll you do when you’ve wasted the whole fortune? No one will even blow wind for you to drink. And you’re all grown up now. After today...yesterday, if you go to the civil administration bureau, you can legally apply for a marriage certificate. Can’t you be a little less high-maintenance?”

The elbow of Fei Du’s uninjured arm rested against the car door; he didn’t answer, only smiled with his chin in his hand.

Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what there was to smile about; he got anxious at the sight of him. If he hadn’t taken pity on his walking wounded status today, he would have nearly thrown this person out of the car.

After a while, Fei Du asked, “Are you sure you don’t need me to keep helping?”

“Do you have a rank? Do you get paid?” In the end, Luo Wenzhou didn’t make him walk. Still criticizing, he turned off onto an opposite side-road as he approached the City Bureau, driving towards a hotel building that could be called a local landmark. “What does this have to do with you?”

“I heard that the so-called ‘accomplice’ you arrested was accused by that savage little girl, and aside from that you have no other evidence, right?”

Luo Wenzhou, expressionlessly, said, “Ongoing investigations are confidential.”

Before he’d finished, Fei Du was already evenly going on: “Oh, right, it was also that he had some connection to the serial kidnappings of little girls twenty years ago, so he seemed suspicious.”

Luo Wenzhou secretly ground his teeth, internally plotting to get back and closely investigate just which bastard’s mouth had been so unguarded.

“That is, you don’t have evidence. The little girl isn’t fully thirteen years old. Her IQ seems high, but her mental state can’t be described as stable. How much credibility can her testimony have? The alibi of the man you arrested today was personally supplied by the police force. What if he persists in denials?” Fei Du spread his hand slightly. “And there’s that little girl. You won’t get anything out of her mouth. At any rate, you can’t torture a confession out of her. Are you really planning to call in a specialist on children’s criminal psychology this very night?”

Each word Fei Du spoke was true; all of these things were giving Luo Wenzhou a headache.

All of tonight’s operations lacked the support of real evidence. If they hadn’t rescued Chenchen in the end, having relied solely on Luo Wenzhou acting on his own initiative, shooting first and asking permission later, he’d have been in for it the next day.

He’d already driven up to the ground floor of the hotel. Surplus cold air assaulted the senses, carrying the scent of the lobby’s chill and serene incense, refreshing to the heart and mind.

Though it was the small hours of the morning, there was still a doorman on duty who energetically stepped up to welcome the guest.

Fei Du got out of the car and was about to go when he suddenly remembered something and turned back. He leaned down and knocked on the window of Luo Wenzhou's car, then pulled open the driver's side door.

"I left my phone," he said. "Could you pass it to me?"

Luo Wenzhou gave an "okay" and picked the phone up from the passenger's seat. He was about to pass it over, but Fei Du, seeming unable to wait, reached out his hand to take it.

His shirt, disheveled from the car accident, hung down loosely. From Luo Wenzhou's point of view, he could just see into his drooping collar. His chest was a little thin, but, displayed under a set of clearly defined collarbones, it had a sense of restrained power. He hadn't purposefully sprayed himself with cologne today, but this person's degenerate flesh had absorbed all the world's essences; from his collar came a faint, almost undetectable masculine scent, vanishing without a trace before it could be clearly considered.

Reaching out his arm to take the phone, Fei Du almost brushed against him; after this near contact, his finger, by accident or by design, touched Luo Wenzhou as he grabbed his phone.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

In the middle of the night, for a young and vigorous man, interested in men and having no fixed partner, under the infinite stress of work, to be taken by surprise by this sort of provocation was no less tragic than for a person who had been fasting for three days to see a late-night online ad for a Michelin restaurant.

“I should still be here in the morning. Come find me if you need me.” Fei Du straightened as if nothing had happened, sticking the pestilential phone in his pocket. “I can talk to the girl for you. While I’m not an expert in troubled young people, I have a considerable wealth of experience being a troubled young person.”

Mentally and physically exhausted, Luo Wenzhou waved his hand. “Go away already.”

When Fei Du had really gone away, Luo Wenzhou stopped his car by the side of the road and smoked two cigarettes in a row before he had finally recovered from his awkward half-hard condition. He started the car and went back to the City Bureau, his heart full of vicissitudes in spite of himself.

When an ordinary person was busy with studies or work, he could still resolve his personal problems by the “blind date” method; matters were much less convenient for those with niche interests.

When he’d just graduated, Young Lord Luo had, like Fei Du, fooled around all over for a few years. Later he’d found that while dissolution was easy, finding a suitable person was very hard. Moreover, he’d found that so-called “enchantment” was a four-step process: first infatuation, then habituation, then insipidness, and finally a revulsion of taste. Adding in his increasing stress at work taking away his attention, Luo Wenzhou had slowly evolved an “elderly” lifestyle of going to and from work, coming home, and petting the cat.

But while his mentality was “elderly,” his body was after all still young; an enormous contradiction had arisen between his physiological and mental states. Luo Wenzhou had the perturbed thought that if he carried on like this, one day he just might take a shine to Luo Yiguo’s big fluffy tail.

He irascibly floored the gas pedal. The car groaned and gave a bound, charging towards the brightly lit City Bureau.

“Captain Luo, Xu Wenchao’s been arrested. He’s in an interrogation room, and Su Luozhan is in another. Xiao Lang is watching her. Are you planning...”

Before the words were spoken, Luo Wenzhou’s hurried steps had halted. He’d seen a stooped figure in the corridor.

“Uncle Guo?”

Guo Heng pinched out the end of his cigarette and slowly stood, striving to straighten his back...but it still wouldn’t straighten.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Why would you be...”

“Did you come to see me today because you’re investigating the old case again?” Guo Heng looked at him with a scorching gaze. “That’s right, isn’t it? My daughter... You haven’t found her after all these years. I heard you’ve just brought a girl back, still living, is that true? Have you arrested the suspect? Is there a hope that you can clear up what happened to Feifei? Aside from Wu Guangchuan, was there also an accomplice?”

In the old man’s turbid eyes, the flames described by the Venerable Yang seemed to have been rekindled, making it hard to look directly at him.

Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what to say. He could only awkwardly muddle out, “We’ll do our very best.”

Having said it, he greased his steps and hurriedly ran off; when he had gone far, he could still feel Guo Heng watching him go, eyes about to burn through his back.

In the interrogation room, Xu Wenchao, called before the throne twice in one day, having gone from “assisting in the investigation” to “suspect,” arrested in his residence in the middle of the night, was looking very bad. His face was wan from missing sleep, and there was stubble at the corners of his mouth.

His manner didn’t seem so polite now. All ten fingers were laced together, laid on his legs; there was an inexpressible strain on his pale face.

“I didn’t.” Xu Wenchao’s tone was helpless and blameless, but his words were sharp. “I’ll say it again, I didn’t kidnap any little girls, and I didn’t kill anyone. You’ve seen my vehicle location record, illegally followed and spied on me. I’d like to ask, if I may, having encroached upon a person’s fundamental rights to this extent, what evidence have you found that I’ve killed someone?”

The criminal policeman interrogating him coldly said, “Su Luozhan kidnapped a girl at her school, maltreated her and attempted to murder her. At the crime scene, she called your number twice. In front of everyone, she accused you of being her accomplice. What else do you have to quibble about?”

Xu Wenchao leaned back in his chair and used his unique gentle voice to say, “A phone call and the words of a child, and suddenly I’m a murderer. I think I’ve understood today what’s meant by, ‘If you’re determined to hang someone, you can always find a pretext.’”

“Why would Su Luozhan call you, and why would she make a false accusation against you?”

Xu Wenchao paused and calmly raised his eyes. Watching on the surveillance feed, Luo Wenzhou got a clear look at his expression and had a sudden surge of foreboding—this person was too calm, too confident, wholly without a hint of panic, as if he held some unknown trump card.

“Because her mom and I were in a romantic relationship,” said Xu Wenchao. “Yes, I didn’t say so when I was here this afternoon... because I was afraid it would cause trouble.—I’ve loved Su Xiaolan since I was little, but she didn’t love me. She’d rather have lived in abject misery than have me. Only when she learned she didn’t have long to live did she selfishly afford me a bit of warmth as alms. But I shed tears of gratitude for it, even wanted to marry her... If not for the fact that she didn’t make it that long, I’d be Su Luozhan’s stepfather now. Because we don’t have a legal relationship, it’s very difficult for me to take the child in to raise her. I’ve had to slowly think of a way, meanwhile doing everything in my power to materially support her. She’d call me if she ever needed anything. That’s very normal.”

“But you didn’t pick up.”

“I didn’t pick up because I’d discovered that I was being spied on,” Xu Wenchao said blandly. “Even if it hadn’t been her on the phone, only some package delivery service or real estate marketer, I still wouldn’t have picked up. Officer, I suppose that under the severe press of public rights, I’m still entitled to maintain some last bit of freedom?”

“So you’re saying that Su Luozhan falsely accused you?”

“I don’t know why the child said that. If it’s true, then I’m very grieved. Her mom always rather neglected her. Comparatively speaking, I feel myself qualified for the responsibilities of a stepfather. The girl’s upbringing was free, and her conduct really was somewhat overboard. I disciplined her. Perhaps she feels a little rebellious towards me.” At this point, Xu Wenchao paused slightly. “Or perhaps she didn’t know what she was saying at all. There was someone prompting her.”

The criminal policeman smacked the table. “None of that bullshit! The surviving victim testified that after Su Luozhan called you, she

said, 'If he won't come, I'll do it myself.' The old Su family residence has been kept clean by hourly workers hired by you, and the water and electricity bills have been paid out of your bank account! What were you doing maintaining an old house that was about to be torn down? It clearly shows you were up to something unspeakable! If we hadn't been keeping an eye on you today, the kidnapped girl may not have lived to see tomorrow's sun!"

Xu Wenchao shook his head. "What's the causal relationship between maintaining an old residence and kidnap and murder? Following your logic, I suppose all the crimes that take place within the scope of the city are the responsibility of the city government?"

"Didn't he say he'd had his brain damaged by a fever?" Luo Wenzhou raised his brows in astonishment. "This looks pretty quick-witted to me. Can being a stupid cunt be intermittent?"

"Captain Luo, if he continues to deny it, and we don't have evidence, are we going to have to give him a lie detector test?"

"Go look into his bank accounts, credit cards, vehicles and properties under his name... Take his photograph to all the large car rental agencies and ask around. There's also his personal relationships; he may have been driving a borrowed car when he committed the crime. The fact that there's nothing wrong with his driving history for the day Qu Tong was kidnapped shows that he didn't drive a car under his own name. I don't believe that he has the ability to hide an entire four-wheeled vehicle..."

While Luo Wenzhou was still speaking, the criminal policeman inside the interrogation room said, "I'll ask you again, where were you on the night of the twenty-seventh?"

"At home, reading a book." Xu Wenchao's expression didn't flicker. "I'm a freelancer. I don't go to work every day. Reading at home is very normal."

“If you were at home reading, then what did you rent a car for?”

This was a bluff.

If the car Xu Wenchao had driven that day in West Ridge hadn't been his own, then whether he'd borrowed it from an acquaintance or had a personal car registered under someone else's name, there would be traces to follow; it would be easy to investigate. The best choice would have been for him to go to an irregularly managed rental agency and rent a car; there were some unregistered companies that were purely illegally operated, very well hidden. This was Xu Wenchao's most likely method.

Luo Wenzhou closed his mouth, crossed his arms over his chest, and focused, waiting for Xu Wenchao's excuse.

But Xu Wenchao unflappably raised his brows in seemingly sincere astonishment. “Officer, what are you talking about?”

“On the evening of the twenty-seventh, you followed a school bus that set out from West Ridge, waiting for an opportunity to act against one of the eleven girls on the bus. You happened to witness the school bus being hijacked. In the process, a girl called Qu Tong jumped out of the bus and ran into you and Su Luozhan. She trusted you, asked for your help, and got into your car. She didn't know she was delivering herself to her ruin at your beastly hands!”

Xu Wenchao sneered. “That's simply...”

The interrogating criminal policeman sternly interrupted his defense. “The security cameras around the museum caught your car's license plate number. What else have you got to quibble about?”

“Officer,” Xu Wenchao asked coldly, “could you tell me at what time on the twenty-seventh this happened?”

The interrogating policeman coldly said, “You don’t know yourself?”

“I really don’t know.” Xu Wenchao lightly raised his hands and shook his head. “All right, since you’re determined to trap me, it seems you won’t tell me the exact time, but I have to say a few words for myself. If this crime occurred during the first half of the night, I’m afraid I wouldn’t have had time to go over there. You’ve seen where my house is located. Driving to this West Ridge you’re talking about would take at least three hours...and that’s not considering traffic and poor weather conditions. Around 8:30 on the night of the twenty-seventh, I ordered take-out at home. The order number and delivery time are recorded. If I’m lucky, the delivery person will remember me.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart gave a thump; he found that his premonition had come true.

“I advise you to verify it as fast as possible and clear my name.” Xu Wenchao looked down at his watch. “It seems I’ll be spending the night at a public security bureau. Can you tell me when I can ask for a lawyer? Oh, right, also, although I still don’t clearly understand what Su Luozhan is meant to have done, she’s still little, after all. Can you officers go easy on her? If necessary, I’m willing to bear the responsibility of acting as her guardian.”

CHAPTER 50 - Humbert Humbert XVII

“At 8:30 pm on the twenty-seventh, Xu Wenchao actually was at home.” Tao Ran had first followed to the hospital and had a few words with the Chenchen, who was gradually regaining awareness, then had once again rushed back. On the way he’d received word and stopped on his way to verify Xu Wenchao’s alibi. “I also checked into his take-out record for the past half-year. It’s very regular, a handful of restaurants, the delivery people all know him.”

A criminal policeman asked, “Could he have bought off the delivery person?”

“Go ahead and have a look into the witness’s personal relationship with Xu Wenchao, but I think the possibility isn’t great,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Take-out delivery people are all kids, they don’t stay long at their jobs. They change over every two or three months. At most they’re passingly familiar with customers. It’s not very possible that they’d perjure themselves in a major case of this sort for the sake of a customer who orders food. And besides, it’s not every person who’d dare talk nonsense in front of the police... There’s another point.”

“What?”

“My shoes are a size forty-two.” Luo Wenzhou lightly stamped one foot. “When Xu Wenchao came in in the afternoon, he was wearing sneakers and I couldn’t really see, but judging from the leather shoes he was wearing when he came in now, my visual assessment is that they should be smaller.”

There was an uproar in the conference room.

Just then, Lang Qiao came into the conference room last of all and flung herself into a chair. “Boss, hurry and get someone else to do it,

I'm at my wits' end with that child. Looking at her gives me the creeps."

Luo Wenzhou asked, "What's happening with Su Luozhan?"

"Oh, she's extremely relaxed, eats and sleeps." Lang Qiao shook her head and took a can of coffee tossed by a colleague. "She's not afraid of grown-ups, and she's not afraid of the police. I still don't know what the theory is. Maybe she's too young and doesn't understand the consequences of what she's done, or maybe she's too crafty, knows she's young, and so she has no fear. If you talk to her nicely, she plays dumb, simpers and puts on a scene. If you try to scare her, she looks at you with a cheeky grin.—Oh, yeah, just now she asked me for a bottle of sweet milk. When she finished drinking it, she said, 'I'm sleepy, can I sleep for a bit?' And then she really did sleep. I'm telling you the truth, if I'd done a bad thing and got caught red-handed and taken to a public security bureau, I'd be scared to death. I definitely wouldn't be able to sleep. Is this child human?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer. With a very grave expression, he lit a cigarette. Without putting it in his mouth, he became lost in thought.

Without any doubt, Xu Wenchao had played some role in this business. Otherwise there couldn't be so many coincidences.

He had a series of ties to the cases twenty-some years ago and now, his relationship with Su Xiaolan and her daughter ran deep; Su Luozhan had called him twice from the crime scene and had accused him without any hesitation when the police had asked.

And his bearing the two times in one day that he'd been brought before the throne was very worthy of consideration. The first time, his bearing had been gentle and polite, but he'd shown himself as not the sharpest knife, readily resorting to the excuse of memory loss; and when pressed by Tao Ran into an awkward position, he seemed not to have expected such a development and panicked a little.

But the second time he was sharp and calm, methodical, his speech watertight. In the middle of the night, the police had burst into his home to arrest him, and he'd been fully dressed.

The first time Xu Wenchao had come, he'd indicated that he'd heard the radio broadcast and knew about Qu Tong's case. The information released to the public had of course not included concrete details, but the two key points of "the night of the twenty-seventh" and "West Ridge District" had been there. He clearly had such a definite alibi, so why hadn't he mentioned it?

Had he been wholly unprepared, panicked, and forgotten, or had he not noticed that the police suspected him?

Or...had he just been testing the police force's reaction?

If it was the latter, then that was too frightening.

But no matter what, a person couldn't split himself in two, couldn't be in two places at the same time. That was an objective fact.

Luo Wenzhou muttered silently to himself for a moment, then knocked on the table. "Come on, everyone listen up, in a while I'll need your help getting some statistics..."

Just then, the conference room door was pushed open from outside. The officer on duty in the reception room stuck his head in and interrupted Luo Wenzhou. "Captain Luo, I think this is the take-out you guys ordered. They've delivered it."

Luo Wenzhou froze; before he could speak, some strapping young fellows who'd been rushing about half the night had already thrown themselves over, their eyes glinting green; then they took the bags, had a look, and were struck dumb.

What had been delivered in the middle of the night wasn't roasted skewers or malatang; it wasn't even McDonald's or KFC.

Altogether, two large bags had been delivered. One was a heat-preserving ready-to-eat bag, and the other was a cold-storage bag packed with dry ice, both printed with a sumptuous logo; the plates and cutlery, packed away in a special cardboard box, were so exquisite that they simply didn't seem like single-use products.

Once opened, they contained Chinese cuisine and Western cuisine, cold dishes and hot dishes; the cold-storage bag also contained a few cartons of very fresh ice cream, as if it had come from the dining room of some luxury hotel!

Luo Wenzhou choked himself half-dead on a mouthful of smoke.

Lang Qiao was the first to recover, deftly snatching up a carton of ice cream and hugging it to her chest. "My goodness, boss, you're too nice!"

Tao Ran, shaken, said, "What are you doing? Are you not planning on living for the second half of the month?"

"Boss, did you buy a winning lottery ticket?"

"You must have won big in the European Cup betting pool!"

"What are you saying, could our captain do that? Hey, Captain Luo, did your mom and dad suddenly give you spending money?"

"Spending money for no reason? To be paying special attentions out of nowhere, do you think they're bribing you because they're going to have a second child?"

Luo Wenzhou said, "...bribe my ass. Beat it!"

This truly was a group of beloved colleagues.

He turned over the heat-preserving bag and with a shock saw a familiar logo on it—he'd just been at their door.

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye began to twitch.

“Hey, this seems to be that nouveau riche hotel to the north,” Lang Qiao said suddenly. “Their dining room is as snooty as all get-out. How come they're working in the middle of the night, and even... even delivering take-out? So in touch with the people!”

“Eating can't even stop up your mouth.” Two small veins stood out at the corner of Luo Wenzhou's forehead. “Where the fuck are all these questions coming from? If you don't want to eat, get to work!”

Lang Qiao scrutinized Luo Wenzhou's expression, and the corpse of her long-dead teenage girl's heart twitched.

Thinking about it carefully, a midnight snack out of a romantic novel like this really didn't seem to fit with Captain Luo's “jianbing, fruit, warm soy milk” homebody style. A whole new line of thought poured into her brain. Lang Qiao blurted out, “Wait a minute, is someone trying to put the moves on you by sending you all your favorite foods on purpose... Ow!”

Luo Wenzhou had used a rolled-up paper to hit her squarely on the forehead.

Feigning deafness and dumbness, Luo Wenzhou forcibly ignored the subject of the midnight snack. Among the scents of food stuffs assaulting the nose, he unflappably picked up where he'd left off before the interruption. “You eat while I talk. I need all of you to split into two groups. The first group will go through the missing child database and pull the records of all missing child cases from each of the city's administrative districts and counties. Focus particularly on

the children's sex, age, physical appearance at the time they went missing, and an outline of the details of the case. Using these four criteria, in that order, we'll roughly sift through them—first restrict the time to the last two years.”

“You suspect Qu Tong wasn't the first?” asked Tao Ran.

“The suspect's lengthy stalking was done without leaving traces, and in an emergency situation they calmly carried off Qu Tong. That clearly shows they had a definite goal then, following and kidnapping. It doesn't feel like they acted on sudden impulse. I think Qu Tong definitely isn't the first.” Heavily, Luo Wenzhou said, “Even if we can't find evidence this time, we'll have to find it for before.—The second group, I want you to dig into all of Su Luozhan, Su Xiaolan, and Xu Wenchao's materials: school transcripts, bank accounts, phone records, personal computers and other such equipment—thoroughly investigate everything.”

These two assignments were like two great mountains. Even listening with your ankle, you could have heard the immense pressure settling over everyone's heads like the Five Elements Mountain¹⁶. Some took notes, some kept their heads down and ate. Even the gourmet midnight snack had lost its flavor; no one cared now to probe into the truth about it.

Luo Wenzhou picked up a fried chicken wing with a paper napkin and in flash picked it clean, like locusts descending on a rice field. “This is all demanding work. Once you've finished replenishing your strength, get to it. Xiao Lang, come collect the results.”

“Boss, should we question Su Luozhan again?”

“It's no use,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Dealing with a grown-up, you can excite him, scare him, trick him, but this Su Luozhan... When she's sitting across from you, she doesn't consider you as the same type of

creature as herself. Maybe in her eyes, there's no difference between humans and sheep, all prey and food. And she's also too young; her testimony can only be used as a reference. This has to be solid. The relative of a victim from the case twenty years ago is out the corridor now. I think none of us wants this to drag out until we retire—hop to it.”

This sort of dry and dull work of sifting through documents couldn't get the adrenaline flowing; the small hours of the morning especially made people drowsy, and only by relying on inferior coffee could they force themselves to focus. The records of missing children were all very succinct: boy or girl, how old, when and how they disappeared... As for how the child had acted, what they'd liked, what their temperament had been, what family members still woke from nightmares every night, planning to spend the remainder of their lives immersed in a hopeless search—none of this would be reflected on paper.

All the tragedies spread out together were like an inscription tablet of the victims of a disaster, both heart-breaking and monotonous.

In the blink of an eye it was light; the conference room was piled with empty coffee cans and cigarette ends.

“Girls aged nine to fourteen, disappeared for no reason, no news to this day, excluding those who left letters saying they were leaving home and those whose deaths were later confirmed when their bodies were found. In the last year there were thirty-two in all, thirty-one in the year before that. Considering physical characteristics, removing those who developed comparatively early and rather resembled adults in appearance, as well as those who had yet to enter puberty and still looked like they'd just lost their first tooth, last year there were twenty-six cases, twenty the year before.”

Luo Wenzhou poured water onto a damp towel and wiped his face. “Adding in the floral-patterned dress?”

“Seven last year, eight the year before.” Lang Qiao looked up. Around her, her colleagues were all yawning their heads off; only she, her face white from the glare of the computer screen, all at once didn’t have a trace of sleepiness in her bloodshot eyes. “Captain Luo, do you guys want to have a look?”

She linked the laptop to the conference room’s projector, throwing the collected photographs up onto the projection screen. Tao Ran, halfway through a yawn, forced it back—

The fifteen girls, looked at individually, didn’t look alike; but assembled together, their particular characteristics were strangely and endlessly diluted. Only the delicate quality belonging to girls between early childhood and teens was prominent, uncommonly unified; at a glance, one simply couldn’t tell them apart!

Tao Ran whispered, “No way...”

These girls were like dried flowers sprinkled on the ground, submerged in the sea of missing child notices, gradually becoming pressed among the pages of unsolved cases, gone without a trace. If not for this chance, no one would have discovered that these cases had grown on the same vine.

This was a poisonous vine growing hidden in a deep forest under a bright sun; its root system was colossal, its tendrils dolorous, like an invisible net. Revealing only the tip of the iceberg already made one tremble in fear.

“Go back,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Look ten years...no, twenty years back, trace all the way back to the Lotus Mountain serial kidnapping case!”

First thing in the morning, Fei Du had a change of clothes brought over. He arranged himself and had his assistant drive him to Dr. Bai’s

house. But the door was opened by a middle-aged man.

The man was of medium height, square-faced, with very broad shoulders. He wore glasses and was dressed so plainly as to be unnoticeable, but his gaze inexplicably made Fei Du frown.

His expression was neither powerful nor sharp, but it had a special presence, like a thin needle silently passing through a person's pores.

Fei Du stared, then very politely said, "Hello, I'm looking for Dr. Bai. I arranged to see her yesterday."

"Oh." The middle-aged man pushed up his glasses. "I know, you must be young Mr. Fei? Bai Qian is my spouse. Please come in."

As he spoke, Dr. Bai had already come out to meet her guest. The man seemed to be in a hurry to go; he said a warm goodbye to Dr. Bai, stuck his briefcase under his arm, and left.

"He works at Yan City Public Security University." Seeing Fei Du turn his head to look at the man, she gave a brief introduction. "In fact he's just a quote-spouting bookworm who can't do anything. Morning to night, he only teaches class and writes essays—that book you wanted to borrow was edited by him."

Fei Du's gaze fell on the book in his hand—*Study on the Psychology of Criminal Abusers (3rd Edition)*—lingering momentarily on the editor's name, Pan Yunteng.

"How have you been recently?" Dr. Bai poured him some tea. "Last time when you told me you wanted to do a post-graduate degree, you really gave me a scare. That was my first time hearing of a successful social figure like you having such a completely incongruous plan in life. Do you think you've flipped through too many scholarly texts with me?"

“I’m just a mascot to begin with,” said Fei Du, not minding. “My father left me an outstanding team of professional managers who can cooperate and also balance each other out. They have no use for me taking everything onto myself. The other shareholders are even more eager for me not to put my hand in, just behave and collect my dividends. What everyone loves to see is for my type of useless ‘son of the house’ to go earnestly study something, instead of waving around a ‘Westpac’ diploma and making a spectacle of himself.”

Surprised, Dr. Bai said, “For your requirements, wouldn’t going abroad to get an MBA be more helpful? Our field is too out-of-the-way, isn’t it?”

Fei Du laughed. “Dr. Bai, other wastrels like me are doing ‘mystical studies’ or ‘specializing in the Beatles.’ Comparatively speaking, my hobbies and interests aren’t especially niche.”

Dr. Bai laughed in spite of herself. “That’s true, and anyway you don’t need to worry about employment prospects.—Which area are you most interested in? Perhaps I could introduce you to an advisor.”

“This area’s pretty interesting.” Fei Du waved the thick book in his hand.

Dr. Bai stared, then saw the young man’s face show a trace of joking self-mockery. “I’ve heard there are quite a few fine-looking beauties in the public security system. What if I can put myself in a favorable position?”

When Fei Du said goodbye to Dr. Bai and left, it was already afternoon. His fully-charged phone had lain peacefully in his pocket, not ringing. Fei Du thought it over a while, got his assistant’s attention, and said, “Go to the City Bureau.”

His assistant stared. “President Fei, what’s happened? Are you going to report a case?”

Fei Du smiled at her. The assistant had been with him for several years and could identify the meaning of each of this playboy's smiles. She at once gave a shudder, feeling that this young master's tastes were becoming increasingly intense.

CHAPTER 51 - Humbert Humbert XVIII

The assistant's expression looked like she had something to say but was holding back. Fei Du only glanced at her and knew what she wanted to say. Very understandingly, he said, "If there are documents that need my signature, leave them on my desk. If any of them are urgent, I'll come back to the office in the evening."

"There are also some letters from business partners that may need your personal attention," the assistant added quickly. "What time would it be suitable for me to come pick you up in the evening?"

"No time would be suitable." Fei Du, opening the car door, laughed at her words. "I'll call a car for myself. If I delay your date with your boyfriend after work, you may not like me anymore. What will I do then?"

The assistant very generously said, "That boyfriend of mine, he has no money and no looks. I don't know what I keep him around for myself. Just give the order and I'll kick him to the curb at once."

"Take pity on the poor man kneeling at your feet. Also, your makeup is so lovely today. How can you only show it to me and the computer? It's a reckless waste of the bounty of nature." Without consulting anyone, Fei Du got out of the car. Before leaving, he put a hand on the car door and leaned down to exhort her. "This car can be a little tricky. Drive slower on the way back. Send me a message when you get back to the office."

At his words, the assistant subconsciously checked her makeup in the rearview mirror, found that her lip color had faded, and, when Fei Du had left, hastily went over it with her lipstick a few times. Then she couldn't resist raising her head to look at Fei Du.

Fei Du's back often had a distinctive swagger. Seen from behind, his arm, hoisted up because of its cast, hardly looked any different from his usual posture holding a glass of champagne; looking like he was attending a dinner party, he made his leisurely, carefree way to the City Bureau.

The assistant was surnamed Miao. Unlike the "palace steward" secretaries specially assigned to trifles, she'd had a solemn education at an elite school and was an excellent worker. Because she'd once run afoul of a nasty individual, her hopes in the workplace had been soured; Fei Du had given her a hand.

Young President Fei was a famous "ladies' man," casually teasing any young lady he met, seeming familiar with everyone; but in fact only those under his personal direction knew what he did every day.

Fei Du always worked by the book. He rarely rejected the senior management team's proposals, understanding very well the sense of letting experts handle business that required expert knowledge; while in some other matters, the qualities of a son of wealth were unusually apparent. Perhaps because he had been spoiled by growing up amidst luxury, he couldn't work up any greed in his bones; he gave up whatever immaterial benefits he could, making his relations with the small shareholders very harmonious. He was more than up to the task of socializing. He was a successor who caused no trouble to anyone...except that Assistant Miao had seen with her own eyes how he'd snatched up control over the conglomerate back then.

But the strange thing was, as far as Assistant Miao could see, their "son of the house" didn't have the disposition of a pioneering leader; he had no wild ambitions of stepping on Asia-Pacific and dominating the whole globe. As long as he had money when he wanted to spend money, he seemed to have no other views.

The strong momentum at the start of his succession seemed to have been just for the sake of making his presence felt and showing others

not to try to fool him. After becoming thoroughly acquainted with all the conglomerate's workings, he hadn't put his hand in too much; this last half year he'd been especially scarce, disappearing more and more often without anyone knowing what he was doing, seeming intent on being a hands-off leader.

It sounded like a young person who lacked focus and hadn't decided yet what he wanted to pursue.

But Assistant Miao thought that Fei Du's mind was very deep; he wouldn't have this type of "blowing hot and cold," "starting fine and ending poorly" style. Thinking it over without being able to reach an answer, she looked towards the City Bureau, feeling that the public security bureau's gates were bustling. Then, weighed down, she drove away.

The gates of Yan City's City Bureau truly were exceedingly bustling. Every place, whether legal or illegal, was parked full of cars. A little traffic cop held up a parking ticket, not knowing whether it would or wouldn't be proper to stick it on, looking blankly all around.

Several officers on duty had been sent to the reception room to take responsibility for signing people in. There were so many callers it would soon surpass the utter confusion of a lowly local police station.

Fei Du followed a crowd of people just heading in. Without saying a word, he somehow mixed in with them.

Looking on, he found that the span of ages and positions among the people who had come was great. They came from all walks of life, wearing all kinds of clothing. There were grave-faced middle-aged people, as well as old people with their faces rimed by hardship.

Some people carried photographs with them; some seemed to be husband and wife—they seemed to stick closer together than ordinary husbands and wives, frequently holding hands or walking

right next to each other, as if neither could easily walk alone, and they had to support each other in order to keep staggering on ahead.

A sudden uncontrollable sob would explode from time to time among the crowd; at these times, the dispirited expressions of the surrounding people would alter. But while they altered, aside from Fei Du, who was a curious outsider, most of the others wouldn't turn their heads to search for the source of the crying, as if they all had a tacit mutual understanding.

Fei Du frowned, faintly sensing something.

He had reported time and again to the City Bureau and was already very familiar with it. While no one was watching him, he simply strolled into the corridors. He was considering whether to call when he bumped into Luo Wenzhou at the door of a corner restroom.

Luo Wenzhou's already distinct eyelids had acquired another crease from staying up all night. He smelled chokingly of cigarette smoke. He had just washed his face with cold water, and the water droplets covering his head and face were rolling down his neck; there was a wet patch on the front of his t-shirt, leaving an unobstructed view. Fei Du's gaze unobtrusively travelled up and down between his chest and waistline; if his naked eyes could have acted as cameras, presumably he'd have taken a dozen close-ups in that moment.

When he'd seen enough, Fei Du pushed up his sunglasses, and, like a proper gentleman, made his opening remarks. "What, do the ones you dug up yesterday for the West Ridge case have a record?"

In matters of major crimes, no one's reactions were faster than Fei's. Luo Wenzhou didn't have any strength to be surprised. He nodded very wearily.

"What a large scale." Hands behind his back, Fei Du looked out the window and said, "On such occasions, the ones that come are usually

the father and mother. I see there's quite a range of ages among these parents. How many years back are you digging?"

"Twenty-two years." When he spoke, Luo Wenzhou felt his voice was rather hoarse; he cleared his throat. "Guo Fei was taken from Lotus Mountain twenty years ago, but the same kind of victim in the same kind of case appears two years before. From Wu Guangchuan's death to the present, it hasn't stopped."

Fei Du got a package of breath mints out of his pocket and passed it to him.

"Our initial conjecture is that it's a gang." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "Each year there's a myriad of missing children, who go missing in all kinds of ways, and most of them aren't found. We can only rely on gathering blood samples and DNA, then trying our luck when suspicious child beggars are reported or we arrest a human trafficking gang. There's not a trace of these kids, dead or alive. It's hard to delimit the circumstances. Generally, the frontline officers are responsible for putting the investigation on record, and by the time it gets to us here, it's only an end-of-the-year report coming up from below. We only look to see that the data is within normal bounds. No one would take too much notice."

"But the old criminal policemen who worked the Lotus Mountain case must still have been in office these past few years? If there had been one or two among them who couldn't let go of the case, like your shifu, they would have discovered a problem long ago—unless these later cases were missing a crucial detail." Fei Du's response was so quick it was a little scary. "It's the follow-up tormenting of the parents, right?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't speak. He crushed a breath mint between his teeth.

“Supposing there is such a gang, using harmless little girls to approach their targets, carrying these girls off with no one the wiser, I think they wouldn’t be willing to attract people’s attention,” said Fei Du. “The conduct of making harassing phone calls to the victims’ homes is too ‘personal.’ It’s not in the interests of the ‘organization.’ What the ‘organization’ wants is little girls around ten years old, but what the caller wants is to torment the girls’ parents. It sounds like the ‘bait’ getting out of control.”

Su Xiaolan twenty years back, Su Luozhan twenty years later.

Why does everyone have things, and I’m the only one who doesn’t? Parents, a home, all the things I don’t have, I’ll destroy them all.

The call Guo Heng had received had come from a waste transfer station in the middle of nowhere; the only road that led there had a toll station. After repeated investigation, it was obvious that the person who’d made the call hadn’t gone through the toll station, but had detoured by the national road, suddenly stopped the car by the side of the road, then climbed down a large slope carrying the kidnapped Guo Fei to make a phone call.

This business had a good deal of illogical points to it. It was a far-fetched guess Guo Heng had come up with after eliminating the impossible, so the police investigating the Lotus Mountain case at the time hadn’t accepted it.

The girl on the phone hadn’t spoken, only screamed. The sound of the bells in the pencil box had made Guo Fei’s family think as a matter of course that the screams had belonged to Guo Fei, but... what if the girl on the phone hadn’t been Guo Fei at all?

If Guo Fei had already been murdered then, and the killer, taking along his diminutive accomplice, had driven into the middle of nowhere to find a place to dispose of the body, and during this time,

the girl had suddenly been unable to endure the pressure in her heart and had burst out, running out of the killer's car.

Luo Wenzhou gently closed his eyes, imagining what had been in the twisted little accomplice's heart then... Fear? Disgust? Disbelief? Or had she been filled with twisted jealousy and hatred?

He found it was beyond his capacity to imagine.

He was like many people who'd grown up in a peaceful age. If you asked them out of nowhere to imagine what they would do if the flames of war suddenly burned up to their doors, what would come into the minds of the vast majority of them would be "collect my jewelry and valuables," "think of how to get to my friends and family," "think of how to maintain the necessities of life as I flee from calamity," and other such "wilderness survival challenge"-like plans.

As an adult of ordinary intelligence, though Luo Wenzhou had countless times deduced all kinds of criminal motives, he could only use some terms floating around on paper to conjecture at the girl's state of mind then.

Why hadn't the same thing happened in the last twenty years?

In the end, what was the link between the deformed mother-daughter pair of Su Xiaolan then and Su Luozhan now?

"Can you sneakily get me in to talk to Su Luozhan?" asked Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou came back to himself and thought, *Isn't that nonsense?*

He was planning to flatly refuse, looked up, and saw Fei Du leaning on the wall of the corridor opposite him, eyes lightly focused on him. He very rarely noticed Fei Du's eyes, because among adults, unless they were planning to fight or date, they wouldn't constantly be looking into each other's eyes; and in his impressions, all the looks

Fei Du gave him were mocking, cold, satirical...each raised eyelash shouting in chorus, “Looking at you is displeasing.”

Never before had his look been this peaceful and harmless; accompanied by that “sneakily” Fei Du had just spoken, Luo Wenzhou imagined he tasted a trace of softness. He went still, the “Bullshit! What are you joking about?” he’d been about to blurt out not leaving his mouth.

Such is the inherent weakness of a man!

Luo Wenzhou internally lamented, but his tone involuntarily softened a great deal. “I’m afraid that won’t work. It’s against regulations.”

“Didn’t you let me listen in on an interrogation last time?”

“Our leader specially authorized it.”

“Then have him authorize it again. I’ve already talked directly to Su Luozhan, anyway.” Fei Du displayed his habitual, somewhat irreverent not-quite-smile. “And moreover I’ve written a little article concerning studies of ‘victims,’ which fortunately happened to be read by a certain teacher some little time ago and collected in the third edition of an academic text on a related topic. Oh, on that note, this April I was enrolled into Yan Security Uni’s applied psychology post-graduate program. Come September, I’ll be halfway to being an insider in your system.—Captain Luo, how about you call and ask that very quick and able leader from last time?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

When the fuck had all this happened!

CHAPTER 52 - Humbert Humbert XIX

Even if Fei Du had lost his mind, gone drag-racing downtown, and been personally hauled back to a little dark room by Luo Wenzhou, that still would have sounded more normal than what he'd just said.

Luo Wenzhou's temples throbbed incessantly. His overloaded CPU, just cooled down a little, once again showed signs of bursting into flames.—Enrolled in April. However rich and overbearing Fei Du was, whatever doors were open to him, he still must have started preparing for this last year.

Why?

Had he suddenly woken up enthralled by academia? Did he have an acute case of nothing better to do? Was it to pursue Tao Ran? Or had he suddenly found that he'd grown weary of his world filled with the stench of profits?

Just then, perhaps because it was rather crowded downstairs, a photograph was accidentally knocked out of the hand of a middle-aged woman. She hastily reached out to grab it, but a wind blew past, tumbling the old photo paper away. This was clearly an insignificant little accident, but to a person with sufficiently sensitive, weakened nerves, it seemed like a mystical hint of something. The woman collapsed, stumbling to her knees and beginning to bawl.

The sound of crying, hoarse but rising with penetrating force, pierced through the cracks in the corridor's window. Meanwhile, amidst this unsettling clamor, a technician from the forensics department trotted over. "Captain Luo, the analysis results have come in on the specimen you delivered yesterday. The blood on the cloth is Qu Tong's!"

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath, looked at Fei Du for a while, then wordlessly went towards Director Lu's office.

Twenty minutes later, Fei Du, holding two cartons of ice cream, walked into the room temporarily being used to hold Su Luozhan. He put the cartons on a little table. “Do you want some? Which one?”

Su Luozhan looked at him, hesitating a moment, then pointed to the strawberry one.

Fei Du left her the strawberry, taking the other carton himself. He got his earbuds and phone out of his pocket, opened a livestream of a basketball game, crossed his legs, and watched while he ate, ignoring her.

The two sat in mutual silence for a while. At first Su Luozhan was calm, not making any eye-contact with him. When she’d eaten half the ice cream and found the other party showed no signs of speaking, she finally couldn’t resist giving Fei Du a look on her own initiative. Her gaze swept over Fei Du’s shirt and phone, finally falling on his wrist laying on the table.

Her head tilted, Su Luozhan considered his watch for a moment, then gently tapped the floor twice with the tip of her foot. “Is your watch real?”

Fei Du may not have heard; he made no response.

Su Luozhan waited a while, then reached a finger across the table and lightly tapped twice on the side of his phone.

Finally alerted, Fei Du pulled out one earbud. “Yes, what is it?”

The volume on his phone was very loud. In the quiet room, you could hear the shouting of the commentator leaking out of the earbud.

Su Luozhan bit a corner of her plastic spoon. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you going to question me?”

“Oh, my colleagues are busy, they made me come over to keep an eye on you.” Fei Du seemed unwilling to tear himself away from the screen. He spared her only a second’s glance before turning back to the game, answering very absently.

When others asked her this and that, this girl would play the fool; but when others weren’t interested in her, she seemed to feel dissatisfied.

At first Su Luozhan looked at Fei Du from time to time. When she finished her ice cream, she simply stared at him, voluntarily opening a conversation. “Are you also with the police?”

“A trainee,” Fei Du answered indolently.

“Are trainees very rich?” Su Luozhan raised her brows in a very adult fashion. “Your watch looks pretty expensive. Is it the real deal, or a quality fake?”

Fei Du seemed to think her words were very funny. First he raised his brows in astonishment; then he spoke, unable to hold back a smile. “You know what a ‘quality fake’ is? Little girl, who taught you that?”

Su Luozhan’s expression hardened at once, clearly affronted by his disrespectful attitude of teasing a small child.

She remembered this man with the wounded left arm. At the old Su residence, he’d also treated her like this. It seemed like he didn’t believe that she could do anything, and didn’t believe she could pose any threat, either.

Finding you’d successfully practiced a deception would generally cause satisfaction. But this satisfaction couldn’t endure, because in “acting the swine to eat the tiger,” the important point was generally to “eat the tiger.” There was no pleasure in always acting the swine, especially when people treated you like one.

Su Luozhan bit her lip, carefully assessing whether he really wasn't interested in her or whether he was only putting it on. After a while, she couldn't resist half-seriously throwing out some bait. She answered, "Those uncles taught me."

Fei Du paused, but he didn't ask her, "Which uncles?" He only very pityingly, with some placating perfunctoriness, said to her, "It'll be all right now, rest assured."

This manner made Su Luozhan feel like she'd put a foot wrong going downstairs. She couldn't resist following up, "You mean I'll be all right?"

"I mean, there won't be anymore bad guys hurting you. As for the question of how to deal with you now, we'll have to see, although the problem isn't serious, and you're still young. You won't have to bear criminal responsibility. I would guess you'll be taken into care." Fei Du thought about it, then finally paused his damned basketball game, seeming to remember his "police" duties. He opened his beautiful peach blossom eyes wide, but out of his mouth came a string of clichés addressed to the girl: "You children have no self-awareness. You get used by people and don't know what's happened. Child, the past is past. When you get out, you have to study hard, not think of these messy things anymore. The road ahead of you is still long..."

Tao Ran had taken advantage of their mutual delays to take a nap in front of the surveillance feed. He'd just woken up when he heard this string and hastily rubbed his eyes. "Heavens, that's Fei Du... With this long-windedness, I thought you were possessing him!"

Luo Wenzhou kicked his chair.

Tao Ran used this opportunity to stand up and clear his head. He rubbed his face and bent an ear to the interminable harangue on the

surveillance feed for a moment. Then he smiled. “Recently you two haven’t been arguing. It’s pretty good.”

“What is there to argue about?”

“Who knows?” Tao Ran laughed. “Didn’t your fur bristle at the sight of each other at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau’s gates? Didn’t you fight it out all the way back? And you had them give him a parking ticket.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

“I told you all along.” Tao Ran sighed, as before habitually playing peacemaker. “Fei Du’s really all right. If you’re a little nice to him, he’ll quietly pay it back to you tenfold. He may run off at the mouth sometimes, but he’ll rarely haggle over anything for real. Otherwise he wouldn’t have let it go so easily when that sports car of his got smashed up.”

Having spoken, Tao Ran prepared for Luo Wenzhou to respond with a sneer; but instead, after a while, Luo Wenzhou hadn’t said anything. He even gave a brief, “Yeah.”

Tao Ran: “...”

What had been happening on earth lately? How come every time he opened his eyes, it was a different world!

Just then, on the surveillance feed, Su Luozhan abruptly stood up and pressed forward, almost sitting on the little table, using her body language to interrupt Fei Du’s ideological education.

“Do you think they just used me?” Su Luozhan asked quietly.

“Xu Wenchao has been arrested and brought to justice,” Fei Du said sternly. “Although there are still questions that haven’t been settled,

we should soon be able to get it out of him.”

Su Luozhan laughed mysteriously.

“If you’re willing to identify him, then of course...” At this point, Fei Du deliberately paused, then shook his head and smiled. “Never mind, what would be the use of you identifying him?—Do you want to eat something else? I can send someone to buy it.”

Su Luozhan wasn’t interested in this. She followed up, “Why would it be no use for me to identify him?”

“Because you’re a child,” Fei Du said matter-of-factly. “Children can’t bear witness. This is a case of a very serious nature. They won’t take what you say as the truth, and if they did, they still couldn’t make you go to court.—But, little girl, there’s one point I have to talk to you about. However scared you are, hurting other children is still wrong. You were holding a knife back there. Do you know how dangerous that was? If you’d slipped up...”

Su Luozhan suddenly interrupted him: “If I’d slipped up, I wouldn’t have been able to kill her?”

Fei Du looked at her, seeming dazed.

Su Luozhan twirled the hair at her temple around her finger again and again, looking at him with a smile that wasn’t quite a smile. She was like a hunter who’d thrown out some bait and was waiting for the prey to take it.

Fei Du became “solemn,” putting down his phone and sitting up properly, looking at Su Luozhan. “I know that for some children who have been hurt, it can be hard to accept themselves as victims. You may mistakenly think that only the bad guys are strong, only the bad guys are capable, and victims are all weak and stupid and deserve

what they get. You may even blindly emulate those people who do bad things, but...”

“Victims *are* weak and stupid and deserve what they get.” Su Luozhan pulled a face at him. “They’re like sheep. All they can do is bleat, slow and foolish. Easily tricked, scream at a touch, die just like that. They’re of no value alive.”

Fei Du furrowed his brow, staring at Su Luozhan in mixed shock and anger. “How could you think that!”

From the time he’d taken her for a stupid child and tried to “educate” her, there had been a vicious restlessness in Su Luozhan’s heart; she’d have loved nothing better than to rip open his gentle face. Seeing his expression change now, the restlessness was at last slightly alleviated, and she felt a bit of indescribable, unwarranted pleasure.

“Anyway, I won’t be sentenced to jail no matter what, right?” Su Luozhan looked at Fei Du complacently. “Those sheep really are very foolish. They believe anything you say. If you get near them once, the second time they’ll think you’re their friend and go with you anywhere you want... Haha, it’s so funny it kills me.”

“Su Luozhan.” Fei Du’s lips trembled faintly. “Don’t talk nonsense!”

Su Luozhan hadn’t had a chance to see Qu Tong’s parents’ expressions when they’d received the recording; it was all imagination. She’d felt an unbearable itch, and now grafted this young “policeman”’s pained and disturbed expression onto the vision. She was so excited her eyes glowed.

“I’m not talking nonsense.” She innocently and artlessly kicked the floor gently with the tip of her foot. “This is what my mom taught me. She said that when other animals encounter danger, they’ll either fight or flee. Only little sheep are different. They’ll only get scared out of their wits, stay where they are without moving a muscle. They’ll go

with anyone who calls them. Though my mom was also a sheep, also very foolish. I read her diary in secret. She got scared out of her wits when she was the same age as me, and afterwards she never dared to leave her signature again.”

“...signature?” said Fei Du.

Su Luozhan very cleverly mimicked a telephone receiver with her hand and put it next to her ear. “The ‘knight’ protecting her died, so she didn’t dare anymore.”

“Knight?”

“Too sickening, right?” Su Luozhan laughed scornfully. “In fact he was just a ‘diner’ she was on good terms with, that’s all. My family lives by hunting. Aside from catching ‘little sheep,’ my mom couldn’t do anything. Then she got old and couldn’t even attend to business. She had to rely on me to support herself... Well, she finally died.”

“...that’s enough. Don’t say any more,” Fei Du said with difficulty. “How old are you?”

“I knew how to do it when I was seven.” Su Luozhan happily pursed her lips in a smile at him. “My mom used me to catch little sheep to entertain the clients. Sometimes she’d have me go ‘hunting’ with a client. When he’d finished his meal, he’d go back home, and she’d take care of the rest, no need for the client to worry about it. That’s the business she learned from her mother.”

In front of the surveillance feed, Luo Wenzhou stood up. “Go investigate Su Xiaolan’s drunkard mom!”

Hearing this order, Lang Qiao, who’d just come in, ran back out without a look back.

All the drowsiness in Tao Ran's body vanished without a trace. "What does that mean? Is the child saying that Su Xiaolan's mother made her living pimping underaged prostitutes, and Wu Guangchuan was only her client? Also, why is it that she didn't say a word when we questioned her, but Fei Du didn't even ask and she insisted on saying it herself?"

"You treated her as a suspect, acting like the police," Luo Wenzhou said quietly, gaze fixed on the screen. "Fei Du treated her as an 'innocent child,' acting like a 'parent,' so she subconsciously wanted to send him a 'recording.'"

The reason only Fei Du had been able to get her to talk wasn't that he had a wealth of experience being a troubled young person; it was that only Fei Du had used the "proper" manner when capturing Su Luozhan.

"Impossible." Fei Du stood up at once, accidentally bumping the little table. It gave a thunk and heavily settled back on the floor. "The killer then was Wu Guangchuan, and Wu Guangchuan was stabbed to death by a victim's family member. Afterwards, there weren't any more..."

At this point, he abruptly paused, suddenly opening his eyes wide as if he'd thought of something frightening.

"You didn't know about it, that's all." Su Luozhan was enjoying his expression. "Though that uncle really had nothing to complain about. My mom loved him, but he was a great scum. He wasn't satisfied just having my mom. He also liked the stupid sheep. She was so jealous she was about to go mad, so she invented a 'fun' sort of signature."

"Do you have the same kind of relationship with Xu Wenchao?" said Fei Du.

“No way!” Su Luozhan cried out in displeasure. Scornfully, she said, “What is he? Is he worthy? He’s a part-time janitor at best!”

Fei Du suddenly raised his voice. “Then why did you want to send the recording to Qu Tong’s parents!”

Su Luozhan smiled cheekily with her arms pressed to her sides.

“It was fun,” she said.

“Boss! Su Xiaolan’s mother was called Su Hui. She worked a little when she was young, then the place she worked at closed down. She was unemployed, stayed home and developed an alcohol addiction. She operated a ‘gaming hall’ that had a second-hand truck!”

CHAPTER 53 - Humbert Humbert XX

“The gaming hall was torn down and rebuilt again and again. It became a commercial building long ago. If the bodies had really been hidden there, it’s impossible that they wouldn’t have turned up when the building was leveled and rebuilt all those times. As for the rest, it’s really been too long, and the records from back then are incomplete. We won’t be able to find anything else within a short time.” Through the surveillance camera, Lang Qiao looked at Su Luozhan, who had her chin propped in both hands. She felt a shiver of disgust. “And is what that little psycho says credible or not?”

“We can only use it as a reference. I can see this child rather likes to show off.” Luo Wenzhou’s unblinking gaze fixed on the surveillance feed. After muttering to himself for a moment, he said, “But the method of the crime has been basically cleared up—the adult and the girl collaborated. First they followed the target. Then, at a suitable moment, the adult would appear and do something to frighten the victim. Next, the girl would appear, gain the victim’s trust under those circumstances, and after one or two contacts trick the victim into coming with her.”

“The day I moved in, Chenchen really was being followed.” Tao Ran thought about it, then said, “If the stalker Fei Du noticed then was the accomplice...”

“Suppose he was Suspect A.” Luo Wenzhou pulled out a sheet of A4 paper and drew a circle around the letter. “For the time being, we’ll say that the man who abducted Qu Tong and drove the car at West Ridge was B—we can’t be certain for the moment whether A and B are the same person, but I personally incline towards thinking they aren’t.”

“Why?” asked Lang Qiao.

“Frequency of offenses.” Luo Wenzhou tapped the table with his pen cap. “If Suspect A was following Chenchen from the time Tao Ran moved, all the way through to last night, then it’s already been over a month. Let’s not consider whether A would have the energy to simultaneously stalk two girls who moved around in completely different places. Even if he could do it, for a person who had the patience to stalk a victim for a month, offending twice in the space of five days is too intensive.

“Then there’s the third person in this case, Xu Wenchao. He has a definite alibi for the night Qu Tong was taken, so we know he can’t be B. So what role did he play in this?” Luo Wenzhou wrote down the character “Xu,” then the character “Su,” and drew a line between them. “After Su Luozhan drugged Chenchen and tied her up at the old Su family residence, she went home like she had nothing else to do. She wasn’t afraid that Chenchen would run, or that she would move around and be heard...”

“Because she knew her accomplice was coming to the old Su residence to take over!”

“But the accomplice didn’t come. Su Luozhan was alerted by the call from the Children’s Palace teacher, then ran to the old Su residence to determine in person whether Chenchen had been taken away. Then she called Xu Wenchao twice.” Luo Wenzhou thickened the line between Xu Wenchao and Su Luozhan, then drew downward, splitting the line into two branches. “Zhang Yuchen was scared stiff last night. We won’t rely on her testimony for the moment. Judging from the rest of our information, there are two possibilities here—

“First, Xu Wenchao was Suspect A, who stalked Chenchen, attempting to abduct her.” Luo Wenzhou paused. “Second, Xu Wenchao is Su Luozhan’s ‘proxy.’ Su Xiaolan was sick for a long time, and there are some things Su Luozhan couldn’t accomplish on her own; she needed a grown-up.”

The first time Xu Wenchao was summoned by the police, he had been very surprised, because he'd had no idea of where he'd slipped up. He'd answered all their questions very carefully, preferring to make himself appear a bit slow—at the time, it was likely he hadn't yet known about Su Luozhan sending the recording to Qu Tong's parents, and he hadn't expected the police to link this case with the one twenty years earlier.

But Tao Ran had inadvertently alerted him during their talk. It was likely that Xu Wenchao had determined what Su Luozhan had done based on this questioning. From the time the police had started to following him to the time he'd received Su Luozhan's phone calls, he'd made his preparations to be taken into custody, and prepared his excuses.

“What you mean is,” Tao Ran said, involuntarily lowering his voice, “like that girl said just now, Xu Wenchao is a ‘part-time janitor.’”

“Part-time janitor... That...that can't mean what I think it means?” Lang Qiao twisted her head to look at Luo Wenzhou. “He takes care of... What about Qu Tong? Is there really no hope?”

“Last night, when Su Luozhan tied Chenchen up at the old Su residence, Xu Wenchao should have taken over. But Xu Wenchao had been summoned by us to cooperate with the investigation and couldn't go.” Luo Wenzhou ignored her question, not even lifting an eyelid. “There was a large quantity of blood found on the strips of cloth in the music box in Su Luozhan's bedroom, but the medical examiners performed a luminol test at the old Su residence without finding traces of blood. That is, it's likely the old Su residence is only a temporary transfer station, and the real crime scene isn't there.”

“Then where is the real crime scene?” said Tao Ran.

“Wait a minute! No... You guys, wait!” In a flurry, Lang Qiao pulled out a page from a stack of materials. “Haven't you made a mistake

somewhere? Over twenty years ago, Xu Wenchao attended a shatteringly expensive private school. When he grew up, he could afford photographic equipment and became a freelance photographer. He has a house, a car, and no debts. He's really pretty wealthy. This may be unsuitable to say, but as long as you have money, you can go through certain channels to get what you want—does he have any reason to work with Su Luozhan, to do these deranged things? He's not short on money, either. What benefit can there be for him?"

These words silenced everyone.

True—why would a man who'd grown up in middle class or even somewhat better off surroundings, with both parents living and a childhood that could be called smooth sailing, get mixed up with the Su family?

If not for Su Luozhan imitating Su Xiaolan's "signature" for "fun" and leaving the recording at Qu Tong's house, as well as his own revealing slip-ups the two times he'd come, who would have thought there was anything wrong with him?

"Captain Luo." Just then, a criminal policeman stuck his head in. "That old uncle surnamed Guo, who came before the rest, is asking for you."

Guo Heng was waiting outside the noisy reception room. Someone, taking pity on him, had brought him a chair, just facing the duty room's back door. The officer on duty had run off to do something urgently, not taking the time to turn off the television. On the somewhat shabby screen, a local station was reporting on last night's sensational rescue operation at the Children's Palace.

Guo Heng had his head stretched out, all his attention focused on the screen, subconsciously straightening his stooped back, arranging himself in an upright and proper sitting posture—when prisoners in

jail were collectively organized to watch TV for news broadcasts or ideological education, the discipline was strict; they were required to use this standard posture to watch.

A prison term of twenty years had turned a man in his prime into an old man who couldn't even relax freely on a sofa.

Luo Wenzhou called to him gently. "Uncle Guo."

Guo Heng subconsciously straightened his back, seeming ready for an inspection. Then he came to himself, and the corners of his eyes drooped in desolation. The wrinkles that had been pulled taught manifested, row after row.

Guo Heng sighed and quietly said, "I'm holding up your work, but I... Seeing so many people come, I've been worrying. When I killed Wu Guangchuan, could I have killed the wrong person?"

After a moment's hesitation, Luo Wenzhou took two cigarettes from his pocket, lit them, and passed one to Guo Heng. "Do you remember the girl you saved back then?"

"I remember." Guo Heng nodded at once. "Rather thin, looked a little older than Feifei, a very pretty little girl. Now what was she called?"

"Su Xiaolan."

"Right, right, that was it." Guo Heng brought his cigarette to his mouth as if it were a treasure, took a deep drag and held it in his mouth, swallowing it rather than letting it out—perhaps this was another habit left over from prison. "Ah, it's been so many years. I don't know what the child is doing now. When I'd just gotten out, I thought about going to see her. But later I thought, she may be married with children. Who'd want to remember miserable things like that? I'd better not go bother her."

As he spoke, a bit of a smile appeared on Guo Heng's distressed and gloomy face. "To be frank, these last twenty years, my conscience has been a little clearer because I thought, if I'd been a coward then, that girl may have died. Some years in a prison cell in exchange for a life seems worthwhile when you think about it, doesn't it?"

Luo Wenzhou's lips moved slightly. Looking at Guo Heng's profile, he simply didn't know where to start.

Could he really tell him, *Maybe you did kill the wrong person, and the girl you saved was the real killer?*

Then wouldn't this man's miserable half of a lifetime, his ramrod posture and cherished cigarettes, become a preposterous joke?

"Officer Luo," Guo Heng, suddenly remembering, asked again, "you still haven't told me what's going on? Was Wu Guangchuan the killer or not?"

"Uncle Guo, I'd like you to remember something for me first." Luo Wenzhou put a hand on the back of his chair. "Look at me and think carefully. Back then—the day you stabbed Wu Guangchuan, how did you find him?"

Guo Heng stared, not understanding why he would ask this. "Wasn't it that boy..."

"He paged you. He was a student at Jinxiu Middle School, named Xu Wenchao. He followed and investigated Wu Guangchuan with you. I know that.—Do you still remember what Xu Wenchao said when he paged you?"

With the cigarette in his mouth, Guo Heng frowned, recalling for a long time. "I think—I think he said, 'He's taken her, at the school.' Right, those were his words, very obscure, not mentioning any

names. When I read that, my head exploded. I found a public telephone immediately and called him back.”

Luo Wenzhou paused slightly. “You called him back? And then what? Please tell me in detail.”

“Then I asked him what had happened and went to the school gates to meet him,” said Guo Heng. “The boy led me to Wu Guangchuan’s house. Didn’t I tell you what happened after that?”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes slightly. “So that means, Xu Wenchao was waiting for your call. Where was he waiting?”

“Near the school,” said Guo Heng. “Jinxiu’s infrastructure was good, there was a new phone booth nearby. He usually always contacted me that way.”

“How long did it take you to get there?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Five or six minutes.”

“First, Xu Wenchao sent a message to your pager, then waited for your call; after getting in touch and understanding the situation, you spent five or six minutes getting to Jinxiu Middle School to meet him, and only then did you set out, right? All of this, start to finish, took about ten minutes?” Luo Wenzhou waited for Guo Heng to nod, then went on. “You two saw Wu Guangchuan, you sent Xu Wenchao away to find someone and followed Wu Guangchuan to his door, is that right? How far was the place where you saw Wu Guangchuan from his house?”

“Not far at all, just around the corner.” Guo Heng calculated. “Somewhere over fifty meters...not more than a hundred.”

“Wu Guangchuan took Su Xiaolan from the school and went back to his house. You also left from near the school. With a ten-minute delay,

how did you two get near Wu Guangchuan's house ahead of him?"

"The child took me by a short-cut," said Guo Heng. "That bastard Wu Guangchuan wouldn't have dared to go by the main road. He'd have gone by the back door. He'd have had to go around a big residential neighborhood, while the two of us went right through the neighborhood, basically in a straight line—all the residential estates had outer walls then, but they weren't very high. They had black-tile fretwork on top of them. Through the wall, I saw Wu Guangchuan pulling that girl. I really was young back then; I sent the boy away and jumped over the wall to follow."

Luo Wenzhou got a small notebook out of his pocket. "Could you draw out the positions you just described for me?"

Guo Heng hesitated a moment, then, thinking about it, he drew a sketch with many revisions and gave it to him. "What is it? Why do you want this? What *is* going on?"

"I don't know yet," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "Uncle Guo, at this point in the investigation, it looks like things may be contrary to expectations. Will you be able to accept it?"

Leaning on the back of his chair, Guo Heng slowly stood up.

"We'll give you an accounting as soon as possible." Leaving these words behind, Luo Wenzhou strode away. He gave the sketch Guo Heng had drawn to Tao Ran, waiting to one side. "Can you find out what estate this used to be? Is it still there now?"

Tao Ran looked the paper over several times. "Wu Guangchuan's house is long gone. When we first suspected that this case was connected to the one from twenty years ago, some colleagues went to investigate the crime scenes from back then. Jinxiu Middle School moved away long ago, and there was a gymnasium built where Wu

Guangchuan's house was. Though this estate seems to be... I'm going to the scene to have a look!"

Fei Du slowly came over. Luo Wenzhou knew it was him without needing to turn his head, because all of Yan City's City Bureau was madly busy, the people coming and going all moving at a march or a trot, and only his footsteps sounded unhurried as always.

Fei Du wiped the lenses on his clothing and once again perched his glasses on his nose, his whole air changing at once, transforming from a "deeply emotional" young man into a beast in human garb—at any rate, if he'd gone to see Su Luozhan looking like this, he definitely wouldn't have gotten a word out of her.

Fei Du lazily drawled, "Do you know the Fuyuan Memorial Hall?"

"The memorial hall at the Fuyuan Funeral Parlor?" Luo Wenzhou stared. "Isn't it a place to store cremated remains?"

"Su Xiaolan's ashes are there," said Fei Du. "Xu Wenchao got them put away. Apparently some of her possessions from when she was alive are with the box of remains. I propose you and I go have a look. Perhaps we'll find something useful."

Luo Wenzhou frowned thoughtfully. "Did Su Luozhan say something?"

"How could that be? That little girl is beyond crafty. She wouldn't reveal a detail like that—it's my guess," said Fei Du. "I was just thinking, faced with a group of weak and cowardly stalker clients, it wouldn't be easy to make them keep their mouths shut and maintain secrecy. Aside from satisfying their desires, at the very least you'd need to have a handle on them. The place where you kept that handle would have to be very carefully chosen. The best place would be like a bank's safety deposit box, with security cameras everywhere and someone keeping watch twenty-four hours a day. At the same

time, it would have to be ‘safe,’ not all under your own name, unlike a bank, where the police would easily turn it up as soon as they started investigating.—If it were me, I’d think an ash storage locker was a fairly ideal place.

“Fuyuan Memorial Hall must be very strictly managed. Only the relatives who handled the internment procedures can swipe in, then have a staff member lead them inside. The cardholders have to make an appointment to come for a mourning visit. It’s not like a cemetery. The management of some cemeteries is so lax that anyone can get in and wander around.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

They hadn’t found a handle on others, but his own handle had been left along with an offering of little white flowers in a cemetery.

“I don’t mean anything by it.” Fei Du spread his hand and smiled. “Otherwise, since Xu Wenchao was handling Su Xiaolan’s funeral arrangements, why didn’t he buy her a grave? I suppose Xu Wenchao would be able to get the money? Well, how about it, might I trouble Captain Luo to act as driver?”

An hour later, Luo Wenzhou stopped the car at the doors of a funeral parlor in the suburbs.

There were some parked hearses scattered around. The place backed on a mountain, peaceful and secluded; the whole funeral parlor was shrouded in the mountain’s shadow, which was very dark. Only there was a chimney spouting white steam towards the sky, the product of a cremation.

Half-crippled Fei looked at it and pushed the door with one hand, but found that the driver hadn’t unlocked the car yet. Fei Du knocked lightly on the door to remind Luo Wenzhou, then heard him suddenly speak, asking, “What did you mean by that last night?”

CHAPTER 54 - Humbert Humbert XXI

At first Fei Du stared. Then he leaned back, seeming very careless. Understanding but feigning not to, he asked, “Hm?”

There was a great deal of the playboy in that lean; the corners of his lips were ready to smile but not smiling, and his head was tilted as he looked at Luo Wenzhou. He asked, clearly knowing the answer, “What did I do last night?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He found he was dismayingly base. He was far more accustomed to a Fei Du with the words “asking for a beating” stuck to his forehead than this strange, ambiguous manner of his.

When the two of them were alone, if either showed signs of getting flustered, the other would quickly take advantage of his weakness.

Luo Wenzhou’s temporary silence made Fei Du mistakenly think that he couldn’t get the words out; it awakened his interest, and he couldn’t resist teasing Luo Wenzhou some more. “Last night, I voluntarily sent some comfort to you good officers. Is Captain Luo thinking of requesting another silk banner for me?”

Saying so, he pressed a little closer to Luo Wenzhou, his eyes giving off varied light, radiating from the irises, distinctly spreading out, like a freeze-frame of ripples. “What are you planning to write this time? I’m thinking...”

“Fei Du,” Luo Wenzhou suddenly said with a great show of propriety, “if you provoke me like that again, I’m going to think you have some ‘unspeakable intentions’ towards me.”

Fei Du: “...”

Because of their unusual relationship, the majority of the time, Luo Wenzhou was in deadly earnest in his presence. As time went on, it had given Fei Du the mistaken impression that this person had shame.

After a pause, Fei Du executed a “retreat at the enemy’s attack,” turning to look out the window at the somber funeral parlor. “Captain Luo, are you sure you want to discuss such an indecent subject with me in surroundings like these?”

“Besides the indecent subject, I also have a decent one,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Are you planning to become a hand-offs leader in September and hand your vast wealth over to others to manage?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. I have a reliable team.” Fei Du shrugged. “They don’t even need to be all that reliable, just a little more reliable than me.—Even though I’m stepping back from daily operations, the company’s major policy decisions will still require my signature. I’ll still have my controlling interest. Anyway, even if it all goes to pieces...”

“The leftover flotsam and jetsam will still sell for more money than we lowly public servants will earn in a lifetime, including our pensions, enough for several people for several lifetimes—right?” Luo Wenzhou cut short his ostentation. “Stop talking nonsense. When your dad had his accident, you were still in school, though your studies were sloppy and brainless enough—why weren’t you willing to trust that ‘reliable’ team then, sit back and collect your annual dividends like a well-behaved shareholder?”

Fei Du looked up and met Luo Wenzhou’s eyes in the rearview mirror; his gaze was deep, with a frank and familiar severity.

“You didn’t take on your dad’s company for the money. You were investigating him,” Luo Wenzhou said positively. “According to this

inference, you applying to Yan Security Uni now has the same aim. What is it for— or rather, who is it for?”

“Maybe it’s to hit on you?” Fei Du said without turning a hair. “Perhaps my taste has suddenly changed, and I’ve started to salivate for Captain Luo’s type of...hm...deadly serious dark horse charm?”

Not a single straightforward word ever came out of this bastard’s mouth; it was all circles and obfuscation.

He narrowed his eyes, his gaze sweeping invasively over Luo Wenzhou’s straight nose bridge and slightly sharp lips, seeming ready to kiss him at any moment. With a trace of a nasal drawl, he gently asked, “How do you know my studies were sloppy, Captain Luo? Aside from secretly sending gifts, were you also concerned about my report cards?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He let a breath out through his nose, unlocked the car, and under the attentive, ambiguous gaze of this bit of goods, without any warning, he reached out and grabbed the collar of President Fei’s thoughtfully arranged shirt, spoiling his large-tailed wolf’s posture.

“First,” Luo Wenzhou said sternly, “my good looks have always received wide social approval from the masses. They belong to a classic, timeless style of male beauty. If you think that I’m a dark horse, that only goes to show that you haven’t studied enough and are ignorant and ill-informed.

“Second.” His gaze swept over Fei Du’s arm in its cast, looking like the sight was a little too tragic to behold. “Darling, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen anyone bold enough to talk as big as you do. You want to hit on me in your condition? You’d be better off hitting the milk and building up some calcium first, President Fei!”

Then he pointed to the car door and said to Fei Du, “Get out.”

President Fei had been invariably victorious in all forms of flirtation. Meeting for the first time with such a rude rebuff, he felt it was very novel. Shooed out of the car by Luo Wenzhou in his disabled state, he watched Luo Wenzhou’s back with a look that said he was itching to have a go; but for the moment he laid down his arms, closed his mouth, and followed him to the memorial hall.

The memorial hall’s atmosphere was harsh, and the cooling system installed inside was perhaps not central air but a refrigeration unit.

As soon as the door opened, a dense chill came rolling out. Some staff members verified Luo Wenzhou’s ID with unusual suspicion, not understanding why the police would want to come investigate a box of remains.

“What would you like to see?” said the memorial hall’s manager as he swiped his card and led them in. “We haven’t broken any laws. Even if we’re being haunted, since when has the scope of business of our People’s Public Security been so wide?”

Luo Wenzhou was in fact only calm on the surface. Having just eaten a certain person’s full broadside of harassment, those last husky words were still going around and around beside his ear, making his heart flutter. All he wanted was to make the entire world shut up. Therefore he irritably responded, “What if someone’s planted a bomb in the wall of remains?”

The storage room’s manager gave him a shocked look, evidently taking Luo Wenzhou for a novel type of psychopath.

The storage area covered the surface of an entire wall, one small square after another reaching from the very bottom all the way to the ceiling. Su Xialoan was in a corner...in a tiny crystal frame.

“Area C, 106—Su Xiaolan.” The manager checked the name. “That’s her. Her daughter and fiancé put her there. Ask if you need anything. I’ll withdraw now and be back in twenty minutes.”

Then he put his palms together, made a little bow towards Su Xiaolan’s photograph, and withdrew.

Luo Wenzhou batted away Fei Du’s hand on its way to pick up Su Xiaolan’s photograph. He took a pair of gloves from his pocket and checked whether the crystal frame had a double layer. Seeing there was nothing out of the ordinary, he passed it to Fei Du and went to go through the “burial goods” beside the box of ashes.

“This photograph is very interesting,” said Fei Du.

“Too interesting,” Luo Wenzhou said as he went through the stuff. “It’s exactly the same one as in our bureau’s file room from twenty years ago.”

The space inside the little square where the box of ashes was interred wasn’t big. It was clear at a glance what the family had put there. Aside from the frame, Luo Wenzhou pulled out an old dress, menthol cigarettes, lipstick, and other things a woman would carry on her; it seemed like conventional burial goods, all without any value.

“So-called commemoration of the deceased is in fact all a rite for the living. At the memorial ceremony, the photograph that gets set out often shows the image of the deceased as they lived in the imaginations of their friends and relatives.—If these were people who associated often with the deceased, it’ll often be a recent photograph. If they were more distant friends and relatives who didn’t have many opportunities to see the deceased, it’ll be a photograph with commemorative significance. Besides that, some of the dead have comparatively strong self-awareness; after they pass, their friends and family will honor their last wishes and choose the photograph they’re most satisfied with, generally showing the deceased’s greatest

accomplishment in life. These are the usual circumstances.” Fei Du tapped lightly on the crystal frame. “So the most worthwhile moment in Su Xiaolan’s life was when she was twelve or thirteen? And after that, in a certain person’s eyes, was she tantamount to already dead?”

Luo Wenzhou was just checking whether there was any place he’d overlooked; he hadn’t spoken yet when his phone suddenly rang.

The abrupt sound of “Five Rings Song” vibrated back and forth inside the tortuous storage room, the echoes going up and down, producing a perfect horror movie effect. Luo Wenzhou himself felt his flesh crawl. The manager who’d said he was “withdrawing” seamlessly appeared, sticking his head in and darkly saying, “Turn off the sound, officer. You have to be responsible in public places. You’re disturbing people’s rest like this.”

“My good dage,” Luo Wenzhou said murderously, “if I weren’t responsible, you’d definitely be in the ground by now.”

The manager didn’t dare to attempt reasoning with a barbarian; he retracted his head at once.

Amidst the ill wind, Luo Wenzhou, his face greenish, picked up the phone. “Tao Ran, what have you found?”

“The estate from back then is still here.” Under the scorching sun, Tao Ran pulled at his uniform collar. While making his phone call, he strode into the shade of a tree to get out of the heat, ceaselessly fanning himself with a photocopied old map. “I’m about to burn up.—This estate is called the Sunward Estate, among the earliest commercial housing batch from over twenty years ago, high quality by the standards of the time. The old uncles playing chess around here say, when Jinxiu was still here, many students from rich families rented apartments there.”

“What about the surrounding wall?” Luo Wenzhou asked. “According to what Guo Heng said, he looked through the fretwork on the wall and could see Wu Guangchuan’s house. Can you determine approximately where it is?”

“This place has been rebuilt so its own mother wouldn’t know it. You sure know how to make things difficult for a person, boss.” Gasping, Tao Ran very improperly wiped the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve. Not far off, he saw his colleagues, dripping sweat like rain, beckoning to him.—They had invited over a few surveyors from a nearby construction site. Following the Sunward Estate’s foundations and the proportions on the old map, they were drawing the traces from back then on the wholly altered surface.

The road had widened more than twofold; Wu Guangchuan’s house had been leveled by it. Luckily the streets were deserted in the midsummer afternoon. Two policemen, each holding up a wooden staff level, stood a meter and a half apart in the road, restoring the main door of Wu Guangchuan’s house.

Tao Ran followed the thickly weeded perimeter wall of the Sunward Estate for a span, then said to Luo Wenzhou, “I think the place must be between Building 7 and Building 8—according to Guo Heng’s description, the place was just facing a corner, and you could spy on Wu Guangchuan’s house from some dozen meters off... This is a hard place to find, Wenzhou. The original building’s bicycle shed is here, the path isn’t wide enough for a person. I had to turn sideways when I came in.—Back then, Xu Wenchao took Guo Heng through very familiarly. How do you suppose he found the way?”

He’d just spoken when a mass-mailed message arrived on both of their phones. It was Lang Qiao.

Lang Qiao had gone to Jinxiu Middle School to go through the old files the school had preserved. She’d found the contact address

recorded for Xu Wenchao during junior middle school—Sunward Estate, Building 8, Unit 3, Apartment 201.

Holding his phone, Tao Ran turned to look at the old buildings with their mottled outer walls, then quickly came out through the small crevice, turned, and ran up to the second floor of Building 8. The window in the corridor, open year-round, had rusted in place. It was covered in a layer of year-round greasy dirt built up over time. It faced in the same direction as the window of the master bedroom in 201.

Tao Ran opened his eyes wide and pressed close to look. Out the window he saw his two colleagues holding staff levels. Some meters behind them, some stones had been arranged to represent the basement of Wu Guangchuan's house—old houses's basements had often been rented out separately, so many of them were sealed off and had windows. There would be a railing around the house, with flowerbeds around the railing, to protect against people falling in, and also to prevent people from spying.

Twenty years ago, this city hadn't been so grandiose. Past nine o'clock at night, the streets would be deserted. There hadn't been so many night owls.

Certain people who could only exist in the shadows would cautiously scope out the surroundings, determine that all was still in the deep night, then peel off their painted faces and take out their pitch-black bones and desires, letting themselves go to their hearts' content in basements that wouldn't see the light of day.

Would there have been a pair of eyes watching from on high then, able to see past the flowerbeds, glimpse everything from this seemingly fated point of view?

Covered in mingled sweat and gooseflesh, Tao Ran dashed to Building 8's committee office and smacked his work ID on the table in

front of the staff member. “Could I trouble you to have a look for me, who is the owner of Apartment 201 in Unit 3, has it changed hands in the last few years?”

“201?” The staff member flipped through the records. “It hasn’t. It’s still the original owner.”

Tao Ran panted twice. “Surnamed Xu?”

“Not Xu, surnamed Sun—an elderly couple.” The staff member turned to the old building’s manager to verify, “Right, Zhao-jie?”

“Right! They’re getting on in years, have a daughter, I think the daughter’s in her forties?” The middle-aged woman poured Tao Ran a cup of water. Tao Ran forced himself to thank her; he couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed—in the corridor just now he’d had a feeling coming out of nowhere, as if there was something on the other side of the wall in 201; it turned out that his nerves were just oversensitive.

Tao Ran was about to take his leave when the middle-aged woman who’d poured him water said, “The daughter’s very capable, settled down abroad. Some years ago she brought her parents over to live with her. I talked with the family’s uncle back then. He said they were planning to sell the apartment before leaving—what happened then? Maybe they didn’t find a suitable buyer or something. I see the ownership was never transferred.—Although maybe it’s been rented out, the water and electricity fees have always been paid...”

At this point, Zhao-jie suddenly thought of something, and her words came to a halt. She exchanged an embarrassed look with her colleague.

Tao Ran stared. “Dajie, do you know who the tenant is?”

Zhao-jie gave a “haha,” her gaze very unnaturally flickering down. “I don’t know. I haven’t run into them. They all buy their own water and electricity now, the owners don’t come to us if they don’t have any problems.”

Tao Ran’s eyes turned to the “Eliminate Safety Hazards, Crack Down On Overcrowded Rentals” poster on the wall of the committee office and deliberately asked, “Wait a minute, you wouldn’t have illegal overcrowded rentals here, would you?”

The two staff members’ faces altered simultaneously. Zhao-jie hurriedly defended herself: “No, no, that family’s luck hasn’t been too good, the tenants keep changing, it’s not an illegal rental, it absolutely...”

Tao Ran stood up at once. “Give me the keys!”

Deceitful property management companies tacitly accepted privately set-up illegal rentals, but were the people coming and going in 201 really an illegal rental?

At this time, Luo Wenzhou had already completed his raid on “Su Xiaolan”’s house and come up empty. He turned helplessly to Fei Du. “President Fei, you can be unreliable sometimes, too.”

Leaning on the wall of remains without a trace of superstitious taboo, Fei Du said, “Why don’t you check the last place before determining whether I’m reliable or not?”

Saying so, he picked up the box of Su Xiaolan’s ashes. It was tightly wrapped in two layers of silk. Like removing a lover’s clothing, his fingers moved over it lightly, and the silk eagerly slipped off, revealing the square wooden box within.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

CHAPTER 55 - Humbert Humbert XXII

“You want me to search...inside the box of ashes.” Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what expression to mobilize in response to Fei Du. He could only give him a teeth-gritting smile. “Are you sure Xu Wenchao is as abnormal as you?”

“I think you ‘normal’ people have a very interesting outlook.” Fei Du gave him the box of Su Xiaolan’s ashes. “On the one hand, you think this is a symbol of an ordinary person; on the other hand, you endow it with extraordinary significance, make it holy, unlucky, not to be profaned, untouchable...no matter what kind of person she was in life.”

The tiny box wasn’t light. After accepting it, Luo Wenzhou took several breaths. “The feeling of ritual and taboo reflect the awe we should feel for life and death.—I’m telling you, Fei Du, if I open this and there’s nothing but ashes inside, I’m sticking you in there.”

Then he put the little box on the ground, lifted off the lid, and pulled out the fragmentary damp-absorber inside. Flesh crawling, he opened up the cloth bag containing the ashes, braced himself, and rummaged around inside a few times.

Suddenly, Luo Wenzhou paused. He exchanged a look with Fei Du, then carefully pulled a sealed plastic bag from the heap of ashes.

Fei Du smiled. “Looks like I don’t have to go in?”

With gloved hands, Luo Wenzhou carefully brushed the ash off the outside of the plastic bag. Inside he found a very pocket-sized old notebook, a little bigger than 64mo¹⁷. It had a pink plastic cover, very characteristic of its era.

Su Xiaolan's characters were actually written rather well, some running strokes having the ease of an adult's writing. The pages were scribbled full of wild embellishments—skulls drawn in ballpoint, bloodstains drawn in red fountain pen, and so on. It looked very gloomy. There were incomplete sentences and exclamation marks everywhere.

X/X/19XX The slut let that fatty mess with me and took money at the door. I'm going to kill her! Rip out her tongue!! Brake her head in with a wine botle!!!

As soon as Luo Wenzhou opened the notebook, his eye was struck by this entry. He calmly sucked in a breath, his brow furrowing into a knot.

X/X/19XX Deng Ying came! It rained suddently, she didn't have her umbrella, she'd been to my house before and ran over to get out of the rain. There was someone here, he was drunk! (After this was a whole page messily blacked out.) The slut helped the drunk drag her into the room, she's a goner!

X/X/19XX The police came to school. They're looking for Deng Ying, asked a lot of people, but they didn't ask me, because I'd asked for the day off. Deng Ying is in the bathroom at home. The slut says, if we don't deal with her, we're finished.

X/X/19XX The slut put Deng Ying into an icebox and took it away. She told people she was going to sell wholesale lollipops. It stinks like hell in the icebox. I threw up. The slut hit me again.

“Who is Deng Ying?” asked Fei Du.

“I don't know.” Luo Wenzhou's thick, heavy brows were like two tense bowstrings. Lowering his voice, he said, “Su Xiaolan was only in fourth grade when this was written. We didn't find any victims fitting the criteria during this period and excluded it—if this was the first

murdered child, she must have gotten in by mistake, so she wouldn't display the later characteristics."

A midsummer evening twenty-four years earlier.

The fourth-grader Deng Ying got out of school and headed home. Suddenly the heavens opened and unleashed a rainstorm. She ran a few steps, found she was in a truly awkward situation, then remembered that she had a good friend in class whose house was nearby. She could go there to get out of the rain. And that good friend was supposed to be sick and staying at home that day. She could go and visit with her—

A torrent of scholar tree flowers was knocked loose by the rain and blown by the wind, their soft subtle fragrance sinking amidst the wet earth.

The girl had no cellphone and no way to tell anyone where she was going. She made a last-minute decision, then rushed headlong onto a forking path where she would be lost forever.

And perhaps that forking path hadn't been hers alone.

Luo Wenzhou said, "So from then on, Su Xiaolan's mother discovered her daughter's other use."

President Fei wasn't willing to squat on the ground like a monkey. To look at the little book pulled from the box of ashes with him, he simply sat down beside him, lifted one leg and propped his injured arm on it, leaning back against the wall of remains as if all taboos were off.

He sank into thought, half his mind focused on this matter, the other half focused on Luo Wenzhou. He thought this person was rather magical, and so couldn't resist asking, "What's going to happen to Su Luozhan?"

“Su Luozhan?” With his chain of thought suddenly interrupted, Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a strange look. “What do you mean what’s going to happen?”

“I said she wouldn’t be sentenced to prison.”

“Oh, right, taken into care.—Given the extent of what she’s done, it should be three years.” Luo Wenzhou turned a page in the notebook and dully said, “We’ll see in another three years when she gets out. I’ll let the jurisdiction’s local police station know to keep an eye out.”

“Three years.” Fei Du raised his brows. “It’s not enough time to get an undergraduate degree. I thought when she said ‘it was fun’ that someone would charge in and throttle her.”

“I sent the more impulsive ones out to investigate the case. They weren’t in the observation room.”

“What about you?” Fei Du asked, not letting him off the hook. “You all worked through the night investigating, got dragged in circles by a horde of victims’ family members, one person crying after another. You had to put yourselves in their shoes to keep investigating this case without complaint, right? Now after all your hard work, you’ve caught the criminals, and not only will they not obediently confess, the main culprit doesn’t show a sign of repentance and objectively speaking can’t bear criminal responsibility. You aren’t getting any ideas?”

Luo Wenzhou looked him over and dismissively said, “When I started out with the police, you were still at home watching cartoons, ‘trainee.’”

“I didn’t watch cartoons,” said Fei Du. “I only sometimes played games.”

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He gave a dry cough and avoided the subject. "Su Xiaolan's diary doesn't say how Su Hui dealt with the body. What ideas do you have?"

For a while Fei Du fixed a look full of "unfathomable intentions" on Luo Wenzhou, until Luo Wenzhou was on edge and wishing to find a needle to sew his eyelids together; then he finally let him off for the moment, cooperatively going along with the subject. "Me? First I'd dismember the body, since I had a car and there was no way to test DNA back then. I'd mince up the pieces a little, buy some bags of pork chops, mix the body parts with the animal flesh and bone, then scatter them all across the suburban wastes. Even if my luck was bad and a body part was unexpectedly recognized for what it was, it would still be very hard for the police to find out who it belonged to."

"If it had been dismemberment, Su Xiaolan's diary ought to have mentioned it." Luo Wenzhou overlooked his spirited tone and said as objectively as possible, "Anyway, an alcoholic woman and a little girl wouldn't necessarily have the strength to chop up a body."

"Then I'd have to find a way to bury it. The best thing would be an absolutely safe place that would belong to me forever, that no one would go digging up before my death—if we were abroad, I could just bury it in my yard, but that's hard to do in this country with our special policy on land ownership. Burying a body is like burying a landmine that could go off any day. There's no insurance," Fei Du said "So I'd have to settle for second best. Choose a place where a body wouldn't easily be dug up, and even if it was dug up, no one would think it was strange—for example, some wild graveyard out in the country, or a place with thick water weeds that's often flooded."

"There are still some rural areas that haven't entirely adopted cremation. There are always graves heaped up with wreathes at the edges of fields. I'd look for a fresh grave, or a place that had been dug

up for renovation, and bury another person in it. The turned earth wouldn't attract suspicion, and the place wouldn't be dug up again in the near future. Although that requires a killer who's very familiar with disposing of bodies." Fei Du paused, then said, "It's more convenient to tie a stone to the person's ankles and sink the body. After a time, the ropes will rot along with the flesh, the heavy object will separate from the body, and the skeleton will be tangled up in the water weeds. There's great potential for it turning into a water ghoulish story. Everything that happens in this world leaves a mark; if you plan for a thousand contingencies, you'll still miss one. Rather than engaging in a battle of wits with the whole public security system, it's better to obey a criminal's general principle—"

Luo Wenzhou was looking at him silently.

"Don't let the body be found. If there's a risk the body will be found, don't let the people who might stumble on it think there's a need to call the police."

Having heard this theory, Luo Wenzhou nodded. "Very insightful, though there are problems putting it into practice—for example, you get sick at the sight of blood. On that subject, why does blood make you sick?"

The corners of Fei Du's mouth subtly stiffened, as if this question had choked him. After a while, he somewhat rigidly said, "If I knew the reason, I wouldn't be sick."

Then he didn't make another sound.

Having succeeded in turning this criminal theorist into a vase with a single sentence, Luo Wenzhou let him sit there looking pretty and, having removed the interference, calmly continued reading Su Xiaolan's diary.

“Disposing of the body somewhere with thick water weeds that’s often flooded is a possibility,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “Su Hui’s hometown is in Pinghai County. Pinghai has always been Yan City’s reservoir. It’s full of streams.—She could have...huh?”

Luo Wenzhou had been skimming Su Xiaolan’s diary, quickly skipping over the vast majority of irrelevant daily details. Suddenly, he stopped turning the pages.

These pages were about school. Su Xiaolan’s hatred was intense. This one was a slut, that one was a slut. It felt like she was living on the planet of sluts; all around there was no other species. But what had attracted Luo Wenzhou’s notice was a photograph stuck among the pages. It must have been from a school performance. Six girls were standing on a stage together for a curtain call, a row of long, slender legs showing under short floral-patterned dresses.

The five other girls’ faces had been scratched out with ballpoint pen. Su Xiaolan was in the very center, chin slightly raised as she looked into the camera.

Floral-patterned dresses—yes, her diary hadn’t mentioned floral-patterned dresses yet.

Luo Wenzhou hurriedly flipped back a few pages.

X/X/19XX The dance teacher’s a miserable slut, she’s scared people will say she’s taking money (crossed out), making us buy our own performance clothes, we can’t participate if we don’t have them. The slut heard and hit my back with a wine bottle. Why won’t the slut die! Why won’t the teacher die!!

X/X/19XX Dress rehearsal tomorrow. I had no dress. I met that disgusting fatty wandering around the school. I went with him, and he bought me the dress.

“The first time Su Xiaolan voluntarily sold herself, it was for the sake of a floral-patterned dress.” Luo Wenzhou flipped through a certain year in the diary. “Twenty-two years ago is the first year we found cases of the same kind among the data. From being forced to take part in the crimes, she changed to taking the lead.—Why didn’t she ask for help before... What are you laughing about?”

“Men, women, children her own age, who could she choose?—Men were disgusting ‘clients,’ women were ‘sluts’ who compelled and abused her, and as for children, after Deng Ying died, she was extremely afraid, instinctively avoided starting close relationships with children her own age... A depressed and unsocial little girl, developing early, and unluckily rather good-looking—would she be welcomed by her classmates? Children have even more tricks than adults when it comes to bullying. And then, she envied and hated those girls so much for their easily-come-by dresses.”

In the last few pages of Su Xiaolan’s notebook, the furious scrawls gradually disappeared, because of the appearance of a certain person.

The precocious girl showed an evident liking for him, especially when she unexpectedly found that he was her teacher. Though Wu Guangchuan was also a “client,” his disposition was elegant and refined. On the one hand, he was a teacher; on the other, he had undesirable lusts. He was like a plant that had grown in the shade, having a malnourished melancholy. He was infatuated with young girls, cared for and petted Su Xiaolan like a lover.

X/X/19XX Went to his house today. I don’t tell the slut about going to his house, and I don’t take his money. He comes to my house twice a week, so the slut doesn’t make me do any other work.

X/X/19XX I love him. He’s my knight.

X/X/19XX He says he wants to adopt me. He’s going to think of a way to get me away from the slut.

...

X/X/19XX The slut says he's been coming for half a year, so he's a trusted older customer, and she can give him a "sheep." I bought rat poison. I'm going to kill her!

X/X/19XX The slut really did give him a "sheep," and he actually wanted it! He actually wanted it!! I hate him!!!

X/X/19XX I secretly followed him to Lotus Mountain.

X/X/19XX He's looking at someone else. The little slut was wearing a floral-patterned dress.

X/X/19XX He was in the hospital. I tricked the little slut into coming to his hotel, tied her up into a sheep, and waited for him.

Afterwards came big black blotches of ink and several pages torn right through, the word "hate" appearing messily several times among the smears. The diary was quickly coming to an end. There was no more coherent content.

Among these ink stains was the serial kidnapping case that had shaken the city, the deranged screaming phone calls, and the floral-patterned dresses cut into strips.

The performance clothes she couldn't obtain had branded a floral-patterned dress onto her soul. It hadn't been to satisfy the clients' obsessions; it had only been a girl in a mire, once and again, over and over, repeating the downfall of her soul.

Wu Guangchuan had given her a hand, only to stamp her down into an even more hopeless abyss. Guo Fei's floral-patterned dress, polluted by unlucky coincidence, had become an iron cage around Su

Xiaolan's flesh and blood, neither rusting nor breaking over twenty years, shaking off life and death to pass on to the next generation.

The last page of the diary was glued to the plastic cover. Luo Wenzhou felt that there was something else behind it and lightly pulled—a stack of photographs came toppling out onto the ground.

These photographs were both old and new. They must have been taken in secret, in a very small room, the four walls covered with soundproofing, the thick window curtains eternally drawn, the light dim. Each photograph contained a different girl with a different man; the beasts clothed in human skin had been photographed head-on, very easy to identify.

But Fei Du picked up the only blurry photograph.

It was an old photograph, poorly lit; though the photographer's skill level was high, only outlines had been captured. A distant low building appeared in the night, edges merging with the surrounding darkness. The camera lens looked loftily down, focusing on a flowerbed below. A china rose planted there had withered, leaving a small gap, enough for a spying gaze to invade.

A skinny girl was pressed against the glass, both hands helplessly laid on the window, her face a blur. Behind her was the shadow of a man —

“Did Xu Wenchao secretly take this of Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan when he was renting a room at the Sunward Estate?”

At the same time, Tao Ran and a group of colleagues opened the door of Apartment 201, Unit 3, Building 8 in the Sunward Estate.

An indescribable smell came rolling out of the empty room.

The thick curtains were drawn. Tao Ran tore them open and saw that the window that had once faced Wu Guangchuan's house had been plastered over with an enormous photograph—

It was a night twenty years ago.

CHAPTER 56 - Humbert Humbert XXIII

In the dim room, the places sprayed with luminol solution glowed with a faint fluorescence. The floor, the ceiling, the cracks around the doors... Vast swaths linked together, all over, like dizzying wallpaper.

Where the couch had been moved away there were age-old bloodstains that hadn't been cleaned up. On the otherwise spotless pale floor, they were especially startling, an injustice from who knew how many years past finally coming to light.

The walls were covered in soundproofing. In the living room, there was one wall hung with photographs. Exquisite fields and natural scenery were displayed there, giving off a tasteful atmosphere of culture—if not for the fact that they were also coated with fluorescence.

In the bedroom, meanwhile, hung a sheep-herding picture. The meter-high frame was very solid. A crime scene technician stared at it for a while, thinking there was something not right. He took it down to investigate and found a stealth camera installed inside. The lens peered out from the shepherdess's eye, giving the young girl's quiet smile an unwarranted hint of furtiveness.

In the locked storage room next to the bedroom were hidden all the cutting tools and bindings the medical examiners needed...

But not one of them was as horrifying as the enlarged photograph on the window.

“Look, Deputy Tao, this window is one of the old-style ones split into an inner and outer layer. Between them there's a blackout curtain like you usually get in hotels, and the photograph is stuck onto the outside of the glass,” said the crime scene technician to Tao Ran. “This way, even if there was a solar storm outside, the UV-blocking

curtain would still shield it. No strong light would pass through to the photo paper... Tsk, this photograph really has been arranged here with skill!”

The photograph had been carefully enlarged to accurate proportions. In the realistic darkness of the surroundings, standing in that room, a person would really be unable to tell the difference between dawn and dusk, day and night. At a glance, you might think that outside the window glass was this night scene—the narrow street, the old thinly-spread buildings arranged in rows, the distant streetlamp as before more than a hundred meters away, the flowerbeds left to grow on their own, delicate flowers and tangled weeds living together. A small part had withered somehow, and from this lofty point of view, you could see a faint light among the dried branches. The light reflected from somewhere onto the half-hidden basement past the flowerbeds, and the basement revealed a corner of a small window, with a girl’s blurred face.

This was important evidence. Two crime scene technicians carefully came up and took the photograph down along with the glass.

Tao Ran pulled open the light-blocking curtain and opened the outer window. At that moment, his pupils contracted slightly, the hot sweat worked up rushing around under the sun receding like the tide—

Tao Ran suddenly saw that outside the window, the locations of the staff levels and the stones used to represent Wu Guangchuan’s house dovetailed perfectly with the photograph when the window was closed.

“Deputy Tao! Deputy Tao!” A trainee from the Criminal Investigation Team who’d been left behind by the others to interrogate the property management came running over, starting to clamor while still in the corridor. “The property management admitted it! They say this apartment really is illegally rented, but the tenants don’t seem to live here normally, maybe they’re just office workers who work nearby

and come here to have a nap in the afternoon or something. The property management people say they don't use the stove, and the water and electricity go slowly, so they think there's no safety hazard, so... Fuck!"

"Careful, this is a crime scene!"

"Don't blunder around in here, stay back!"

Seeing the "magnificent" room from the door, the youngster had been dumbstruck, earning a scolding from his colleagues.

"No safety hazard." Tao Ran was looking out the window without blinking. "Can we contact the owner?"

"The-the owner is abroad, I just called, the number's disconnected, we have to think of another way." At this point the trainee remembered something. "Oh, right, Deputy Tao, 201's parking spot is occupied, there's an SUV!"

The traffic police quickly turned up information about the car's owner—it wasn't the owner of 201, nor was it anyone connected with the case. The recorded owner was an old fart who had nothing to do with anything. While his registered address was still in Yan City, he'd moved out of town years ago. Receiving a call from the police, the old fart was at first utterly flummoxed, until he heard the them ask about the license plate number and began to get a little panicked.

After some more questioning, they found that while the license plate was his, the car wasn't.

The old man had moved out of town to live with his children after retirement. He had no more use for a license plate here, so, since it had been hard to get license plates these last few years, he'd used the opportunity to privately rent it out and earn a bit of money each year,

which was no bother. He only had to show up for the annual check-up, and the renter even reimbursed his travel fees.

“Are...you going to fine me? Or suspend my license?” The owner of the license plate defended himself, “Comrade Policeman, I really didn’t get that much money, about two-thousand a year, if you don’t believe me, you can look at the contract...”

“You guys signed a contract to illegally rent out a license plate?” Tao Ran really had nothing to say to this. “Who was the person who signed the contract with you?”

“Oh... It was a woman, called Su...Su what? Oh, yes, Su Xiaolan!”

Tao Ran hung up the phone and turned around at once. “Investigate the car’s driving history from the day Qu Tong went missing up to now!”

“Deputy-Captain Tao, there’s no GPS or driving record installed in that car, we had to rely on the traffic cameras.—The day before the recording was left at Qu Tong’s house, this car left the city by South Airport Highway, turned onto Yan Port Highway, and two hours later left the highway for a national road. After another half-hour, it exited the national road and turned out of security camera range. The next day it went back by the same road. It didn’t stop at a gas station the whole way.”

That was to say, after the car had left the national road, it hadn’t gone very far at all.

“What was nearby when it left the national road?”

“Some natural villages...a seaside sanatorium, an agritourism place, an oil-painting village.”

Seaside?

Tao Ran approached the wall of photographs in the living room. Among them there was a photograph of a reef washed by the waves at sunset.

“Determine where all the photographs on this wall were taken. Let’s go!”

As Tao Ran and the others left the city, Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du returned to it.

The sun was sinking once again into the west. The summer heat was still steaming so it was hard to open your eyes. Yan City’s City Bureau had quieted down a little. When Luo Wenzhou returned, the work of recording everyone’s information had basically been concluded, and the family members had been sent home to wait for news. Some people either lived too far away to return home or were simply unwilling; they were still pacing around the City Bureau. The officers on duty and the Criminal Investigation Team had had to arrange for them to eat in the dining hall.

Luo Wenzhou twisted open a water bottle, snatched two packets of instant coffee from Lang Qiao’s desk, poured them into the mouth of the bottle, and gave it a few forceful shakes. The instant coffee unwillingly half-combined with the cold water, brewing up an exotic color and even more exotic taste. Then, under Fei Du’s shocked gaze, he drank half the bottle in one go. “What are you looking at? It’s not like I’m drinking piss.”

Fei Du felt that even his retinas had a stomachache, as if he’d drunk a big mouthful of cold sesame oil with his eyes. He quickly averted his gaze, concentrating on the photographs they’d removed from the box of ashes.

“Over twenty years, more than a hundred missing girls. Though the standards for ‘membership’ must be rather harsh, isn’t five suspects

too few?” Fei Du tightly tapped on the photographs in his hand. “And these all seem pretty new, probably from these last few years...”

His voice suddenly stopped.

Luo Wenzhou gave him a slightly questioning look. Fei Du, using a glasses wiping cloth, carefully picked up one of the photographs—it was of a man with his head raised, rather refined, around forty, even looking fairly regular.

Each person recorded in these photographs had had several pictures taken of him, probably by stealth, and then the more recognizable among them had been left behind. This man’s other photographs featured either beastly revelry or a sinister and twisted expression. There was only this one where his expression was a little more normal and you could more or less see that he was human.

“This person looks a little familiar.” Fei Du scratched his chin. “Familiar, but I can’t remember him. He must not be someone I met in the course of business. When I collect business cards I purposefully take note of the person’s facial characteristics and afterwards jot them down on the back of the business card, to save myself the awkwardness of not recognizing them after too long a time. He also can’t be someone I’ve gone out to have fun with. Ordinarily there’s only a small group I go out with, and even when we bring someone along, we wouldn’t bring along this type of...unremarkable old man. My sensitivity towards people’s faces is very average. If I see someone once, I generally won’t remember them, so this must have been within the last thirty days.”

Drinking his piss-like instant coffee, Luo Wenzhou listened with a great sense of novelty as Fei Du disassembled his own memory—his understanding of himself was like that of a nerd who knew all the ins and outs of a computer, precise and objective. While he couldn’t remember everything that had happened, he could trace all its inner workings.

It seemed that he had to regularly pry open his brain and subject each thought to intense, detailed scrutiny.

During this moment, Fei Du had already quickly recalled everything he'd done in the last month—a middle-aged man with a bland, middle-grade Swiss watch on his wrist, some buying power. Reasonably speaking, he wouldn't show up in any of the places where the meddlesome rich youngsters gathered...

Just then, Lang Qiao came in like a dead dog. "Boss, you're back. I don't want to settle the victims' relatives anymore! I..."

Luo Wenzhou held up a finger at her.

"The pianist," Fei Du said suddenly. "At the West Ridge racing club, his photograph was on the wall. The day Qu Tong disappeared, he was absent, so the owner had invited a stray music group to liven things up... That's right. If a person who wasn't familiar with the terrain ran into a one-in-a-million chance hijacking, his first reaction would be to withdraw, avoid the business, not conveniently 'herd a sheep.'"

"No wonder none of the cameras at the exits caught him that day. Since it's a 'membership' arrangement, these people must introduce each other. We can trace down the other four, too. If the ringleader won't talk, can't we get it out of these little devils?" Luo Wenzhou turned to Lang Qiao. "You don't like settling victims' relatives. Will arresting people do?"

Hearing the words "arresting people," Lang Qiao's interest perked up, her listlessness falling away. Without another word, she took the photographs and ran.

Luo Wenzhou put a file under his arm and stamped on the ground to wake a colleague who was napping in the office. "Wake up, let's go!"

Come with me to question Xu Wenchao again.”

The two of them went out one after the other. Fei Du stood and gave a very restrained stretch. He was surrounded by the swirling smells of cigarette smoke and sesame oil. He felt it would be very unsuitable to remain here much longer and was planning to leave when Luo Wenzhou returned.

“I have some things to say to you,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Though I have to go do some work now. Don’t go yet. You can wait in my office for now.”

When he was finished, he hurriedly left again.

Fei Du froze. Having taken half a step to leave, he hesitated a moment, then finally withdrew it.

Xu Wenchao wasn’t after all as heartless as Su Luozhan. He evidently hadn’t slept the night before.

His eyes were sunken in. He’d made mental preparations to be repeatedly questioned by the police—that was all right; he had very definite alibis for both kidnappings.

That was why Su Luozhan had dared to call him out.

Yan City’s City Bureau wasn’t a little police station in some remote county; someone was watching everything they said and did. They absolutely wouldn’t dare to use any kind of torture tactics against an underage girl who wasn’t even fourteen.

And as for him, there was no real evidence. When the custody period had elapsed, they’d have to let him go whether they liked it or not.

But he’d waited a whole day and night without anyone paying attention to him.

The City Bureau's policemen seemed to have forgotten such a person existed.

Xu Wenchao's face was calm, but as time had rolled on, he had gradually lost his initial composure and was feeling rather agitated—could they have heard his alibi and completely believed it? Abandoned the investigation?

Though that was for the best...if he had been cleared of suspicion, why hadn't they released him?

In the midst of Xu Wenchao's nervousness, Luo Wenzhou came in with his colleague.

"I kind of stink of cigarettes." Luo Wenzhou pulled out a chair and sat down across from him. "Sorry, I worked all night, mostly for the sake of grabbing your foxtail."

Xu Wenchao was shaken by these words. He lightly adjusted his posture and raised an unmoved gaze to look at Luo Wenzhou. "I really don't have anything else to say about this."

Luo Wenzhou smiled at him, seeming very casual, and said, "What's your relationship with Su Luozhan?"

"I was her mother's fiancé," Xu Wenchao answered patiently. "Officer, I've already answered this question."

"I know you were Su Xiaolan's fiancé." Luo Wenzhou raised his brows. Suddenly, he looked at him with a certain meaningful expression. "What I want to know is, were you planning to wed Su Xiaolan because of your remaining passion for that faded beauty, or because you'd taken a liking to her little daughter?"

At first Xu Wenchao froze. Then he immediately opened his eyes wide and said with difficult-to-conceal fury, “My good officer, take responsibility for your words!”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression didn’t flicker. “Su Xiaolan was a single mother with no education, no background, and a shady source of income, surrounded by ugly-sounding rumors. While you, Mr. Xu, have a successful career, have a house and a car, and aren’t bad-looking, either. You ought to be an ideal partner. I’ve thought it was strange all along. If what you said is true, why wouldn’t she be willing to marry you?”

“Love and marriage can’t be judged by material conditions.” Xu Wenchao laughed and forced his anger down with difficulty, preserving his demeanor. “Also, that’s private business between us, I want—”

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. “Was she unwilling to marry you because she had an unusual disdain for money, or was it that you didn’t want to marry her?”

“What connection does that have to this case?” Xu Wenchao said coldly. “You can question me about anything related to the case, even though I’m innocent, but you can’t insult my...”

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him again. “Insult the photograph stuck onto the south-facing bedroom window in the Sunward Estate’s Building 8, Unit 3, Apartment 201? Insult your...love?”

Xu Wenchao’s body abruptly stiffened. The blood drew back from his face like the tide.

For a time, the interrogation room was silent.

The criminal policeman taking notes next to them had worked all night. He’d just had a muddled nap in the duty room and hadn’t yet

had a chance to catch up with his colleagues' latest progress. He hadn't been able to resist yawning under cover of turning a page. Hearing these words, his half-yawn caught in his throat. Dumb as a wooden chicken, he looked at Luo Wenzhou, then looked at Xu Wenchao.

Xu Wenchao's ears roared. The drop of agitation stirred up by Luo Wenzhou's words just now seemed to be a lead, bringing a bolt of lightning down from the heavens and sweeping a conflagration across the prairie. He struggled to squeeze a denial out of his throat. "What...are you talking about?"

"The Sunward Estate. Building 8. Your photographic juvenilia is still plastered to the window," Luo Wenzhou said, one word at a time. "There are bloodstains on the scene, so the DNA can still be traced. Your hair is in the SUV parked in that apartment's parking spot. There are also the photographs taken by the hidden eyes behind the picture frame, which I just received from Su Xiaolan's own hands."

Smiling, he knocked on the table. "Mr. Xu, can the two of us have a chat now?"

CHAPTER 57 - Humbert Humbert XXIV

Xu Wenchao couldn't quite seem to catch his breath. He didn't even have time to consider how the police had found that apartment. He didn't have time to decide whether he'd left any traces behind in that car. At the moment he heard the address, he knew he was done for.

The roaring in his ears stretched out for half a minute. He sat there still as a carved idol, putting the policemen facing him, the eagerly watching security camera, and the cramped little dark room all at the back of his mind, drowning in his own world.

Xu Wenchao had received a high-level education. His intelligence was even greater than average.

He knew right from wrong, could clearly recognize the red line drawn on the ground by law and virtue. He knew what he was doing, and he knew the consequences. But all the same he couldn't stop; he did all he could to be careful, considered how to conceal his crimes, erase whatever traces could be erased.

All these years, he'd felt like a person floating on the surface of the water. His upper body was exposed to the bright light of day. He was mixed in among regular people, considering the same problems of life as an ordinary person, agreeing with the outlooks of the majority. Only he never looked down.

Because his lower body was immersed in ice-cold muddy water.

He had been split into two for a long time, until just now, when a fierce external force had pushed his upper body, protruding out of the water, down into the mud. His mouth and nose had at once filled with the stinking, freezing "liquid." For a time, he couldn't catch his breath.

Luo Wenzhou patiently waited for him for a while before continuing. “The photographs you took were clear enough. You can see all the pits on their faces. We’re already verifying their identities and summoning them one by one—now that I mention it, if we had their contact information and mailing addresses, that would be better. Why didn’t you leave a sheet with them while you were at it?”

At his voice, Xu Wenchao’s vague gaze fell on him. After a moment, his pupils finally found their focus, and he reacted to Luo Wenzhou’s words.

“It’s no use,” he said.

“What do you mean?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“It’s no use,” Xu Wenchao said quietly. “You won’t find evidence, and they won’t admit it.”

The policeman beside them had at last been frightened into wakefulness by his superior and the man being interrogated. Using the hints coming from his colleagues through his earbud, he finally caught up with that day’s thousand li¹⁸ of progress. He was immediately enraged and fiercely smacked the table. “We won’t find the evidence?! That apartment full of bloodstains and weapons doesn’t count as evidence? If those clear as day photographs aren’t evidence, then what the fuck other evidence do you want?”

Xu Wenchao looked fixedly at him, something nearly like a bit of pitying sorrow in his expression.

He said, “But all those photographs are from the last decade.”

The furious criminal policeman was bewildered when he heard this, wanting to grab this beast in human garb by the collar, give him a

couple of shakes and make him talk. But Luo Wenzhou had already understood.

The “diners” Su Luo-zhan had spoken of had only ever bought girls; they hadn’t participated in the follow-up. Did they know what the fate of those girls would be?

Of course they knew, but they could just as easily not admit it—

I didn’t know where the girls came from. An acquaintance introduced me. It was just these few times.

How could they have been kidnapped? How could they have died? They clearly told me that they were all willing.

And even if they found the bodies, they would have been thoroughly cleaned. It would be very difficult to find traces. It was likely the police wouldn’t find direct evidence to show the men were connected to the recent child kidnapping cases. And the photographs from the box of ashes could only show that they had sexually assaulted female children.

If these photographs had been taken before the “Visiting Young Girl Prostitutes Offense” had been removed, then according to the so-called “Leniency Theory” in criminal law, even if Lang Qiao brought back all five of the men in the photographs, then it was possible they would only have arrested some boorish men who’d “visited young girl prostitutes.” They’d be fined some money, or at most shut up for three to five years and then let go.¹⁹

And in this major case spanning more than twenty years, had there really only been five offenders?

“How to judge other people is our business at the public security authorities. Thank you for your concern on our behalf,” said Luo

Wenzhou, not batting an eyelid. “However considerate you are towards us, we still can’t give you a silk banner. You’d be better off looking after yourself. From what I personally see, others may be able to escape blame, but you, Xu Wenchao, can’t get away from the charges of kidnapping multiple children, killing them, and disposing of their bodies. What do you have to say?”

“In the end I, an outsider, am to assume all the consequences. Thinking about it, I think it’s truly absurd.” Xu Wenchao’s clenched hands opened, slowly spreading. He said, “I’ll tell you the truth. I never touched Su Luozhan, and I never touched any of those girls. I never took any money from this. I’m not a beast.”

Luo Wenzhou was almost speechless. “Then what did you do? You took pictures, voluntarily undertook the cover-up? You’re really a living Lei Feng.”

Xu Wenchao said, “I did it for Su Xiaolan.”

Saying so, he lightly lowered his eyes, gaze seeming to fall on a very distant place. “I was attracted to Su Xiaolan the first time I saw her at school. There was something special about her, I’ve never seen another girl who had it. I tried everything I could to get close to her, but she was too unsociable, and she often missed school. It seemed that aside from our homeroom teacher—our homeroom teacher was Wu Guangchuan then—no one else knew where she was... And in junior middle Year 2, even the new homeroom teacher didn’t know where she was going. I found out then that she only ever seemed to be around Wu Guangchuan.”

“You started following Wu Guangchuan before Guo Heng?”

“I didn’t need to follow him. I could see him out my window every day. I rented an apartment near the school—you’ve already found that apartment. My mom was helping me with my studies then, but she also had to take care of an old relative. She was always being

pulled in two directions. Except at mealtimes, I was basically always alone. Su Xiaolan was my first love, the kind you think about day and night.” Xu Wenchao smiled, giving Luo Wenzhou an “all men understand this” expression. “Once I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night, picked up a photograph I’d secretly taken of her at our school’s anniversary, and leaned back in bed ‘relieving my frustrations.’ My bed faced the window. It was summer, and the curtains hadn’t been drawn. I saw Su Xiaolan coming home with Wu Guangchuan.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“It must have been after midnight,” said Xu Wenchao. “Wu Guangchuan was very prudent.

“Later... What I saw completely surpassed what I’d imagined—you know that a teenaged boy’s imagination is mostly rather hazy—I was too shaken, I forgot to be angry or jealous. Later I came back to myself and thought that something wasn’t right. Wu Guangchuan was a teacher, wasn’t it a crime?

“I felt sick, and I suspected she wasn’t willing. So I set an alarm, stealthily prepared a telescope, used the camera and lens I’d finally gotten out of my parents.”

With one hand, Luo Wenzhou held down his colleague, who wanted to interrupt Xu Wenchao. He slowly twirled a pen in his fingers and calmly asked, “Then how did you find out that Su Xiaolan wasn’t purely a victim? I don’t suppose Wu Guangchuan would bring the kidnapped girls home?”

Xu Wenchao closed his eyes, revealing a somewhat self-ridiculing smile. “For a time, I really don’t know what happened. All I could think about day and night was her. When I thought of her, I felt sadness and yearning, as well as mingled grief and indignation. I would have loved to rip Wu Guangchuan apart. Once I couldn’t resist.

I lied to my teacher and asked for a sick day to go see her. I just happened to see her with a girl I didn't know. I hesitated, then didn't go to say hello to her. I snuck away. But not long after that, there was a notice that that girl had gone missing. It was on the local news. I had a faint bad feeling then. I went to her house the next day, under the guise of taking her her homework. I saw her at home cutting up a dress... It was... It was the dress that girl had been wearing.

“She begged me in a panic not to tell anyone. I was scared out of my mind, really out of my mind. I simply didn't dare to think about what was happening. I felt like the sky had fallen down... But in the end... in the end, I couldn't bear it, I promised her.” Xu Wenchao covered his face. “I was the class monitor, I could have a sick day just by asking for it. The teacher trusted me, didn't even look at my permission slip. But for her sake, I spied, lied, covered up a crime... I handed over my decade and more of a normal life... She ruined me, she completely ruined me. And I still loved her so much.”

Luo Wenzhou followed up, “You didn't run into Su Hui at the Su house that day?”

Xu Wenchao shook his head. “If I had, I may not have been able to sit here talking to you.”

Having heard this much, for a long while, Luo Wenzhou didn't continue questioning him. He pressed his thumbs to his temples and rather politely said, “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Can you give me one, too?” said Xu Wenchao.

Luo Wenzhou very magnanimously lit one and passed it to him. “You don't seem like you have a cigarette habit.”

“I don't.” Xu Wenchao's fingers trembled a little as he took the cigarette, but his tone relaxed slightly. “I just occasionally smoke one or two with other people when I'm in company. Ordinarily I don't

have much of a craving... Sorry, today is really too painful for me. These things have been weighing on my heart for over twenty years. I always pretended they didn't exist. Even the people closest to me don't know."

"Oh." Luo Wenzhou looked at his phone. There had been nothing yet from either Tao Ran or Lang Qiao. The cigarette had eased the atmosphere between the policeman and the suspect considerably. Rather mildly, he said, "I think I can understand.—Can you tell me what you were thinking when you helped Guo Heng investigate Wu Guangchuan?"

"I thought then that Wu Guangchuan was forcing her." Xu Wenchao let out a mouthful of smoke. "I promised Su Xiaolan not to go to the police or tell anyone else. Otherwise, she'd be finished. I had the wildest fantasies then... Little boys all have some heroism. I wanted to punish Wu Guangchuan myself, rescue Su Xiaolan. While I was following Wu, that uncle found me. He was investigating in secret, and so was I. We were both doing it for someone we loved. I pitied him, and besides, it felt safer having an adult around—but I never expected that he'd actually go and stab Wu Guangchuan to death. If I'd known, I never would have helped him."

"Why?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"That guy was crazy. It's lucky I didn't tell him what Su Xiaolan had done, and that Wu Guangchuan didn't have time to speak before he stabbed him, or else she wouldn't have gotten away." Xu Wenchao took two large drags. With smoke pouring out of him, his face seemed a little blurred. "Remembering it now, I'm scared for her all over again."

"Scared for her." Luo Wenzhou looked at him with a certain meaningful expression, quietly repeating what he'd said. Then he said, "How was your relationship with Su Xiaolan after Wu Guangchuan died?"

Xu Wenchao was silent for a long time. He seemed to feel his collar was choking him; he raised it with difficulty and shook it.

“Su Xiaolan hadn’t been forced at all. She did it willingly. She was born an opium poppy growing on a rose bush, with poison in her roots—and she actually...actually truly and sincerely loved that...” Xu Wenchao raised an arm and rubbed hard at his face. “After that, she wilted. She was just a walking corpse. I simply didn’t dare to believe it. Can you imagine how powerless I felt? And I still had to pretend I didn’t know. I had to save up for a long time to buy some of her time from her mother.”

“Wait a minute.” Luo Wenzhou paused. “Su Luozhan isn’t your daughter, is she?”

“She isn’t,” Xu Wenchao denied without even thinking about it. “I never touched Su Xiaolan. I only bought her time so I could be with her. It’s not what you think.

“She was so venomous, so abnormal, but I still loved her. I couldn’t hold her back, and I couldn’t hold myself back, either...”

Having heard this much, the criminal policeman, who had been tormented all day by the victims’ family members, could hardly stand it anymore. He seemed about to explode, turn Xu Wenchao’s refined head into pulp. Once again held down by Luo Wenzhou’s hand, which seemed to be cast in iron, he cried, “Boss!”

“There are still some things I haven’t asked.” Luo Wenzhou gave his colleague a look telling him to be patient. “Xu Wenchao, when did you start helping Su Xiaolan cover up? What role did you play in all this?”

“After Su Hui died.” Xu Wenchao thought about it and let out a long sigh. “I suppose it’s been ten years. When Su Hui was alive, every day

Su Xiaolan wanted nothing better than for her to die. But when she really did die, she felt isolated. That gaming hall her mom had run was about to be torn down, too. Su Xiaolan said she didn't trust anyone else, she could only appeal to me. What else could I do? I had no bottom line when it came to her.

"Just then the owners of that apartment in the Sunward Estate were going abroad. My income was all right, and I got some money from my family. I had some savings, so I bought the apartment, only they left too quickly and didn't have time to transfer ownership." Xu Wenchao looked down. "I let her use that apartment."

"Oh," said Luo Wenzhou. "I've just about understood. At first, Su Xiaolan was a young girl. Before she was fully grown, she became a pregnant woman, and then a mother carrying a small child, all categories that people would give up their seats on the bus for. She used that to lower the victims' guard. She abducted the children, sold them to perverts to defile, then killed them to keep them from talking. You supplied the location and were responsible for taking care of the bodies. How did you do it? Dismember them? Find a place to throw them after you'd dismembered them? I'm right, aren't I?"

Xu Wenchao took a deep breath, covered his face, and didn't refute it.

"She died, but the nightmare wasn't over yet. I discovered that the child... Little Luozhan was a perfect copy of her. I didn't fit the requirements for adoption. I've spent the last two months racking my brain trying to think of a way. I looked away for a moment, and the child actually... She actually went and privately contacted those people again. When I heard about the girl who went missing in West Ridge, and then shortly after you summoned me to a public security bureau for questioning, do you know how shocked I was?" Xu Wenchao looked at Luo Wenzhou, his eyes red. "Go ahead and arrest me. It'll be like freeing me. I won't ever have to..."

Luo Wenzhou's phone vibrated gently, a message coming from Lang Qiao. "Boss, I arrested that asshole! He saw the photograph but still won't admit it, he keeps saying he didn't know the facts. Wait until I get a line about the others!"

"Wait, I still have a question." Luo Wenzhou was wholly unmoved by his "heartrending" confession. He put down his phone, his previously mild tone changing abruptly. "You're saying you couldn't control Su Luozhan, you didn't know anything, is that right? Why isn't that what the child said? She said the two of you worked pretty well together. You dressed up as an old blind man to follow Zhang Yuchen. When the child was alone, you suddenly appeared and frightened her, then had Su Luozhan appear and fool the child into trusting her. Did this happen?"

This gang's criminal method had always been headed by the members of the Su family. The "innocent" buyers only spent their money and enjoyed; they weren't willing to assume any risk. So the victims must have been chosen by the Su family. From determining the target to starting to follow her to implementing the kidnapping, it must have been a complete and strict process. They'd gotten their eye on Chenchen over a month ago, had gradually become acquainted with the rhythm of her daily activities, then taken decisive action at a suitable moment—this was in keeping with the method.

That meant that the method they'd previously assumed the "criminal gang" used, that is, that several suspects chose their own targets and used the little girl Su Luozhan as bait to lure in the victim, was impossible.

Xu Wenchao was too clever. When the initial shock had passed, he'd been able to analyze the evidence the police had found and, sticking as close to the facts as possible, had delicately shifted the blame off of himself—he'd only covered up out of sentiment, he was only an accomplice helping to take care of the bodies. But he had accidentally

accorded with Su Xiaolan's diary, picked up the central criminal method in this case.

That meant that the person who'd followed Chenchen wasn't someone else; it was definitely him. He wasn't a passive shield, he was one of the active criminals!

Why had the "unexpected development" of Qu Tong occurred midway?

Why, when Xu Wenchao had been summoned for questioning because of Qu Tong, had he been so shocked when he'd worked out from the attitude of the police that Su Luozhan was copying the case from twenty years ago?

Because the kidnapping of Qu Tong had been carried out by Su Luozhan entirely on her own initiative. The girl had really gone "out of control." Attempting to shake herself free of the "janitor" she didn't care for, she had accepted a "private job" from one of the clients!

"Xu Wenchao, when you found out about Wu Guangchuan's relationship with Su Xiaolan, you were disgusted. You suspected Wu Guangchuan of rape. But you didn't tell anyone. You started to spy on them, take pictures of them." Luo Wenzhou watched him intently, giving him no time to respond. "Was it good? Did you get a kick out of it? Years afterward, was it still always on your mind?"

Xu Wenchao's face was ashen. He was covering his mouth tightly. His pupils were a little enlarged. His throat moved uncontrollably. A thin drop of sweat dripped from the tip of his nose.

"You say you saw Su Xiaolan with a strange girl, so you didn't go to say hello. Why? You couldn't say hello to a classmate because there was someone else there? Or is it that you hadn't meant to go say hello at all?" Luo Wenzhou suddenly stood up and grabbed Xu Wenchao's collar. "You unexpectedly saw Su Xiaolan cutting up floral-

patterned dresses in her house. How did you unexpectedly see it, huh? She didn't hide it before opening the door? Because you burst in. You took advantage of Su Hui not being at home to burst into a room with only a girl in it... Xu Wenchao, what were you doing?"

"I didn't..."

"You didn't touch the girls," Luo Wenzhou lowered his voice, speaking into his ear, "because you can't get hard at all. You put a photograph of Su Xiaolan at thirteen in front of the box of her ashes, you plastered that old photograph from twenty years ago onto the window to fool yourself, because you were infatuated with the Su Xiaolan who was callous, abnormal, who hurt children her own age without hesitation, not the Su Xiaolan who was scared out of her wits by Wu Guangchuan's death, a 'sheep' who could be controlled by you and her psycho mother.

"Let me ask you. When you saw her committing crimes like back then with your own eyes, when you saw her taking care of the bodies, was that the only time you could get it up?"

Xu Wenchao could hardly sit up straight. He weakly pushed away Luo Wenzhou's hand. "I..."

"Why did you suddenly want to marry Su Xiaolan? Because you saw that twenty years later, Su Luozhan had grown up to be the perfect image of her back then, and you wanted to become Wu Guangchuan?"

"You aren't a beast? Of course you aren't a beast. Beasts are pretty nice. They can do work, they can provide meat. Are you worthy of that?"

CHAPTER 58 - Humbert Humbert XXV

Luo Wenzhou in fact had a private office, but perhaps for the sake of more convenient communication, or because the chatterbox didn't want to be on his own, his office was open to the outside. Though there was a door in between, it hadn't been closed in donkey's years; it had been flattened against the wall by a heap of odds and ends others had put there, no different than if it hadn't been there at all.

The vegetation in the room was painstakingly cared for. The flowers and plants by the windowsill appeared to be flourishing. The ones that liked light were placed on the outer layer, and the ones that liked shade were in the corner, all picturesquely arranged. Only the two potted money plants by the door were living eventful lives, getting watered every morning with the remains of tea from the night before by his lazy bum coworkers until they were on their last gasps, the dregs in the flowerpots on the point of turning toxic.

Luo Wenzhou's wallet and keys had been carelessly thrown onto the desk, with no fear of anyone taking them—though as far as Fei Du could see, there really wasn't anything worth taking.

Fei Du obediently sat waiting in his office for a while until he got bored. The surrounding smells really were hard to bear. He had a foreboding that Luo Wenzhou wouldn't be back soon, so he sent him a message: "Do you need me to feed your cat?"

Among his multitude of cares, Luo Wenzhou responded with a period. Presumably he was too busy to take time to answer. Fei Du took this as tacit acknowledgement, picked up his keys, and left.

Luo Wenzhou's house wasn't far from the City Bureau, close enough to ride a bike. Taking a taxi barely went over the minimum fare. Fei Du had learned from experience; as soon as he opened the door a small crack, a ball of fur impatiently stuck out its head. The next

instant, the fur ball noticed this was the wrong person, slipped back in, and flashed under the couch, extending its neck to look anxiously out.

The night before, the two of them had gotten halfway through the meal before being called out by Tao Ran and hadn't had time to clean the room. Luo Wenzhou, as if facing a surprise inspection in a university dorm, had cleared away the plates and bowls from the table and crammed them into the fridge. Because he hadn't allocated the space properly, there'd been no place to put the last plate of croquettes. He'd had to temporarily shelve it on top of the 1.8-meter-high fridge—relying a great deal on luck when it came to a cat's ability to climb to high places.

Evidently, luck was all that would have done.

Shards of porcelain were scattered “like stars across the sky” in a trail from the dining room to the living room. The corpses of croquettes littered the ground, each bearing toothmarks. Comrade Luo Yiguo's scientific method was unsurpassed; only after exhaustive testing had it reached the conclusion that none of this suited its taste.

The cat's food bowl was empty, faintly glimmering under the lights; perhaps the cat itself had licked it.

Fei Du poured out dry cat food like Luo Wenzhou had, thought about it, then also opened two cans and put them next to the bowl.

Luo Yiguo, hungry enough to lick its bowl, couldn't resist this temptation. It quietly stuck out its little head, immediately met Fei Du's gaze, and tremblingly withdrew once again.

Fei Du ignored it. He washed his hands twice before feeling they had been washed clean of cat food smell, then took a broom from the kitchen and tried to sweep the mess covering the floor into a pile—he

really didn't have the makings of doing this kind of labor. After a while, he still hadn't gotten the hang of it.

President Fei, one arm hoisted up, stood to one side leaning on the broom, objectively evaluating the fruits of his labor. He felt his sweeping had produced an oil slick, by a different path reaching the same result as the City Bureau's dining hall's greasy floor.

He determined to give it up. He found a familiar cleaning company on his phone and invited an hourly worker to come over.

Just then, he suddenly felt something touch the backs of his heels.

Fei Du turned his head and found that Luo Yiguo had at some point come over. A portion of the cat food in the bowl was gone. It had eaten and drunk its fill and finally gotten up its courage. It thoughtfully circled Fei Du, sniffing uncertainly around his legs.

Finding that Fei Du was looking at it, Luo Yiguo turned its head and retreated two meters. After a while, seeing no reaction from him, it turned back again as if venturing into the unknown.

Fei Du lifted his pant legs, crouched down, and offered it two fingers.

At first Luo Yiguo dodged instinctively. Then, seeing that he didn't move, it approached, shaking its whiskers. Perhaps smelling the friendly scent of its cat food, it gradually let down its guard and touched Fei Du with the tip of its nose. Not meeting with any harmful treatment, it boldly lowered its head, using the top of its head to rub against the palm of his hand.

Fei Du's hand stiffened.

Seeing he was slow to respond, Luo Yiguo became even bolder. Raising its large tail high, it rescinded its alarm and made a circle

around Fei Du, sniffing this way and that, letting a soft, delicate sound out of its throat.

At last, Fei Du put his suspended hand down on the cat's back and gently stroked the sleek fur. Luo Yiguo pressed against him, looking for a more comfortable place, occasionally pushing at his sleeve, rising when Fei Du lifted his arm.

“You don't remember me?” Fei Du asked quietly.

Luo Yiguo, with its brain smaller than a fist, looked at Fei Du in ignorance and some fear. Animals abide by instinct, and instinct was telling it to be afraid of Fei Du, even though it didn't know what it was scared of. At the same time, Luo Wenzhou had raised Luo Yiguo into a creature that remembered kindness and forgot mistreatment; a bowl of cat food had made it overcome its instincts.

But looking at it, a thin layer of sweat suddenly appeared on Fei Du's palms. He gently set Luo Yiguo aside and quickly drew back his hand.

The small animal's soft body, the rise and fall of its breath, its heartbeat, were all hard for him to bear.

He stood at once, ignored the curious Luo Yiguo, and pressed his back closely to the wall.

What was “life?”

This seemed to be a biological definition, but the average person understood it long before starting to attend biology class.

Some people experienced situations of birth and old age, sickness and death, very early, and adults used their own experiences to explain them in plainer or more romantic ways.

Some people meanwhile developed their own blurry ideas from ceaseless repetition in books and movies.

Fei Du groped around for his phone and earbuds, sticking the earbuds into his ears with something like the haste of an addict. The familiar and grief-laden singing immediately flooded his world. He instinctively held his breath, gaze falling on the cat not far from him. The cat really was annoying. Eating its fill and having nothing better to do, it had pulled down and broken the porcelain and covered the ground with croquettes, enjoying itself awfully, getting grease all over the floor.

“What is life?” The man’s voice seemed to echo beside his ear.

The man held his hand and made him put it onto a small animal, perhaps a little hamster, or a little quail or little rabbit. Fei Du didn’t remember anymore. At any rate, it had been a very small animal, small enough for a child to hold in his hand. He only remembered a tiny ball of fuzz curled up in his palm, warm and soft, its heart beating, the heartbeat seeming to tremble.

It felt like a wonder.

“This is life,” said the voice.

Suddenly, the hand that had been gently guiding him contracted all at once, like an enormous iron clamp, squeezing his hand closed, forcing him to grab that little thing’s neck, rigidly holding his fingers. The small animal struggled, letting out dying moans. He instinctively struggled as well, but the man could control him easily, until the trembling heartbeat and fruitless struggles had ceased in the palm of his hand.

“This is death,” the man’s voice said to him. “You see, the transition from life to death is in fact very prosaic. It isn’t at all as serious as in people’s exaggerations. The reason why they exaggerate it is that

man is a social animal with very grave inherent weaknesses. On the one hand, he wants to improve his existence with the help of the community and of society. On the other hand, he can hardly control all kinds of bizarre evil urges and desires. Therefore he has to agree on mutually restrictive rules, for example 'law' and 'public policy doctrine.' The former is a contract with society. To guard against you privately going back on the agreement, there's also the latter, making a person accept the brainwashing of the community's values and willingly conform to the behavior of the majority. Having recognized this point, you have escaped the pattern of the majority.

“Do you want to see the truth about life and death again... What are you shaking your head for? Children ought to be modest. You have to repeatedly reinforce the things you've learned before they can become your own. Come, we'll start again—”

The sound of the hourly worker knocking at the door interrupted his thoughts. Fei Du gave a fierce start, his temples already soaked in a cold sweat.

An hour later, Fei Du returned to the City Bureau carrying some cups of freshly ground coffee.

At this time, the victims' relatives who had been pacing around had basically all left. There were only Qu Tong's parents and Guo Heng left sitting across from each other. On one side were people who still didn't dare to believe the reality and were looking towards a one-in-a-million hope; on the other side was someone who has waiting for the truth, coming more than twenty years late. Guo Heng was engaging in small talk with Qu Tong's father, the dialogue regularly interrupted by the young couple's sudden tears. When they had calmed down, each struggled to comfort the other.

Fei Du had just reached the Criminal Investigation Team's offices when he saw a stocky middle-aged man with a scar on his brow quickly walking by leading a crowd of people. “...still at home. It's

enough for each department's necessary personnel to stay. The others go assist. Xiao Tao doesn't have enough people over there, I'll submit a report to the dispatcher and request concerted action with the local police..."

He saw Fei Du, and his speech suddenly paused.

Fei Du deduced that this must be one of the City Bureau's leaders. He didn't know what account Luo Wenzhou had given to his superiors. He was just planning to go up and introduce himself when the middle-aged man made a gesture at the people with him, making them hurry up and move. Then he walked up to Fei Du and held out his hand. "You must be President Fei. I'm Lu Youliang, temporary head of the City Bureau. I was the one who issued your silk banner last time."

Fei Du put the coffee down and shook his broad hand like a decent person. "Director Lu, nice to meet you."

Lu Youliang uttered some conventional greetings, then said, "Tao Ran and the others have already found the suspects' burial site. We're deploying a mass action. The excavation work should go very quickly. We'll very soon be able to provide society with a result."

In the memorial hall, Luo Wenzhou had mentioned that Su Hui's hometown had been in Pinghai County, a county under Yan City's jurisdiction and one of the city's reservoirs; it was likely to be where the bodies in this case had been disposed of.

So Fei Du very politely inquired, "Is it in Pinghai County? There's a project going on over there that I have some shares in. They're building it now. The construction site is rather amply staffed. If there's a need, I can call and have some people go over to help."

"Huh?" Lu Youliang froze. He must have thought that Fei Du had heard wrong. He deliberately explained, "They must not have said it

clearly. It's not in Pinghai, it's in 'Binhai²⁰,' three or four hours' drive from here. Though it's the nearest marine resource, the administrative partitions take it out of the province. Ah, it's going to be trouble coordinating this..."

In the dimly-lit corridor, Fei Du's pupils contracted sharply. After a good while, he found his voice. "Did they sink the bodies into the sea? But hasn't it been typhoon season? Wouldn't there be problems throwing the bodies into the sea?"

"Yes, the bodies that couldn't be thrown into the sea were buried," said Director Lu. "We're looking for those now, especially Qu Tong. That girl is crucial."

Just then, Qu Tong's parents and Guo Heng, who had been alerted by Director Lu's deployments, came over together, planning to ask about the progress of the case. A few officers on duty rushed over, wanting to prevent them from entering the offices.

"Hey, hey, don't," Director Lu said quickly, "let them come and sit. Everyone understands the family members' feelings. I'll go say a few words to them."

Fei Du cleared his somewhat dry throat and said a timely, "You're busy, sir. I won't bother you."

Lu Youliang nodded to him and sighed deeply. "The suspects in this case really are... Having arrested them, we still may not be able to get a satisfactory result. I'm afraid what happened twenty years ago will happen again."

Then he nodded to Fei Du, quickly went past him and left.

Perhaps because society had strengthened its views on environmental protection in recent years, the supposed plans to develop Binhai had

failed to pass some credentials and procedures relating to environmental protection and had thus been put off to this day.

On the small surrounding islands there were convalescent estates that could be considered flourishing. Nearby there was an oil-painting village. At a fixed time each year, fixed schools that had signed an agreement would bring their students to do drawings from life, which could also bring some business to Binhai's "holiday village," which was like an agritourism spot. The rest of the time, the visitors were few and far between.

Away from the coastline, there were many mountainous places, rising and falling in unbroken stretches, entirely uninhabited. Only a few old roads passed through. The green of the grasses and the untouched deep forests was strong and thick among the faint salt sea breeze.

All the roads had been closed. The locations of all the clear and beautiful scenery on the wall of photographs had been marked one by one. They extended over close to ten kilometers, unexpectedly following the same little road with indistinct boundaries. The Yan City police and the police officers dispatched from Binhai's town followed the route, making countless circles of yellow tape.

"Deputy-Captain Tao, we've found a place... Oh, wait a minute! This corpse is fresh!"

Qu Tong's little body had been cut into seven or eight pieces, buried separately. By daybreak, it had finally been completely assembled. The cutting marks on the body matched the cutting tools in the apartment in the Sunward Estate. The medical examiners even managed to extract some bodily fluids from the corpse.

This sheer luck in the midst of misfortune made the middle-aged man Lang Qiao had arrested collapse on the spot.

“I was following another child then. I already knew her parents were busy at work, she usually went home alone. I never expected I’d run into a bizarre thing like a hijacking... I wanted to call the police. It was that little girl, that Su Luozhan, who bewitched me. She said she liked this one, desperately urged me to grab this one. I just happened to be familiar with West Ridge, my brain heated up...”

“I didn’t kill her! I absolutely didn’t kill her! I left when I was finished, really. Then that man—the janitor—he furiously barged in and grabbed Su Luozhan. I saw something was off and quickly ran away... I really didn’t know they would be so deranged, really. Trust me!”

“I love them so much. How could I stand to hurt them?”

¹ The god Tai Sui, who in some traditions determines luck.

² Something on the order of teacher/mentor, in this context.

³ To be very clear: a “renal deficiency” is a culture-specific disease in China, associated with lowered Yang energy after ejaculation.

⁴ The *Lolita* quotes that appear here are notably different from the original text, and I felt compelled for the purpose of compromise and to avoid losing anything in translation to retranslate those and supply the original quotes in footnotes; in this case: *I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you.*

⁵ A pear-shaped four-string lute, often associated with beautiful women in poetry.

⁶ I feel bound to say that I’ve taken a liberty rendering this as a slight misquote; but people do almost inevitably misquote it, so it would feel strange using the quote as actually written.

⁷ I.e., bad people can only influence those who are vulnerable.

⁸ Meaning “beautiful as brocade,” “splendid.”

⁹ Reference to Lu Dongbin, Tang scholar later deified in Taoism, known good person, part of a proverb that goes “the dog bites Lu Dongbin”, meaning that kindness is repaid with malice.

¹⁰ Lei Feng, soldier in the People’s Liberation Army circa the 1960s, in propaganda portrayed as a model citizen after an early death.

¹¹ In fact an accurate quote (of the translation) of Maxim Gorky’s poem, “The Song of the Storm Petrel”, about a storm petrel delighting in a tempest, but actually a revolutionary call to arms that was later used in Soviet propaganda.

¹² Circa mid-2000s Chinese kids TV show, exactly what it says on the tin and of sickly sweet cuteness levels.

¹³ Traditional measurements, a chi is a little over a foot, a zhang is 10 chi.

¹⁴ 费事儿 - means 'troublesome' or 'time-consuming' and uses the same character as Fei Du's surname.

¹⁵ Original quote: *The days of my youth, as I look back on them, seem to fly away from me in a flurry of pale repetitive scraps like those morning snow storms of used tissue paper that a train passenger sees whirling in the wake of the observation car.*

¹⁶ From Journey to the West, used to suppress Sun Wukong.

¹⁷ Printing term, 1/64 of folio size or approximately 2" x 3"

¹⁸ Traditional unit of measure equal to about a third of a mile/half a kilometer.

¹⁹ Clear enough already, but to elucidate further: from 1997 to 2015 there was a criminal offense on the books of "visiting young girl prostitutes under fourteen years," which was treated as a sex crime but not as sexual assault, and the girls in question would also be guilty of underage prostitution. The law was taken off the books after mass public opinion outrage. The Leniency Policy is a fundamental principle in Chinese law, where when the laws have changed, the version used will be the one more favorable to the defendant.

²⁰ Respectively "calm seas" (平海) and "seaside" (滨海).



默读

2

Silent Reading / Priest