

Middleman Assassination Squad

Written by

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Based on the true events of the 2020 Funny Nobel Prize winner in Management.

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FADE IN

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT

LUO QIAO (51), a man who could sniff out a loophole faster than you could say 'tax fraud,' stares at the ceiling. Regret, thick and heavy as prison gruel, churns in his gut.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
I thought loopholes were business
savvy. Turns out, they're just
fancy talk for breaking the law.
Justice doesn't blink.

TITLE CARD: MIDDLEMAN ASSASSINATION SQUAD

(Based on the true events of the 2020 Funny Nobel Prize
winner in Management.)

EXT. NAN'AN CITY - DAY

SUPER: 2014

A black BMW tears through the city. Crape myrtles and phoenix flowers blur into a riot of color. The car's roar shatters the calm, a beast hungry for its next prey.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

"Human World" blares. LUO QIAO and his hulking sidekick, FANG GANG, belt out the lyrics, their voices as off-key as their lives.

LUO QIAO/FANG GANG
(joyfully off-key)
Live happy or not, it's all a
gamble! Pain, dreams, a touch of
madness—who's laughing now?

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The relentless sun scorches the cracked asphalt. A black BMW screeches to a halt beside towering excavators, dust swirling in its wake.

Luo Qiao's sharp gaze met MANAGER WANG's (45) skeptical glare. ASSISTANT MANAGER MA (39) hovered nervously nearby.

MANAGER WANG
Two million. Take it or leave it.

LUO QIAO
(Chuckling)
That won't even buy my lunch, Wang!

MANAGER WANG
Got Cat 200s elsewhere.

LUO QIAO
On a hill? They'll sputter out. My
Cat 250s roar like beasts.

Luo Qiao winks at FANG GANG (41), a muscular force of nature lounging in the BMW, coiled and ready to spring into action.

LUO QIAO
Gang, show Assistant Ma the site.
Let him see the magic.

FANG GANG
On it! Come on, Ma, let's roll.

Assistant Manager Ma hesitates, glancing at Manager Wang.

MANAGER WANG
Go on already! Quit stalling!

Reluctantly, Ma joins Fang Gang, and they zoom off.

LUO QIAO
2.15 million, and I'll bill you for
2.3. Sweet deal, huh?

Manager Wang eyes Luo Qiao with a cunning smile, suspicion brewing.

LUO QIAO
Trust me, Wang. It's our little
secret.

MANAGER WANG
I'll need to see those other
machines first.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sunlight streams through windows, casting sharp light on a traditional Chinese landscape painting. Luo Qiao fiddles with a coffee machine, the aroma a fleeting escape.

JIANG FANG (30), his fiery, beautiful wife, focuses on "Black Widow" playing on the TV. Nearby, their baby dreams peacefully in a bassinet.

Luo Qiao hands Jiang Fang a steaming cup, glancing at the screen.

LUO QIAO
Great flick! Ready for "Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons" next?

Jiang Fang accepts the coffee, rolling her eyes with a hint of mirth.

JIANG FANG
Old and ugly, dodging danger at every turn.

LUO QIAO
I want you to see the White Bone Demon get her comeuppance.

Jiang Fang chuckles, but her demeanor shifts to concern as she turns to Luo Qiao.

JIANG FANG
Are you really selling all the machinery?

LUO QIAO
What's got you antsy?

JIANG FANG
Rumor has it Shi Mao gambles in Macau, and the 's riding on those deputies.

Luo Qiao nods knowingly.

LUO QIAO
Shi Mao's just a face. His cousin, Shi Qing, runs the show.

JIANG FANG
Who's Shi Qing?

LUO QIAO
The big cheese at Nan'an City Development.

JIANG FANG
Watch your step. Don't bet all your chips on one hand.

Luo Qiao taps her nose playfully.

LUO QIAO
Got it, darling. I'll mull it over.

JIANG FANG
If only you had half your brother's
caution and talent.

LUO QIAO
Sweetheart, you can't have it all!

EXT. NAN'AN CITY - DAY

The black BMW prowls through a tapestry of southern flavors:
old friend noodles, lemon duck, barbecue pork buns.

It halts before a building materials store, a predator on the
hunt.

INT. BUILDING MATERIALS STORE - DAY

ZHANG XIAO (41) drowns in paperwork, glasses perched on his
nose like a scholar burdened by the world.

LUO QIAO
Zhang, I need a favor.

Zhang's eyes snap up, surprise flickering before settling
into curiosity.

ZHANG XIAO
How much?

LUO QIAO
Five million. For a year.

Zhang chuckles, a dry sound that echoes the tension in the
room.

ZHANG XIAO
Which highway project did you snag?

LUO QIAO grins, a cat with a secret.

LUO QIAO
Switched lanes.

ZHANG XIAO
To what?

LUO QIAO
Real estate. Queen Villa Complex. I
want a 20% stake.

Zhang's face darkens slightly, concern threading through his features.

ZHANG XIAO

Luo, real estate ain't just numbers. It's guanxi. Who you know, who owes you.

LUO QIAO

Guanxi, sure, but I learned from pops—saving face while haggling. It's a tightrope act.

ZHANG XIAO

Project size?

LUO QIAO

Fifty million.

ZHANG XIAO

No more highways for you?

LUO QIAO

Highway business is dead. Used to make money as a second-tier contractor, now it's just a money pit.

ZHANG XIAO

Who says it isn't? My materials business is drowning in debt.

LUO QIAO

If cash is tight...

ZHANG XIAO

Not that I don't want to help. I've got three million on hand. Might seem like too little.

LUO QIAO

It's plenty! I'm grateful for anything.

Zhang stands, retrieves a bankbook from a drawer, a plan forming.

ZHANG XIAO

Let's hit the bank.

They exit with camaraderie in their stride, laughter trailing behind.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sunlight bathes the room, spotlighting the luxury bag Luo Qiao tosses onto the sofa.

His son chews a toy, unfazed. Luo Qiao playfully pinches his cheek.

LUO QIAO

Hey champ, where's Mom?

The child mumbles, undisturbed. Jiang Fang enters with a milk bottle, her eyes gleaming as they land on the bag.

LUO QIAO

Honey, what do you think about this?

JIANG FANG

Another bag? You planning to start a collection?

She pulls out the designer bag, her smile betraying her feigned indifference.

LUO QIAO

Like it?

JIANG FANG

Not bad, not bad. Finally showing some taste.

LUO QIAO

Speaking of taste, where's your brother buying his apartment?

JIANG FANG

Why the interest?

LUO QIAO

He only has you. Too far is a hassle, but no new places near us. What a pickle!

JIANG FANG

Since when do you worry about family logistics, Mr. Developer?

LUO QIAO

Just thinking out loud! We'll keep two villas, sell this place, and live like a sitcom family!

JIANG FANG
Each villa's five or six million.
You'd part with one?

LUO QIAO
Cost's about two million.

JIANG FANG
Thought you regretted giving my
brother two million!

LUO QIAO
Come on, think I'm that tight? Just
realized we're two million short on
the fee...

JIANG FANG
Money's in the safe. Do what you
need.

LUO QIAO
You're the best!

He heads to the safe, hesitates, turns back with a grin
tugging at his lips. Jiang Fang watches, a sly smile on hers.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Molten gold blazes across the sky, igniting the battered old
excavator in a fiery glow.

Luo Qiao and Fang Gang light three incense sticks, bowing
deeply in farewell.

Manager Wang orchestrates the loading of a newer excavator
onto a flashy red flatbed truck.

LUO QIAO
Old friend, 27 years and countless
memories. Parting with you is like
losing a piece of my soul.

FANG GANG
Bro, remember those first few
months? You turned the earnings
into my mom's new hip joint.

LUO QIAO
Ancient history, Gang. Why dig up
relics?

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

A bold banner reads "Natural Real Estate and YAOLUO ENGINEERING Co., Ltd. Equity Transfer Signing Ceremony."

Lean and sharp LAWYER HE YAN (33) stands to the side, Waiting for the chance to show his fluency in Mandarin.

HE YAN

Today we witness the signing of the Queen's District equity transfer between Natural Real Estate and Yaoluo Engineering. This is a significant step towards a prosperous future for both parties. Representatives, please sign.

Rugged GENERAL MANAGER SHI MAO (50) and Luo Qiao rise, exchange nods of mutual respect, and sign the contract. Applause erupts.

SHI MAO

Here's to a partnership that thrives!

HE YAN

Congratulations, gentlemen. The contract is now binding.

INT. RESTAURANT - PRIVATE ROOM - NIGHT

Laughter and the clinking of glasses fill the air. Luo Qiao, Fang Gang, lawyer He Yan, Shi Mao, and two deputies bask in their collective tipsiness.

LUO QIAO

When the road roller roars, gold flows!

He gestures to He Yan, who deadpans:

HE YAN

When the gavel strikes, gold flows!

Everyone roars with laughter, turning to Fang Gang, who blushes and downs his drink.

SHI MAO

When the property market booms, gold flows!

He attempts to cue his deputy but suddenly clutches his shoulder.

LUO QIAO
What's wrong, Shi?

SHI MAO
Ugh, my old enemy, frozen shoulder!
It's killing me!

LUO QIAO
Try some tiger bone plaster?

SHI MAO
Where can you find real tiger bone
these days?

One of the bespectacled deputies jumps in.

DEPUTY
When the official seal stamps, gold
flows!

They raise their glasses again, faces flushed with success
and alcohol.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Streetlights flicker with a ghostly glow. Shi Mao, barely
upright, clings to his deputies like a drunkard's lifeline.

Luo Qiao and Fang Gang stumble behind, equally intoxicated.

Shi Mao grips Luo Qiao's hand with sloppy affection.

SHI MAO
Luo... my brother! Next time... we
drink till dawn!

LUO QIAO
Easy, Shi. Need me to call a
driver?

SHI MAO
No need! Nan'an... is my domain!

Shi Mao belches, nearly toppling into a trash can. His deputy
steadies him.

LUO QIAO
Not like these stumbling fools,
huh? Let's hail a cab!

Fang Gang clutches a utility pole, vomits. Luo Qiao flags a taxi, shaking his head.

LUO QIAO
Look after yourself! I'm out!

The taxi zooms off, leaving Fang Gang conducting an invisible orchestra, flailing for a phantom cab.

EXT. JADE GARDEN APARTMENTS - ENTRANCE - DAY

A taxi screeches to a halt, and Luo Qiao spills onto the pavement like a discarded marionette, his suit crumpled and stained.

He stumbles through the entrance with the bewilderment of a lost traveler.

LUO QIAO
(slurred)
Anyone home? I'm locked out of my
own life!

A MIDDLE-AGED MAN, amused by the spectacle, pauses to chuckle.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN
Which building, buddy? Need a hand?

LUO QIAO
No clue, man.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN
Call your wife. She'll reel you in.

Luo Qiao fumbles his phone, handing it over helplessly.

LUO QIAO
You... you dial... I'm done for.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN
What's her name?

LUO QIAO
Uh... Zheng Shishi! A real looker!

The phone flickers, dies in the man's hand. Luo Qiao continues his plea.

LUO QIAO
Zheng Shishi! Get down here, quick!

A WOMAN WITH PERMED HAIR smirks nearby.

WOMAN WITH PERMED HAIR
This Zheng Shishi must be quite the
spectacle.

An OLDER WOMAN nods knowingly.

OLDER WOMAN
She's his ex. A decent gal, but
couldn't handle him.

From the crowd, Jiang Fang storms over, yanking Luo Qiao by
the ear like a mischievous child.

ITH PERMED HAIR
And this one? Just a gold digger?

OLDER WOMAN
Obviously! What else? She's young,
pretty, and too smart for her own
good.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jiang Fang sits with arms crossed, as Luo Qiao lounges on the
sofa, looking sheepish.

JIANG FANG
Shouting for Zheng Shishi last
night? Missing her? Or just trying
to embarrass me?

LUO QIAO
She's nothing compared to you, my
brilliant star...

JIANG FANG
Then why call her name?

LUO QIAO
Just wanted you to hurry
downstairs...

JIANG FANG
You think I'm naive? The moment you
asked for that 2 million, I knew
you were scheming!

LUO QIAO
I'm genuinely short...

JIANG FANG
I'm not unreasonable!

Jiang Fang gestures to the safe with a resigned sigh.

JIANG FANG
Code's 7474774. Take what you need.

LUO QIAO
Can we bury this conversation?

JIANG FANG
And the villa money?

LUO QIAO
One unit is a fair exchange, no?

Jiang Fang chuckles, shaking her head.

JIANG FANG
You're a silver-tongued fox!

LUO QIAO
I swear...

JIANG FANG
Alright, alright, just teasing you.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Shi Mao clutches his phone, eyes sparkling with glee like a child unleashed in a candy store.

SHI MAO
Buy it! Buy it all! 110,000 is a bargain. Skin and bones, we'll take it!

He hangs up, rubbing his hands together with greedy anticipation, before dialing again.

SHI MAO
Hey, about that tiger... dead or alive?
(sighs with relief)
Alive, excellent! A lively masterpiece!

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

On TV, a stern-faced FEMALE ANCHOR delivers the news.

FEMALE ANCHOR

Recently, police cracked a case of illegal hunting and trafficking of Siberian tigers. Suspect Shi Mao and others have been detained.

Jiang Fang paces like a restless cat, cradling her son. Luo Qiao sprawls on the couch, brow knit, scrolling his phone.

JIANG FANG

Shi Mao's in trouble. What about our project?

LUO QIAO

He'll wriggle out with a fine.

JIANG FANG

You think this is shoplifting?

LUO QIAO

With cash, prison's just a hotel.

Jiang Fang rolls her eyes.

LUO QIAO

How much do we have left?

JIANG FANG

Fifty, sixty thousand. Why?

LUO QIAO

Fork over forty grand for Fang Gang.

JIANG FANG

Borrowing again?

LUO QIAO

His dad had a stroke, needs hospital cash.

JIANG FANG

Is it serious?

LUO QIAO

Just a limp arm.

JIANG FANG

Oh, I forgot, my brother took thirty thousand for tuition the other day, now there's only a little over ten thousand left.

LUO QIAO
It's an emergency!

JIANG FANG
You care more for him than your brother!

LUO QIAO
Different kind of brotherhood.

JIANG FANG
Luo Qian outshines you in every way.

Luo Qiao grins, stuffing cash into a briefcase, slipping out like a sly fox.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao shuffles papers nervously. Fang Gang barges in, face grim.

FANG GANG
Shi Mao... got seven years.

Documents scatter like autumn leaves. Luo Qiao sinks onto the sofa, deflated.

LUO QIAO
We're sunk... What's the plan now?

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

A sun-bleached wasteland stretches ahead. Luo Qiao and Fang Gang squat, defeated.

LUO QIAO
Who's running their show now?

FANG GANG
Just an office drone and a foreman.

LUO QIAO
Think they can read blueprints?

Luo Qiao inhales deeply, smoke curling around his darkening face.

FANG GANG
Let's snatch Shi Mao's rights.

LUO QIAO
Easy as stealing candy, right?

FANG GANG
Money solves everything. Loans or subcontracting.

LUO QIAO
With your credentials? The office won't bite.

FANG GANG
What's your plan? Sit and stew?

Luo Qiao ponders, eyes sparking with a sudden idea.

LUO QIAO
Get Shi Mao's wife. We need a chat.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

WANG XIUHONG (45), dressed modestly, perches nervously, out of place in the room's opulence.

Across from her, Luo Qiao, sharp and polished in his suit, lounges with nonchalance, exuding a calm confidence.

LUO QIAO
Wang, you're the captain of this ship now. Feeling the seasickness yet?

Wang Xiuhong wrings her hands, her anxiety palpable.

WANG XIUHONG
Luo, these contracts might as well be in alien tongue. What if I mess up?

Luo Qiao waves off her concerns with a dismissive chuckle.

LUO QIAO
Piece of cake. Just bring in a pro to steer this thing.

Her eyes widen, a storm of doubt brewing within.

WANG XIUHONG
A manager? They cost a fortune! What if they're just here to milk us dry?

Luo Qiao leans forward, his gaze reassuring.

LUO QIAO
 Chill, Wang. Most folks aren't out
 to fleece you. Think of them as
 guard dogs, not wolves.

Wang Xiuhong's brow furrows deeper with worry.

WANG XIUHONG
 What if they overcharge me for a
 table, say it costs two grand when
 it's just one?

Luo Qiao's expression hardens, his voice firm.

LUO QIAO
 If this ship sinks, we're both
 going down with it.

Tears well up in Wang Xiuhong's eyes. Luo Qiao hands her a
 tissue with a gentle smile.

LUO QIAO
 Here's a wild idea: visit Mr. Shi,
 chew it over, decide on a manager
 or pass the baton.

Her eyes brighten with a glimmer of hope.

WANG XIUHONG
 Visit... visit? I can see him?

Luo Qiao nods, his smile encouraging.

LUO QIAO
 Absolutely, family visits are on
 the menu.

INT. PRISON - MEETING ROOM - DAY

Shi Mao, clad in a prison uniform, appears weary yet resolute
 as he converses with his wife, Wang Xiuhong.

SHI MAO
 Still radio silence from Shi Qing?

WANG XIUHONG
 Laying low, bribery probe's got him
 cornered.

Shi Mao's frustration is clear, but determination gleams in
 his eyes.

SHI MAO
Tell Luo Qiao to snag more shares.
We'll pocket an 8% management fee.

WANG XIUHONG
And if he balks?

SHI MAO
Who says no to free cash?

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao reclines in his chair, contemplating Wang Xiuhong with a shrewd gaze.

LUO QIAO
I'm onboard with Shi's plan, but
there's a catch.

Her interest piqued, Wang Xiuhong leans in.

WANG XIUHONG
What catch?

LUO QIAO
You'll take the helm from Shi Mao,
manage the Keishin crew.

Wang Xiuhong stiffens, panic creeping into her voice.

WANG XIUHONG
I'm just a housewife! This is Greek
to me!

Luo Qiao's tone softens, yet remains firm.

LUO QIAO
If you don't, we're both sunk. I
can't solo this gig.

WANG XIUHONG
Let me discuss it with Shi Mao
first.

LUO QIAO
I'll have Lawyer He draft a new
contract. You two mull it over,
then we'll ink it.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

A fiery red stamp slams onto the contract, leaving its mark with authority. He Yan stands, his smile broad.

HE YAN
Congrats! The deal's locked in. A
pleasure to witness history.

He Yan shakes hands with Luo Qiao and Wang Xiuhong, their faces a blend of relief and determination.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao looms over a cluttered desk, eyes scanning blueprints like a treasure map.

The door bursts open. FANG GANG swaggers in, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

FANG GANG
Boss, my cousin's itching to
subcontract some work. What's the
verdict?

Luo Qiao stays focused on the blueprints, a sly smile forming.

LUO QIAO
So, you want to play the big boss
now?

FANG GANG
He promised me a cut. Of course, I
told him no way!

Luo Qiao chuckles, finally locking eyes with Fang Gang.

LUO QIAO
Tell him it's fine.

Fang Gang nods with vigor, bouncing on his toes.

FANG GANG
Great! He'll nail it!

Fang Gang exits, practically skipping. Luo Qiao's phone buzzes with Wang Xiuhong's name flashing. He answers, shifting to mild concern.

LUO QIAO
Wang, what's the matter?

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
We need to talk. Can you swing by
my office?

LUO QIAO
Tomorrow DAWN. See you then.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Wang Xiuhong, now in a sharp suit, exudes newfound confidence. Luo Qiao and Fang Gang, taken aback, stare at her transformation.

WANG XIUHONG
Director Yang from Qingxin Street
Office wants to reclaim the
development rights for Queen's
Villa!

Fang Gang's fist slams the table, sending teacups skittering.

FANG GANG
In his dreams!

Luo Qiao throws Fang Gang a cautionary glance, then addresses Wang Xiuhong.

LUO QIAO
What's his reasoning?

WANG XIUHONG
Claims we're unqualified post-Shi
Mao. He's jittery about the risk.

LUO QIAO
What else does he know?

WANG XIUHONG
Probably heard about Shi Mao's
cousin, Shi Qing, getting busted.
He's trying to capitalize on our
bad streak.

LUO QIAO
Shi Qing too? What's the charge?

WANG XIUHONG
Bribery. The higher they rise, the
harder they fall!

FANG GANG
He's just fishing for a bribe!

LUO QIAO
It's deeper than that. Someone's
pulling the strings.

WANG XIUHONG
So, what's our move?

LUO QIAO
We dig up the puppet master.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

The car idles under a looming building. Luo Qiao turns to Wang Xiuhong, her face a mix of trepidation and resolve.

LUO QIAO
Wang, head up there. We need to
know who's pulling the strings on
this one.

WANG XIUHONG
Think he'll spill the beans?

Luo Qiao retrieves two cartons of cigarettes from a bag, handing them to Wang Xiuhong with a knowing smile.

LUO QIAO
Consider these a friendly nudge.
Everyone loves a peace offering.

Wang Xiuhong hesitates, then clutches the cartons and exits the vehicle, striding toward the building.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Wang Xiuhong returns, sliding into the passenger seat, recounting her encounter.

WANG XIUHONG
Handed him the smokes, and he
turned into Mr. Nice Guy. Said your
partners are scared stiff of being
exposed.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng, huh?

WANG XIUHONG
Who else? Riding his dad's
coattails, borrowing scaffolds,
never returning them. Always got
another 'project.'

LUO QIAO
His dad used to be the big shot in
urban planning, right?

LUO QIAO
(murmuring)
Retired early...

WANG XIUHONG
Should we confront Yao Jiancheng?

LUO QIAO
Nah, he'll come knocking soon
enough.

Luo Qiao gazes out the window, the city's chaos a chessboard
in his mind, poised to make his next move.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao sits at his desk, punching numbers into his
calculator, the clicks echoing in the tense silence.

The phone rings, Wang Xiuhong's name glaring on the screen.
He picks up.

LUO QIAO
Wang, what's the latest
catastrophe?

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
Yao Jiancheng wants all the rights
for Queen's District. If not, he's
bailing on us!

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao and Wang Xiuhong sit across from each other, the air
thick with tension.

LUO QIAO
The nerve of that guy!

He pauses, weighing his options, and makes a decision.

LUO QIAO
Offer him 40% of the rights.

WANG XIUHONG
You sure that's smart?

LUO QIAO
Just testing the waters. Let's see
his reaction.

WANG XIUHONG
Alright, I'll see what he says.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Luo Qiao, white-knuckled, grips the steering wheel. Phone buzzes. Wang Xiuhong. He answers, voice tight.

LUO QIAO
Did he bite?

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
Nope, spat it out. Wants the whole
enchilada.

LUO QIAO
He's got guts. Offer him 60%.
But...

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
But what?

LUO QIAO
Remind him not to overstep. Or
else...

Luo Qiao slams the phone down, face a thundercloud. BMW roars, a metal shark in the city's concrete ocean.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dim light casts long shadows across the room. Luo Qiao slumps on the sofa, weighted by despair. Jiang Fang enters, concern etched on her face.

JIANG FANG
You've been brooding for days.
What's gnawing at you?

Luo Qiao bites into an apple with unnecessary force.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng wants the entire
Queen Villa project!

JIANG FANG
His greed knows no bounds! He'll
choke on it!

Luo Qiao lets out a hollow laugh, eyes betraying helplessness.

LUO QIAO
If only I could...

The unspoken threat hangs in the air. Jiang Fang takes his hand, a small anchor in the storm.

JIANG FANG
Talk to him again. Explain our side. He can't want to destroy us.

Luo Qiao looks at her, anger giving way to weary acceptance.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao paces like a caged animal, yelling into the phone. Fang Gang leans against the wall, a smirk playing at his lips.

LUO QIAO
He still won't budge?! Fine! Not a single crumb for him! Let's see if Yao Jiancheng can wrestle it away!

He slams the phone down, fist hitting the table with a satisfying thud.

FANG GANG
Told you, with sharks like him, you've got to use a harpoon!

LUO QIAO
Subcontract Shi Mao's share immediately!

He waves dismissively, shooing away doubts like pesky flies.

FANG GANG
Why not start construction early? Catch him off guard!

LUO QIAO
Now that's a plan I can get behind!

EXT. NAN'AN CITY - DAY

Luo Qiao and Fang Gang drift through offices, entering with buoyant grins, leaving with deflated dreams.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

The city blurs through the windows as the BMW speeds along. Luo Qiao and Fang Gang slump in their seats, weary from rejection.

LUO QIAO
Another bust. They all think Queen Villa's got a hex on it.

FANG GANG
Maybe it does. Even my cousin's bailing.

Luo Qiao's frustration is a simmering pot about to boil over.

LUO QIAO
We're running out of lifelines, Fang.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The living room resembles a battlefield of paperwork. Luo Qiao collapses onto the sofa under the crushing weight of failure.

JIANG FANG
So, no one's biting on Queen Villa?

Luo Qiao shakes his head, the gesture heavy with defeat.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng's got them all spooked.

Jiang Fang's determination blazes like a lighthouse in a storm.

JIANG FANG
Giving up ain't in your vocabulary, right?

Luo Qiao massages his temples, searching for a solution.

LUO QIAO
We need someone desperate enough to be outside Yao's reach.

INT. HUIHUANG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Luo Qiao sits across from WANG JIAN (51), a shrewd manager with hawk-like eyes.

WANG JIAN

Ten percent profit? Might as well offer me a coupon for a free coffee. Who risks their neck for that?

LUO QIAO

Twelve percent, Wang. Sweeten the pot, like adding a cherry to your sundae.

Wang Jian raises five fingers, eyes gleaming like a cat eyeing a canary.

WANG JIAN

Fifteen. Final offer, no haggling.

Luo Qiao chuckles, slides a contract across the desk, a silent duel of wits.

LUO QIAO

Fifteen's my slice too, but snag forty percent, and we have a deal.

Wang Jian devours the contract, his greed blazing like a furnace.

WANG JIAN

You play a mean game, Mr. Lu. A real maestro in the art of the deal.

LUO QIAO

Can't stand subcontractors getting squeezed like lemons while the big cats feast. Gotta spread the wealth, right?

WANG JIAN

Ain't that the truth? Backroom deals run the world. I'll get back to you in two days. Forty-eight hours. Tick-tock.

LUO QIAO

Looking forward to it. Tremendously.

They exchange smiles, a silent understanding between them. Luo Qiao and Fang Gang leave, stepping into the gathering darkness.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - MEETING ROOM - DAY

Anticipation buzzes. Managers from Natural and Huihuang Real Estate surround the table. He Yan stands ready to witness the signing.

HE YAN

Will Mr. Luo Qiao and Mr. Wang Jian
please sign the equity transfer
agreement?

Luo Qiao and Wang Jian exchange nods, pens hovering over the contract. Suddenly, Wang Xiuhong bursts in, panic and urgency on her face.

WANG XIUHONG

Mr. Lu, we've got a situation!

LUO QIAO

What's going on?

She thrusts a document into his hands. His triumph melts into alarm.

WANG XIUHONG

Jiancheng Real Estate wants to pull
the plug on the Empress Villa
project. Here's the lawsuit.

Luo Qiao's eyes narrow as he absorbs the document's weight. Fang Gang steps forward, attempting levity.

FANG GANG

Mr. Luo, the signing's done. Let's
party first, sort this mess later.

WANG JIAN

Yeah, let's do that.

Fang Gang ushers everyone out, leaving Wang Xiuhong and Luo Qiao in the charged room.

Luo Qiao glares at the lawsuit, anger simmering. He picks up a cigarette left by Fang Gang.

LUO QIAO

Let's find that bastard!

INT. RESTAURANT - PRIVATE ROOM - DAY

Laughter and clinking glasses fill the air. Executives from Huihuang Real Estate revel in the celebration.

Fang Gang, wine glass in hand, grins from the head of the table.

FANG GANG

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Luo had a bit of a crisis pop up, sends his apologies!

The crowd exchanges amused glances, raising their glasses.

FANG GANG

But Mr. Luo insists we celebrate! On behalf of Natural Real Estate, cheers to all!

WANG JIAN

We'll see plenty more of Mr. Luo soon enough. Cheers!

Music swells, and the room erupts into lively chatter and toasting.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao sits, gripping Yao Jiancheng's lawsuit.

Jiang Fang offers him tea, her voice a soothing balm.

JIANG FANG

Don't stress. Talk to Yao Jiancheng. If he insists on reclaiming all the rights, just make sure we have a safe exit strategy.

LUO QIAO

Think he can guarantee that?

JIANG FANG

We don't need his guarantee. Just make sure he doesn't steamroll us.

Luo Qiao sighs, nodding in resignation.

LUO QIAO

Alright, Wang Xiuhong and I will tackle this tomorrow.

Jiang Fang squeezes his hand, offering silent support.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Fang Gang weaves through city streets. Luo Qiao sits beside him, anxiety visible. In the back, Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian share a worried glance.

EXT. YAO JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

The BMW halts at the gate. A SECURITY GUARD approaches, eyes curious.

SECURITY GUARD
Who are you here to see?

Luo Qiao lowers the window.

LUO QIAO
Manager Wang from Natural Real
Estate here to talk business with
Manager Yao.

SECURITY GUARD
Got an appointment?

LUO QIAO
No.

SECURITY GUARD
Hang tight. I'll check.

The guard ducks into the booth. Moments later, the gate swings open. Luo Qiao parks in front of the imposing building.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Inside the BMW, tension clings like a stubborn fog.

Luo Qiao stares at the dashboard, fingers drumming a nervous beat. He glances at Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian.

LUO QIAO
You two go in, mention dropping the
lawsuit. If Yao Jiancheng digs in
his heels, Wang Jian, make sure he
knows you're all-in on this
project.

LOU JIAN
He'll get the message!

Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian hop out. Luo Qiao lights a cigarette, hands trembling like leaves in a storm.

FANG GANG
Bro, that punk's begging for a
knuckle sandwich!

Luo Qiao exhales, filling the car with a fog that rivals London's.

EXT. YAO JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian trail after YAO JIANCHENG (53), his arrogance like a designer suit, as he strides out with impatience.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Luo Qiao lowers the window, craning to catch the commotion outside. The car hums with tension.

EXT. YAO JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Wang Xiuhong, an unstoppable force, chases after Yao Jiancheng, her voice piercing the air like a siren.

WANG XIUHONG
Mr. Yao, you backing down or what?
Last chance!

Yao Jiancheng, smug as a Cheshire cat, waves dismissively.

YAO JIANCHENG
Back down? Ha! See you in court!

He slides into his Mercedes with a grin that screams mischief, leaving Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian seething.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

A dangerous glint flickers in Luo Qiao's eyes. Fang Gang, ever the hothead, reaches for the door handle, but Luo Qiao clamps a hand on his arm.

FANG GANG
That sissy needs a lesson!

LUO QIAO
Hold your horses!

Wang Xiuhong and Wang Jian return, faces flushed with indignation.

WANG XIUHONG
Infuriating!

Luo Qiao smirks, trying to lighten the mood.

LUO QIAO
No use getting your knickers in a twist. Was that Yao in the Merc?

WANG XIUHONG
Who else?

WANG JIAN
I asked him, he said it's our internal mess. Nothing to do with him.

Luo Qiao chuckles, shaking his head.

LUO QIAO
Damn, twisting words slicker than a lawyer.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - OFFICES - DAY

Fang Gang sifts through photos of a battered Yao Jiancheng, each image a silent confession. Luo Qiao barges in, fury in his eyes.

LUO QIAO
Did you do this?

Fang Gang's gaze hardens, defiance flickering.

FANG GANG
He had it coming!

LUO QIAO
I told you to keep it cool!

FANG GANG
What's a little lesson?

LUO QIAO
You might've blown everything!

Fang Gang shrugs, indifference cloaked as concern. Luo Qiao sighs, frustration giving way to resignation.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - MEETING ROOM - DAY

Wang Xiuhong stands in a sharp Armani suit, exuding authority among skeptical developers. Tension hangs like a storm cloud.

DEVELOPER REPRESENTATIVE A, with a nose like a hawk's beak, leans forward, impatience carved into his features.

DEVELOPER REPRESENTATIVE A
Mrs. Wang, can you really steer
this ship?

WANG XIUHONG
Gentlemen, I've learned on the fly.
It's time for fresh leadership.

DEVELOPER REPRESENTATIVE B smirks, masking skepticism.

DEVELOPER REPRESENTATIVE B
How noble! Duty or opportunism?

Wang Xiuhong's eyes flash with resolve.

WANG XIUHONG
My husband made mistakes, but his
dedication was real. I'm here to
fix, not exploit.

Uneasy glances and whispers snake through the room. Wang Xiuhong stands like an unyielding fortress.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark stillness envelops the room, the soft rhythm of Jiang Fang and their baby's slumber.

Luo Qiao tosses, brow knotted with unease, then bolts upright, a single word escaping his lips, venomous and sharp.

LUO QIAO
Kill!

Jiang Fang stirs, eyes fluttering open, amused.

JIANG FANG
Crazy...

She rolls over, surrendering to sleep. Luo Qiao watches her, guilt and desperation storming his eyes.

Quietly, he slips away to the living room, burdened by his thoughts.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A solitary lamp casts long shadows.

Luo Qiao stands by the window, face a mask of simmering rage, fists clenched, words seething under his breath.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng, you'll regret this.

Jiang Fang's voice, soft but firm, cuts through the tension.

JIANG FANG (V.O.)
Who are you talking to?

Startled, Luo Qiao turns to find Jiang Fang in the doorway, eyes piercing.

JIANG FANG
What are you scheming, Luo Qiao?

LUO QIAO
Nothing. Just thinking out loud.

JIANG FANG
Don't lie to me. You're up to something dangerous.

LUO QIAO
You're imagining things.

JIANG FANG
Don't underestimate me. This isn't going to end well.

Luo Qiao turns back to the window, jaw clenched, silence thick and heavy like the air before a storm.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAWN

The BMW lurks at the gate, a predator in wait. Employees stream in as Luo Qiao's eyes gleam with intent.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Yao Jiancheng's white Mercedes glides into the lot. Luo Qiao, like a hunter spotting prey, snaps incriminating photos with his phone.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

As the sun dips, Yao Jiancheng departs. The BMW slips into traffic, a cheetah on the prowl, vanishing into the urban jungle.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dim light stretches shadows across the room. Jiang Fang grips her phone, her voice a tightrope of worry.

JIANG FANG

Lu Qian, he's lost it... Can't see the risks...

LU QIAN (V.O.)

He's impulsive, sure, but his heart's in the right place.

Her voice wavers, fear cracking through.

JIANG FANG

He wants to silence Yao Jiancheng... permanently.

LU QIAN (V.O.)

Bring him to his senses. This isn't business—it's madness.

JIANG FANG

Please... talk sense into him.

Jiang Fang stares at a wedding photo, tears glistening like unshed pearls.

EXT. YA'AN VILLA COMMUNITY - DAWN

Night shift workers trudge home. A black BMW idles at the entrance, its presence an anomaly in the dawn.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAWN

Luo Qiao hides behind a surgical mask, eyes locked on the entrance with hawk-like intensity. A jogger emerges. Luo Qiao grins.

LUO QIAO

(To himself)
There you are, Yao Jiancheng.

He starts the engine, trailing the jogger into the shadows.

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Luo Qiao, disguised in a baseball cap and sunglasses, nervously trails Yao Jiancheng.

He clutches a wrench, his hand slick with sweat. Doubt gnaws at him.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
This is insane. What am I doing?
This isn't me.

Yao Jiancheng stops to stretch, oblivious to Luo Qiao lurking behind a tree. Luo Qiao raises the wrench, his heart pounding. He takes a step forward, then hesitates.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
I can't do this. This is wrong.

He lowers the wrench, his body trembling with relief and fear. A jogger passes, startling him. He stumbles, dropping the wrench with a clang.

Yao Jiancheng turns, a questioning look on his face.

YAO JIANCHENG
Everything alright?

Luo Qiao stammers, desperately trying to regain his composure.

LUO QIAO
(Feigning nonchalance)
Just... admiring the scenery.
Beautiful park.

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

Long shadows stretch across the site as Luo Qiao sits among shattered beer bottles, glaring at a photo of Yao Jiancheng.

LUO QIAO
(muttering, sarcastic)
Yes, yes... You need to be
cautious!

A bitter laugh escapes him.

LUO QIAO
You think you can just waltz in and
take everything I've built, Yao?
This is my life, you clown!

He kicks a bottle, eyes burning with defiance.

LUO QIAO
I won't let you win! I've got a
family! You leave me no damn
choice!

A rusted van arrives. Fang Gang approaches, casual in his stride.

FANG GANG
Drowning your sorrows, boss?

LUO QIAO
Here to rub it in?

FANG GANG
Nah, just checking—My cousin Fang
Yuan wants to know when we're
starting.

LUO QIAO
We're not. It's under new
management.

Fang Gang's eyes turn steely.

FANG GANG
Anyone messes with you messes with
him.

LUO QIAO
What was he, before?

FANG GANG
A butcher.

Luo Qiao shivers, uneasiness creeping in.

LUO QIAO
No, no, too risky. What if it
leaks?

FANG GANG
Just pay for the "PR," and he'll
handle it.

Luo Qiao shakes his head, anxiety gnawing at him.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - STUDY - NIGHT

The study's darkness weighs heavy. Luo Qiao bends over his desk, the lamp casting Yao Jiancheng's photo in a harsh spotlight.

Jiang Fang stands in the doorway, a silhouette of determination.

JIANG FANG
Luo Qiao, something's eating at
you. Spill it.

Luo Qiao's eyes flicker to the shadows, seeking solace.

LUO QIAO
Just business headaches. Nothing
worth losing sleep over.

Jiang Fang steps closer, her touch steady on his hand, concern etched on her face.

JIANG FANG
Whatever it is, we're in it
together, remember?

Luo Qiao forces a smile, a flicker of relief passing over him.

LUO QIAO
Really, it's under control.

Jiang Fang's voice drops to a warning whisper.

JIANG FANG
This isn't a playground.
Recklessness won't fix things.

Luo Qiao stands abruptly, his figure looming, voice firm.

LUO QIAO
He took everything! What should I
do, send thank you cards?

Jiang Fang grips his arm, a lifeline.

JIANG FANG
There's always another way. Think
of us, our child!

Luo Qiao shrugs off her grip, turning away with icy resolve.

LUO QIAO
I know what I'm doing.

Jiang Fang steps back, silence stretching between them. Her gaze lingers, pleading.

JIANG FANG

I hope so, for all our sakes.

She exits, door closing softly. Luo Qiao slumps back in his chair, eyes fixed on Yao Jiancheng's photo.

INT. YAOLUO ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Luo Qiao paces, eyes sharp with tension. A blue plaid snakeskin bag sits ominously on the coffee table.

Fang Gang enters, sensing the storm brewing.

LUO QIAO

Open it.

LUO QIAO

Fang Gang unzips the bag, revealing crisp stacks of red bills. His phone buzzes, "Fang Yuan" flashing. He silences it with a sigh.

LUO QIAO

Before any "public relations," let me know.

INT. SILVER VAN - DAY

Fang Gang drives, smug grin plastered on his face, a snakeskin bag beside him. His phone flashes "Fang Yuan" again.

FANG GANG

Yuan, what's the emergency?

Fang Yuan's frantic voice crackles through the van.

FANG YUAN (V.O.)

Uncle's in the ICU! When are you coming to the hospital?!

INT. HOSPITAL - CORRIDOR - DAY

Fang Gang rushes in, snakeskin bag in hand, panic etched on his face. He finds FANG YUAN (39), muscular and stern, outside the ICU.

FANG GANG
How's Dad?

FANG YUAN
Stable, but where was your phone?

FANG GANG
Busted. Just got it fixed.

FANG YUAN
Sixty grand, gone in a blink!

FANG GANG
I'll handle it. Go rest. We'll chat tomorrow.

Fang Yuan eyes the bag suspiciously, then walks away. Fang Gang paces, restless. A young nurse approaches, her demeanor icy.

NURSE
Family of bed 5?

FANG GANG
Yes, yes, I am.

NURSE
Settle the bill soon, or the hospital won't take responsibility!

She clicks away, leaving Fang Gang staring at the bag, scratching his head. He starts to call Luo Qiao, hesitates, then hangs up.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao grinds coffee beans, his mind adrift. Jiang Fang watches with a knowing smile.

JIANG FANG
What schemes are brewing now?

LUO QIAO
Ah, my wise wife... caught me again.

They exchange weary smiles, a semblance of normalcy. A loud knock spills coffee grounds everywhere.

Jiang Fang laughs and opens the door to a disheveled Zhang Xiao, clutching a sleeping bag.

ZHANG XIAO
Sister-in-law, I'm your new
doorman! The missus wants a
divorce!

Jiang Fang stifles a laugh, ushering him inside. Zhang Xiao plops down, unfurling his bag.

LUO QIAO
What's up, Zhang Xiao? I said I'd
pay you back soon!

ZHANG XIAO
Luo, you have no clue. My wife yaps
every day, says your project's a
sinking ship, and lending you
money's like throwing buns at a
stray dog... she's scared stiff!

Luo Qiao's phone rings again. "Fang Gang" flashes. He hesitates, then answers.

LUO QIAO
Handle it! And quit bugging me!

He hangs up, visibly relieved, then kneels beside Zhang Xiao.

LUO QIAO
Stay here. I've got to head out.

Zhang Xiao watches, confused, as Luo Qiao exits, leaving unspoken anxieties hanging in the air.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Luo Qiao's BMW halts at the mall entrance. He steps out, each stride toward the bus station heavy with worry.

INT. SILVER VAN - DAY

Sun blazes off the van's windows as it speeds along.

Inside, Fang Gang and Fang Yuan clutch a blue plaid snakeskin bag, ominous with hidden intentions.

FANG GANG
If this project tanks, we're
screwed.

FANG YUAN

Thirty guys count on us to put food
on their tables. How do we face
them if we fail?

FANG GANG

That snake Yao Jiancheng's looking
to swallow the whole thing. Nail
him, and that million's yours.

FANG YUAN

Anyone steps in my way, they'll
regret it.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jiang Fang cradles their baby, eyes glued to the TV. Zhang
Xiao sprawls on the floor, immersed in video games.

A video call from Luo Qiao interrupts.

LUO QIAO

Guess where I am?

The camera swings to the majestic South China Sea Guanyin
statue.

ZHANG XIAO

Luo Qiao, you rascal! I'm stuck
here, and you're off sightseeing.
What kind of man are you?

EXT. FANG YUAN'S COURTYARD - DAY

Fang Yuan sharpens his butcher's knife, sweat glistening on
his muscled arms.

The blade gleams under the sun, matching his steely resolve.

EXT. SCENIC AREA - SANYA - DAY

Sunlight streams through palm leaves. Luo Qiao kneels before
the Guanyin statue, hands clasped in prayer.

LUO QIAO

Bodhisattva, bless this endeavor!
The project's fate is in your
hands!

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAWN

Fang Yuan pretends to exercise, eyes darting to each passerby, hiding something sinister in a rolled-up newspaper.

EXT. SCENIC AREA - SANYA - DAY

Luo Qiao kneels at the Guanyin statue, desperation morphing into veiled threats.

LUO QIAO

Bodhisattva, I've begged you
countless times! Show your power
just this once! Make him retreat,
or... don't blame me for what
happens next!

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jiang Fang cradles their baby as her phone rings. Luo Qiao's image appears, standing before the "End of the Earth" monument.

LUO QIAO

Remember our vows? To the ends of
the earth...

Jiang Fang rolls her eyes, frustration spilling over.

JIANG FANG

How dare you bring that up! Leaving
me with debt collectors while you
wander. Is this "never parting"?

LUO QIAO

Come on, love! Zhang Xiao's
relentless. I had no choice.

JIANG FANG

You think running solves anything?
What if he goes crazy?

LUO QIAO

Relax, Zhang Xiao's all bark, no
bite. He'll leave once he's fed up.
When I return, a gift to make it
up!

JIANG FANG

Gifts, shmifts! Just come back and
sort this mess!

LUO QIAO
Yes ma'am! Mission accepted!

JIANG FANG
What's your plan for Yao Jiancheng?

LUO QIAO
Don't worry, I'm going legal.
Gathering evidence. He'll get
what's coming, just wait.

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Fang Yuan spots Yao Jiancheng, grips the knife hilt within the newspaper, and creeps forward.

Yao Jiancheng, oblivious, stretches his leg.

Suddenly, Fang Yuan's phone rings loudly in his pocket.

YAO JIANCHENG
Phones nowadays—more reliable than
alarm clocks.

FANG YUAN
Ain't that the truth!

He answers the phone, irritation in his voice.

FANG YUAN
What is it, Yang Tianxiang? Money
again? I told you, I'm tapped out!

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SANYA - NIGHT

Luo Qiao twists in bed, sheets tangled like his thoughts.
Sweat glistens, a sheen of guilt.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Luo Qiao sprints, police in hot pursuit.

POLICE OFFICER
Stop! Don't let the killer escape!

Luo Qiao weaves but gets caught, shackled by fate.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jiang Fang's glare pierces as Luo Qiao is led away, shame casting long shadows.

JIANG FANG

You've wrecked everything! Our
business, our family, yourself!

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

Luo Qiao kneels, a police officer's gun aimed at his head, judgment heavy in the air.

POLICE OFFICER

In the name of the people, I
sentence you to death by firing
squad!

LUO QIAO

Wait! I have last words!

POLICE OFFICER

Make it quick!

LUO QIAO

My assets... give them to my wife
and brother...

POLICE OFFICER

Save it, they've already hooked up.

LUO QIAO

Don't you think they make a good
match?

POLICE OFFICER

Shut up!

A gunshot echoes, Luo Qiao falls...

END MONTAGE

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SANYA - NIGHT

Luo Qiao jolts awake, cold sweat clinging like regret.

LUO QIAO

(to himself)

Jiang Fang was right...

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Fang Yuan lounges on a stone step, toothpick dangling, exuding unwarranted confidence.

Yang Tianxiang (36), wiry and desperate, approaches under a cloud of gloom.

YANG TIANXIANG

Bro Fang! My wife's packing up to leave!

FANG YUAN

What's her beef now? Your mother-in-law stirring the pot again?

YANG TIANXIANG

We're still short 80,000 on the bride price. She says no cash, no wedding bells!

FANG YUAN

With your looks, she's doing you a favor.

YANG TIANXIANG

Come on, Boss Fang! If you don't help, she'll elope with the next guy!

Fang Yuan's eyes twinkle with a mischievous idea. He spits out the toothpick, leaning in conspiratorially.

FANG YUAN

You want quick cash? 250,000. You in?

YANG TIANXIANG

What's the job?

FANG YUAN

Make a developer lose interest in his land... permanently.

YANG TIANXIANG

Count me in! Where's my cut?

FANG YUAN

150,000 up front, 100,000 when it's done.

Yang Tianxiang hesitates, then nods eagerly. Their eyes lock, a shared understanding glistening with cunning.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SANYA - DAY

Luo Qiao sits on the bed, lost in thought as the TV murmurs news.

A police siren jolts him back. He rushes to the window, pulling the curtains apart.

LUO QIAO
They're here for me? No way, not
already!

Police cars speed past, leaving him relieved.

LUO QIAO
Thank heavens... they're not after
me.

He collapses onto the bed, the TV's droning now a distant hum of mockery.

LUO QIAO
I shouldn't have done such a
boneheaded thing!

Luo Qiao grabs his phone, dialing Fang Gang, but an automated voice taunts him:

PHONE
Sorry, the number you have dialed
is powered off.

Frustration mounts as he calls his office. Silence mocks him. He stomps, grabs his coat, and bolts out.

EXT. LABOR MARKET - DAY

Sunlight spills over the bustling labor market. Workers gather like ants, faces a mix of hope and desperation.

FAN SI (31), a wiry figure with eyes sharp as daggers, prowls through the crowd, hunting for opportunity.

A rusted van screeches to a halt. A FOREMAN, built like a bulldozer, leaps out, barking orders.

FOREMAN
Bricklayers! Need three! Quick
hands, come!

The crowd surges, jostling Fan Si, who claws to the front.

FAN SI

Wait! I'm fast, and my price is as flexible as a yoga instructor!

The Foreman sneers at Fan Si's scrawny frame.

FOREMAN

With that scrawny frame? What can you do, scare the bricks into place?

Fan Si's silent stare unnerves him.

FOREMAN

Next time.

The van roars away, leaving Fan Si and disappointed workers behind.

As the sun climbs, Fan Si retreats to a shadowy corner, chewing stale buns with resignation.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

A taxi speeds down the highway, Luo Qiao's eyes dart between the horizon and his phone.

INT. TAXI - DAY

Luo Qiao dials Wang Xiuhong, urgency crackling in his voice.

LUO QIAO

Sister Xiuhong, I need a favor...

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)

Mr. Lu? What is it?

LUO QIAO

Call Yao Jiancheng, tell him someone's after him. Tell him not to go jogging for the next few days.

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)

Oh my, what's this about? Why help that bastard Yao Jiancheng?

LUO QIAO

I hate him too, but we're in the same boat. If the development rights get pulled, we're all sunk.

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
You're always thinking ahead. I'll
take care of it.

Luo Qiao hangs up, releasing a sigh, tension still etched on his face.

Outside, the sun blazes brightly, a stark contrast to the storm brewing within him.

INT. SMALL STORE - DAY

Yang Tianxiang inspects a fruit knife with precision, shaking his head.

YANG TIANXIANG
Got anything sharper? For...
slicing fish.

A raspy voice responds from the shelves.

FEMALE SHOPKEEPER
Wang Mazi's cleaver is top-notch.

Yang Tianxiang grimaces.

YANG TIANXIANG
Too clumsy, like trying to write a
love letter with a broom.

EXT. SOUTH AN CITY - DAY

Yang Tianxiang spots Fan Si getting pushed aside at the labor market. Grinning, he sneaks up and embraces Fan Si from behind.

Fan Si, startled, squats defensively but eases upon recognizing him.

FAN SI
Looking for work, Yang?

Yang's eyes glint with mischief.

YANG TIANXIANG
Nah, just waiting for the right
opportunity.

FAN SI
What kind of job? Need an extra
hand?

YANG TIANXIANG
Already promised it to someone
else.

FAN SI
I'm starving here, Yang. Cut me in!

Yang leans closer, voice dropping conspiratorially.

YANG TIANXIANG
Got a real estate mogul willing to
pay big to "resolve" some
development rights issues. You in?

Fan Si's face darkens with caution.

FAN SI
No way. Swore to the warden I'd
stay clean.

YANG TIANXIANG
We're talking 100 grand, Fan.

FAN SI
Why not handle it yourself?

Yang glances around, lowering his voice.

YANG TIANXIANG
Promised my girl I'd walk the
straight and narrow.

A rusty van screeches to a halt nearby. A portly man jumps
out, barking orders.

PORTLY MAN
Need two laborers! Tall guys first!

Fan Si and Yang exchange a knowing look, moving to a quieter
spot.

YANG TIANXIANG
Thought you were inside till next
year.

FAN SI
Good behavior got me out early.
What's the payment plan?

Yang thumps his chest with confidence.

YANG TIANXIANG
Fifty grand upfront, fifty when
it's done. Trust me, I've got the
cash right here.

He flashes a wad of cash and a photo. Fan Si examines them,
resolve glinting in his eyes.

FAN SI
Deal.

INT. HOSPITAL - CORRIDOR - DAY

Luo Qiao sprints down the hallway, bursting into the ICU.

INT. HOSPITAL - INTENSIVE CARE UNIT - DAY

Fang Gang sits at his father's bedside as the medical machine
beeps continuously. Luo Qiao quietly enters.

LUO QIAO
How's the old man holding up?

Fang Gang sighs, fatigue etching his features.

FANG GANG
Still not awake...

Lu Qiao hesitates.

LUO QIAO
Called in a favor. There's a
specialist who might work a
miracle.

Fang Gang shakes his head.

FANG GANG
Miracle's gonna cost more than I
got.

Lu Qiao settles into the chair beside him.

LUO QIAO
I've got this.

Fang Gang's eyebrows knit together.

FANG GANG
Can't keep digging into your
pockets.

LU QIAO
It's not just cash we're talking.

Fang Gang studies him, gratitude mixed with suspicion.

FANG GANG
Seen the stress you're under. The
gamble you've made.

Lu Qiao shifts uneasily.

LUO QIAO
Let's take this chat outside.

EXT. HOSPITAL ROOF - DAY

Luo Qiao paces, lighting a cigarette, hands shaking. Fang Gang leans on the railing, eyes locked on him.

LUO QIAO
We need to call it off, Fang Gang.
This has gone too far.

Fang Gang scoffs, bitter.

FANG GANG
And what about our necks?
Everything we've sweated for? Yao
Jiancheng's out to crush us, Lu
Qiao. He'll take the lot.

Luo Qiao runs a hand through his hair, tense.

LUO QIAO
There are other paths. Legal ones.
We can dig ourselves out without
blood on our hands.

Fang Gang shakes his head, voice low and dangerous.

FANG GANG
Sometimes, Lu Qiao, the law's a
dull knife. Sometimes, you gotta
fight fire with fire.

He walks away, leaving Luo Qiao alone, weighed down by choices.

INT. HOSPITAL - INTENSIVE CARE UNIT - DAY

Luo Qiao's face storms as he confronts Fang Gang.

LUO QIAO
It's too risky! We could lose everything.

FANG GANG
Just paying for PR, what's the risk?

LUO QIAO
You think a judge will see it that way?

FANG GANG
No guts, no glory, right?

Luo Qiao's expression shifts abruptly.

LUO QIAO
This isn't about guts— Ever wonder why I'm risking what should be mine?

Fang Gang pauses, sighs, resigned.

FANG GANG
The money's with Fang Yuan. You talk to him.

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

The park basks in a soft golden glow. Fan Si moves with purpose, practicing martial arts with a dagger, eyes fixed with intent.

FAN SI (V.O.)
Where's Yao Jiancheng? Did he change his DAWN routine?

Joggers fill the park as the sun rises.

Fan Si studies a photo, frustration mounting as his target remains elusive.

EXT. FANG YUAN'S COURTYARD - DAY

Luo Qiao and Fang Yuan stand under a gnarled tree, tension crackling like static.

FANG YUAN
You think this is just a game?

LUO QIAO
I acted rashly. Forgive me,
brother.

FANG YUAN
Money's gone. What's your plan?

Fang Yuan sinks onto a worn stool, avoiding eye contact. Luo Qiao circles to face him.

LUO QIAO
Let's not talk money now.

FANG YUAN
We will eventually, won't we?

Luo Qiao pauses, resolve hardening.

LUO QIAO
No. We won't.

Fang Yuan sighs, walks inside, dials his phone, returns moments later.

FANG YUAN
Can't reach him.

LUO QIAO
No phone?

FANG YUAN
Fresh out of prison. Nothing.

LUO QIAO
We need to stop him! Got a photo?

Fang Yuan nods, shows Luo Qiao a picture on his phone.

FANG YUAN
This is him. Fan Si.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Fan Si crouches behind an SUV, eyes locked on the entrance.

A white Mercedes glides in, and Yao Jiancheng assists an elderly lady inside.

FAN SI
All this for a hundred grand?

He edges toward the entrance but is halted by a SECURITY GUARD.

SECURITY GUARD
Who are you here to see?

FAN SI
President Yao. Urgent business.

SECURITY GUARD
Appointment?

FAN SI
I have a secret, a matter of life
and death!

The guard skeptically unfolds a crumpled note, his expression quickly turning serious.

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Fang Yuan scans the park, eyes darting for Fan Si, tension palpable.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Luo Qiao, masked, scouts for Fan Si outside the building, anxiety etched in every movement.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

The cityscape sprawls beyond the windows.

Yao Jiancheng, brow furrowed, stares at a crumpled note:
"Someone's got a hit on you. Call if you want to live.
13858110110." The shaky handwriting matches his nerves.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

In a sleek room that screams wealth, Yao Jiancheng and TWO BEEFY EXECUTIVES sit, worry etched on their faces.

ZHANG SANMING
Boss, could this be a prank?

Cai Caijin, the stocky finance manager, shakes his head.

CAI CAIJIN
Someone might be shaking us down.

ZHANG SANMING
Right, can't take this lightly.

YAO JIANCHENG
It's real. Natural Real Estate
thinks so too.

ZHANG SANMING
Why would they?

CAI CAIJIN
Think they staged it?

YAO JIANCHENG
One step at a time.

Yao Jiancheng taps the table, hesitates, then dials the
number on the note. A cold voice answers:

FAN SI (V.O.)
Yeah?

YAO JIANCHENG
Who am I speaking to?

FAN SI (V.O.)
Fan Si. Meet at "Encounter" Cafe, 3
PM.

The call ends. Yao Jiancheng grips the phone, deep in
thought.

INT. ENCOUNTER CAFE - DAY

Soft jazz fills the air. Yao Jiancheng and his team sit by
the window, their untouched coffees reflecting their anxiety.

ZHANG SANMING
You really think someone'll show?
This is nuts.

YAO JIANCHENG
Better paranoid than dead. We need
to know if someone really wants me
six feet under.

Fan Si enters, exuding confidence, and approaches their
table.

FAN SI
Mr. Yao Jiancheng, I presume?

YAO JIANCHENG
That's me. And you're...?

FAN SI

Fan Si. Seems someone's slapped a price tag on your head.

Zhang Sanming scoffs.

ZHANG SANMING

You, an assassin? Give me a break!

Fan Si shows a phone with Yao Jiancheng's photo and address. The executives turn pale.

YAO JIANCHENG

Why haven't you done the job?

FAN SI

Coin's too thin. Not risking my neck for peanuts.

YAO JIANCHENG

So why are you here?

FAN SI

Let's stage your death. I snap some pics, we scam the lot, and they leave you alone.

Yao Jiancheng exchanges looks with his team, then nods.

YAO JIANCHENG

Fine, but I better not end up six feet under for real.

FAN SI

No sweat.

Fan Si flashes his ID, easing their skepticism.

FAN SI

See? All above board.

YAO JIANCHENG

Swing by my office tomorrow for the shoot.

Fan Si leaves, leaving disbelief in his wake.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

The black BMW stands guard at the entrance, an unyielding sentinel.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Luo Qiao watches the flow of people, spots Fan Si approaching, and rushes out.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Luo Qiao intercepts Fan Si.

LUO QIAO
You're Fan Si, right?

Fan Si startles, eyes wary.

FAN SI
Who are you?

LUO QIAO
The employer. Stop all actions!

Fan Si sidesteps, Luo Qiao blocks him.

FAN SI
Who sent you?

LUO QIAO
Fang Yuan.

FAN SI
Don't know him.

LUO QIAO
Did you take a 2 million yuan job?

Fan Si chuckles coldly, glaring.

FAN SI
Get lost!

He tries to pass, Luo Qiao grabs him.

LUO QIAO
Wait, let me call Fang Yuan.

Fan Si grins wickedly.

FAN SI
You trying to steal my job?

LUO QIAO
I'm the employer! Why steal?

FAN SI
Stop lying!

Fan Si attacks, knocking Luo Qiao out, drags him to the BMW, and leaves him unconscious in the passenger seat.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

The office is chaotic, furniture overturned. Fan Si orchestrates the scene, directing Yao Jiancheng and his team.

FAN SI
President Yao, don the white shirt.
Now lie there! More agony!

Yao Jiancheng lies on the floor, shirt stained with fake blood, grimacing dramatically. Fan Si snaps photos.

FAN SI
Perfect! These'll fool anyone!

Yao Jiancheng stands, dusting himself off, his team exchanging uneasy glances.

YAO JIANCHENG
What's our next move?

FAN SI
Spread the word you're "dead," then
lay low for a spell.

Fan Si exits, leaving them in stunned silence.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Fluorescent lights flicker overhead as Luo Qiao jolts awake, sweat glistening on his forehead.

EXT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - DAY

Luo Qiao charges toward the security room, adrenaline surging. A HULKING GUARD intercepts, suspicion etched on his frown.

GUARD
What's the hurry?

LUO QIAO
Did a short guy in black come
through?

GUARD

Yeah, why?

LUO QIAO

He's an assassin! We need to act now!

The guard eyes him warily, but urgency wins.

GUARD

How do I know you're not the assassin?

LUO QIAO

I overheard him! No time to argue—move!

The guard hesitates, grabs a club, and nods. They sprint together.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CORRIDORS - DAY

A tense silence blankets the hallway as Luo Qiao and the guard reach the CEO's office. Employees linger, eyes wide with fear.

Inside, Yao Jiancheng lies motionless, blood pooling, face frozen in a grimace.

Luo Qiao stands, aghast, then silently retreats.

EXT. YA'AN VILLA NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Yao Jiancheng flings his luggage into a limo, which speeds away.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The sun, a relentless inferno, blazes through the windshield of a speeding black BMW racing towards Sanya.

INT. BLACK BMW - DAY

Luo Qiao pulls up to the Duty Free Mall, picks up his phone, urgency in his voice.

LUO QIAO

Fang Yuan, remember: you haven't seen me.

FANG YUAN (V.O.)

Got it.

Luo Qiao straightens his clothes, steps out of the car, and takes a deep breath.

EXT. INTERNATIONAL DUTY FREE CITY - DAY

Luo Qiao, decked out like a neon billboard, paces outside Duty Free City, straining a smile for his phone camera.

On the screen, Wang Xiuhong watches, amused.

WANG XIUHONG

You men sure know how to relax!

LUO QIAO

You wouldn't believe it, Wang Xiuhong, but I'm here for damage control! Every project, I pray at the South Sea Guanyin statue. Never failed me. Forgot this time, and bam, Yao Jiancheng appears! I'm sweating bullets!

WANG XIUHONG

My grandma had a trick for that. Make a voodoo doll, write their name on it, stick it with needles. Guaranteed bad luck!

LUO QIAO

I know that one! But I'm all thumbs, can't make a doll to save my life!

WANG XIUHONG

No problem! I have a picture of Yao Jiancheng. I'll send it to you. Print it out, stick it at the foot of the Guanyin statue, and put a rock on it. He won't be able to budge!

LUO QIAO

(Grinning)

Brilliant! Let's do it!

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAY

Fan Si reclines on a bench, counting a stack of bills, grinning triumphantly.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SANYA - DAY

Luo Qiao answers a video call groggily. Fang Gang's eager face fills the screen.

FANG GANG
Boss, Fan Si took care of Yao
Jiancheng!

He waves his phone, displaying photos of Yao's "corpse."

LUO QIAO
Can't believe this is real...

EXT. NANHAI GUANYIN STATUE BRIDGE - DAY

Luo Qiao walks the bridge, face filled with apprehension, wrestling with a decision.

He spots a boat below with a man resembling Yao Jiancheng laughing with a woman.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng?

The boat vanishes. Luo Qiao rushes to the other side but sees nothing.

LUO QIAO
No... impossible...

He collapses, trembling, cold sweat pouring as if he's seen a ghost.

EXT. NANHAI GUANYIN STATUE - DAY

Sun blazes down, wrapping the towering Guanyin statue in a serene silhouette.

Luo Qiao kneels, eyes wide with terror and regret.

LUO QIAO
Bodhisattva, I was wrong! I
shouldn't have considered murder!
Protect me, please!

His plea echoes along the empty seaside, soaked in despair.

INT. LUXURY HOTEL ROOM - BEIJING - DAY

Yao Jiancheng perches on the bed, his lavish suite a gilded cage. Memories haunt him, unease twisting like a knife.

Yao Jiancheng, pale and sweating, urgently dials Vice President Zhang Sanming.

YAO JIANCHENG
Sanming, pull out all stops. Find
out who's behind this—now!

ZHANG SANMING (V.O.)
Got it! We're on it.

Determination hardens Yao Jiancheng's features as he braces for the storm.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - SANYA - DAY

Luo Qiao frantically scrolls through news on his phone, anxiety twisting his features. He dials Wang Xiuhong with shaky fingers.

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
Mr. Luo, will the Bodhisattva
punish me?

LUO QIAO
What's wrong, Sister Xiuhong?

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
Yao Jiancheng... he's been killed!

LUO QIAO
My god! Do they know who did it?

Wang Xiuhong's sobs echo through the speaker.

WANG XIUHONG (V.O.)
No idea.

LUO QIAO
Don't worry, Sister Xiuhong. This
isn't on us.

INT. LUXURY HOTEL ROOM - BEIJING - DAY

Yao Jiancheng paces like a trapped animal, eyes flicking between the door and the window.

YAO JIANCHENG
When does this nightmare end?!

He slams his laptop shut, frustrated, and picks up his phone.

YAO JIANCHENG
Cai Caijin, I'm coming back.

CAI CAIJIN (V.O.)
You sure? It's risky.

YAO JIANCHENG
No choice. Get me top bodyguards.
Spare no expense.

CAI CAIJIN (V.O.)
Understood, Mr. Yao.

Yao Jiancheng hangs up, eyes challenging the horizon.

YAO JIANCHENG
This ends now. Whatever it takes.

Resolve carves his features into stone.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao bursts in, tossing his luggage aside like it's haunted.

LUO QIAO
Finally escaped that mess. Sanya's
magic, huh?

Jiang Fang appears, arms crossed, eyes like daggers.

JIANG FANG
You think it's that simple?

LUO QIAO
You didn't pay him to disappear,
did you?

JIANG FANG
Actually, I did.

Luo Qiao blinks, then forces a grin, offering a velvet box.

LUO QIAO
Come on, love, don't be mad. Check
this out—like it?

Jiang Fang opens the box, her eyes flicker with surprise.

JIANG FANG
Wow, this is... impressive. You've outdone yourself.

Her smile fades, concern returning.

JIANG FANG
Yao Jiancheng is dead. Someone... took care of him.

LUO QIAO
(feigning surprise) What?! Wrong crowd, I guess.

JIANG FANG
That's what I thought, but it's unsettling.

He pulls her close, his touch soothing.

LUO QIAO
Don't let it haunt you. You've done enough. Rest, okay?

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAWN

Yao Jiancheng jogs, bodyguards orbit him. A man in a duck-billed hat fidgets on a bench.

YAO JIANCHENG
That guy looks fishy. Check him out.

Two bodyguards approach.

BODYGUARD A
Sir, hands out of your pockets—slowly.

The man reveals walnuts. Yao Jiancheng exhales, tension easing.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao commands the room from the podium, energy crackling.

LUO QIAO
Brothers! Queen's Villa project kicks off in 17 days!

Applause erupts, excitement mingling with anxiety.

LUO QIAO
We're tight on time, but we'll nail
it!

He faces WANG JIAN and Wang Xiuhong, trust firm in his eyes.

LUO QIAO
Let's show them our mettle!

The room buzzes, charged for the challenge ahead.

INT. WHITE BENZ - DAY

Yao Jiancheng sits in the back, his gaze flicking nervously to the rearview mirror.

YAO JIANCHENG
We've been tailed for three blocks.
Got the plate?

BODYGUARD
Yes, Boss Yao.

INT. YAO JIANCHENG'S VILLA - NIGHT

The villa, a fortress of light, has wolf dogs prowling. Yao Jiancheng watches his bodyguard secure the doors, unease palpable.

YAO JIANCHENG
Stay sharp tonight. No surprises!

In the study, he slumps into his chair, unrest pressing down.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Luo Qiao thrashes in bed, sleep evading him. His wife and child rest peacefully beside him.

BEGIN FLASHBACKS:

EXT. NANHAI GUANYIN STATUE BRIDGE - DAY

He spots a boat below with a man resembling Yao Jiancheng laughing with a woman.

LUO QIAO
Yao Jiancheng?

END FLASHBACK.

LUO QIAO
What are you plotting, Yao?

He rises restlessly, heading to the study.

INT. STUDY - CONTINUOUS

Luo Qiao clasps his hands before the Guanyin statue, desperation in his voice.

LUO QIAO
Guanyin Bodhisattva, please... just
make him disappear!

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Yao Jiancheng rubs his eyes, dwarfed by mountains of files. The clock declares it past eleven.

He weakly waves a bodyguard over.

YAO JIANCHENG
Bring in Zhang.

ZHANG SANMING rushes in, anxiety etched on his face.

YAO JIANCHENG
Any leads?

ZHANG SANMING
Yang Tianxiang, Fan Si's old
cellmate. He's a bricklayer now.
Motives unclear.

YAO JIANCHENG
Yang Tianxiang? What's his beef
with me?

Yao ponders, perplexed.

YAO JIANCHENG
What landed them in prison?

ZHANG SANMING
Yang for burglary, Fan Si for
shaking down folks.

YAO JIANCHENG
Fan Si? With his slight build?

ZHANG SANMING
Lost his parents young, joined
gangs at sixteen.

Yao's face hardens, thoughts churning.

EXT. YAO JIANCHENG'S VILLA - NIGHT

The villa looms under the moon, a fortress of glowing windows.

Yao Jiancheng's car glides silently up the driveway. Two bodyguards, hawk-eyed, scan the night. Satisfied, they nod.

Yao steps out, his face a map of tension.

INT. YAO JIANCHENG'S VILLA - NIGHT

Dim light bathes the living room, casting soft shadows. Yao Jiancheng's MOTHER, her face etched with years of worry, sits quietly.

YAO JIANCHENG
Mom, why are you still up?

Her hand reaches out, warm and steady, clasping his.

MOTHER
How can I sleep with all this
chaos?

Yao sighs, a world of burden on his shoulders.

YAO JIANCHENG
I've made you worry more than I
should have.

MOTHER
You're no spring chicken. Still
single. What's your plan?

YAO JIANCHENG
Freedom's a sweet perk of
bachelorhood, Mom.

She shakes her head, concern deepening.

MOTHER
Who'll look after you when I'm
gone?

Yao's resolve hardens, eyes reflecting determination.

YAO JIANCHENG

This ends tomorrow. I'm going to
the police.

Relief washes over her face, softening her expression. Yao
steels himself, ready for the challenges ahead.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - STUDY - DAY

Luo Qiao stands before a miniature Guanyin statue, anxiety
etched on his face.

LUO QIAO

Guanyin, please... make Yao
Jiancheng vanish. I can't keep
doing this!

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Luo Qiao thrashes, sweat-soaked and restless. Jiang Fang
stirs beside him, alarmed.

JIANG FANG

Bad dream?

LUO QIAO

Yeah.

JIANG FANG

About what?

LUO QIAO

Being chased by my teacher.

He rises, pacing toward the living room. Jiang Fang follows,
concern shadowing her steps.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Luo Qiao wipes sweat from his brow, tension coiling in his
muscles.

JIANG FANG

I heard you say "I didn't kill
him"?

LUO QIAO

Oh, the teacher asked who killed
the frog on the desk.

Jiang Fang's gaze pierces him, voice firm.

JIANG FANG

Luo Qiao, don't ruin our family.
Don't ruin yourself.

Luo Qiao meets her eyes, resolve wavering.

LUO QIAO

Don't worry, I know what I'm doing.

He glances out the window, the city's lights stretching like a grid of possibilities, each one more dangerous than the last.

EXT. NANHU POLICE STATION - DAY

Yao Jiancheng, flanked by Zhang Sanming and bodyguards, strides into the station. Tension coils around him like a snake.

INT. NANHU POLICE STATION - RECEPTION ROOM - DAY

OFFICER SUN (48), seasoned and sharp-eyed, sits across from Yao Jiancheng. A young policeman stands by, ready to assist.

OFFICER SUN

Tell us what happened.

Yao Jiancheng leans forward, voice steady but tinged with anxiety.

YAO JIANCHENG

A hitman said someone offered
100,000 yuan for my life. He took
fake photos to scam money, but I'm
on edge every day.

OFFICER SUN

He didn't actually try to off you?

YAO JIANCHENG

No, but it's driving me nuts.

OFFICER SUN

Why take his word?

YAO JIANCHENG

A partner tipped me off.

OFFICER SUN

How'd she know?

YAO JIANCHENG
Heard something in a diner.

Officer Sun leans back, skeptical.

OFFICER SUN
Think she's involved?

YAO JIANCHENG
No way, she's just a country woman.

OFFICER SUN
Then why go along with the charade?

YAO JIANCHENG
Wanted them off my back.

OFFICER SUN
Upset anyone lately?

YAO JIANCHENG
Kept to myself.

OFFICER SUN
Think, Mr. Yao.

YAO JIANCHENG
Well, during my divorce, my ex said
she'd split me in half...

OFFICER SUN
How so?

YAO JIANCHENG
Something about lightning or an
axe.

OFFICER SUN
Why'd she say that?

YAO JIANCHENG
Wanted more money.

Officer Sun nods, exchanging a glance with the young
policeman.

OFFICER SUN
We'll get to the bottom of this.

YOUNG POLICEMAN
We'll ensure your safety, Mr. Yao.

Yao Jiancheng nods, relief softening his features.

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

A wasteland vibrates with energy. Fang Gang directs workers, lines crisscrossing the earth.

Luo Qiao, atop his BMW, surveys like a monarch.

Zhang Sanming storms over, frustration boiling.

ZHANG SANMING

Who gave you permission to start construction? Has Jiancheng Real Estate agreed?

Luo Qiao, unruffled, dismisses him with a wave.

LUO QIAO

We have the rights. Your agreement? Not needed.

Fang Gang rallies the workers, who march forward, ushering Zhang Sanming away.

Luo Qiao's smile widens, a conqueror in his domain.

INT. NANHU POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

A single light pierces the dim room, spotlighting Fan Si, who squirms under Officer Sun's cold gaze.

OFFICER SUN

Why did you do it?

Fan Si's lips quiver, eyes darting like a trapped animal.

FAN SI

I... I was just at the labor market... looking for work...

Officer Sun and the young policeman share a knowing look, the boy's tale as thin as smoke.

INT. GIFT SHOP - DAY

Luo Qiao, humming a tune, peruses the shelves with an air of confidence. The young salesgirl beams at him.

SALESGIRL

What can I get for you, boss?

Luo Qiao's eyes twinkle with mischief.

LUO QIAO
Two cases of thousand-shot
firecrackers! And fifty "good
fortune" red envelopes!

The salesgirl packs the items efficiently.

Luo Qiao slips a hundred yuan bill into a red envelope,
grinning slyly.

EXT. GIFT SHOP - DAY

Luo Qiao stands by his car, juggling shopping bags.

His phone rings, slicing through the air.

LUO QIAO
This is for you. Thanks for the
hustle!

SALESGIRL
Thank you, boss!

Luo Qiao answers the call, his jovial expression crumbling
into dread.

FANG GANG (V.O.)
Boss! The cops! They nabbed
someone!

Luo Qiao's knees buckle, the salesgirl catching him just in
time.

SALESGIRL
Are you okay, boss? Should I call
an ambulance?

LUO QIAO
No... no need... I'm good...

He dismisses her concern, sinking into his car like a puppet
with cut strings.

INT. BLACK BMW - CONTINUOUS

Luo Qiao slumps, sweat sliding down his face. His phone
abandoned on the seat.

SALESGIRL
You sure you're okay?

LUO QIAO
Th...thanks...

He offers a weak smile, more grimace than reassurance.

The salesgirl shuts the door, leaving him adrift, eyes vacant.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - DINING ROOM - DAY

A table brims with dishes, soft light casting a warm halo. Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang eat in silence, tension simmering.

LUO QIAO
Jiang Fang, can we talk?

Jiang Fang eyes him, wary.

JIANG FANG
About what?

Luo Qiao gathers his thoughts.

LUO QIAO
Why did you marry me?

A smirk tugs at Jiang Fang's lips.

JIANG FANG
Wondering if it was for your money?

Luo Qiao nods, uncertainty clouding his eyes.

LUO QIAO
It's been on my mind, especially
after your brother...

He stops, recalling the loan for her brother's house.

JIANG FANG
Leave my brother out of this!

LUO QIAO
If I had nothing, would you still
be here?

Jiang Fang's gaze hardens.

JIANG FANG
No! Is that what you wanted to
hear?

Luo Qiao's face pales, disappointment deepening. He rises, heading for the door.

LUO QIAO
I've got things to sort out. Might
be gone a while.

JIANG FANG
Where are you going?

Luo Qiao offers no answer, casting a long, lingering look before leaving. Jiang Fang stands, fear flickering in her eyes.

INT. YAOLU ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Flames reflect on Luo Qiao's weary face as he feeds the last document to the fire. Holding a letter marked "To Jiang Fang," his voice shakes.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
Jiang Fang, the invoices for two
bulldozers are in here. Selling
them should keep you and our child
afloat for a while. After the
project, Luo Qian will give you
another 4 million yuan. We may not
be as rich as those corrupt
officials, but you won't go
hungry...

He caresses the envelope, voice breaking.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
You joked about wishing I had half
of Luo Qian's talent... The 's his
now. I hope... I hope you two...

Unable to continue, Luo Qiao shuts his eyes, anguish etched into his face.

He leaves the letter on the desk, exiting as the flames cast a long shadow.

INT. BLACK BMW - NIGHT

Luo Qiao drives away from the office, glancing nervously in the rearview mirror.

He pulls into a secluded spot, retrieves his phone, and plays a sea-recorded video. He dials the police on a second phone.

LUO QIAO
Hello, police? I... I'm Luo Qiao. I
want to turn myself in.

Officer Sun's steady voice cuts through:

OFFICER SUN (V.O.)
Luo Qiao? You sure about this?

LUO QIAO
Yes. But... I have one condition.

OFFICER SUN
Let's hear it.

LUO QIAO
Don't let my wife, Jiang Fang, find
out. I'm worried... worried about
the kid's future... If you agree,
I'll come in. If not, I'll... I'll
take a boat and disappear.

OFFICER SUN
Disappear? Not without a boat!
Relax, we can agree to that. In
fact, I'm right by the sea. Let's
chat in person.

Luo Qiao freezes, then rolls down the window. Officer Sun
stands outside, grinning like a cat with a canary, gesturing
for him to step out.

INT. NANHU POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao slouches in his chair like a deflated balloon, the
gray walls mirroring his despair.

Officer Sun watches him, balancing amusement and pity.

OFFICER SUN
Luo Qiao, why did you and Fang Gang
hire someone to "off" Yao
Jiancheng?

Luo Qiao sighs, the weight of his missteps pressing down like
a guilty conscience.

LUO QIAO
(remorsefully)
I thought money could fix
everything. Fang Gang handled the
details... I never imagined...
(MORE)

LUO QIAO (CONT'D)
they'd actually kill Yao
Jiancheng...

His voice dwindles; he avoids Officer Sun's gaze.

OFFICER SUN
The photos? All a ruse. Yao
Jiancheng is alive and kicking!

Luo Qiao's head snaps up, disbelief across his face.

LUO QIAO
What? He's alive? Then... the
photos?

Officer Sun leans back, enjoying the moment.

OFFICER SUN
A staged act by Yao Jiancheng and
Fan Si to scam you out of cash.

Luo Qiao's face shifts to realization, a sardonic laugh escapes.

LUO QIAO
I hate subcontracting. Yet, same
thing happened to me. Ironical, isn't
it?

INT. YAOLU ENGINEERING - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Jiang Fang stands before Luo Qiao's desk, clutching a letter labeled "To Jiang Fang." Tears blur the ink as determination solidifies her resolve.

JIANG FANG (V.O.)
(Determined)
Cracking jokes about flaws turns
them into knots in the heart. Luo
Qiao wouldn't go this far... He's
hiding something! I have to find
him. We'll face this mess together!

She wipes her tears and rushes out with determination.

INT. DETENTION ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao slumps on the cold iron bed, spirit as broken as the dim light. The door groans open. Zhang Xiao and Officer Sun step in, casting long shadows.

LUO QIAO

Zhang Xiao? How'd you track me down here?

Zhang Xiao, breathless and frazzled, gestures wildly.

ZHANG XIAO

Aigoo, Mr. Luo! Jiang Fang's tearing her hair out looking for you! I said he even swindled your brother's house purchase money to pay off his debts, can he commit suicide? There must be a problem with the project. That's why I called the police. Who knows...

Luo Qiao blinks, confusion clouding his features.

LUO QIAO

When did I cheat him of his money?

Zhang Xiao leans closer, sincerity in his eyes.

ZHANG XIAO

When Jiang Fang paid me back. While you were hiding out in Sanya.

Realization hits Luo Qiao like a tidal wave. He collapses back, deflated.

LUO QIAO

She did pay you back... and I didn't trust her.

Jiang Fang storms in, fury igniting her voice.

JIANG FANG

Luo Qiao! Think it's that simple? Have you thought about what would've happened if Yao Jiancheng were really dead?!

Silence hangs heavy as Luo Qiao absorbs her words, complexity etched into his face.

LUO QIAO

Everything's got two sides. You only know what's right or wrong by going through it...

Zhang Xiao and Officer Sun retreat quietly, leaving the couple to their storm.

JIANG FANG
Don't worry. No matter what
happens, I'm with you. We'll face
it together.

Jiang Fang wraps her arms around Luo Qiao, tears mingling
with unspoken promises.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Officer Sun stands over a cluttered desk, questioning Yao
Jiancheng. Case files flutter under the ceiling fan.

OFFICER SUN
What's your relationship with
Natural Real Estate?

Yao Jiancheng, defensive, shifts uncomfortably.

YAO JIANCHENG
We're partners on the Queen's Villa
project.

Officer Sun, unimpressed, leans in.

OFFICER SUN
Then why try to take their
development rights?

Yao Jiancheng's gaze darts away.

YAO JIANCHENG
Their executives got arrested.
Quality control's at risk. Didn't
want to risk my neck.

Officer Sun flips a file open with a casual flick.

OFFICER SUN
Did you know Natural is a joint-
stock company?

Yao Jiancheng blinks, caught off guard.

YAO JIANCHENG
No, I didn't.

Officer Sun smiles, slides a photo across the table.

OFFICER SUN
Luo Qiao holds 40%.

Yao Jiancheng picks up the photo, realization dawning.

YAO JIANCHENG

So... he's the mastermind behind this?!

Officer Sun nods, eyes twinkling with irony.

OFFICER SUN

He's bet everything on this project.

Yao Jiancheng stares at the photo of Luo Qiao—honest, unassuming—understanding unfurling slowly.

YAO JIANCHENG

Now it all makes sense...

INT. HE YAN'S LAW FIRM - OFFICE - DAY

He Yan frowns over a mountain of documents. Jiang Fang sits across, anxiety twisting her features.

JIANG FANG

Please, He. I need your help. Luo Qiao's been set up.

He Yan raises an eyebrow, considering.

HE YAN

Mrs. Jiang, I've ditched criminal law, remember?

Jiang Fang leans forward, desperation in her voice.

JIANG FANG

This is different! He was just trying to spook Yao Jiancheng, not harm him.

He Yan sighs, tapping his pen rhythmically.

HE YAN

Even spooking can land you in hot water, you know.

Jiang Fang's voice rises, urgency palpable.

JIANG FANG

I know, but Yao was trying to swallow the whole project! Luo Qiao was pushed into a corner!

He Yan studies her, then nods slowly.

HE YAN
It's a complex case. I need to dig
through the files.

Jiang Fang exhales, relief mingled with hope.

JIANG FANG
So, you'll give it a shot?

He Yan leans back, a thoughtful smile touching his lips.

HE YAN
No promises, but I'll give it my
best shot.

Jiang Fang stands, gratitude in her eyes.

JIANG FANG
Thanks, He.

As she leaves, He Yan watches, contemplation etched into his face. He picks up the file, shadows flickering over his determined expression.

INT. QINGXIN DISTRICT COURT - DAY

A charged atmosphere grips the courtroom. Yao Jiancheng, exuding confidence in a tailored suit, wears a smug grin.

Jiang Fang fidgets in the gallery, anxiety etched into her features.

Luo Qiao and four other defendants shuffle in, their expressions a mix of defiance and dread.

The CHIEF JUDGE (54), stern and commanding, silences the room with a sharp gavel crack.

CHIEF JUDGE
The court will now hear the case
against Luo Qiao and others,
charged with attempted murder.

His gaze, sharp as a hawk's, lands on Luo Qiao.

CHIEF JUDGE
Defendant Luo Qiao, do you know the
plaintiff Yao Jiancheng?

LUO QIAO
No.

The Chief Judge turns to Yao Jiancheng.

CHIEF JUDGE
Plaintiff Yao Jiancheng, do you
know the defendant Luo Qiao?

YAO JIANCHENG
Not at all.

CHIEF JUDGE
Then why invest two million in "PR"
related to him?

LUO QIAO
He's hijacking our development
rights—my life's work!

Yao Jiancheng smirks, sarcasm lacing his voice.

YAO JIANCHENG
I was safeguarding the project
after some arrests. Didn't know of
his stake.

He dismisses Luo Qiao with a glance.

YAO JIANCHENG
Don't dress up murder-for-hire as
"PR."

Luo Qiao's voice rises, indignant.

LUO QIAO
"PR" was Fang Gang's term. We were
partners, Yao! You cut us out—thief
is still a thief!

Chaos erupts. The judge fights for control.

CHIEF JUDGE
Silence! Prosecution, your
statement.

ZHENG CEN (38), the prosecutor, rises with the gravity of a
hanging judge.

ZHENG CEN
Luo Qiao, driven by financial
dispute, conspired to kill Yao
Jiancheng. He used
intermediaries—Fang Gang, Fang
Yuan, and Yang Tianxiang—to engage
Fan Si. Fan Si then colluded with
Yao to fake a crime scene.
Intentional homicide, Your Honor.
We seek severe punishment.

All eyes turn to the defense lawyer, He Yan, poised for counterattack.

HE YAN

Your Honor, the evidence is riddled with gaps. The photos, the phone—provided by the plaintiff—are unreliable.

He Yan's words stir the courtroom, whispers of doubt flutter through the crowd.

HE YAN

Fan Si's actions prove no intent to kill, merely a ruse to deceive.

As the debate crescendos, the Chief Judge calls for calm, deliberation imminent.

CHIEF JUDGE

I will now announce the verdict! Having reviewed the evidence, the court finds it insufficient to convict the five defendants of intentional homicide.

Relief floods Luo Qiao and his co-defendants, disbelief etched on their faces.

Jiang Fang covers her mouth, tears of joy brimming.

EXT. COURTHOUSE STEPS - DAY

Luo Qiao exits the courthouse, the sun a relentless inferno overhead. REPORTERS swarm, cameras flashing like lightning.

LUO QIAO

No comment. Please, give us space.

He pushes through the crowd, Jiang Fang by his side, their steps syncopated by relief and resolve.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Wang Xiuhong stands, eyes bright with excitement, facing Luo Qiao, who reclines in his chair, finally relaxed.

WANG XIUHONG

You're out! And guess what? Yao Jiancheng called. He dropped the lawsuit and apologized!

Luo Qiao raises an eyebrow, cautious.

LUO QIAO
Really? What spooked him so bad?

Wang Xiuhong leans in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

WANG XIUHONG
Rumor is he's so scared, he's got
bodyguards swarming him like bees.

Luo Qiao nods, a cautious smile on his face.

LUO QIAO
He must be brewing something. We
can't slack off now. Start the
construction right away. No time to
waste!

Wang Xiuhong gives him a thumbs-up, determination etched on her face.

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

Excavators hum like a victorious chorus.

Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang perch on a grassy mound, tension dissolving from Luo Qiao's face.

LUO QIAO
With Yao backing off, it's like a
mountain off my shoulders.

Jiang Fang turns to him, a teasing glint in her eyes.

JIANG FANG
(Playfully)
Weren't you the brave one before?

Luo Qiao chuckles, shaking his head.

LUO QIAO
When you're cornered, you gotta
play the part. But man, it was
terrifying.

Her smile fades, curiosity taking hold.

JIANG FANG
(Concerned)
What about Fang Gang? Did he ever
come back?

Luo Qiao sighs, gaze drifting to the horizon.

LUO QIAO
Vanished after the trial. Just
poof, gone.

JIANG FANG
And the money?

Luo Qiao shrugs, self-mocking smile.

LUO QIAO
Vaporized. But hey, his dad needed
it for treatment.

Jiang Fang squeezes his hand, offering silent support. In the distance, excavators press on, forging a new path for the future.

INT. JIANCHENG REAL ESTATE - CEO'S OFFICE - DAY

Yao Jiancheng sits alone, the city lights twinkling outside his panoramic window.

He picks up a framed photo of a younger, happier him standing with his father on a construction site.

YAO JIANCHENG (V.O.)
(To the photo)
They think it's easy. They think
it's all about greed. You taught
me better than that.

He lifted his teacup and set it down again.

YAO JIANCHENG (V.O.)
This city... it chews you up and
spits you out if you're not
careful. Luo Qiao... he's playing a
dangerous game. He doesn't
understand the stakes.

He sets the photo down, a shadow crossing his face.

YAO JIANCHENG (V.O.)
I have to protect what we built.
Even if it means playing dirty.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Dim light casts shadows on the walls. Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang sit in silence, chopsticks clinking against bowls.

Luo Qiao fidgets, words caught in his throat.

JIANG FANG

What's on your mind? You look like you're about to ask for a loan.

LUO QIAO

Uh... where'd you stash those bulldozer invoices?

JIANG FANG

Thinking of selling again?

LUO QIAO

Need a little financial cushion.

A sharp knock interrupts them. Luo Qiao returns with a court summons.

JIANG FANG

Property fees?

LUO QIAO

Court's reopening our case.

They exchange horrified looks. Luo Qiao dials Fang Gang.

LUO QIAO

Fang Gang, got the summons?

FANG GANG (V.O.)

Yeah. We toast?

LUO QIAO

Stay cool. Stick to our story. PR money was just to scare, not kill. Fan Si was after a con.

FANG GANG (V.O.)

Right... hope it works.

Luo Qiao nods, mind drifting to memories of the past.

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BEGIN FLASHBACKS:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

Dust swirls as angry farmers, armed with hoes and shovels, surround Luo Qiao and Fang Gang's vehicles, faces ablaze with fury.

OLD FARMER

Look what your trucks did to our crops!

LUO QIAO

(Frantically)

Sir, I told you, we're just workers. Talk to the project manager.

BALD FARMER

It was him! Promised no trucks at night, then worked all night!

HOTHEADED FARMER

Let's teach him a lesson!

Farmers advance, tools raised. Luo Qiao weaves through them, pleading.

LUO QIAO

Brothers, let's talk! No need for violence!

Fang Gang intercepts a shovel, kicking the hotheaded farmer into a ditch.

The farmer rises, charging at Luo Qiao, but Fang Gang shoves him aside, taking a blow on his shoulder.

Fueled by adrenaline, Fang Gang disperses the farmers.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Back in reality, Luo Qiao extends an olive branch.

LUO QIAO

Come back to work, Gang.

FANG GANG (V.O.)

No.

The call ends. Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang sit in silent despair.

INT. NANAN INTERMEDIATE PEOPLE'S COURT - DAY

The courtroom hums with solemnity. The CHIEF JUDGE (43) , a man weathered by countless cases, presides.

Jiang Fang sits in the gallery, worry etched on her face.

CHIEF JUDGE
Defendant, did you instigate others
against Mr. Yao Jiancheng?

Luo Qiao sits, sweat trickling down his brow.

LUO QIAO
Never meant harm. Just protecting
my family and business.

CHIEF JUDGE
Why hand Fang Gang 2 million yuan?

Luo Qiao's grip tightens, voice strained.

LUO QIAO
Scare tactics, that's all. Told him
to warn Yao, maybe rough him up,
but no killing!

CHIEF JUDGE
Bring Fang Gang up!

TWO BAILIFFS escort Fang Gang into the courtroom.

CHIEF JUDGE
What did Luo Qiao say when he gave
you the 2 million?

FANG GANG
"Warn him," he said. "No killing."

The Chief Judge signals for Fang Yuan, Yang Tianxiang, and
Fan Si, who echo Fang Gang's testimony.

CHIEF JUDGE
Then why the photos of Yao
Jiancheng 'being blown up'?

FAN SI
I thought it would shock him more,
scare him effectively!

Chuckles ripple through the gallery, even the Chief Judge
suppresses a smile.

CHIEF JUDGE
Court is now in recess for
deliberation.

The courtroom falls silent, the ticking clock echoing like a
heartbeat.

INT. NANAN INTERMEDIATE PEOPLE'S COURT - DAY

The courtroom is tense. The Judge, weary but stoic, reads the verdict:

JUDGE

Upon review, the evidence is
insufficient to find the defendants
guilty of intentional homicide...

Luo Qiao and the others exhale collectively, relief washing over them. Jiang Fang covers her mouth, tears of joy streaming.

CHIEF JUDGE

(bangs gavel)

In accordance with the Criminal Law
of the People's Republic of China,
the verdict is as follows: uphold
the original judgment, the five
defendants are acquitted!

The gavel's echo is a symphony to their ears. Luo Qiao and his co-defendants embrace like shipwreck survivors finding land.

Jiang Fang's smile beams through her tears, eyes bright with hope.

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA DEVELOPMENT SITE - DAY

Machines roar, dust clouds the sky. Luo Qiao and Wang Jian, helmets askew, navigate the chaos with childlike delight.

LUO QIAO

Chief Luo, you're my hero! That
cement and rebar deal was a
lifesaver!

WANG JIAN

(grinning)

Chief Luo, you bet your life on
this project. How could I not pull
out all the stops?

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao strides in, optimism radiating.

He freezes as Jiang Fang's stern gaze shrinks his bravado.

LUO QIAO
Honey, what's eating you? Who's
ruffled your feathers this time?

JIANG FANG
Sit down!

Luo Qiao sinks into the chair, suppressing each breath.

JIANG FANG
Did you cut corners on the highway
project?

LUO QIAO
How could I?! Don't you trust me?

JIANG FANG
So it was built to national
standards?

LUO QIAO
National standards? That's a
surefire way to go broke! I just
followed the budget the higher-ups
gave...

JIANG FANG
Ran into Fang Gang at the market.
He said there was a landslide on
the highway, and someone got
arrested!

LUO QIAO
The cave-in's a cement issue,
nothing to do with us! Our
section's rock solid!

Jiang Fang's tension eases slightly.

LUO QIAO
What's Fang Gang up to these days?

JIANG FANG
He and Fang Yuan opened a
slaughterhouse, supplying meat to
butcher shops.

LUO QIAO
Business good?

JIANG FANG
I hear it's not bad.

EXT. LABOR MARKET - DAY

A silver van screeches to a halt, Yang Tianxiang and Fan Si leap out, their voices slicing through the crowd like knives.

YANG TIANXIANG
Carpenters! Bricklayers!

FAN SI
Experienced preferred! Wages
negotiable!

Applicants swarm, eyes wide with hope.

EXT. QUEENS VILLA COMPLEX - DAY

Three years on, the barren wasteland flourishes as a high-end villa complex.

Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang stand before a villa, shadows stretching in the setting sun.

LUO QIAO
This one for your brother, or the
one by the road?

JIANG FANG
This one.

LUO QIAO
Why do you like being next to the
curb?

JIANG FANG
Easier to find when drunk.

LUO QIAO
Tease!

Laughter shared, peace momentarily restored. A call interrupts, draining Luo Qiao's smile.

LUO QIAO
Hello, court? Okay, I'm coming.

JIANG FANG
What's wrong now?

LUO QIAO
The prosecutor's office is
appealing again, wants to retry the
Yao Jiancheng case...

INT. INTERMEDIATE PEOPLE'S COURT - DAY

The courtroom buzzes with anticipation. Jiang Fang fidgets in the front row. Luo Qiao and others stand in the dock, faces tense.

CHIEF JUDGE

Court is in session! We'll announce the verdict for Luo Qiao et al., charged with attempted murder.

ZHENG CEN

Your Honor, previous trials misjudged. We protest!

HE YAN

Your Honor, evidence is weak, full of holes. Key evidence mishandled, some testimonies suspect.

Zheng Cen leans forward, zealous.

ZHENG CEN

Post-trial, we found collusion among the defendants! Luo Qiao's trip to Sanya was a calculated alibi!

He Yan waves a dismissive hand, a feline smile playing on his lips.

HE YAN

My client returned to prevent any crime, proving no intent to kill. Attempted murder doesn't apply.

CHIEF JUDGE

Arguments concluded. Panel will deliberate.

INT. COLLEGIAL PANEL DELIBERATION ROOM - DAY

Judges clash like gladiators, their debates fierce. Case files teeter on the table. A mountain of cigarette butts fills the ashtray.

JUDGE A

This case has been retried thrice. What's the right verdict?

JUDGE B, a skeptic with a detailed eye, taps his pen.

JUDGE B

There are gaps in the evidence. Luo Qiao claims he only intended 'public relations,' not murder.

JUDGE C, a cynic with a wry smile, snorts.

JUDGE C

'Public relations?' Two million for that? Who's he kidding?

The CHIEF JUDGE raises a hand, quelling the noise.

CHIEF JUDGE

Enough bickering! The crux is, Luo Qiao's money trickled down through subcontracting. By the end, just 100,000 reached the hitman. Is that intentional homicide?

INT. INTERMEDIATE PEOPLE'S COURT - CONTINUOUS

Judges reclaim their seats, expressions taut with the weight of judgment.

JUDGE A

(bangs gavel)
Deliberation concluded! The chief judge will now read the judgment.

The Chief judge unfurls the judgment, a dramatic gesture akin to a general declaring a preposterous battle.

CHIEF JUDGE

(reads judgment)
This court finds the actions of the original trial defendants Luo Qiao, Fang Gang, Fang Yuan, Yang Tianxiang, and Fan Si...

Luo Qiao clutches the dock's railings, palms sweaty, heart hammering like a band of timpani players on their first day.

CHIEF JUDGE

...In accordance with the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, the judgment is as follows:

Time freezes. Only the chief judge's voice pierces the silence.

CHIEF JUDGE

One, revoke Criminal Judgment No. 249 of the Qingxin District People's Court of Nan'an City; Two, sentence the defendant Luo Qiao to five years imprisonment and deprivation of political rights for one year; Three, sentence the defendant Fang Gang to three years and six months imprisonment; Four, sentence the defendant Fang Yuan to three years and three months imprisonment; Five, sentence the defendant Yang Tianxiang to three years imprisonment; Six, sentence the defendant Fan Si to two years and seven months imprisonment...

Luo Qiao slumps into his chair, ashen. Regret coils around his heart like a serpent. His carefully crafted plan shatters, leaving only cuffs.

In the gallery, Jiang Fang's face reveals resigned sorrow.

Cameras click like locusts, capturing the gravity of the moment.

JUDGE

(bangs gavel)

Silence! Court adjourned!

Bailiffs guide Luo Qiao and the others from the courtroom, shadows trailing like faded echoes of a somber melody.

INT. PRISON - WORKSHOP - DAY

Luo Qiao struggles with the monotonous task of assembling electronics, his mind elsewhere. The THIN PRISONER (43) sneers, pointing to a faulty circuit board.

THIN PRISONER

Still dreaming of loopholes, Luo?
Some circuits can't be bypassed.

Luo Qiao glares, but the words sting. He throws the board down, frustration boiling over.

LUO QIAO

Shut up! You think you know anything about me?

THIN PRISONER

I know a con man when I see one.
Just like you, I thought I could
game the system.

The BURLY PRISONER (46), observing from nearby, approaches.
He places a heavy hand on Luo Qiao's shoulder.

BURLY PRISONER

Leave him be. He's learning.

He gestures to a nearby table where a chessboard sits, pieces
neatly arranged.

BURLY PRISONER

Care for a game? Helps pass the
time. And teaches a thing or two
about consequences.

Luo Qiao hesitates, then joins him. They play in silence,
the only sound the clack of plastic pieces.

LUO QIAO

You seem... different. Not like
the others.

BURLY PRISONER

We all make choices. Some land us
here. I built a faulty foundation,
and the whole structure collapsed.
Took others down with me.

He captures Luo Qiao's knight.

BURLY PRISONER

Every move has a consequence. You
can't just bulldoze your way
through life. Sometimes, the law
is the only stable ground.

Luo Qiao stares at the board, seeing not just the game, but
his own life. The deals, the betrayals, the shortcuts - all
leading to this.

LUO QIAO

I thought I was playing chess.
Turns out, I was just a pawn.

BURLY PRISONER

We all are, in the end. The
question is, what kind of game are
you playing? And are you willing
to play by the rules?

The Burly Prisoner looks at Luo Qiao intently, his gaze piercing. Luo Qiao looks down at the chessboard, a flicker of understanding dawning in his eyes.

INT. PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

Luo Qiao sits across from Jiang Fang. Time has etched lines into their faces.

Luo Qiao reaches for her hand, pulling back, eyes full of regret.

JIANG FANG
You've changed.

LUO QIAO
Who wouldn't here?

JIANG FANG
Wanted to bring Tongtong. Shi Mao
said kids shouldn't come here.

LUO QIAO
Shi Mao's out?

JIANG FANG
Early release. First thing he did
was beat up Yao Jiancheng. Almost
landed back here.

LUO QIAO
Some never change. How's Tongtong's
school?

JIANG FANG
Started last year. Doing well.

Jiang Fang bursts into tears.

LUO QIAO
What's wrong?

JIANG FANG
Tongtong asked, "Is Dad a
murderer?"

Luo Qiao looks stricken.

LUO QIAO
Does he... hate me?

JIANG FANG

He's too young for hate, Luo Qiao.
He just misses you.

LUO QIAO

I chased fame and fortune... forgot
what really mattered.

JIANG FANG

In life, who doesn't grow while
wiping away tears?

A guard signals time's up. Jiang Fang hands Luo Qiao a law book.

JIANG FANG

Study this. Don't be like before.

Luo Qiao grips the bars.

LUO QIAO

Tell Tongtong... I'm trying to be
better. A better man, a better
father.

JIANG FANG

I will. We're all waiting for you
at home!

Luo Qiao watches her leave, eyes full of longing and regret.

INT. PRISON - WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Luo Qiao sits alone, meticulously carving a small wooden figure of Guanyin. The Thin Prisoner approaches, sneering.

THIN PRISONER

Praying to idols won't get you out
of here, Luo.

Luo Qiao ignores him, continuing to carve.

THIN PRISONER

Only thing that matters in here is
power. And you ain't got none.

The Burly Prisoner appears, placing a hand on the Thin Prisoner's shoulder.

BURLY PRISONER

Leave him be. He's finding his own
kind of power.

The Thin Prisoner slinks away. The Burly Prisoner nods at the carving.

BURLY PRISONER
 She's a symbol of compassion,
 right? Mercy. Things we could all
 use a little more of in here.

Luo Qiao looks up, surprised.

BURLY PRISONER
 I've had a lot of time to read in
 here. To think. About the choices
 I made. The harm I caused.

He pauses, his voice softening.

BURLY PRISONER
 Compassion isn't weakness, Luo
 Qiao. It's strength. It's what
 gets you through this.

He walks away, leaving Luo Qiao to contemplate his words, the small Guanyin figure a silent promise in his hands.

INT. PRISON - LIBRARY - DAY

Luo Qiao sits at a table, surrounded by law books. He's not just reading them now; he's studying them, highlighting passages, taking notes.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
 The Burly Prisoner was right. The
 law isn't just a set of rules to be
 manipulated. It's a framework for
 a just society. A way to protect
 the vulnerable. A way to right
 wrongs.

He closes a book, a newfound understanding dawning in his eyes.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
 I used to think justice was a game.
 Now I realize it's a
 responsibility.

FLASHFORWARDS:

- Fang Gang at a sewing machine, sweat on his brow.
- Fang Yuan with a heavy bucket of pig slop.

- Yang Tianxiang shapes bricks, covered in mud.
- Fan Si scatters birdseed, pigeons fluttering.

FLASHFORWARDS ENDED.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
 My decisions dragged them all down.
 Time to rethink my life. The law's
 not just a cheat code—it's a shield
 for justice. True strength is
 respecting both law and morality.

INT. PRISON - WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Under dim light, Fang Gang slumps over a garment, sorrow heavy in his voice.

FANG GANG (V.O.)
 (sorrowful)
 Luo Qiao, I let you down.

He pulls out a crumpled letter.

LUO QIAO (LETTER, V.O.)
 Greed blinded me, Gang. Thought
 money could buy it all, even
 justice. It cost us everything.
 Hope you can forgive me.

FANG GANG (V.O.)
 You never forced me. I loved being
 the muscle, but I was just a pawn.

Fang Gang, sobbing, throws the letter.

FANG GANG (V.O.)
 (whisper)
 I'm the one needing forgiveness.

INT. PRISON - WORKSHOP - DAY - FIVE YEARS LATER

Dim light stretches shadows across the workshop. Luo Qiao, older, instructs a young inmate, patience etched in every line of his face.

LUO QIAO
 Easy now, precision over speed.

The young inmate glances at him, defiance mingling with admiration.

YOUNG INMATE
First thing out, I'm settling
scores.

Luo Qiao chuckles softly, a knowing sound.

LUO QIAO
Still chasing shadows? Learn from
your mistakes.

YOUNG INMATE
What about my money? Just let it
go?

Luo Qiao smiles slightly.

LUO QIAO
Not at all. Use the law. I'll help
you.

He smiles, a genuine smile that reaches his eyes. The Thin Prisoner, also older, watches him with respect.

EXT. PRISON GATES - DAY

The gates swing open, and Luo Qiao steps out into the sunlight, a free man.

Jiang Fang and Tongtong rush towards him, their faces beaming. Tongtong is taller now, but his eyes still shine with the same innocent adoration.

Luo Qiao embraces them, holding them close, savoring the feeling of freedom and the warmth of their love.

TONGTONG
Dad! You're home!

Luo Qiao looks at his son, then at Jiang Fang, a promise etched in his eyes.

LUO QIAO (V.O.)
Respecting the law makes a better
man. It starts with believing in
it. And that belief needs an
independent judiciary. Without
corruption, projects thrive. Then
families like ours won't live in
fear. Maybe this chess game has
just begun.

He takes their hands. They walk away, a reunited family, ready for whatever life throws at them, legally this time.

FADE OUT.