

## THE MIDDLE MAN

FADE IN:

INT. PRISON DORMITORY - DAY

A cramped concrete cell with rusted bars. Sunlight filters through grimy windows, casting long shadows across cracked walls. The air is thick with the smell of industrial disinfectant and despair.

LUO QIAO (51) sits on his thin bunk, fingers tracing invisible calculations on the rough blanket. Once commanding in expensive suits, he's now weathered by years of confinement—a businessman reduced to prison blues and hollow eyes.

In his hands, a worn photograph: a younger Luo, radiant JIANG FANG (35), and their toddler TONGTONG on a beach, all smiles and sunlight.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

*(bitter, reflective)*

Subcontracting.

He lets out a derisive snort, a mocking smile curling his lips.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

Every industry's the same. I spent two million to settle a business dispute, but by the time it reached the contractor, there was only two hundred fifty thousand left. Makes no difference—"subcontracting" is etched into our DNA...

He traces Jiang Fang's face in the photo with a trembling finger.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

I wish I could go back to them...  
Before I became just another middleman in a chain that destroyed everything I touched.

SOUND: Cell doors CLANG open. BREAKFAST CALL echoes through the corridor.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.) (CONT'D)**

They say confession is good for  
the soul. But some confessions  
come too late to save anything  
except your conscience.

He tucks the photo away and stands, preparing to face another day of punishment for crimes that seemed like solutions at the time.

TITLE CARD: "THREE YEARS EARLIER"

EXT. LUO QIAO'S EQUIPMENT YARD - MORNING

A sprawling lot filled with construction equipment—excavators, cement mixers, cranes in various states of repair. Mountains of steel and machinery under a canopy of industrial ambition. The air tastes of motor oil and possibility.

LUO QIAO, 48, strides through the yard with the confidence of a man who has built his fortune from scrap metal and determination. His clothes are expensive but practical—someone who has earned his success rather than inherited it.

FANG GANG (45) leans against a massive excavator, his bulk making the machine look almost delicate. He's polishing the blade with the care of someone who understands the value of proper maintenance.

**LUO QIAO**

*(approaching with coffee)*

How's the knee holding up?

**FANG GANG**

*(accepting the coffee)*

Better since the surgery. Your money made all the difference, brother.

**LUO QIAO**

*(dismissing)*

My mother's hip replacement, your mother's knee surgery. That's what brothers do.

**FANG GANG**

*(serious)*

Three hundred thousand yuan. That's not just brotherly love—that's family money.

**LUO QIAO**

*(grinning)*

Everything I have, I built with my hands and your back. We're closer than blood, Gang.

They watch as WORKERS prep equipment for the day's rentals. The yard bustles with purposeful activity—men who know their trade and take pride in it.

**FANG GANG**

*(studying a work order)*

Shi Mao's requesting the big excavator again. Third time this month.

**LUO QIAO**

*(calculating)*

He's breaking ground on that Queen's Villa project. Luxury condos for people with more money than sense.

**FANG GANG**

*(suspicious)*

And why exactly are we not part of that project?

**LUO QIAO**

*(pause)*

Because we're equipment rental, not construction contracting.

**FANG GANG**

*(not buying it)*

Since when has that stopped you from expanding?

Luo's phone RINGS. "Jiang Fang" appears on the screen with a photo of her holding Tongtong.

**LUO QIAO**

*(answering)*

Morning, beautiful.

**JIANG FANG (V.O.)**

*(over phone, tense)*

Your son is asking why daddy leaves before he wakes up.

**LUO QIAO**

*(checking his watch)*

Business doesn't sleep, Fang. You know this.

**JIANG FANG (V.O.)**

*(sharper)*

Neither do worried wives. Come home for lunch today. We need to talk.

The line goes dead. Luo stares at his phone, Fang Gang reading his expression.

**FANG GANG**

Marriage troubles?

**LUO QIAO**

*(defensive)*

Marriage complications. There's a difference.

**FANG GANG**

*(amused)*

Brother, I've been married fifteen years. There's no difference.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

A modern apartment that speaks of recent prosperity—new appliances, imported fixtures, but still maintaining touches of traditional Chinese family life. Children's toys scattered on expensive marble floors.

JIANG FANG chops vegetables with mechanical precision, her movements sharp with suppressed frustration. She's beautiful in an understated way, but tension lines her features.

TONGTONG (4) sits at the kitchen table, building towers with colorful blocks and knocking them down with gleeful destruction.

**TONGTONG**

*(giggling)*

Boom! Building falls down!

**JIANG FANG**

*(not looking up from chopping)*

Not all buildings fall down, sweetheart. Only the ones built badly.

Luo enters, loosening his tie. The sight of his family should bring comfort, but today it amplifies his anxiety.

**LUO QIAO**

*(kissing Jiang Fang's  
cheek)*

Smells good. What's the occasion?

**JIANG FANG**

*(continued chopping)*

We need to discuss your meeting with Shi Mao tomorrow.

**LUO QIAO**

*(surprised)*

How did you—

**JIANG FANG**

*(turning to face him)*

Wang Xiuhong called. She's worried about the Queen's Villa project.

**LUO QIAO**

*(defensive)*

Wang Xiuhong worries about everything. It's why she's good at her job.

**JIANG FANG**

*(stepping closer) )*

She says the soil reports are questionable. The safety inspections rushed. The whole project feels... wrong.

Tongtong's blocks CRASH to the floor. He claps happily at the destruction.

**TONGTONG**

Again! Again!

**LUO QIAO**

*(crouching to help  
rebuild) )*

Everything in construction feels  
wrong until it's finished, Fang.  
That's the nature of building  
something from nothing.

**JIANG FANG**

*(sitting across from him)*

Did you marry me because you saw I  
had money?

The question hits like a physical blow. Luo's hands still  
on the blocks.

**LUO QIAO**

*(shocked)*

What?

**JIANG FANG**

*(meeting his eyes)*

My father's connections in city  
planning. My family's reputation  
in real estate. Did those factor  
into your decision to marry me?

**LUO QIAO**

*(standing abruptly)*

That's... that's an awful thing to  
ask.

**JIANG FANG**

*(calmly)*

Is it? Because sometimes, lying  
next to you at night, I wonder if  
I'm your wife or just another  
business asset.



**TONGTONG**

*(sensing tension)*

Mama? Daddy? Why are you sad?

**JIANG FANG**

*(forcing a smile)*

We're not sad, baby. We're just talking about grown-up things.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling)*

Jiang Fang, I love you. I've always loved you. From the first day we met at your father's construction site.

**JIANG FANG**

*(bitter)*

My father's construction site. Yes, I remember. You were there selling equipment, and I was there because daddy wanted me to understand the family business.

**LUO QIAO**

*(defensive)*

That doesn't mean—

**JIANG FANG**

*(interrupting) )*

It doesn't mean it didn't help either, does it? My connections opened doors for you. My father's reputation gave you credibility.

She picks up Tongtong, who clings to her like a life preserver in the storm of adult emotions.

**JIANG FANG**

*(quieter)*

(I need to know, Luo. If  
I had nothing—no family  
money, no connections,  
no father in real  
estate—would you have  
still chosen me?)

**LUO QIAO**

*(after a long pause)*

I... I can't separate who you are  
from where you come from. Neither  
can you.

**JIANG FANG**

*(nodding sadly)*

That's what I was afraid you'd say.

She carries Tongtong toward the bedroom, leaving Luo alone  
in the kitchen surrounded by the expensive trappings of a  
success that suddenly feels hollow.

**LUO QIAO**

*(calling after her)*

Fang, that doesn't mean I don't  
love you!

**JIANG FANG**

*(not turning back)*

I know you love me, Luo. I'm just  
not sure you love me for the right  
reasons.

The apartment falls silent except for the HUM of expensive  
appliances and the distant sound of construction from the  
city beyond.

INT. LOCAL RESTAURANT - NIGHT

A modest establishment where construction workers and small business owners gather after long days. Red lanterns cast warm light over worn wooden tables. The air is thick with the smell of garlic, ginger, and honest sweat.

Luo and Fang Gang sit at a corner table, empty beer bottles accumulating like evidence of their long friendship. Between them, the easy comfort of men who have shared years of struggle and success.

**FANG GANG**

*(refilling Luo's glass)*

Women. They think too much.

**LUO QIAO**

*(drinking deeply)*

Maybe they think the right amount,  
and we think too little.

**FANG GANG**

*(laughing)*

Brother, you're getting  
philosophical. That's never a good  
sign.

**LUO QIAO**

*(serious)*

Gang, do you think I married Jiang  
Fang for the wrong reasons?

**FANG GANG**

*(considering)*

Does it matter? You're married now.  
She's happy now. Tongtong's  
healthy.

**LUO QIAO**

*(frustrated)*

But what if she's right? What if I  
used her family connections to  
build my business?

**FANG GANG**

*(leaning forward)*

And what if you did? You think her  
father didn't benefit from your  
equipment rentals? You think she  
didn't benefit from your success?

He gestures around the restaurant.

**FANG GANG (CONT'D)**

Everything is connections, brother.  
Everything is using what you have  
to get what you need. That's not  
crime—that's survival.

**LUO QIAO**

*(doubt creeping in)*

Then why does it feel like crime?

**FANG GANG**

*(serious)*

Because you're thinking too much.  
Like your wife.

Luo's phone BUZZES. A text from Shi Mao: "Meeting tomorrow  
2 PM. Come prepared to discuss partnership opportunities.  
Big money."

**FANG GANG (CONT'D)**

*(reading over his  
shoulder)*

Shi Mao?

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding)*  
Queen's Villa project. He wants to  
bring us in as partners.

**FANG GANG**

*(whistling)*  
Partnership in a fifty-million-  
yuan project? That's life-changing  
money.

**LUO QIAO**

*(hesitant)*

Jiang Fang thinks something's wrong with the project.

**FANG GANG**

*(firm)*  
Jiang Fang thinks something's  
wrong with everything that makes  
money. Women see problems. Men see  
opportunities.

**LUO QIAO**

*(considering)* )  
What if she's right this time?

**FANG GANG**

*(clasping his shoulder)*  
Brother, you helped me pay for my  
mother's surgery. You've been  
there for every crisis, every  
celebration, every stupid decision  
I've made for fifteen years.

He raises his glass.

**FANG GANG (CONT'D)**

If this opportunity can set up our  
families for life, shouldn't we at  
least listen?

**LUO QIAO**

*(clinking glasses)*

To listening. And to hoping we  
hear the right things.

They drink, but the toast feels more like a prayer than a  
celebration.

INT. SHI MAO'S OFFICE - DAY

Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the city's skyline like a  
promise of what money can build. SHI MAO (50s) stands  
behind a desk that could double as a aircraft carrier,  
studying architectural models of Queen's Villa.

The models are beautiful—luxury towers rising from  
landscaped grounds, promising lives of comfort and status  
for those who can afford them.

LUO QIAO and FANG GANG enter, their equipment yard clothes  
replaced by business suits that mark them as potential  
partners rather than service providers.

**SHI MAO**

*(not turning from the  
models)*

Gentlemen. Welcome to the future  
of luxury living in our city.

**LUO QIAO**

*(examining the models)*

Impressive. What's the target  
market?

**SHI MAO**

*(turning with a smile)*

People like yourselves. Successful  
businessmen who want homes that  
reflect their achievements.

**FANG GANG**

*(studying blueprints)*

Construction timeline?

**SHI MAO**

*(spreading papers across  
the desk)*

Eighteen months from  
groundbreaking to occupancy.  
Aggressive but achievable.

**LUO QIAO**

*(noting details) )*

The soil reports show some...  
inconsistencies.

**SHI MAO**

*(waving dismissively)*

Paperwork complications. Nothing  
that can't be resolved with  
proper... coordination.

The word 'coordination' hangs in the air like smoke,  
carrying implications nobody wants to name directly.

**FANG GANG**

*(blunt)*

What kind of coordination?

**SHI MAO**

*(leaning forward) )*

The kind that ensures inspectors  
see what they need to see. That  
approvals happen on schedule. That  
construction proceeds without  
bureaucratic delays.

**LUO QIAO**

*(uncomfortable)*

That sounds like—

**SHI MAO**

*(interrupting)*

Standard business practice. Every  
major project requires  
relationship management.

He pulls out a contract, the numbers at the bottom making  
both men lean forward.

**SHI MAO**

Twenty percent of gross profits.  
Plus equipment rental fees at  
premium rates. Plus management  
consulting fees.

**FANG GANG**

*(whistling softly)*

That's... that's substantial money.

**SHI MAO**

*(studying their faces)*

Substantial enough to set up your  
families for generations. To send  
your children to the best schools.  
To build legacies.

**LUO QIAO**

*(hesitant) )*

What's the catch?

**SHI MAO**

*(serious)*

YAO JIANCHENG is trying to steal  
this project. He's been meeting  
with city officials, questioning  
our permits, spreading rumors  
about safety violations.

**FANG GANG**

*(alert)*

What kind of rumors?



**SHI MAO**

*(bitter)*

That our soil reports are  
falsified. That our safety  
measures are inadequate. That the  
entire project is built on  
fraudulent documentation.

**LUO QIAO**

*(nervous)*

Are they?

**SHI MAO**

*(direct)*

Does it matter? In construction,  
every project bends rules. The  
question is whether you bend them  
safely and profitably, or whether  
you let competitors destroy you  
with idealistic nonsense.

Luo's phone BUZZES. A text from Jiang Fang: "How's the  
meeting? Remember what we discussed."

**SHI MAO (CONT'D)**

*(noticing the text)*

Family concerns?

**LUO QIAO**

*(pocketing phone) )*

My wife worries about the  
project's... ethics.

**SHI MAO**

*(laughing)*

Ethics don't feed families. Ethics  
don't pay for children's education.  
Ethics don't build retirement  
security.

He taps the contract.

**SHI MAO (CONT'D)**

But partnerships do. Practical decisions do. Understanding that business requires compromise.

**FANG GANG**

*(to Luo)*

Brother, this is the opportunity we've been working toward for twenty years.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling)*

I need time to consider—

**SHI MAO**

*(urgent)*

Time is what we don't have. Yao Jiancheng files his official complaints tomorrow. Once investigations begin, this project dies, and your opportunity dies with it.

**FANG GANG**

*(pressing)*

Luo, we can solve problems as partners. We can't solve anything as outsiders.

Luo stares at the contract, seeing in the numbers a future where his son grows up secure, where his wife never again questions his motivations, where his friendship with Fang Gang deepens into shared success.

**LUO QIAO**

*(after a long pause)*

What exactly do you need us to do?

**SHI MAO**

*(smiling)*

Ensure project continuity. Handle relationship management. Solve problems that threaten construction schedules.

**LUO QIAO**

*(specific)*

Solve them how?

**SHI MAO**

*(meeting his eyes)*

However necessary.

The office falls silent except for the HUM of air conditioning and the distant sound of construction cranes reshaping the city skyline.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

Queen's Villa rises from raw earth like a promise being kept in steel and concrete. Workers swarm the site with the organized chaos of major construction—cranes swinging materials, cement trucks arriving in steady succession, the symphony of building something substantial from nothing.

Luo stands at the site's edge wearing a hard hat that feels both empowering and heavy. The weight of responsibility, literal and metaphorical.

WANG XIUHONG (40s) approaches with a clipboard and the worried expression of someone who has learned to see problems before they become catastrophes.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(anxious)*

The foundation inspectors are scheduled for tomorrow.

**LUO QIAO**

*(watching the construction) )*

Good. Let them inspect.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(hesitant) )*

The soil density reports they'll  
be checking... they don't match  
the soil we're actually building  
on.

Luo turns to face her, reading the implications in her  
expression.

**LUO QIAO**

*(carefully) )*

What kind of discrepancy?

**WANG XIUHONG**

The kind that suggests someone  
paid for reports that show what  
they needed them to show, rather  
than what the soil actually  
supports.

**LUO QIAO**

*(nervous)*

How significant?

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(direct)*

Significant enough that if these  
buildings collapse in an  
earthquake, every resident dies.

The words hit like physical blows. Around them, workers  
continue their tasks, unaware they're building potential  
death traps.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the  
construction) )*

What would it cost to fix the  
foundation properly?

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(calculating)*

Tear down everything built so far.  
Start over with proper soil  
preparation. Maybe eight million  
yuan in additional costs.

**LUO QIAO**

*(thinking)*

Which would eliminate our profit  
margin entirely.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(nodding) )*

And probably bankrupt Shi Mao in  
the process.

Luo's phone RINGS. Fang Gang's name appears on the screen.

**LUO QIAO**

*(answering)*

Gang.

**FANG GANG (V.O.)**

*(over phone, urgent)*

We have a problem. Yao Jiancheng  
just filed formal complaints with  
the construction ethics board.

**LUO QIAO**

*(feeling the walls  
closing in)*

What kind of complaints?

**FANG GANG (V.O.)**

Everything. Bribed inspectors, falsified soil reports,  
substandard materials. He's demanding immediate  
investigation and project shutdown.

Wang Xiuhong reads Luo's expression and steps closer,  
clearly hearing the conversation.

**LUO QIAO**

*(to Wang) )*

How long before investigators  
arrive?

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(checking her phone)*

If Yao filed this morning? Maybe  
forty-eight hours.

**FANG GANG (V.O.)**

*(continued) )*

Brother, this could destroy  
everything. Our equipment business,  
our reputations, our families'  
security.

**LUO QIAO**

*(desperate) )*

There has to be a solution.

**FANG GANG (V.O.)**

There is. But it's not a  
conversation for phones. Meet me  
tonight. Usual place.

The line goes dead. Luo stares at his phone, then at the  
construction site where hundreds of workers continue  
building something that might kill people.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(quietly)*

Are we going to stop construction?

**LUO QIAO**

*(after a long pause)*

I don't know yet.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(firm)*

The longer we wait, the more  
people we put at risk.

**LUO QIAO**

*(meeting her eyes)*

I understand.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(pressing)*

Do you? Because this isn't about profit margins anymore. This is about whether we can sleep at night knowing what we've built.

Luo watches a crane lift a steel beam into place, workers scurrying across scaffolding like ants building monuments to human ambition.

**LUO QIAO**

*(quiet)*

Some decisions you can't take back, can you?

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(sad)*

No. But some decisions you still have time to make right.

INT. LUO QIAO'S HOME - EVENING

The apartment feels different in evening light—shadows make the expensive furniture look less impressive and more like evidence of choices that might have been wrong.

Jiang Fang sits at the dining table with Tongtong, helping him with a coloring book. The domestic scene should be comforting, but it amplifies Luo's sense of everything he stands to lose.

**TONGTONG**

*(showing his picture)*

Look, Mama! I made our house!

**JIANG FANG**

*(examining the crayon drawing) )*

It's beautiful, sweetheart. Are we all happy in your picture?

**TONGTONG**

*(nodding vigorously) )*

Very happy! Daddy's home, Mama's cooking, and I'm building with my blocks!

Luo enters quietly, loosening his tie. The weight of the day shows in his shoulders.

**JIANG FANG**

*(not looking up)*

How was the site inspection?

**LUO QIAO**

*(careful)*

Complicated.

**JIANG FANG**

*(finally meeting his eyes)*

Wang Xiuhong called. She's very worried about the foundation work.

**LUO QIAO**

*(defensive)*

Wang Xiuhong worries about everything.

**JIANG FANG**

*(standing)*

She worries about buildings that might collapse and kill people. Should that not be a concern?

Tongtong looks up from his coloring, sensing adult tension.

**TONGTONG**

*(confused)*

Why would buildings fall down?



**JIANG FANG**

*(kneeling to his level)*

They don't, baby. Not when they're  
built properly with good materials  
and careful work.

**TONGTONG**

*(to Luo) )*

Daddy builds things properly,  
right?

The question is innocent but cuts deep. Luo crouches beside  
his son.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling) )*

Daddy tries to build things  
properly. But sometimes...  
sometimes grown-up building is  
complicated.

**JIANG FANG**

*(sharp)*

It's only complicated when people  
choose to make it complicated.

**TONGTONG**

*(returning to his  
coloring)*

I don't like complicated. Simple  
is better.

**LUO QIAO**

*(standing)*

Sometimes we don't get to choose simple, son.

**JIANG FANG**

*(following him to the  
kitchen)*

We always get to choose. We might  
not like the consequences, but we  
always get to choose.

**LUO QIAO**

*(frustrated)*

Easy to say when you're not  
responsible for other people's  
livelihoods.

**JIANG FANG**

*(stepping closer)*

I'm responsible for our son's  
future. For raising him to  
understand right from wrong.

**LUO QIAO**

*(defensive)*

And what if doing the right thing  
destroys everything we've built?  
What if it means Tongtong grows up  
poor instead of secure?

**JIANG FANG**

*(firm)*

I'd rather he grow up poor and  
honest than rich and ashamed.

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter) )*

That's easy to say when you've  
never been poor.

The words hit like a slap. Jiang Fang steps back, hurt  
evident in her eyes.

**JIANG FANG**

*(quiet)*

Is that what you think? That my  
family money makes me naive?

**LUO QIAO**

*(regretting it  
immediately)*

Fang, I didn't mean—

**JIANG FANG**

*(interrupting)*

No, you're right. I've never been poor. But I've watched poverty destroy people, and I've watched wealth destroy them too.

She moves to the window, looking out at the city lights.

**JIANG FANG**

*(continued)*

The difference is that poor people usually destroy themselves trying to survive. Rich people destroy others trying to get richer.

**LUO QIAO**

*(approaching her)*

What do you want me to do, Fang?  
Walk away from the biggest opportunity of our lives?

**JIANG FANG**

*(turning to face him) )*

I want you to ask yourself: what kind of man do you want Tongtong to remember as his father?

Luo's phone BUZZES with a text reminder: "Tonight. 11 PM. Usual place."

**JIANG FANG**

*(noticing his expression)*

What is it?

**LUO QIAO**

*(pocketing phone)*

Business. I need to go out for a while.

**JIANG FANG**

*(suspicious)*

What kind of business happens this late?

**LUO QIAO**

*(avoiding her eyes)*

The complicated kind.

**JIANG FANG**

*(stepping closer)*

Luo. Look at me.

He reluctantly meets her gaze. For a moment, they're just two people who love each other but are pulling in different directions.

**JIANG FANG**

*(soft)*

Whatever you're planning... don't. Please.

**LUO QIAO**

*(confused)*

I'm not planning anything specific.

**JIANG FANG**

*(touching his face)*

Your eyes. They have the same look as when you told me about taking the partnership. Like you're about to do something you can't undo.

**LUO QIAO**

*(removing her hand gently)*

Some things can't be avoided, Jiang.

**JIANG FANG**

*(desperate)*

And some things can't be forgiven.

He grabs his coat and heads for the door, leaving Jiang standing in their expensive apartment with their son and the weight of unspoken fears.

**LUO QIAO**

*(at the door)*

I love you. Both of you.  
Everything I do is for us.

**JIANG FANG**

*(as he leaves)*

What if what's best for us is for  
you to stay?

The door closes behind him, leaving her question echoing in the expensive silence.

EXT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

A grimy industrial district where legitimate business gives way to the kind of arrangements that can't be discussed in offices. Broken streetlights cast uneven shadows, and the air smells of motor oil and secrets.

Fang Gang leans against his sedan, smoking a cigarette despite his wife's constant nagging about lung cancer. His expensive suit looks out of place in this neighborhood, but his comfort suggests deep familiarity.

Luo approaches on foot, having parked his car several blocks away—a habit born of paranoia and experience.

**LUO QIAO**

*(joining him in the shadows)*

This better be good. Jiang Fang is  
already suspicious.

**FANG GANG**

*(taking a long drag)*

How suspicious?

**LUO QIAO**

*(nervous)*

The kind where she asks direct questions I can't answer honestly.

**FANG GANG**

*(crushing the cigarette)*

Then we better make sure she never has to know the truth.

He pulls out a folder thick with photographs and documents.

**FANG GANG**

Yao Jiancheng's complaints are detailed. Professional. He's been planning this for months.

Luo examines the papers—official letterheads, technical specifications, photographs of construction irregularities that would damn them in any investigation.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the evidence)*

How much does he actually know?

**FANG GANG**

*(grim) )*

Everything. Soil report falsifications, inspector bribes, substandard materials. He has documentation that goes back to the project's beginning.

**LUO QIAO**

*(panic setting in)*

Where did he get all this?

**FANG GANG**

*(bitter)*

Someone inside. Someone with access to records that should have been destroyed.

A stray cat slinks through the alley, pausing to stare at them with eyes that reflect the streetlight like tiny accusers.

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice barely above a  
whisper) )*

What are our options?

**FANG GANG**

*(meeting his eyes)*

Legal? None. By the time  
investigations conclude, we're  
bankrupt and probably in prison.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling)*

And illegal?

**FANG GANG**

*(leaning closer)*

Yao Jiancheng disappears. His  
evidence disappears with him.  
Project continues, investigations  
stall, everyone wins.

The words hang in the air like a bridge to a country  
neither man has visited before.

**LUO QIAO**

*(stepping back)*

You're talking about murder.

**FANG GANG**

*(firm)*

I'm talking about survival. Yours,  
mine, our families'.

**LUO QIAO**

*(shaking his head)*

There has to be another way.

**FANG GANG**

*(bitter laugh)*

Like what? Negotiations with  
someone who wants to destroy us?  
Bribes to officials who might  
already be in his pocket?

He kicks an empty can, sending it CLATTERING down the alley.

**FANG GANG**

*(voice hardening)*

Brother, this is war. And in war,  
you don't negotiate with enemies.  
You eliminate them.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling)*

I'm not a killer, Gang.

**FANG GANG**

*(softly)*

You don't have to be. That's what  
money is for.

The warehouse's broken windows stare down at them like dead  
eyes witnessing a conversation that should never happen.

**LUO QIAO**

*(after a long pause)*

How much?

**FANG GANG**

*(meeting his eyes)*

Two million. Clean, professional,  
no connection to us.

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice hollow) )*

Two million to make a man  
disappear.



**FANG GANG**

*(nodding)*

Two million to save everything  
we've built. Everything our  
families depend on.

Luo closes his eyes, seeing Jiang Fang's face, Tongtong's  
innocent smile, the construction site where his dreams are  
taking shape in steel and concrete.

**LUO QIAO**

*(opening his eyes)*

If we do this... there's no going  
back.

**FANG GANG**

*(grim)*

There's already no going back.  
Yao's complaints will be processed  
tomorrow. Investigations start  
next week. Everything we've worked  
for will be gone within a month.

**LUO QIAO**

*(after another long  
pause)*

How would it... happen?

**FANG GANG**

*(pulling out his phone)*

I know someone. Who knows someone.  
Who knows someone else.

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter laugh)*

Subcontractors. Even for murder.

**FANG GANG**

*(serious) )*

It's safer that way. Layers of  
separation. Plausible deniability.

Luo pulls out his checkbook, pen trembling slightly in his  
hand.

**LUO QIAO**

*(writing)*

If anyone asks... this is for  
equipment maintenance.

**FANG GANG**

*(taking the check)*

What happens next is not your  
concern.

They shake hands—a formal sealing of an informal contract  
that will destroy both their lives in ways they cannot yet  
imagine.

**LUO QIAO**

*(as they part)*

Jiang can never know.

**FANG GANG**

*(disappearing into  
shadows)*

Family never knows. That's the  
first rule.

Luo stands alone in the alley, the warehouse's dark windows  
reflecting his face like a broken mirror. In the distance,  
the city's construction sites twinkle with lights—a  
constellation of ambition and corruption spreading across  
the night sky.

EXT. ILLEGAL GAMBLING DEN - NIGHT

**LATER THAT NIGHT** Smoke hangs thick as fog over tables where  
fortunes change hands with the click of mahjong tiles. The  
air tastes of cigarettes, desperation, and the particular  
tension that comes from people risking money they can't  
afford to lose.

FANG YUAN (35), Fang Gang's cousin, emerges from the  
shadows like a well-dressed ghost. Younger but carrying  
himself with the predatory confidence of someone who has  
learned to profit from other people's desperation.

His suit is impeccable, his shoes Italian leather, his smile sharp enough to cut glass.

**FANG YUAN**

*(approaching Gang)*

Still meeting in alleys like we're teenagers selling cigarettes?

**FANG GANG**

*(grunting)*

Need your services.

**FANG YUAN**

*(amused)*

The cousins reunite. What delightful chaos are we orchestrating this time?

Fang Gang pulls out an envelope—Luo's check visible through thin paper.

**FANG GANG**

*(direct) )*

Permanent removal. Two million budget.

Fang Yuan's eyebrows rise, his cigarette pausing halfway to his lips.

**FANG YUAN**

*(whistling low) )*

That's not removal. That's erasure.

*(studying his cousin)*

What did they do? Steal your girlfriend? Burn down your house?

**FANG GANG**

*(shrugging) )*

Threatened someone else's house.

**FANG YUAN**

*(opening the envelope)*

And you're the knight in shining armor? How noble.

He counts the money with practiced fingers, his expression shifting from amusement to professional interest.

**FANG YUAN**

*(calculating)*

One-point-five for me. Five hundred stays with you.

**FANG GANG**

*(firm)*

Non-negotiable.

**FANG YUAN**

*(considering)*

That's a twenty-five percent management fee. Steep, but... family rates, I suppose.

A drunk stumbles past the alley, singing off-key karaoke. They wait for his voice to fade before continuing.

**FANG YUAN**

I'll need to subcontract. My usual... specialist... is enjoying government hospitality at the moment.

**FANG GANG**

*(turning to leave)*

Your business. Just handle it.

**FANG YUAN**

*(curious) )*

Don't I get to know who we're erasing?

**FANG GANG**

*(over his shoulder)*

Yao Jiancheng.

Fang Yuan's smile flickers—recognition, then calculation, then a return to professional indifference.

**FANG YUAN**

*(to himself)*

Well. This should be interesting.

**CUT TO:**

INT. UNDERGROUND MAHJONG PARLOR - LATE NIGHT

Smoke hangs thick over tables where fortunes change with each tile. The air tastes of cigarettes, desperation, and money changing hands in transactions that exist in no official records.

FANG YUAN slides into a seat across from YANG TIANXIANG (40s), a lean man whose fingers move across mahjong tiles like a pianist playing a deadly concerto. His clothes suggest modest success, but his eyes carry the weight of someone who has made too many compromises.

**FANG YUAN**

*(placing a smaller  
envelope on the table)*

Got work.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(not looking up from his  
tiles)*

I'm busy making honest money.

**FANG YUAN**

*(smirking)*

One million says you're not that busy.

Yang's hands still. Around them, the eternal sound of tiles clicking continues, but their corner of the room has gone quiet.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(eyes flicking to the  
envelope)*

Removal?

**FANG YUAN**

*(nodding)*  
Premium target. Requires...  
finesse.

**YANG TIANXIANG**  
*(suspicious)*  
How premium?

**FANG YUAN**  
*(leaning forward)*  
Yao Jiancheng.

A tile CLATTERS to the floor. Nearby players glance over, then quickly return to their games. In places like this, curiosity can be dangerous.

**YANG TIANXIANG**  
*(hushed)*  
Are you insane? He's connected.  
Protected.

**FANG YUAN**  
*(spreading his hands)*  
That's why the fee is so generous.

Yang weighs the envelope in his hand like he's measuring his own soul.

**YANG TIANXIANG**  
*(after a long pause)*  
I'll need to subcontract. Seven-  
fifty for me, two-fifty for  
operational expenses.

**FANG YUAN**  
*(standing)*  
I don't care how you split it.  
Just get it done.

**YANG TIANXIANG**  
*(calling after him)*  
Timeline?

**FANG YUAN**

*(not turning back)*

Soon as possible. Before he files  
his reports.

Yang stares at the envelope, then at his mahjong tiles.  
He's holding a winning hand, but the money represents more  
than he could win in a year of gambling.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(to himself, bitter)*

Sometimes the house always wins.  
Sometimes you become the house.

He pockets the envelope and abandons his winning hand.

**CUT TO:**

EXT. LABOR MARKET - DAWN

A sprawling marketplace of human desperation under a sky  
the color of concrete dust. Men cluster in whatever shade  
they can find, holding handwritten signs: "Experienced  
Welder," "Day Labor - No Questions," "Will Work for Food."

The morning sun beats down mercilessly, and the air  
shimmers with heat and hopelessness. This is where China's  
economic miracle meets its human cost.

YANG TIANXIANG weaves through the crowd like a shark  
through schools of smaller fish. His clothes mark him as  
management, not labor, and desperate eyes track his  
movement.

He spots FAN SI (30s) hunched against a corrugated metal  
wall, studying a crumpled newspaper's employment section  
with the intensity of someone reading holy scripture.

Fan Si is thin, hollow-eyed, wearing clothes that were once  
nice but now bear the patina of extended poverty. His hands  
shake slightly—whether from hunger, fear, or withdrawal is  
unclear.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(approaching casually) )*

Still looking for honest work?

**FAN SI**

*(wary, not looking up)*

Depends who's asking.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(crouching down) )*

Someone with better opportunities  
than what you'll find in those  
classifieds.

**FAN SI**

*(finally looking up)*

What kind of opportunities?

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(glancing around)*

The kind that pays enough to get  
you out of places like this.

He pulls out car keys—BMW, expensive, catching the morning  
light like a promise.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

Two hundred fifty thousand. Plus  
transportation.

*(dangling the keys)*

Plus a clean passport when the  
job's done.

Fan Si's eyes widen, but suspicion wars with desperation  
across his weathered features.

**FAN SI**

*(voice hardening)*

What kind of job?

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(leaning closer)*

Problem solving. For a businessman  
named Yao Jiancheng.



**FAN SI**

*(backing away)*

I know that name. Real estate.  
Connected.

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(softly)*

Which is why the compensation is  
so... generous.

Fan Si stares at the keys, seeing in them a ticket out of  
this marketplace of broken dreams.

**FAN SI**

*(calculating)*

What kind of problem solving?

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(standing)*

The permanent kind.

The words hang between them like a bridge neither wants to  
cross but both know they will.

**FAN SI**

*(after a long pause)*

When?

**YANG TIANXIANG**

*(walking away)*

Soon. I'll be in touch.

Fan Si watches him disappear into the crowd, then stares at  
the BMW keys in his palm. Around him, men continue their  
desperate search for honest work while he holds the tools  
for something entirely different.

**FAN SI**

*(to himself)*

Two hundred fifty thousand from an  
original two million.

*(bitter laugh)*

Even murder has middlemen.

EXT. BLUE SKY PARK - DAWN

**THREE DAYS LATER** A sprawling urban park where the city's wealthy jog away their guilt and the working class practice tai chi before heading to jobs that will break their bodies for other people's profit.

Mist clings to carefully manicured grass, and the air carries mixed scents of blooming jasmine and distant exhaust. This is neutral territory—a green oasis in a concrete jungle.

FAN SI crouches behind an ancient oak tree, its gnarled trunk providing concealment. His hands shake as he fumbles with a switchblade, the blade SNICKING open and closed in nervous rhythm.

His phone glows with a photo of YAO JIANCHENG—mid-40s, confident, wearing expensive athletic wear that costs more than most people make in a month.

**FAN SI (V.O.)**

*(whispering, frantic)*

Two hundred fifty thousand... just  
one cut... one quick cut and  
disappear...

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS approaching with the steady rhythm of someone who exercises religiously.

YAO JIANCHENG jogs into view, sleek and confident in designer running gear. Wireless earbuds glow blue against his temples, and his breathing is controlled despite obvious exertion.

Fan Si lunges from concealment, knife raised—but his foot catches a protruding root. He staggers, the blade CLATTERING to the gravel path.

Yao stops mid-stride, plucking out one earbud as he spots the knife gleaming in early morning light.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(mock-concerned)*

Well, well. Looking for something?

Fan Si freezes, panic flooding his system. Yao studies him with calm interest of someone examining an interesting insect.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(amused)*

Fan Si, right? Yang Tianxiang's  
new errand boy.

The casual use of his name hits Fan like a physical blow. This was supposed to be anonymous, professional, clean.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(stepping on the knife) )*

Should have invested in better  
equipment. Or better intelligence.

The blade SCREECHES against gravel as Yao grinds it into the path.

**FAN SI**

*(stammering)*

I... I don't want any trouble!

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(laughing) )*

Really? Because lurking in parks  
with knives generally indicates a  
desire for exactly that kind of  
trouble.

He leans down, face inches from Fan's, and suddenly his amusement evaporates.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(voice dropping)*

Let me guess. Luo Qiao's behind  
this little morning adventure?

Fan's silence confirms everything. Yao straightens, pulling out his phone.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(scrolling through  
contacts)*

Here's what's going to happen.  
You're going to help me stage my  
own death. I'm going to collect  
evidence against Luo Qiao. And  
you're going to get paid twice.

**FAN SI**

*(confused)*

What?

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(patient, like  
explaining to a child)*

I help you fake my murder. You  
collect your fee from Yang. I get  
the evidence I need to destroy Luo  
Qiao. Everyone wins.

*(pause)*

Well, everyone except Luo.

**FAN SI**

*(suspicious)*

Why would you...?

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(interrupting)*

Because revenge served cold is  
much more satisfying than revenge  
served with a rusty knife in a  
public park.

Fan's brain struggles to process this unexpected turn.  
Around them, the park is coming alive with early morning  
joggers and elderly people practicing tai chi.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(checking his watch)*

How much did they promise you?

**FAN SI**

*(hesitant)*

Two hundred fifty thousand.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(incredulous) )*  
Out of how much total? A million?  
Two million?

Fan's expression gives him the answer. Yao shakes his head in mock admiration.

**YAO JIANCHENG**  
*(almost admiring)*  
Magnificent. A perfect example of  
the middleman efficiency that's  
destroying this country.

**FAN SI**  
*(worried) )*  
Yang will want proof.

**YAO JIANCHENG**  
*(grinning) )*  
Oh, we'll give him proof. I was a  
theater major before real estate.  
I can play dead very convincingly.

**FAN SI**  
*(calculating)*  
It would need to look real. Blood.  
Photos. Evidence of struggle.

**YAO JIANCHENG**  
*(standing, brushing off  
his running gear) )*  
Leave the theatrics to me. Meet me  
tonight at my villa. Bring a  
camera and whatever passes for  
your artistic vision.

He resumes his jog as if nothing happened, leaving Fan kneeling in dirt beside the abandoned knife—a metaphor for the mess he's both creating and potentially escaping.

**FAN SI**

(to himself) )  
Sometimes the prey hunts the  
hunter.

INT. PRISON DORMITORY - DAY

**BACK TO PRESENT**

Luo Qiao sits up in his bunk, restless, pacing the cramped cell. Outside, rain taps the window, each drop like a tear from a broken heart.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

Should Fang Gang have kept that million? As a company man, as a brother, he shouldn't have. As a hitman, maybe he should. I still don't know from which angle to treat him, and he seems unsure which angle to face me from...

EXT. YAO'S VILLA - NIGHT

**FLASHBACK  
CONTINUES**

Rain lashes the ornate gates of an estate that screams new money—towering walls, security cameras, topiary sculptures designed by someone who learned about elegance from magazines.

Fan Si's beat-up sedan sits hidden behind carefully manicured hedges, looking like a scar on the perfect landscape.

INT. YAO'S VILLA - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A cavern of marble and glass that feels more like a luxury hotel lobby than a home. Imported everything—Italian marble, German fixtures, French furniture—assembled with the aesthetic sensitivity of someone who confuses expensive with tasteful.

YAO JIANCHENG lies sprawled across pristine floor, surrounded by a carefully arranged pool of theatrical blood. His designer shirt is torn in specific places, his face artfully bruised with stage makeup that would convince anyone who didn't know better.

FAN SI circles him with a digital camera, flash POPPING as he captures the "murder scene" from multiple angles. Each photo is a small lie that will become part of a larger truth.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(from the floor, annoyed)*

Get my left side. The wound needs to look deeper.

**FAN SI**

*(snapping photos)*

You're supposed to be dead. Dead people don't give directing notes.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(adjusting his position)*

Dead people also don't care about their reputation. I need this to look like I fought back.

Fan Si kneels, taking close-ups of Yao's face, the "fatal wound," scattered evidence of a violent struggle that never happened.

**FAN SI**

*(murmuring)*

This might actually work.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(with grim satisfaction)*

Oh, it'll work. Give these photos to Yang. Collect your money. Then disappear for a while.

**FAN SI**

*(worried)*

What about the police? When they investigate?

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(sitting up in his pool  
of fake blood)*

There won't be an investigation.  
Because there won't be a body.

*(wiping fake blood from  
his hands)*

Tomorrow morning, I give a press  
conference. "Businessman survives  
assassination attempt, provides  
evidence of murder conspiracy."

**FAN SI**

*(understanding)*

And Luo Qiao gets arrested for a  
murder that never happened.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(standing, stretching)*

Beautiful, isn't it? The perfect  
crime is the one that never occurs.

Fan Si continues photographing, but his expression has  
shifted from nervousness to something approaching  
admiration.

**FAN SI**

*(thoughtful)*

You know, in a different world, we  
could have been business partners.

**YAO JIANCHENG**

*(laughing)*

In a different world, none of us  
would need to be criminals.

INT. PRISON DORMITORY - DAY

**BACK TO PRESENT**



Luo Qiao lets out a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he sits back down on the bunk.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

Should I thank him, or curse him?  
If not for him, maybe I'd have  
become a real killer.

INT. LUO'S HOME - NEXT MORNING

**FLASHBACK  
CONTINUES**

The apartment feels different in morning light—less like a showroom, more like a mausoleum. Expensive furniture catches sunlight that seems somehow dimmer, as if the very air has been tainted by previous night's decisions.

LUO QIAO sits at the breakfast table, staring at Tongtong's abandoned cereal bowl. The milk has turned pink from sugary cereal, creating an unintentional metaphor for innocence corrupted.

JIANG FANG moves through the kitchen with mechanical precision, preparing breakfast no one will eat. Her movements are sharp, angry—the domestic routine of someone trying to maintain normalcy in an increasingly abnormal situation.

Luo's phone BUZZES. A message from Fang Gang: "Package delivered. Check the news."

His hand trembles as he switches to a news app. Nothing yet. Another message arrives—photos.

CLOSE ON: The staged photos of Yao's "murder." Brutal. Convincing. Final.

**LUO QIAO**

*(whispered, horrified)*  
Oh God. What have I done?

**JIANG FANG**

*(noticing his pallor)*  
What's wrong?

**LUO QIAO**

*(quickly locking his  
phone)*

Nothing. Just... construction  
delays.

**JIANG FANG**

*(studying his face)*

You look like you've seen a ghost.

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter, hollow)*

Maybe I have.

He stands abruptly, chair SCRAPING against marble. The  
sound echoes through the apartment like a scream.

**JIANG FANG**

*(following him)*

Luo. Talk to me.

**LUO QIAO**

*(heading for the  
bathroom)*

I need to... think.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Luo locks the door and stares at his reflection in the  
mirror. The man looking back is a stranger—hollow-eyed,  
pale, carrying the weight of decisions that can never be  
undone.

His phone BUZZES again. Fang Gang: "Problem solved. We're  
safe now."

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

*(to his reflection)*

Safe? I've just become a murderer.

He splashes cold water on his face, trying to wash away  
guilt that has already soaked into his bones.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

Two million yuan to take a life.  
The most expensive thing I've ever  
bought.

When he emerges, Jiang Fang stands in the hallway, arms  
crossed. Her expression has shifted from concern to  
suspicion.

**JIANG FANG**

*(quietly)*

There was a time when you told me  
everything. Even the terrible  
things.

**LUO QIAO**

*(avoiding her eyes)*

This is different.

**JIANG FANG**

*(stepping closer)*

How much worse could it be than  
the safety violations? The bribed  
inspectors? The workers who died  
because you cut corners?

Luo can't answer. The weight of his newest secret makes his  
previous corruption seem like minor accounting errors.

**JIANG FANG**

*(softening)*

Whatever it is, we'll face it.  
Together. Like we always have.

**LUO QIAO**

*(hollow) )*

Some things can't be fixed, Jiang.  
Some choices can't be undone.

He moves past her, grabbing his coat from the closet. She  
catches his arm.

**JIANG FANG**

Where are you going?

**LUO QIAO**

*(not looking back)*  
To make sure Tongtong still has a  
father worth having.

The door SLAMS behind him, leaving Jiang alone with their  
sleeping child and the echo of words that sound too much  
like goodbye.

INT. NATURAL REAL ESTATE OFFICE - DAY

The office bustles with energy of a successful construction  
project. WANG XIUHONG coordinates with contractors, permits  
are being approved, and progress charts show Queen's Villa  
rising on schedule.

LUO QIAO stands at floor-to-ceiling windows, watching  
construction resume at the site below. Workers swarm like  
ants, cranes swing materials into place, and the skeleton  
of luxury rises from the ground.

Progress. Victory. His dreams taking physical form.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(approaching with a  
tablet)*

The morning inspection went  
smoothly. No questions about soil  
density. No delays.

**LUO QIAO**

*(not turning from the  
window)*

Good. That's... good.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(studying his  
expression) )*

Is everything alright? You seem...

**LUO QIAO**

*(cutting her off) )*

I'm fine. Just tired.

His phone rings. Local news station. He lets it go to  
voicemail.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(hesitant)*

There's something you should see.

She turns her tablet toward him. On screen: YAO JIANCHENG at a podium, very much alive, surrounded by police officers and reporters.

The caption reads: "BUSINESSMAN SURVIVES ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, CLAIMS MURDER CONSPIRACY."

The tablet slips from Wang's hands, CLATTERING to the floor.

**LUO QIAO**

*(backing away from the window)*

This... this isn't possible.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(retrieving the tablet)*

He filed a police report this morning. Claims someone hired a hitman to kill him. Says he faked his death to gather evidence.

The office suddenly feels too small, walls pressing in like a closing fist.

**LUO QIAO**

*(struggling to maintain composure)*

That's... that's ridiculous. Wild accusations.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(softly) )*

He mentioned you by name, Luo.

The words hit like physical blows. Luo's vision narrows, breathing becomes shallow.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(reading from the tablet)*

"Luo Qiao approached multiple intermediaries to arrange my

assassination. I have photographic evidence of the financial transactions."

The office door BANGS open. POLICE OFFICERS flood in, led by OFFICER SUN, whose face could have been carved from the same stone as mountains surrounding the city.

**OFFICER SUN**

Luo Qiao?

Luo nods mechanically, watching his world collapse in slow motion.

**OFFICER SUN**

*(stepping forward with handcuffs)*

You're under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder.

As the cuffs CLICK around his wrists, Luo catches Wang Xiuhong's expression—not surprise, but resignation of someone who has been expecting this moment since the project began.

**LUO QIAO**

*(to Wang, as he's led away) )*

Call Jiang Fang. Tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I tried to build something good.

**WANG XIUHONG**

*(nodding sadly)*

She already knows you're in trouble, Luo. Wives always know when their husbands cross lines they can't uncross.

The last thing Luo sees as he's escorted out is the construction site through the window—Queen's Villa rising toward the sky like a monument to ambition that costs too much and delivers too little.

INT. POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

A windowless box painted the color of despair, furnished with metal table and chairs that seem designed to increase rather than relieve discomfort. The air tastes of industrial disinfectant and accumulated fear of everyone who has sat in these chairs before.

Officer Sun spreads photographs across the table like tarot cards predicting a very specific future. The images tell a story: Luo meeting with Fang Gang, money changing hands, the staged murder scene.

**OFFICER SUN**

*(methodical) )*

Two million yuan. Transferred  
through four different individuals  
before reaching the alleged  
assassin.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the photos)*

I don't understand. Fan Si was  
supposed to... the photos show...

**OFFICER SUN**

*(leaning forward)*

The photos show exactly what Mr.  
Yao intended them to show. Theater,  
Mr. Luo. Performance art.

Luo's lawyer, a thin man who looks like he'd rather be  
anywhere else, whispers urgently in his client's ear.

**LAWYER**

*(hushed)*

Don't say anything else. They have  
enough to convict already.

**OFFICER SUN**

*(continuing)*

The interesting thing about this  
case is the efficiency. Or rather,  
the inefficiency.

He pulls out a calculator, punching in numbers with satisfaction of someone solving a puzzle.

**OFFICER SUN**

Two million yuan started this process. By the time it reached Fan Si, only two hundred fifty thousand remained.

*(looking up)*

That's twelve-point-five percent efficiency. The rest was absorbed by... what would you call them? Middlemen?

**LUO QIAO**

*(hollow)*

Administrative costs.

**OFFICER SUN**

*(smiling grimly)*

Administrative costs for a murder that never happened. Committed by a man who was paid a quarter of the intended fee to pretend to kill someone who was never in any real danger.

The lawyer shuffles papers nervously, clearly out of his depth.

**OFFICER SUN**

*(standing)*

In a way, it's a perfect metaphor for your entire industry. Multiple layers of contractors, each taking their cut, until the original intent is so diluted it becomes meaningless.

**LUO QIAO**

*(looking up)*

What happens now?

**OFFICER SUN**



*(gathering the photos)*  
Now you learn what it feels like  
to be on the receiving end of the  
system you helped create.

INT. PRISON WORKSHOP - DAY

**PRESENT DAY - TWO YEARS INTO SENTENCE**

The workshop CLANGS with sound of hammers against metal, an industrial symphony of rehabilitation through repetitive labor. Fluorescent lights flicker overhead, casting sickly illumination over rows of inmates manufacturing license plates.

LUO QIAO, now weathered by years of confinement, scrubs rust off a steel plate with mechanical precision. His movements are economical, practiced—gestures of someone who has learned to find meditation in mindless work.

Across the workshop, BALD INMATE (neck decorated with spiderweb tattoos) eyes Luo's untouched lunch tray with predatory interest.

**BALD INMATE**

*(snarling) )*

New money eats last. If he eats at  
all.

Luo continues scrubbing, jaw set in determined ignorance. Bald Inmate flips the tray, sending gray gruel splashing across workshop floor.

**LUO QIAO**

*(lunging, desperate)*

I'll kill you!

The words hang in air with unintended irony. Other inmates ROAR their approval, forming a circle like wolves scenting blood.

Bald Inmate swings a length of chain, catching Luo's shoulder. Pain explodes through his body, but anger is stronger. He grabs a rivet gun, SPRAYING hot metal.

From a shadowed corner, FAT INMATE (60s) watches the confrontation with detached interest of someone who has seen this drama played out countless times. He whittles a piece of wood into a tiny bird, humming a folk tune that somehow carries over the violence.

**FAT INMATE**

*(chuckling)*

Boy's fighting a hornet's nest  
with a toothpick.

Luo dodges another swing, driving the rivet gun into Bald Inmate's gut. The man doubles over, gasping.

**LUO QIAO**

*(panting)*

Got a better strategy?

**FAT INMATE**

*(still carving)*

Ever see a river fight a mountain?  
It doesn't. It just flows around  
until the mountain wears away.

SCARRED INMATE charges from the side. Luo sidesteps, using momentum to SLAM him into a furnace. The man SCREECHES, clutching his burned arm.

**FAT INMATE**

*(nodding approval)*

Better. But rivers don't have  
pride. And pride makes terrible  
armor.

Bald Inmate recovers, swinging the chain in a deadly arc. Luo grabs it, yanking him forward—

**FAT INMATE**

*(sharp command)*

Stop.

The single word cuts through chaos like a blade. The workshop freezes. Fat Inmate stands, his considerable shadow swallowing the combatants.

**FAT INMATE**

*(folksy, dangerous)*

See that sparrow?

He tosses the wooden bird to Luo, who catches it automatically.

**FAT INMATE**

It's small. Weak. But it knows  
storms aren't fought—they're  
survived.

Bald Inmate lowers the chain, suddenly wary. Fat Inmate approaches with deceptive casualness, prying the rivet gun from Luo's grip.

**FAT INMATE**

*(to Bald Inmate) )*

This one's under my protection now.  
Got a problem with that, take it  
up with the warden.

*(pause) )*

Heard he needs a new rug. Persian,  
if you catch my meaning.

Bald Inmate pales, backing away quickly. Other inmates disperse, returning to their work with renewed focus.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the wooden  
bird)*

Why help me?

**FAT INMATE**

*(returning to his  
carving)*

Saw your case in the papers. The  
middleman who hired a killer  
through four other middlemen.

*(chuckles)*

Most beautiful example of  
inefficiency I ever witnessed.

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter)*

Two million yuan. Only two hundred  
fifty thousand reached the  
"killer."

**FAT INMATE**

*(grinning)*

And he didn't even kill anybody!  
Just took some photographs with  
stage blood.

*(shaking his head)*

Perfect metaphor for the whole  
construction industry. Or the  
whole country, really.

**LUO QIAO**

*(surprised)*

You know construction?

**FAT INMATE**

*(sad smile)*

Built bridges. Real ones, not the  
paper ones you rich boys shuffle  
around.

*(pause)*

One collapsed. Twelve dead.  
Twenty-eight injured.

His hands—thick fingers stained with motor oil—continue  
carving despite the weight of memory.

**FAT INMATE**

The bosses needed someone to blame.  
I had the right credentials: no  
family money, no political  
connections, no expensive lawyers.

**LUO QIAO**

*(understanding) )*

You were the fall guy.

**FAT INMATE**

*(nodding)*

Scapegoat. Sacrificial lamb.  
Whatever metaphor makes you  
comfortable.

*(looking up)*

The real criminals? They're  
probably building new bridges  
right now. With the same shoddy  
materials and creative accounting.

Luo stares at the wooden bird, its simple form somehow  
containing more truth than all the complex schemes that  
brought him here.

**FAT INMATE**

*(leaning closer) )*

You want to survive in here? Stop  
thinking about what you lost and  
start planning what you'll build  
when you get out.

*(tapping Luo's chest)*

Not profit. Not connections.  
Bridges. Between what you were and  
what you could become.

**LUO QIAO**

*(quiet)*

What if the gap is too wide?

**FAT INMATE**

*(standing)*

Then you build a longer bridge.

He shuffles away, leaving Luo alone with his thoughts and  
the wooden bird. For the first time since his arrest,  
something resembling hope flickers in his chest.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

*(examining the carving)*

Sometimes the smallest things  
carry the most weight.

INT. PRISON VISITATION ROOM - DAY

**ONE YEAR LATER** A sterile chamber designed to facilitate human connection while preventing human contact. Plastic chairs bolted to linoleum floors, scratched plexiglass barriers, and fluorescent lights that make everyone look like they're dying.

Luo sits at a corner table, fingers tracing graffiti carved by previous inmates: "HOPE," "LOVE," "FUCK THE SYSTEM." The accumulated despair and defiance of the incarcerated.

The door BUZZES. JIANG FANG enters hesitantly, older now, wearing the careful composure of someone who has learned to expect disappointment. Behind her, TONGTONG (now 7) clutches a drawing, his eyes wide with the mixture of curiosity and fear that children bring to adult mysteries.

**LUO QIAO**

*(standing too quickly) )*

You came.

**JIANG FANG**

*(guiding Tongtong forward)*

He wanted to show you something.  
From school.

Tongtong peers around his mother's arm, studying this stranger who shares his name and features but lives in a different world.

**LUO QIAO**

*(crouching to Tongtong's level)*

What did you make?

**TONGTONG**

*(hesitant)*

It's... it's our family. Before.

He hands over a crayon drawing—stick figures under a lopsided sun, standing in front of a house that looks more like a fairy tale than the penthouse apartment they actually lived in.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the drawing)*

We look happy.

**TONGTONG**

*(nodding)*

Mama says you're learning to be different. Like school, but for grown-ups.

**LUO QIAO**

*(glancing at Jiang)*

That's... that's one way to put it.

Jiang sits across from him, her posture rigid with accumulated pain and carefully maintained boundaries.

**JIANG FANG**

*(forced brightness)*

They're finishing Queen's Villa next month. Wang Xiuhong says the rooftop gardens are beautiful.

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter)*

Built on the foundation of a murder that never happened.

**JIANG FANG**

*(sharp)*

Not in front of Tongtong.

**TONGTONG**

*(looking between them)*

The kids at school say you tried to hurt someone.

The adult conversation crashes to a halt. Jiang stiffens, but Luo leans forward, meeting his son's gaze directly.

**LUO QIAO**

*(honest)*

I did something very wrong, Tongtong. I tried to solve my problems by hurting someone else.

**TONGTONG**

*(confused)*

Like when Liu Wei takes someone's lunch money?

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding slowly)*

Exactly like that. Except grown-up problems are bigger, so the wrong solutions are bigger too.

**JIANG FANG**

*(softening)*

He asks about you. Every day.

**LUO QIAO**

*(to Tongtong) )*

What do you ask?

**TONGTONG**

*(shyly) )*

When you're coming home. If you're scared. If the food is yucky.

**LUO QIAO**

*(laughing despite everything) )*

The food is terrible. But I'm not scared anymore.

**TONGTONG**

Why not?

**LUO QIAO**

*(thoughtful)*

Because I have a friend who's teaching me to be brave in a different way.

He pulls out the wooden bird Fat Inmate carved, placing it on the table between them.

**LUO QIAO**



This is from my teacher. He says  
small things can be stronger than  
big things, if they're made with  
the right intentions.

Tongtong touches the carving with gentle fingers.

**TONGTONG**

*(awed)*

It's beautiful.

**JIANG FANG**

*(studying the bird)*

Your teacher sounds wise.

**LUO QIAO**

*(meeting her eyes)*

He built real things. Before this  
place. Bridges that lasted.  
Buildings that protected people.

**JIANG FANG**

*(understanding)*

The opposite of what we were doing.

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding) )*

He says when I get out, I should  
think about building bridges  
instead of walls.

**TONGTONG**

*(excited)*

Can I help? I'm good at building  
things!

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice thick with  
emotion)*

I would love your help.

Jiang reaches across the table, her fingers briefly touching his before pulling back—a gesture of connection constrained by circumstance.

**JIANG FANG**

*(soft)*

How much longer?

**LUO QIAO**

One year. Maybe less, with good behavior.

**TONGTONG**

*(calculating)*

I'll be eight when you come home.

**LUO QIAO**

*(smiling)*

Old enough to be my construction supervisor.

**TONGTONG**

*(giggling) )*

I'll make sure you don't use bad concrete!

The joke hits harder than intended. Luo's smile falters as the weight of his past mistakes crashes back.

**LUO QIAO**

*(serious)*

That's exactly what I'll need.  
Someone to keep me honest.

**GUARD**

*(calling out)*

Time's up!

Jiang stands, gathering Tongtong close. The boy waves the wooden bird at his father.

**TONGTONG**

Can I keep this? Until you come home?

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding)*

Take care of it. And when I get  
out, we'll build something  
together. Something that lasts.

As they walk away, Luo watches through the reinforced glass until they disappear. The wooden bird sits forgotten on the table—a small symbol of hope in a place designed to crush it.

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT

**ONE YEAR LATER - FINAL YEAR**

The same cell, but transformed. Books line makeshift shelves—construction manuals, ethics texts, biographies of people who found redemption. The walls are covered with sketches: bridge designs, architectural plans, blueprints for structures that prioritize safety over profit.

Luo, grayer now but somehow more solid, sits writing in a journal by lamplight. His handwriting is careful, deliberate—the script of someone who has learned to choose words with precision.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

*(reading as he writes)*

"Day 1,095. Tomorrow I rejoin a  
world I helped corrupt. The  
question isn't whether I can  
change it—the question is whether  
I can resist becoming it again."

He pauses, pen hovering over paper.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

"Fat Inmate was released last  
month. Before he left, he told me:  
'The bridge between who you were  
and who you'll become has to be  
built one honest decision at a  
time.'"

SOUND: Cell door CLANKS open.

GUARD enters with a clipboard and civilian clothes.

**GUARD**

*(official)*

Luo Qiao. Time to go.

Luo closes the journal, running his fingers over the cover. Three years of thoughts, reflections, and plans for a different kind of life.

**LUO QIAO**

*(standing)*

Thank you.

**GUARD**

*(surprised)*

For what?

**LUO QIAO**

*(sincere)*

For keeping me alive long enough  
to figure out how to live.

EXT. PRISON GATES - DAY

A gray morning with the promise of sun breaking through clouds. Luo emerges through the gates carrying a small bag—everything he owns now fits in something he can carry himself.

Jiang Fang waits by a modest sedan, older but somehow more beautiful, as if hardship has revealed something essential beneath the surface. Tongtong, now 8, bounces with barely contained excitement.

**TONGTONG**

*(running to him)*

Did you bring the bird?

**LUO QIAO**

*(producing the wooden  
carving)*

Never left my side.

**JIANG FANG**

*(approaching cautiously)*

How do you feel?

**LUO QIAO**

*(considering)*

Different. Scared. Hopeful.

*(pause)*

Ready.

They stand in awkward silence—a family rebuilt from broken pieces, still learning how the new configuration works.

**TONGTONG**

*(breaking the tension)*

Can we get breakfast? Prison food really is terrible, right?

**LUO QIAO**

*(laughing)*

Worse than terrible. It's a crime against food itself.

As they walk toward the car, Luo pauses to look back at the prison—not with nostalgia, but with the acknowledgment of someone who has learned valuable lessons in an unexpected classroom.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

Some bridges burn behind you.

Others you build as you cross them.

INT. MODEST APARTMENT - DAY

**SIX MONTHS LATER**

A simple two-bedroom apartment that speaks of careful budgeting rather than prosperity. The furniture is basic but clean, the decorations minimal but meaningful. On the walls, Tongtong's drawings mix with Luo's architectural sketches—two generations learning to build together.

Luo sits at a small desk, working on plans for a community center. His drawings are meticulous, every beam and joint calculated not just for efficiency but for safety and durability.

Jiang Fang prepares lunch in the tiny kitchen, her movements economical but content. The financial pressure is obvious, but so is a sense of peace that was absent from their previous wealth.

**TONGTONG**

*(looking over Luo's  
shoulder)*

What's this building for?

**LUO QIAO**

*(pointing to different  
sections)*

Community classes. Job training.  
Safe spaces for children whose  
parents work construction.

**TONGTONG**

*(impressed)*

Will it be strong?

**LUO QIAO**

*(serious) )*

It will be the strongest building  
I've ever designed. Because it  
needs to protect the people who  
can't protect themselves.

**JIANG FANG**

*(approaching with tea)*

The worker safety organization  
called. They want you to speak at  
their next meeting.

**LUO QIAO**

*(hesitant) )*

I'm not sure I'm ready for public  
speaking.

**JIANG FANG**

*(sitting beside him) )*

You're the only one who can tell  
their story. Who understands both  
sides.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying his plans)*

What if they don't listen?

**JIANG FANG**

*(touching his hand)*

Then you keep talking until they do.

Luo's phone RINGS. An unknown number appears on the screen.

**LUO QIAO**

*(answering cautiously)*

Hello?

**YOUNG WORKER (V.O.)**

*(over phone, nervous) )*

Mr. Luo? This is Chen Wei. I work construction at the new hospital project.

**LUO QIAO**

*(alert) )*

What can I do for you?

**YOUNG WORKER (V.O.)**

*(urgent) )*

The safety inspector... he's taking bribes. Approving work that isn't safe. People are going to get hurt.

Luo meets Jiang Fang's eyes. She nods encouragingly.

**LUO QIAO**

*(decisive)*

Where can we meet?

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

A massive hospital project rising from cleared earth.  
Workers swarm the site, but their movements seem rushed,  
corners being cut in the name of schedule and profit.

Luo stands at the site's edge with CHEN WEI (25), a young  
welder whose hands shake with the nervousness of someone  
risking everything to do the right thing.

**CHEN WEI**

*(pointing to welding  
joints)*

See those connections? They're not  
meeting code specifications. But  
Inspector Liu signs off on  
everything.

**LUO QIAO**

*(examining the work) )*

How much is he taking?

**CHEN WEI**

*(bitter)*

Fifty thousand per month. Plus  
bonuses for expedited approvals.

**LUO QIAO**

*(calculating) )*

And the cost of proper welding?

**CHEN WEI**

Maybe two hundred thousand total.  
But that would delay completion by  
six weeks.

Luo studies the site, seeing not just the immediate safety  
violations but the systemic problems that created them.

**LUO QIAO**

*(deciding)*

We need evidence. Documentation.  
Video if possible.

**CHEN WEI**

*(worried) )*

What if they find out? I need this  
job.



**LUO QIAO**

*(meeting his eyes)*

What happens when this building  
collapses during the next  
earthquake? How many patients die  
because we stayed quiet?

Chen Wei stares at the construction, seeing not progress  
but potential catastrophe.

**CHEN WEI**

*(resolute)*

What do you need me to do?

INT. WORKER SAFETY ORGANIZATION OFFICE - NIGHT

A cramped space filled with filing cabinets, safety posters,  
and the accumulated documentation of workplace injuries and  
deaths. WANG XIAOLI (50s), the organization's director,  
reviews Chen Wei's evidence with grim satisfaction.

**WANG XIAOLI**

*(studying photographs) )*

This is exactly what we need.  
Clear documentation of safety  
violations and inspector  
corruption.

**LUO QIAO**

*(leaning forward)*

What's the next step?

**WANG XIAOLI**

*(organizing files)*

Media exposure. Public pressure.  
Force the construction company to  
choose between their reputation  
and their profit margins.

**CHEN WEI**

*(nervous)*

What about retaliation?

**WANG XIAOLI**

*(firm)*

That's why we go public. Hard to  
silence witnesses when the whole  
city is watching.

She turns to Luo with an expression that mixes respect and  
curiosity.

**WANG XIAOLI**

*(direct) )*

The workers trust you. Because  
you've been where they are—caught  
between survival and conscience.

**LUO QIAO**

*(uncomfortable) )*

I made the wrong choice before.

**WANG XIAOLI**

*(leaning back)*

Which is why they believe you'll  
make the right choice now.

EXT. INDUSTRY CONFERENCE - DAY

**ONE MONTH LATER**

A sprawling tent complex where China's construction  
industry gathers to network, share ideas, and occasionally  
acknowledge the human cost of building dreams from concrete  
and steel.

The crowd is sharply divided: developers in expensive suits  
cluster around cocktail tables, while workers in coveralls  
gather near food stations. Two worlds occupying the same  
space but speaking different languages.

A modest banner reads: "ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION PRACTICES -  
KEYNOTE SPEAKER: LUO QIAO"

Luo stands at a simple podium, wearing a clean but  
inexpensive suit. Behind him, a projection screen displays  
a photograph that makes several audience members shift  
uncomfortably: the hospital project's faulty welding—  
evidence that sparked a citywide investigation.

**LUO QIAO**

*(adjusting the  
microphone)*

Three years ago, I stood in a prison cell, convicted of conspiracy to commit murder. A murder that never happened, organized through a chain of subcontractors so inefficient that it became a farce.

His voice carries clearly across the tent, cutting through background chatter.

**LUO QIAO (CONT'D)**

*(pointing to the  
screen) )*

But that farce taught me something about our industry. About how we use layers of middlemen to distance ourselves from consequences.

A DEVELOPER in the front row snorts, swirling his drink dismissively.

**LUO QIAO**

*(focusing on the man) )*

You find this amusing? Tell me about your last project. How many subcontractors did you use? Do you know any of their names? Do you know which ones cut corners to meet your deadlines?

The developer's smirk evaporates. Uncomfortable murmurs ripple through the suited section of the audience.

**LUO QIAO**

*(turning to the workers)*

I'm not here to apologize. I'm here to tell you that the system that nearly made me a murderer is the same system that makes you expendable.

He holds up a hard hat—not his expensive executive model, but a standard worker's helmet, dented and worn.

**LUO QIAO**

This belonged to Li Ming. Died  
last month when scaffolding  
collapsed because his supervisor  
used substandard bolts to save two  
hundred yuan.

He SLAMS the hard hat onto the podium. The sound CRACKS  
through the tent like a gunshot.

**WORKER #1**

*(shouting from the back)*  
Tell them how it really works!

**LUO QIAO**

*(walking around the  
podium)*  
The middleman system is cancer  
eating this industry from the  
inside. I know because I was the  
tumor.

Nervous laughter from some developers, but the workers are  
leaning forward, engaged.

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice rising)*  
I once paid two million yuan to  
solve a problem. By the time it  
filtered through our beautiful  
system of subcontractors, only two  
hundred fifty thousand reached the  
person supposed to do the actual  
work. And the job STILL failed.

**WORKER #2**

*(calling out) )*  
What happened to the rest?

**LUO QIAO**

*(bitter) )*  
"Administrative fees."  
"Coordination costs." "Risk  
management."  
*(pause)*  
Fancy names for theft.

He points to the screen, showing the hospital's faulty construction.

**LUO QIAO**

That's how your safety equipment gets diluted. That's why your harnesses snap. That's why families bury their children while we count profit margins.

A developer stands, pointing accusingly.

**DEVELOPER #1**

*(mocking) )*

Easy words from a convicted criminal.

**LUO QIAO**

*(grinning dangerously)*

You're right. I am a criminal. But at least I admit it.

*(sweeping gesture at the audience)*

How many of you have bribed an inspector this month? How many have passed responsibility down the chain until it disappeared entirely?

The workers surge to their feet, CHEERING. Security guards edge closer, hands on radios.

**LUO QIAO**

*(grabbing the microphone) )*

This industry is a pyramid scheme where everyone climbs over the person below them. Well, I'm done climbing.

He rips the projector cable free. The screen goes dark.

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice carrying without amplification)*

Start building up instead of down. Start knowing the names of people who actually do the work. Start taking responsibility for what

happens when your buildings  
collapse.

The standing ovation is deafening—workers whistling, hard hats drummed against chairs. Developers file out in tight-lipped silence.

A YOUNG WORKER pushes through the crowd, shoving a union pledge into Luo's hands.

**YOUNG WORKER**

*(URGENT)*

Sign this. Worker protection  
initiative.

Luo stares at the paper. The words "Collective Bargaining" and "Safety Standards" blur in his vision.

**WORKER #1**

*(clapping his shoulder)*

We got your back this time. For  
real.

Luo signs with shaking hands, the pen digging grooves into the paper. As he hands it back, the tent flaps part.

Jiang Fang and Tongtong wait at the edge of the crowd. The boy wears a child-sized hard hat, his smile wider than Luo has seen since before his arrest.

**TONGTONG**

*(running to him)*

Dad! You were like a superhero!

**LUO QIAO**

*(lifting him up) )*

Superheroes don't go to prison,  
kiddo.

**TONGTONG**

*(serious)*

Sometimes they do. When they need  
to learn how to be better heroes.

Jiang approaches, her expression unreadable.

**JIANG FANG**

*(quietly)*

That was either very brave or very stupid.

**LUO QIAO**

*(setting Tongtong down)*

Probably both.

**JIANG FANG**

*(studying his face)*

You know this means you'll never work in construction again. Not in the traditional way.

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding)*

Good. Traditional wasn't working.

Workers continue to surround them, offering handshakes and stories of their own struggles with the system. For the first time in years, Luo feels like he's building something that might actually last.

EXT. QUEEN'S VILLA SITE - SUNSET

**TWO YEARS LATER**

The completed complex rises against a crimson sky, its glass facades reflecting clouds like promises kept. Rooftop gardens overflow with jasmine and bougainvillea—green life thriving in spaces designed for human habitation rather than maximum profit.

A brass plaque at the entrance reads: "QUEEN'S VILLA - BUILT WITH INTEGRITY. EVERY WORKER MATTERS. EVERY SAFETY STANDARD MET. EVERY PROMISE KEPT."

Luo, Jiang Fang, and Tongtong (now 10) walk along paved paths where families gather for the community's anniversary celebration. Children play in carefully designed spaces while adults admire architecture that balances beauty with structural honesty.

**JIANG FANG**

*(squeezing his hand)*

Hard to believe we're actually  
here.

**LUO QIAO**

*(studying the buildings)*

It's never really finished. Just  
passed on to the people who live  
inside.

Tongtong runs ahead to join a group of children, his  
laughter mixing with theirs in the kind of pure joy that  
only comes from spaces designed with care.

**JIANG FANG**

*(watching their son)*

He asked me yesterday if you were  
a good man now.

**LUO QIAO**

*(curious)*

What did you tell him?

**JIANG FANG**

*(smiling)*

That you're working on it. One  
honest choice at a time.

Across the gathering, Luo spots a familiar figure: FANG  
GANG, thinner and grayer, standing at the edge of the  
celebration like a ghost from another life.

Their eyes meet. Years of shared history—loyalty, betrayal,  
consequences—pass between them in silence.

Fang Gang nods once. Luo returns it. Not friendship, not  
forgiveness, just acknowledgment of two men who walked  
different paths from the same crossroads.

**LUO QIAO**

*(to Jiang)*

Some bridges can't be rebuilt.



**JIANG FANG**

*(following his gaze)*

And some shouldn't be.

A YOUNG WORKER approaches, clipboard in hand, wearing a union badge and a confident expression.

**WORKER**

Mr. Luo? We're ready for your speech.

Luo hesitates, suddenly nervous. Public speaking still feels dangerous—too much potential for saying the wrong thing.

**JIANG FANG**

*(straightening his tie)*

No middlemen this time. Just you.

**LUO QIAO**

*(nodding)*

Just me.

He walks toward a simple podium where families have gathered. Behind him, Queen's Villa rises not as a monument to ambition, but as proof that redemption can take physical form.

**LUO QIAO**

*(beginning)*

Five years ago, I stood in a prison cell, wondering if there was any point in trying to build something honest in a dishonest world.

The crowd quiets, sensing they're about to hear something true.

**LUO QIAO**

*(voice growing stronger)*

Today, my son and I are learning to build bridges. Not the kind that span rivers, but the kind that connect who we were with who we're becoming.

Tongtong stops playing to watch his father, pride evident in his posture.

**LUO QIAO**

*(gesturing to the  
buildings)*

These aren't just apartments.  
They're promises. Promises that  
every beam was tested, every weld  
inspected, every worker paid  
fairly for honest labor.

**LUO QIAO**

*(meeting individual  
faces in the crowd)*

Promises that when you turn on the  
lights, flip a switch, or trust  
your children to play in these  
gardens, you're not gambling with  
your lives.

**LUO QIAO**

*(final words)*

The most expensive lesson I ever  
learned: there are no shortcuts to  
anything worth building.

The applause is warm rather than thunderous—the  
appreciation of people who have found homes rather than  
investments.

As families begin to disperse, Tongtong runs back to his  
parents, the wooden bird Fat Inmate carved clutched in his  
hand.

**TONGTONG**

*(excited)*

Dad! Can we start planning our  
bridge project tomorrow?

**LUO QIAO**

*(crouching to his level)*

What kind of bridge?

**TONGTONG**

*(serious)*

The kind that helps people get  
from where they are to where they  
want to be.

Luo looks up at Jiang Fang, seeing in her eyes the woman he  
fell in love with before corruption and ambition nearly  
destroyed them both.

**LUO QIAO**

*(standing, taking both  
their hands)*

Then we better get started.

The camera pulls back, rising above the complex to show the  
city beyond—a landscape of construction sites and half-  
finished dreams, waiting for transformation.

But for the first time, the cranes and scaffolding look  
less like machines of destruction and more like tools for  
building something that might actually last.

**LUO QIAO (V.O.)**

*(final voice-over)*

The middle man's greatest trick is  
convincing everyone that shortcuts  
are the only way forward. But  
sometimes the longest road is the  
only one that leads home.

**FADE TO BLACK.**

**THE END**

**FINAL TITLE CARD:**

*"For every middleman who takes more than they give, there  
is a worker who builds more than they take. This story is  
dedicated to the builders."*

**FADE OUT.**