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—CHLOE GONG,

**#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS*, ON
*IF YOU COULD SEE THE SUN***

I COULD GIVE YOU THE MOON

ANN LIANG

*New York Times bestselling author of *If You Could See the Sun**

I COULD GIVE YOU THE MOON

Ann Liang



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Dedication

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1 Chanel

The best thing about heartbreak is how spectacularly predictable it is.

I've watched it play out enough times to know exactly what to expect, how to react. First, there's flat-out denial. *He won't hurt me, I swear. He isn't like that. He was just getting lunch with her, and he said himself she was only sitting on his lap because there weren't enough seats in the cafeteria. He never lies about anything, so why would he be lying to me now?*

If well-meaning friends remind you about the twenty-five instances where he was, in fact, lying, you pretend not to hear them. You're too busy clinging to whatever's left of your time together, holding out hope that you can find a cure, even if the relationship is gray in the lips. . . .

Until at some point, the denial collapses under the weight of suspicion, and that's when the anxiety kicks in—the second stage. Casual messages from months ago turn into vital evidence, every punctuation mark analyzed for proof of how he texted when he loved you, if he ever loved you, and when he stopped. In a selfie, the blurry reflection of a girl standing beside him in a coffee-shop window becomes a killing blow. The rage hasn't arrived, not yet. But it will, during that third stage, in a violent spiral of midnight venting sessions and deleted conversations and tossed pillows.

My friend Haili is clearly still stuck in the second stage of heartbreak—by far the least fun of them all.

"Maybe this is a bad idea," she mutters to me, the worried line between her brows illuminated by the warm hotel lobby lights. She's fiddling with the diamond charms on her wrist, a nervous gesture I've seen her perform like a ritual a hundred times in the decade I've known her. "Maybe I should just ask him. . . ."

I shake my head. “You’re never going to get an actual answer if you just ask about these things. Like, okay, what could he possibly say? ‘Yeah, you’re right, I snuck out to get dinner with another girl even though we’ve been a thing for two months already?’”

“But . . . what if he gets mad at me for following him here?” she whispers. “What if he never wants to talk to me again?”

Even though this is yet another expected symptom of second-stage heartbreak, it’s still mind-boggling how the sufferers tend to focus on how the *other* person feels.

A memory sneaks up on me: my own mom, sobbing to her friend on the phone when she thought I was out of the house, a silk bathrobe draped around her shaking shoulders, the crack in her voice as she spoke. *He doesn’t love me anymore. Why doesn’t he love me anymore?*

I shove it away. Lock it up before bile can rise to my throat.

“The question isn’t whether he wants to talk to you,” I tell Haili firmly, loudly enough to drown out the rattling in the back of my brain, and give her slender arm a squeeze. “You should start thinking about whether or not you’ll ever talk to him again.”

“I . . . okay.” Even through the dark tint of my sunglasses, I can see her complexion turn pale. “Okay, let’s go find him.”

I make a beeline for the front desk, through the bamboo groves designed to look like they’ve sprung right out of the black marble floors, and around the indoor pond that’s been trending as *the* new aesthetic photo spot on Xiaohongshu. Everything here is sleek wood, subdued colors, sophisticated in a way that isn’t too try-hard. Perfect influencer bait.

Two businessmen stop and stare at me as I brush past them, but I don’t slow my steps. The trick to fitting in anywhere is to act like you already belong there. Walk with purpose, shoulders straight, eyes ahead.

“Hello.” I greet the receptionist in my brightest voice. “Can you please point us in the direction of the Sky Restaurant?”

The receptionist glances up from her laptop and offers a smile almost as fake and wide as mine. “Yes, sure.” Then her attention slides past me, to Haili, and I follow her gaze with a wince. Haili looks like she’s on the verge of having a breakdown right in the middle of the perfect lobby. “Is your friend . . . okay?”

“She’s fine,” I say. “She’s just really hungry. We haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“Right,” Haili squeaks out unconvincingly. At least she’s stopped gnawing on her lower lip. “I’m really, *really* hungry. Super hungry.”

But the receptionist studies us with growing suspicion. “Sorry, before I let you through—could I actually have your room number first?”

I feel Haili stiffen beside me.

“Um,” Haili says. “We don’t . . . we aren’t staying here—”

“I see.” The receptionist’s smile slips all the way off her face. “Well, I’m sorry, then. The restaurant is only open to our guests and VIP members.”

“That’s okay,” Haili begins to say, but I make a quick motion behind my back for her to leave it to me.

“I’m one of your VIP members,” I say smoothly, though I’m unsure if that’s true. Of course, this in itself wouldn’t have been an issue a few months ago. My father’s a titanium member at practically every major hotel and airline in the world; if I ever needed to pop into the lounge or visit a restaurant like this one, all it’d take was a quick phone call from him for the staff to let me through. But that might prove a little harder now, seeing as I’ve blocked his number and cut off every channel of communication between us.

“Do you have your membership card with you?” the receptionist presses. “Or your membership number?”

No, and no. But a quicker solution springs to mind—just a considerably more obnoxious one. “You can search for my name,” I tell her.

“Pardon?” The receptionist blinks at me.

“I’m sure I’m in your system,” I say. “It’s Chanel Cao.”

I wait as she types, her long nails clicking against the keyboard. “Chanel Cao,” she murmurs to herself. A pause as she frowns at the screen, then a slow shake of her head. “No, I’m sorry. Your name’s not coming up.”

Okay, fine. Another way then. I scan the lobby and spot two girls around my age posing by the bamboo. One of them has paired a cropped Louis Vuitton shirt with simple sweatpants, the ultimate fashion statement to let you know she’s rich but totally casual about it. The other is in a full floor-length gown, her makeup so heavy that her eyeliner is visible from here, like Sharpie on a white wall. They rotate between taking photos using their phones with the flash on, then the flash off, then the digital camera that every influencer has been recommending lately, then their phones again but video this time. Definitely my target demographic.

I wait until they’ve finished assessing their newest photos before lowering my sunglasses a few deliberate inches, right as they glance up.

They both do a double take.

Then Louis Vuitton Girl elbows Ballgown Girl, and they exchange a look, curiosity and confirmation at once. *Oh my god, could it really be her? Are*

you seeing this too? Yes, yes, I think so, let's find out. And they unanimously make the decision to approach me.

"Excuse me," Louis Vuitton Girl says in a breathless voice. "So sorry to bother you, but are you . . . are you Chanel Cao?"

I grin at them like I'm surprised to be recognized, a little shy, even. "Yeah, I am, hi."

They exchange another look, that shared language between best friends, a silent scream of excitement and *I can't believe this is happening*, and they both start gushing.

"Oh my god, you're even prettier in real life—I didn't think that was possible—"

"We're huge fans. We *worship* your Instagram, you have no idea—"

"I've been following you for years—"

"You're literally so pretty, like, for real—"

"I *love* your leather jacket," Ballgown Girl coos, and makes a motion as if to stroke the material, then thinks better of it, though her fingers still twitch in my direction. "It's the limited edition one, right? I heard they only sell it at their flagship store in Venice and it's, like, fifty thousand dollars."

"Yeah, I don't think they make these anymore," I agree, though I can't remember the price. I'm not even the biggest fan of this jacket—I'd bought it on a whim during my last trip to Venice because it was getting chilly and I happened to be walking past the store. "I have another really similar jacket at home, to be honest—do you want this one?"

Ballgown Girl's eyes widen. "What? Are you being serious?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind that it's secondhand," I say, shrugging off my jacket and holding it out to her.

"I . . . Would I *mind*?" Ballgown Girl makes a choked sound as she takes the jacket from me. "I can't even . . . there's no way—"

"That's so sweet of you, what the hell," Louis Vuitton girl says.

Without turning around, I can sense the receptionist watching the exchange from behind us, the scales of her risk assessment tipping heavily in my favor.

"Do you have an event at this hotel or something?" Ballgown Girl asks.

"We actually had plans to go to the restaurant, but I forgot my ID," I tell them, glancing over at the receptionist. "So it's just taking a while to get my identity verified. . . ."

Ballgown Girl makes an indignant sound on my behalf. "Oh my god, since when did *Chanel Cao* need verification?" She whirls toward the receptionist. "She's literally famous. Just look her up right now."

Before the receptionist has even turned back to her laptop, I know what will show up. The professional photos and viral selfies and family portraits, everything from my reported height (a few inches above my actual height) to my reported weight (a few pounds below). All the suggested search results:

is Chanel Cao related to model Coco Cao?

Chanel Cao net worth

Chanel Cao boyfriend

what high school does Chanel Cao go to

Chanel Cao interview

what is Chanel Cao famous for

Chanel Cao Instagram

“Chanel Cao . . .” the receptionist says again, this time with recognition, her eyes widening. “Oh!” Her smile springs back into place with such speed even my actress friends would be impressed. “Please do forgive me for the inconvenience here, Ms. Chanel Cao. Hotel policy, you understand. The restaurant is on the seventy-third floor. Turn around the corner and take the lift on the farthest left to go straight up. Would you like me to show you there myself? I’ll ask them to prepare some drinks for you—a mocktail, perhaps? Or something warmer, like our brown sugar and ginger tea?”

“That’s fine, we can head over ourselves,” I say graciously, then turn to the two girls. “Thank you so much—”

“No, no, it’s our pleasure,” Ballgown Girl says. “I’m just so glad we got to meet you in person—”

“I’m glad I got to meet you guys too,” I say, and this goes on for about as long as I would expect from past experience, more compliments passed back and forth, three different attempts to say “We’ll let you go, we know you’re busy,” a quick selfie of us together after finding the best lighting, a promise to tag me once they post it. It’s all very flattering, no matter how many times it happens.

Then I wave goodbye to them and grab Haili’s wrist, pulling her along with me inside the lift, which is better equipped than most actual hotel rooms are.

There's a plush velvet sofa sitting in the corner, a wooden stand offering scented tissues and alcohol wipes and cotton swabs, and a bamboo basket of complimentary tea bags to take to your room. There's even a gold-framed vanity mirror I'd put to good use under happier circumstances.

"Welcome to QiXing Luxury Hotels," a lilting, questionably seductive female voice plays overhead as the lift ascends. "We hope you enjoy your stay."

"Oh god. I was so scared we were going to get kicked out of the hotel," Haili says.

"The only person who might get kicked out today is Yaozu," I assure Haili. "Though for your sake, I hope it doesn't come to that."

She swallows. "You think there is still hope? That it might all be okay? That maybe I'm just overthinking it?"

I don't want to lie to her, so instead I hold out my hand. "Show me the last thing you sent him?"

She fishes out her phone and passes it carefully over to me like it's a DNA sample from a crime scene. Her WeChat is already open to her old conversations with him. I've seen most of the messages before, sent in screenshots from her over the past few weeks, alongside key details about their relationship.

It's a familiar tragedy. In the beginning, *he's* the one who's more interested. He adds her on WeChat, asks for her alias, shamelessly comments on how nice her figure looks in her latest posts, invites her out to parties. She humors him with one-word responses, or sometimes straight up ignores him, but that doesn't stop him from texting again an hour later, with an entirely new conversation starter.

There's a brief moment in time where they're both equally into each other, affection almost dripping off the screen, "I like you" exchanged as easily and naturally as breathing.

But of course it doesn't last, because he senses it. The instant she's hooked, he starts to pull back. The exclamation marks disappear, and the "good morning" texts taper off, and there's a vague note of annoyance to his responses when they do eventually come in, eighteen hours later.

And then I land on her most recent messages. They're hard to miss, because the text basically takes up the entire screen.

can u please call me when u get the chance??

i really want to talk to u

idk if it's just me and i'm overthinking like i usually do but it feels like you've been kinda distant these days? again idk i could be overthinking. it's just unfair bc you're on my mind 24/7 and u make me so sad and angry and confused sometimes and i've put in all this effort to keep u and open up to u in a way i haven't with anyone else before but you never let me in. and then you'll say something that makes me think u actually like me. but do u actually like me? i don't even know where this is going or why i'm this upset and i'm sorry if i'm being super annoying rn but i need u to tell me what you're thinking bc it's literally driving me insane. . . .

“I know I sound pathetic,” Haili mumbles. “I tried to control myself, but I couldn’t.”

“You’re not pathetic. You’re just . . . in love,” I tell her, suppressing a shudder at the very thought of it. *Love*. By far the worst idea humans have ever come up with, even worse than mesh ballet flats. “Happens to everyone.”

“It doesn’t happen to you, though,” she says quietly.

And thank god for that, I think to myself. Watching yet another one of my beautiful, smart, talented friends fall apart because of some random douchebag just reaffirms my personal motto: You can cry over a stained dress, but you should never cry over a boy. “I just don’t think romance is really my thing,” I tell Haili as the lift doors part with a soft *ding*.

The Sky Restaurant has been effectively designed to feel like you’re really dining in the sky. You can see the entirety of the hotel sprawled out below in all its gorgeous, glistening luxury: the traditional gardens and pagodas, the canopied sunbeds, the curved man-made lake that transitions seamlessly into a swimming pool. Lanterns float over the dark waters, their yellow flames clarifying the shapes of canoes strung to the decks and the lily pads dotting the edges. The rest of the city waits just behind it, the Beijing skyline glowing against the night.

It doesn’t rank anywhere near the top ten restaurants I’ve been to—maybe not even the top fifty—but I suppose it does make for a pretty nice venue. Before our school wisely opened up its wallet to hold our annual prom at Rivera Restaurant, making it *the* most extravagant, buzzed-about international school event of the season, they used to rent out this place.

It’s also the perfect spot for a romantic dinner—peaceful, scenic, and most important of all, private. Rather than having the tables spread out across the floor, there’s a single narrow corridor that forks off into individual sets of steps, leading down into what are essentially glamorous pits, encircled by ferns and white marble. Each table occupies its own corner, with a sectional sofa and a balcony to lean over; spacious enough to move around and take

pretty photos before the appetizers come in, but cozy enough to make out against the satin cushions after dessert.

Most of the diners here are couples, their heads close together in the intimate candlelight, but as I search the area, my eyes land on a tall figure standing alone by the railings. He's holding an empty glass, his expression alert, as if he's waiting for something to happen.

I blink in surprise.

Ares Yin.

The new boy at Airington International Boarding School. Dropped like a bomb into our classes at the start of this semester, no warnings given, no further information provided.

From the second he walked in, his shirt collar rumpled, his blazer conspicuously missing and his black hair left to grow out to a length the teachers would deem "distracting" or "unruly," he'd become the Number One Trending Topic on campus. Most of my classmates are as scared of him as they are fascinated by him.

Even now, standing in the restaurant, he appears not just intimidating, but actually dangerous—something about the severe cut of his jaw, the hollowed-out look to his cheekbones, the dark brows angled over his pitch-black eyes. In the weeks since school started, I haven't seen him smile once, not even when people are speaking to him. Everything about him is sharp and unyielding, like he's prepared to enter a knife fight.

For a moment, his gaze swings to me.

I deliberately hold it and lift my hand in a casual wave, waiting for him to acknowledge me. It's not as if we've ever really spoken to each other before, but it's what any guy from school would do: wave back, grin, invite me over. They'd be eager to make our acquaintance known, to come closer. And honestly, I wouldn't mind coming closer to Ares. He's more than attractive enough, even by my standards, and I still haven't finalized my prom date. Based on all the buzz around him, he could be a *very* valuable asset in my campaign—I simply need him to make a move.

But Ares stays right where he is, expression unchanged, and turns his head away, as if my presence is of zero importance to him.

I blink again, this time in disbelief, heat rushing to my cheeks. There's no way he just chose to *ignore* me—

"He's over there," Haili says on a shaky breath, yanking my attention to the table at the back.

I force myself to focus, forget Ares, and crane my neck for a better view. I only know her guy through photos, all preselected by Haili and shown to me

while she explained sheepishly and insistently that he looked *way* better in person.

As expected, he does not look better in person.

He looks like the kind of guy I'd go out of my way to avoid at a club. The overwaxed hair—so shiny I can see it glinting like a beetle shell even before I start marching my way over—isn't helping, but it could be forgiven, if he didn't have his arm around the girl beside him. They're laughing together, practically falling into each other's laps, and just when I didn't think the evidence could be any more damning, he plucks the cherry off one of the mini cupcakes on his plate and feeds it to her.

Bile threatens to creep its way back up my throat. This feels far too familiar.

"Okay, I'm going to kill him," I decide, my stomach twisting with outrage on my friend's behalf. "That *asshole*."

"I . . . can't believe it," Haili whispers. "I—I can't believe he's actually . . ."

"Unfortunately, I very much can believe it," I say darkly. "Look, you stay here—I'll handle it for you."

"Can you?" She grips my arm tight, like she might lose her balance otherwise. "Are you . . . are you going to splash water on him or something?"

"No. Water dries. Humiliation lasts much longer."

And with that, I march straight over to their table, my hands curled into fists.

Yaozu jerks his head up, his fingers still stained red with cherry juice, and scowls at me, like I must have accidentally lost my way around the restaurant, before he focuses on my face. His mouth goes slack, a familiar, mesmerized look that would be satisfying if it weren't coming from a piece of total trash. "Have I met you somewhere before?" he asks, his attention shifting away completely from the girl sitting right next to him.

"Are you fucking *serious*, Yaozu?" I hiss, letting all my disgust and rage spill into my performance. "Where's the ball?"

His features freeze into an expression of comical confusion. "Huh?"

"I said, where's the fucking *basketball*? You told me you were playing *basketball* with your *bros* tonight." I jab my thumb toward the girl. "How long have you been sneaking around with her behind my back?"

The girl pushes away from him. "Who is she?" she asks sharply. "You already have a girlfriend?"

"I—I don't know," he splutters.

She glares at him. "You don't know if you have a girlfriend or not?"

"No, that's not what I—I don't know who she is—"

“Oh, right, sure you don’t,” I scoff. “I actually should’ve figured you were an asshole ages ago. I mean, I rented out your favorite restaurant and invited all your friends just to surprise you for your birthday, and you couldn’t be bothered to see me in person on my birthday because you just *had* to see some emerging indie artist called Pipplo perform live in Shanghai, and you know what? I saw his sets after, and he couldn’t even keep up with his own backing track.” The words flow easily from me, unscripted and unrehearsed. Maybe a little too easily. Because even as I’m speaking, it’s my mom’s voice I hear ringing inside my head, bitter and betrayed and broken, every argument she and my father waged against each other after the truth came out.

“What are you *talking* about?” Yaozu demands, his brows scrunching up in bewilderment. He whips around to face the girl, hands half raised above his head like her gaze is a gun, pointed right at him. “I—I don’t listen to anyone named Pipplo, I swear! I’ve never heard that name before!”

“You said you’d pick me up from the restaurant, but then you got sidetracked playing video games,” I talk over him, really on a roll now. “You said you’d introduce me to all your friends from your old school, but every time I ask about it, it’s like they vanish into thin air. You said you wanted to travel to Italy with me, but suddenly you can’t afford plane tickets or your schedule’s too full or you’re concerned the weather won’t be warm enough or you need more time to buy a bigger suitcase. You said you *wanted* me.”

“I have no idea who you are,” Yaozu insists, red in the face, and turns again to the girl, repeats with urgency, “I literally have no idea who she is.”

“Yeah, sure.” The girl grabs her black leather clutch and lurches onto her feet, her lower lip curling. “Feel free to delete me on WeChat.”

“Wait. *Wait!*” he calls, scrambling after her.

She’s already gone.

I breathe out, letting my scowl loosen, but my fists won’t unfurl. The anger is still there, the acid searing my stomach, burning me from the inside out. I don’t know if it’ll ever go away. I used to think it would at some point, maybe after the divorce was finalized and everything went back to normal, but these days I’m starting to worry that there *is* no going back to normal after what my father did. This is just how I am now.

As I walk back over to Haili, I can sense someone staring. Instinctively, I glance back and spot him right away. Ares. It’s clear from the way his dark brows are furrowed, his mouth pressed into a thin line, that he overheard everything. But there’s no trace of sympathy anywhere on his face.

My fingers tingle with a strange, unfamiliar, out-of-control feeling, my insides clenching. I’ve always prided myself on being able to detect exactly

what someone's thinking about me, but between him ignoring me earlier, and how he's looking at me now, I have no idea what he's thinking.

Part of me is tempted to march right over and find out for myself. Does he have a problem with me? Did I accidentally smudge my makeup on his favorite shirt or something? Or, the most mortifying possibility of all: Does he just *not like me*?

But then I notice Haili, who's been hiding behind one of the pillars, her cheeks streaked with tears, and I push my questions away. I can deal with Ares Yin later. Right now, my friend needs me.

"Are you okay?" I ask Haili.

"No, but . . . I watched the whole thing," she says, and manages a weak smile. "Thanks for doing that. I wouldn't have had the guts to even confront him."

"I held back, honestly. If you *really* want to make him miserable, I have plenty of other ideas," I say. I reach into my purse, rifling through several tubes of lip gloss and a tin of strawberry mints and a new bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume, before I find the packet of tissues I'm searching for. I hold it out to her.

"I don't think he could ever be as miserable as I am right now," she mumbles, scrunching the tissue up into a ball and dabbing at the mascara flecks under her eyes. "He doesn't care the way I do."

"Remind me again," I say gently, "why you like him."

"I don't know. . . ." She pauses and thinks for so long that I start wondering if she's planning on skipping over my question entirely. "He's . . . I guess he's nice to me?"

"He's nice to you," I repeat, less gently, unable to keep the skepticism out of my tone.

"He gives me all these little compliments—like, he'll say that I'm cute or that he thinks my necklace is pretty or he can't stop thinking about my body," she elaborates in a hurry. "He carries my bags, and he holds the door open for me, and sometimes he helps me stab the straw into my bubble tea, and . . . and there was this one time where I spilled water on my shirt and he got me a napkin. . . ."

I take a deep breath and silently lament the fact that the bar is so low these days you'd have to dig through hell's basement to find it.

"Also," Haili goes on, to her own detriment, "once I was running seven minutes late to go meet him, and he didn't even get mad."

"Okay, no. I'm sorry, but literally any human with basic decency would do those things. An old woman held the door open for us on our way into the hotel just now. And I've seen actual *pigs* who are trained to carry bags," I

add, which makes her snort a little, even as more tears slip down her cheeks. “It’s truly not that difficult, and more importantly, it’s not that rare. Like, give me half an hour, and I could find you another boy with his exact same haircut and nose ring and love of clubbing and Jack Daniel’s off a random street in Beijing.”

“I just wanted it to be him,” she whispers. “I so badly wanted it to be him.”

“I know,” I say, my voice softening again, and consider how I should phrase my next words to get the point across without rubbing the salt deeper into her wounds. “But you said that he’s had plenty of girlfriends before, right? What was it, six? Seven?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah. Seven. And a half, if you count that summer fling.”

“Okay, so, the way that he was behaving around you—that’s like, muscle memory for him. He knows what he’s doing. He’s got all his tricks tried and tested. It only seemed special because it was your first time experiencing it with him—and *you* are special. You’re gorgeous and way too good for him. And you can cry about it, or get angry, and you can call me whenever you need to vent, but on days when you miss him, and you’re fighting the urge to text him, you have to remind yourself that what you miss is the experience. The *feeling*. Not him, the person.”

She nods again, faster, though I’m not sure how much of it is sinking in. “God, I’m so done.” She sniffs, leaning back against the gray stone. “I’m going to become a nun. No more feelings for me; I’m never liking anyone ever again.”

But I know she will, and soon. Haili is one of those people who’s simply in love with the idea of love. She’ll lock eyes with a stranger in the grocery store or see someone helping an old lady across an ice-slicked road, and that’s it for her. She’s already gone, heart on her sleeve, twenty thousand feet in free fall, with no thought for self-preservation at all.

I genuinely can’t fathom how she does it—how anyone does it. How she can bear to put herself through the pain of wanting someone, only to lose them again and again. It sounds like signing yourself up for torture.

“Do you want my driver to give you a ride home?” I offer. “I can also hang out here with you.”

“It’s okay, it’s getting late. I think . . . I just need some time alone right now,” she says with a wobbly smile, and I wish I could magically make everything better, spare her from the last two stages of heartbreak: the rage, followed by the grief. But this is where love always leads. “Thank you, though, for coming with me tonight. I seriously have no idea what I would’ve done if you weren’t there. . . . Just so you know, I’m definitely voting for you.”

It takes me a moment to realize she's talking about the election for prom queen. "You don't have to thank me—I'm always here for you," I tell her. It's the diplomatic thing to say, but I really mean it. "Just text me when you get home safe, yeah?"

"You too."

I glance back at her a couple times on my way to the lift. She remains standing in the same spot, arms wrapped around herself, her hurt palpable, everything about the wounded, betrayed look in her eyes so reminiscent of my mom's that I consider running back to hug her—or running after Yaozu to punch him.

But I know it wouldn't help, not really, no more than I was able to help my mom. The only way to prevent heartbreak like that, from what I've seen, is to avoid the ordeal of falling in love altogether. Save yourself before you're in too deep. What's romance really good for, anyway? I can buy myself nicer gifts than any guy could afford, I already enjoy the full princess treatment everywhere I dine and shop, and I regularly receive messages from followers that are sweeter and more sincere than any kind of love letter.

The doors to the lift slide open. A couple in their twenties walks out first, the woman gazing dreamily at her boyfriend like he's the moon in the sky while he's busy checking a stock-trading app on his phone.

I step inside, more grateful than ever to be alone.

2

Chanel

I've always liked Beijing better at night.

There's something thrilling about the cloak of darkness, the same reason why parties only *really* start to get exciting as the hours tick by and drinks are poured and layers are stripped off. Mornings are for the self-disciplined, the ambitious, the hard workers with Big Plans in life, people like my best friend, Alice Sun. Nights are for secrecy and spontaneity, for cocktail dresses and covering up messes, for all the people who don't have their shit figured out but are desperate to put it off until dawn.

The air is cool against my cheeks as I wait on the sidewalk, the stars above half concealed behind a thin veil of smog and clouds and distant city lights.

Cars and mopeds whir past me, their shiny metal edges glinting under the neon signs of surrounding shops: rice noodle stores and grilled squid stands and karaoke bars, all in full swing. Even though it's almost one in the morning, this city is used to staying up late, just like its overworked twenty-and thirtysomethings.

I check my phone again. My driver's been stuck in traffic for the past ten minutes, and I'm debating whether to just cancel and call a DiDi instead when I spot Ares leaving the hotel.

He doesn't see me. He's too busy surveying the street, and as a bus rounds the corner, its headlights throw the hostile edges of his profile into clarity. There's an odd sense of urgency to his movements as he checks the time on his phone. Glances up at the sky, his eyes sharp and focused, as if there's a secret message written in the clouds. Then he checks his phone again.

I frown, my mind whirring faster and faster with suspicion. Why had he even been at the Sky Restaurant anyway? He wasn't eating, and he wasn't