

DEAR ACCOMPLICE

親愛的共犯

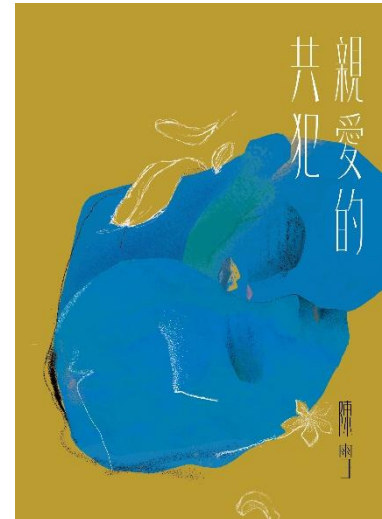
* 2022 Taipei Book Fair Award

When police detectives are sent to a posh mansion to investigate the disappearance of the second son of a wealthy tycoon, they inadvertently uncover clues pointing to the cover-up of an orphanage child-abuse scandal.

Dear Accomplice starts from a kidnapping investigation. Chang Chen-Tung, the head of a restaurant chain and second son of a wealthy business tycoon, has disappeared, and police detectives have been sent to the Chang family mansion, known as Whitehall, to investigate. There, they discover that while Whitehall might appear dignified from the outside, its interior hides all manner of eyebrow-raising activities: fraternal power struggles, secretive servants, and the shell-shocked wife of the missing brother who may be losing her grip on reality.

The kidnapping investigation brings to light a suppressed case of child abuse at an orphanage. As the detectives follow the trail of clues, they find the two cases are more deeply intertwined than they originally thought. The wife of the missing brother is one of the victims in the child abuse case, and she is bound to her fellow victims by a bond that runs deeper than blood, and which appears intimately connected to the kidnapping. What is the horrific secret that connects the orphanage to Whitehall, and what role does the wife of the missing man play in all of this?

Shifting between multiple perspectives, and incorporating the testimony of police detectives, family members, servants, and others related to the cases, the novel is a densely populated stage of competing voices. With tight pacing and sharply-honed prose, author Chen Xue constructs a narrative seething with internal tensions, leveraging her rich cast of characters to explore the contradictions of human behavior within the context of moral dilemmas and a fracturing family. Initially, the lavish luxury of Whitehall seems far removed from the stark



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conditions of a failing orphanage, but what ultimately brings these two worlds together is a past so dark that no one dares to speak of it.

Chen Xue 陳雪

One of Taiwan's best known authors, Chen Xue writes in a range of genres, from queer literature to romance and thrillers. Since the publication of her first book in 1995, she has gone on to publish numerous essays, short stories, and novels. Her novel *Dear Accomplice* was awarded the 2022 Taipei Book Fair Award. Her other works include *Fatherless City*, *Skyscraper*, *The Child on the Bridge*, *The Book of Bad Women*, and *Ten Years in a Same Sex Marriage*.

DEAR ACCOMPLICE

By Chen Xue

Translated by Qing Zhao

Part One: The Man from My Dreams

1

In the dream, the bridge stretched far into the distance, vanishing toward a point she could never reach. A figure moved along it, blurred and unsteady, one leg dragging. He clutched something in both arms. His coat hung askew, its open collar gaping like a confession. His hair was a mess, and from afar, his dark eyes seemed to flicker with light.

Then he began to run. She watched him struggle forward, but the bridge kept unspooling ahead of him, always just out of reach. He grew smaller, slipping farther away. She tried to cry out, but no sound came. He limped faster, desperate to outrun the elongating bridge, but it was no use. He would never reach the far end. She opened her mouth wide, shouting with all her might, but still nothing. There was no way to hold him, no way to keep him from disappearing.

Gunshots rang out. One, then another. His body jerked with the impact. The force from behind bent him inward, folding him like paper – once, then again – until he collapsed, soft and limp, curling in on himself as he hit the ground.

The bridge finally stopped moving. The image froze: his body, crumpled like a paper bag crushed and folded, blood spreading beneath him in a crooked, jagged Z.

She hadn't been there when it happened. But now, she was witnessing his death. A plainclothes officer, chased, shot, and felled. The bridge was empty. No pursuers in sight. One by one, faces rose like balloons – faces she couldn't name, drifting off into the wind.

The air was thick with the smell of blood.

Chou Hsiao-yung had dreamed of her father again. This time, she saw his final moments – scenes she had never witnessed in real life. She often dreamed of him, especially when the pressure of a major investigation weighed on her. The harder the case, the more often he appeared. Sometimes, he came to help: offering advice, pointing out what she'd missed, guiding her through the mystery. In those dreams, she was a grown woman, and he remained in his prime. They were like colleagues, partners, poring over case details with shared intensity. He was always wise – able to cut through her blind spots with nothing but experience and clarity. At first, waking from those dreams left her more heartbroken than any nightmare. But as time passed, she began to welcome them. Whether the dream was kind or cruel, it didn't matter. She just wanted to see her father.

Chou Hsiao-yung's father had been a respected detective. He was killed in a shootout. A suspect had grabbed a colleague's gun, and while her father was chasing another fugitive, the man with the stolen weapon shot him from behind.

She was fifteen at the time.

Her father died in the line of duty. The news caused a public stir. The family received compensation, and donations came in from all sides. Later, in court, Chou Hsiao-yung saw the man who had shot her father. A pale, unremarkable face – except for the absence of remorse. In that moment, she resolved to become a police officer. Not for vengeance, but because her father hadn't lived to make the arrest. She hadn't even seen him one last time. If she could pick up the chase where he left off, she thought, it would be like walking beside him again.

She remembered sitting on his lap as a child, case files stacked high on the table. "What's that?" she asked. "Work," he said. "What do you do?" He smiled. "A cat chasing mice." "Does the cat always catch the mouse?" "Not always," he replied. "Sometimes the mouse turns into a wolf and eats the cat." Her father often came home late at night or just before dawn, moving quietly so as not to wake them. Years of sleepless nights and skipped meals had taken a toll. No matter how much he ate, he stayed thin. Her mother later told her he had hepatitis and shouldn't have been keeping such hours. If the bullet hadn't killed him, it might have been his liver.

Against her mother's objections, Chou Hsiao-yung applied to the police academy. She followed her father's path with quiet determination, never complaining, no matter how hard it got. In the end, she made it into the Major Crimes Unit of the Criminal Investigation Corps. She was just twenty-eight – young, and already an anomaly as a woman in that line of work. But she was skilled in judo, sharp with a gun, blessed with a memory like a steel trap and a dogged streak that wouldn't let go. In every way, she reminded people of her father.

She started each morning with 100 push-ups, 100 lunge jumps, 500 jumps with a rope. Then stretches, a shower, and getting dressed. She tied back her long hair, pulled on a cap, and left no trace of femininity. Still, her fair face made her look delicate.

Backpack slung over one shoulder, she dashed downstairs. At the corner breakfast shop, she picked up a cheese egg crepe, a sandwich, and a cup of iced milk tea before heading to the station.

She worked in the Major Crimes Unit of the 3rd Criminal Investigation Corps, T City Police Department. The name sounded dramatic, but the office was modest: a corner space on the second floor, partitioned off with dark wood and glass. Their chief had a small private office; the rest shared four facing desks. A simple acrylic sign reading "Major Crimes Unit" hung at the entrance – nothing grand.

She set down her bag, shrugged off her jacket, and headed to the break room to make coffee for Chief Li Chun. He preferred his own beans – roasted by a friend, she'd heard, and delivered fresh, always on schedule. She ground them carefully and brewed a full pot in the drip machine. Chief Li drank it all day, not just in the office. He'd fill a thermos to take on the road. It took five or six cups just to keep him going.

Li Chun was something of a legend, both for the cases he cracked and for his personal peculiarities. He had a hopeless sweet tooth. Whenever he passed the food stalls near the precinct – red bean pancakes, bean paste buns – he'd buy a whole bag, enough to cover breakfast, afternoon tea, and whatever meal he might miss in between. When the stalls ran out, he turned to convenience store chocolate bars. The filling didn't matter. What mattered was that it tore open easily and could be eaten right away.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with sharply defined features. His trench coat hung loosely on him, its cuffs frayed and worn through. He looked like a rough, unkempt man, but was never without coffee and something sugary in hand – a contrast that felt odd. But the longer you knew him, the more these little indulgences faded into the background. He had so many contradictions that they stopped seeming contradictory at all. They became his style. A small crescent-shaped knife scar arched over his right brow, adding menace to an already severe face. He smoked Marlboros, two packs a day, most of them lit and forgotten, burning slowly between his fingers as if they existed only to help him think. He did everything to excess: sweets, caffeine, cigarettes. But he got results. As long as Li Chun was on the case, odds were it would be solved. Whatever quirks he carried were simply accepted as part of the bargain.

Chou Hsiao-yung had a rough time in the Major Crimes Unit. Female detectives were rare to begin with – young ones like her, even more so. When she first joined the team, she was treated like an assistant, constantly being ordered around. It wasn't until she helped crack a case that Li Chun began mentoring her personally.

Chou Hsiao-yung's father had served in the 4th Criminal Investigation Corps, where he was known as "Master Chou". He was famous for his fiery temper, his fierce sense of justice, and a top-notch crime-solving rate. He died in the line of duty at the age of fifty-five. But perhaps thanks to the lingering respect his name still carried, Chou Hsiao-yung, just four years out of the police academy, had steadily risen through the ranks and made it into the Criminal Investigation Corps.

Chou Hsiao-yung had never been good at using the muscles in her face. Her expressions were limited: even a smile looked strained, and sorrow registered as a kind of sulky defiance. To avoid being misunderstood, she made a conscious effort not to show much at all. The result was a face that looked perpetually blank, vaguely sullen. She wasn't unattractive, but there was something unapproachable about her. Perhaps it was the absence of smiles that, over time, gave her a grave demeanor. When she tried to make a joke, it never quite landed. When she meant to be warm, she came off as distant. Eventually, she gave up trying to win people over – she kept her face stiff, her head down, and focused on her work. There was a certain distance between her and the others, but every assignment she received, she executed to the letter. She had no close friends on the team, but Chief Li didn't seem to mind her impassive face – and that made working with him surprisingly easy.

About six months ago, Chou Hsiao-yung began making coffee for Chief Li. At first, it was something she did in passing, but later it became a habit. A morning ritual that marked the start of her day. For over a year now, she had followed Chief Li through case after case, witnessing firsthand how he unraveled the trickiest robberies and cracked the most complex murder

investigations. Her feelings toward him were a mix of awe and admiration. The Major Crimes Unit had just solved a jewelry store robbery: a couple had stolen millions in jewels from Tsai Hsing Jewelers. The case was closed in two weeks. Everyone got credit, and morale was high.

She took her night shifts like everyone else, sleeping on a folding cot in the duty room. She'd unroll her sleeping bag, shut her eyes, and be out. When it was time to wake, she was up without delay. Everyone in the Major Crimes Unit had their strengths. Li Chun had eagle eyes: he never forgot a face he'd seen. Ouyang Yeh was a master interrogator. Li Kuang-chiang could tail a suspect for days without being noticed. And Chou Hsiao-yung – she had a head for numbers, patterns, symbols. She had trained herself in marksmanship, too. Her father had been killed by a bullet, and she made sure hers always found their mark. The trophies from interdepartmental shooting contests proved it.

Just as Chou Hsiao-yung finished brewing the coffee, Li Chun walked in. Whenever he arrived at the station, even colleagues from other departments would tense up. The atmosphere turned solemn. He always opened and closed doors with force, not out of rudeness, but because he was distracted. He had been divorced for five years. Custody of their son had gone to his wife. Now, he had no family, no dependents, no lover. The only person left in his life was Lisa, the woman who ran a café in their precinct. An old flame. Years after drifting apart, they met again. Lisa had been widowed, he divorced, and somehow, they fell back together. Whether it was old feelings rekindled or just mutual comfort didn't matter. They saw each other once a week, always at his rented two-bedroom apartment. When the divorce was finalized, he let his ex-wife take everything. He didn't mind. Truth was, he hadn't accumulated much over the years. Leaving it all to her and their son felt, in some small way, like doing right by them.

Li Chun was quick-tempered by nature, but when needed, he could be astonishingly patient. He had a sweet tooth, though there was nothing soft about him. The sweets were mostly medicinal: when his blood sugar dropped, he grew restless and irritable, even lightheaded in severe cases. He never said a word about it. Let people think he was just some strange man with sugar cravings. From his early days as a beat cop, he had known that skipping meals was part of the job. After joining the Criminal Investigation Corps, his schedule became chaotic – no distinction between day and night. He often couldn't remember if he'd eaten at all. But when the signs of low blood sugar crept in, one bite of something sweet would calm the nerves almost instantly. Two bites, and the fog would lift. Ideas would surge in, and suddenly, the case seemed to unravel on its own.

To him, Chou Hsiao-yung always looked like a student: jeans, a ponytail, black-rimmed glasses, a worn canvas backpack slung over her shoulder. As plainclothes detectives, uniforms weren't required, but her look leaned too much toward that of a college student. Eventually, he gave her a military jacket – the kind with detachable sleeves that could be worn as a vest. Chou Hsiao-yung often wore that pocket-covered vest, still with the same old backpack. Sometimes she added a baseball cap and tied her hair up. From a distance, she could've passed for a teenage boy.

Many people thought it was because of Master Chou that Chou Hsiao-yung became the youngest and one of the few female members of the Criminal Investigation Corps. But Li Chun

knew it was her own strength that got her there. She'd excelled at the police academy and had an exceptional memory for numbers and symbols. With abilities like that, she could've gone to medical school instead of choosing this underpaid, high-risk job. But she'd grown up idolizing her father, dreaming of wearing the badge. After his death, her focus sharpened: she set her sights on the Criminal Investigation Corps and never looked back. She passed every test, cleared every round. Once she fixed her mind on something, she held on tight and refused to let go. That was what Li Chun admired most – she was bold, relentless, unafraid of hard work. When she chased something, she chased it to the ends of the earth and wouldn't rest until she had thought it through and seen it clearly. She made good use of computers and the internet, frequented the library, and could often be seen moving through the police station's archives. She even insisted on participating in forensic autopsies. Chou Hsiao-yung was stubborn, with a certain obsession when it came to solving cases. But Li Chun appreciated that kind of foolish determination in her. They were the same type: preoccupied with things that others avoided at all costs, turning them repeatedly in their minds, losing sleep over them. It wasn't exactly that they enjoyed it, but rather that they felt a kind of compulsion, something inside them that wouldn't let them walk away.

Every morning when she arrived at the station, Chou Hsiao-yung would hand Chief Li his coffee and sandwich. He'd take the sandwich and bite right in, and she'd return to her desk to start on her own breakfast. It had become an unspoken understanding between them. Sometimes Chief Li would slip her some money, and she'd accept it without a word. Sometimes that breakfast was the only proper meal they'd get all day. Chou Hsiao-yung also kept energy bars and chocolate in her bag, in case they missed meals while out investigating. She always knew just the right moment to hand him something to eat, to keep his blood sugar from dropping and setting off one of his tempers. They both ate quickly, their minds elsewhere. Eating was just something to get over with so they could start the day. What occupied their thoughts was always the same: What kind of case would they face today? And how would they go about solving it?

2

After the jewelry store robbery in August, things quieted down for Chou Hsiao-yung and Li Chun. What came next were the routine cases – petty theft, drug possession, trafficking, fraud. The days remained busy, but the edges had dulled. And still, Chou Hsiao-yung kept dreaming. Each morning, she would lie in bed for a few quiet minutes, trying to gather the threads of the night before. Sometimes she jotted them down in the notebook beside her pillow. Lately, in her dreams, her father's face had taken on the features of Li Chun. He didn't look the way he used to. It was as if the man in her dreams had become a blend of the two: Li Chun now, and the father she remembered from her childhood. Sometimes, they would eat together or watch television. It was as if they were living together. The dream scenes often showed them sitting side by side on the sofa, the television playing ball games or the news, while they discussed cases. Sometimes the

table would be piled with case files or photographs, as if their lives revolved around nothing but solving crimes.

The father who looked like Li Chun – or perhaps Li Chun who looked like her father – was full of wisdom, but gone was the humor he'd once had. He seemed colder, more detached, as though the person in front of him wasn't his daughter, but a colleague at the precinct. At times, he didn't seem to be talking to her at all, only thinking out loud. Still, the dreams comforted her. They felt like an extension of life itself, a continuation of her father's presence. If he no longer existed in the waking world, then at least he could live there.

She didn't know what the dreams meant, but she kept recording them. Perhaps her life had become too monotonous. Perhaps she had begun to lean on dreams more than reality.

Nothing in life seemed meaningful anymore, not even working cases, which had turned into routine procedures. She was becoming numb, uninterested in everything. The absence of major incidents signaled peace, but deep down, Chou Hsiao-yung longed for unrest. If her father were still alive, he would surely scold her for such thoughts. But what she yearned for wasn't the thrill of solving crimes, or the tension of investigation. She simply found herself no longer able to understand who she was. She had once wanted so badly to join the Major Crimes Unit. She had spent so much effort studying for the exams, working hard to prove herself. And now that she had finally made it – why was she still unhappy? No, she wasn't happy. But then again, was anyone in Major Crimes? This was not a job designed to bring joy. She looked over at Li Chun. Lately, he had gone back to re-investigate a cold case – a murder committed for insurance money the previous year. Chou Hsiao-yung had wanted to get involved, but the case had already hit a dead end, which only left her feeling more defeated.

His desk was buried in case files, a chaotic sprawl. His hair stuck up in places where he'd raked his fingers through it too many times. He might've been going farsighted – he held documents at arm's length when he read. Without realizing it, he went through many chocolate bars, and his body was already starting to show it. Around him, other colleagues nodded off in their chairs, heads thrown back, mouths agape, looking foolish in their exhaustion.

Chou Hsiao-yung had heard that Li Chun suffered from insomnia. Ever since his partner died in the line of duty three years ago, he hadn't been able to sleep well. The doctor prescribed sleeping pills and tranquilizers, but Li Chun said they damaged the brain, so he was reluctant to take them. In order to fall asleep, he started drinking, but alcohol only made it harder to work. So, he returned to the clinic and resumed the medication. The doctor gave him many suggestions – aside from taking medicine, he could try meditation, mindfulness, zazen. The idea was to ease himself toward rest, to prepare the mind for sleep. "They want me to meditate," Li Chun said to Chou Hsiao-yung. "To calm my mind. What a joke. It's an insult to the work we do." Even when he was off-duty, the job didn't let go. At home, he pored over case files, still chasing leads, still scribbling notes. Sometimes the obsession followed him into sleep. In a life like that, where could one find a state suitable for sleep?

His divorce, too, had been largely because of this job.

Back then, Li Chun had been working on a serial murder case that stretched from the north to the south of Taiwan, requiring coordination across regional jurisdictions. The killer had murdered two women, both drugged and then strangled. The methods weren't particularly unusual, but the crime scenes were disturbingly immaculate. The killer knew how to avoid surveillance cameras. All they had was one accidental image: his back, clad in a black bucket hat and a black jacket.

His wife used to call him a workaholic, claiming he'd lose his sense of self without a case to obsess over. He always said he had no choice. But in truth, he preferred immersing himself in investigations over participating in family life. "You like the dead more than the living," she once told him. "They don't talk back. You just study them."

His wife had been right. And wrong. He did feel responsible for the dead, though it wasn't something he could ever explain, not out loud. It wasn't some messiah complex. It started with his very first case, the first time he stood over a body. He remembered what the forensic pathologist, Pan Hung-i, had told him then: "The dead are the only ones who never lie. Corpses talk."