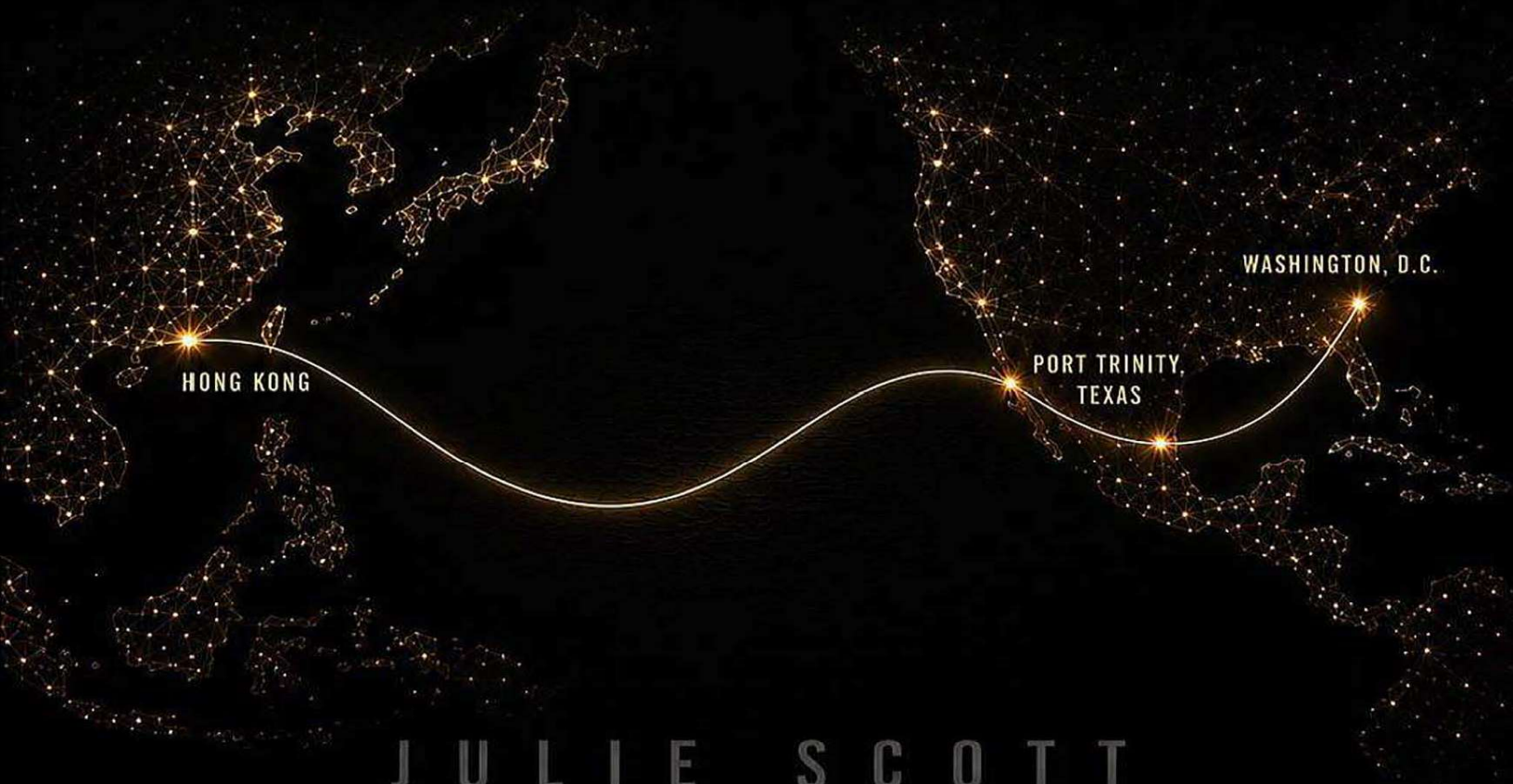


THE
TERMS
OF HIS
SURVIVAL

MONEY • POWER • CONTROL



HONG KONG

PORT TRINITY,
TEXAS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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The Terms of His Survival

MONEY . POWER. CONTROL

Chapter One | The Departure

Taio lay under the covers fully dressed, listening intently as the house settled into its night routine. The timing would need to be perfect. He furrowed his brow as he went through a mental checklist. His plan had taken most of a year to arrange; even then, he felt pensive. Everything would need to fall into place, a flawless execution. As the clock ticked toward midnight, he could feel panic sitting on his chest like a marble boulder.

Each step toward freedom brought additional risk. His plan could end up costing him everything. Trapped in Hong Kong under the oppressive watch of his controlling and manipulative stepmother—a woman who, for most of his life, had shaped every decision made for him to fit her agenda. She held sway over his father, a powerful, wealthy man. Unable to fully grasp the dynamics at play, he was only aware that her and her father's reach was far beyond his understanding. A veil of secrecy that his father willingly allowed.

A powerful ally or a dangerous foe? He risked almost certain ruin in Hong Kong once she discovered he had crossed the

line. Rather than an ever-present quiet threat, simply by being another woman's child, his escape from his beautiful prison could place him directly in her cross-hairs. Or perhaps she would simply be glad to be rid of him. The risk was not knowing which way the pendulum would swing.

Nothing about Liang's arrival felt accidental. She came into the house after the disaster that took Taio's mother and grandfather, slipping into the empty space they left behind with a calm that made people fall in line without thinking. His grandmother stayed on, steady but worn, while his father moved through the days with the distracted air of a man suddenly responsible for more land and power than he knew how to manage.

The wealth was always there, humming beneath everything—spoken of quietly, handled like something volatile. Everyone understood it would one day be Taio's. Everyone except the woman who began shaping the household with a kind of deliberate grace that never announced itself.

Her cruelty didn't come in sharp blows. It lived in the small, calculated choices she made. A lesson withheld. A privilege reassigned without explanation. A memory of his mother allowed to fade because no one bothered to repeat it. Her son, younger but somehow always centered, moved through the rooms as if the house itself leaned toward him. Liang made sure of that. She didn't need to raise her voice; she only needed to shift the ground beneath Taio's feet.

Her family's influence seeped into the home slowly, like water finding every crack. Servants changed. Traditions softened. The stories tied to Taio's birthright grew quieter, as if they belonged to someone else. And with his father gone so often—traveling, negotiating, grateful for the order Liang seemed to

maintain—no one questioned how the balance kept tilting.

Taio felt the changes long before he understood them. A door closing just before he reached it. A celebration where his name was spoken less than it should have been. A future that once felt certain now slipping just out of reach.

Liang never touched him, never scolded him, never made a scene. She didn't have to. Every quiet decision she made carved away another piece of the life that should have been his, leaving him to grow up in the shadow of a plan designed to erase him one careful inch at a time.

The estate, a beautiful home, sat looking across the bay, a monument to power and wealth. A home that had everything but love. Beautiful and austere, a reflection of Liang herself. As he waited, listening, he began his mental checklist.

The bare necessities had been carefully packed and slowly removed for shipment ahead of him. He had been transferring as much of his stipend as he could into cryptocurrency. A stipend that arrived unceremoniously each month to pay for his education, clothes, transportation, and anything else he needed. A generous sum befitting the son of an elite. All arranged with little forethought, simply a calculation like a business transaction.

Because of his hard work and the fact that little was in his control but time, he excelled academically and had a natural mind for business. A trait that would have suited him well to take over his father's enterprise. Instead, Rong Hoa, a cruel, dull, and entitled boy, was being groomed for the position. A fate worse than Liang herself. She was calculating and ever-present in his life, but each decision she made was to elevate herself and her son. Unlike Rong Hoa, she had a plan for her cruelty. She was not petty or unthinking. Rong Hoa, however, did

little to hide his disdain for him and took every chance he had to hold his position over him. A petty, cruel little boy who would become an intolerable man intent on making his life as miserable as possible simply because he could.

Thoughtfully weighing the risk versus the potential rewards, as was his nature, Taio could see his only way out was to find a way to remove himself from the equation. He only risked a life of control and comfort. His grandmother had shown him how she had rebuilt her life and found joy and peace again, even amid her tragedy. She lived a simple life, but it was hers. He longed for a life of his own, simple and free of the oversight of those who cared nothing for him.

He found himself at the university library searching for freedom through education. He researched and was not flagged, so he continued. Eventually settling on an international business program at Georgetown University in the United States. His spirits lifted when he learned he had been accepted into the program for the summer semester. He began planning in earnest but realized he would need help to escape unnoticed. He considered asking his father and Liang to give him permission to leave but knew if they said no, he would no longer be able to leave. It was not a risk he was willing to take.

Considering all his options, Taio needed an ally, someone who could help him mask his identity and minimize the risk of exposure. He has many friends and acquaintances from wealthy families who could afford the type of education and lifestyle he was afforded, but only one he felt he could trust. He and Genji had been friends since childhood, families in similar circles, and many shared experiences. She knew his life and his options and was sympathetic to his plight. Their parents even had an arranged marriage between them planned. She understood the

risks and the trap money, power and influence had over their lives.

Unlike him, she had more freedom of movement and choices. She had parents who loved, supported and prioritized her happiness within their own agenda. He began testing the waters, revealing small hints and gauging her reaction. Longing for a life of her own, free from the pressures that came with Hong Kong oversight, she was sympathetic and began offering veiled advice. They danced around the truth for months, gauging the threat both in terms of planning and the human costs if trust were broken.

Long study sessions and dinners became the norm as they traversed the ramifications. Genji revealed she had a plan and someone she trusted who could help him leave under a false identity. They began to use cloaking apps instead of meeting in person. Genji connected him to her source and made suggestions along the way. Each step along the way became a virtual game of Jenga; the possibility of him being caught increased. He felt the significance of his choice teetering his resolve. The cost was monumental, both psychologically and financially.

Glancing at the time, he began to steel himself. Hearing only Rong-Hoa down the hall, still awake, he calculated the risks and his plan once again. He would have to time his footsteps to the sound of gunfire coming from his brother's room. The pleasure Rong-Hoa would take in exposing his plan would be unbearable. The pleasure he would take and the cruel measures in which he would do so fueled Taio's resolve.

Reaching under his mattress, he retrieved his passport, visa, and crypto wallet. His backpack, still too light for the weight it carried, sat at his feet. Only a change of clothes and some

toiletries. Taio stood at his desk and opened the drawer, retrieving his phone. Severing ties so he couldn't be tracked was necessary. He looked at the photos of him and his grandmother one last time, committing them to memory. The last voicemail she left him before he was told of her death seared into his mind.

The phone was powered down and placed into his backpack to be discarded along the route Genji had made for him once he exited the house. She was able to use her resources to help him avoid any regular patrols or surveillance. Checking his bag once again, he assured himself that his new burner phone was still in its zippered compartment, ready for its only purpose.

If he were caught, the only identification he would have with him would be of someone who no longer existed. Genji had insisted he ship his identity in the boxes he sent prior to his departure. If you carry the truth, she said, you become the risk.

Taio shouldered his backpack and cautiously opened his door. His breath shallow, his senses heightened. The house was still, cold, and beautiful. He exited quietly, controlling his breath and the echo of his steps. He paused before Rong-Hoa's door. Blue light poured out from the doorway as gunfire and shouts of triumph erupted from inside, loud and careless, almost his exact opposite.

Pausing briefly, he moved quickly and silently down the hallway towards the staff corridor at the end of the house. One place that would be unmonitored at this hour. Liang's security was precise—motion sensors, alarms, cameras—but like everything else she controlled, it was optimized for importance. The servants' exit remained unmonitored. Careless, maybe, or a simply calculated risk, Liang accepted. Taio slipped through the kitchen and out the service door.

Cool night air struck his face as he stepped into the garden. He pulled his hood up and moved fast, scanning shadows, listening for doors, for footsteps that didn't belong.

He didn't head for the road. He followed the narrow service path Genji had indicated on a map. Quickly out through residential streets, the farther he walked, the louder the rush in his ears became, slowing because of his dizziness.

Every sound felt amplified. He didn't look back until he reached an old banyan tree several blocks away. He pulled the burner phone from his backpack and powered it on. Hidden beneath the branches, he dialed the taxi service. "Pickup at Belleview Drive," he said quietly. He kept moving swiftly through the affluent neighborhood, keeping hidden in the shadows. Ahead of him, he saw the taxi arrive, idling at the curb. Taio climbed in and glanced back toward the estate, reassuring himself that he had not been followed. From this distance, he did not see any signs that his leaving had been noticed.

As they approached the airport, the illuminated sky seemed to rise out of the dark, a living beast with a life of its own. Beautiful yet dangerous, glass and steel.

He kept his head down as he crossed the terminal. His actions were almost robotic as he willed himself forward through his fear. A man passed quickly on his left, startling him. A sole suitcase turned slowly around on the carousel; would it be missed or simply something that would be replaced?

At the counter, he handed over the passport and visa. As the agent took it. Taio watched the man's eyes as he looked at the screen. The documents were scanned, the agent looked back at him, and appeared to pause. Taio kept his emotions in check; beneath the surface, he was like a duck, his mind racing below

the surface. His face flushed as emotions rose. Would he run if the passport and visa didn't work? He wouldn't know the outcome until it was too late.

A phone rang behind the counter, startling him with its demand for an answer. The agent looked at his monitor once more. Taio tried to read his expression as he picked up the phone and nodded. Time stretched and stood still at the same time. Panic began creeping in. If he failed.... The agent returned without speaking a word. He printed out his boarding pass and handed back his documents. Taio nodded and walked towards his gate. Breathless, he became aware he had been holding his breath.

Only moments before, a cell phone buzzed, awakening Liang. Her father notified her that he had received a call from airport surveillance, informing him that Taio was attempting to leave the country under a false identity. Her reach and connections far surpassed anything Taio could ever suspect. She sat up slowly, deliberately, calculating her next move and weighing the costs. She made phone calls deep into the night to correct the trajectory of his plan to her benefit.

When he reached the departure gate, he sat with his back to the wall, scanning the passengers for anything out of the ordinary. Two men stood nearby, their conversation minimal, eyes, he felt, drifting too often in his direction. In Hong Kong, men like them were everywhere. He continued his vigilance until the passengers began boarding. One by one, he made his assessment. Still unsure, he found his seat and waited. The lights dimmed, and the engines rose. He cautiously set back into his seat. Above Hong Kong, the aircraft continued to climb, putting distance between him and the world he intended to leave behind. The plane lurched like a rug being pulled out

from under his chair. He gripped the armrest tightly as the city fell away beneath him, lights dissolving into darkness.

He always knew that leaving was not the biggest danger. It was what or who would notice he was gone. Only hours into the flight did the magnitude of his decision settle. He had left the country without permission. He had crossed lines and borders; there was no undoing what had been done. Somewhere between Hong Kong and Washington, D.C., a box carrying his real identity was already in transit, still out of his control.