

LETTERS FROM PRISON

來自監獄的信

Two good friends happen upon a love letter written from prison. Curiosity and compassion inspire them to write back. Little do they know that the correspondence that follows will bring their own desires and pain to the surface.

Classmates Li Chia-Mei and Chang Kai-Hsin are very different people. Chia-Mei is an excellent athlete and a bit of a tomboy; she says what she means, and would rather be playing sports with the boys than do anything else. Kai-Hsin is an intelligent and gentle soul from a wealthy family who has won the admiration of everyone in her class. Yet despite their differences, these two have always been friends.

One day, the girls discover a lost letter originally sent from prison. It turns out to be a love letter, its pages full of hope and heartbreak, that concludes with a pained inquiry as to why the recipient hasn't written back. The girls, deeply moved, decide to answer the letter, and a correspondence begins. Yet as their epistolary relationship grows, other bonds begin to fall apart. Kai-Hsin's first date with a male classmate causes a nervous outbreak that makes her emotionally withdrawn; Chia-Mei's parents divorce, and she is forced to move to her aunt's house, away from her father and brother, and help her aunt run a food stall at the night market all summer. As the two young women invest very different conceptions of love into their anonymous letters, conflicts arise that threaten to blow the friendship apart.

In *Letters from Prison*, Lin Man-Chiu brings us a tale of growth, fragmentation, and the difficulty of hope. Through vivid detail and careful plot construction, Lin imbues her characters with a psychological depth that makes their pain accessible to readers who have never shared it, and offers comfort to those who have.



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Letters from Prison

By Lin Man-Chiu

Translated by Helen Wang

1. Tagiole

As soon as Li Chia-Mei caught the ball, she turned and drove to the hoop, keen to ride the momentum and score twice in a row. But Lin Hao-Sheng had his eyes on her. He spread his arms like a steel wall in front of her.

She had just transferred to this school, and though she still couldn't remember all her classmates' names, she had already clicked with the basketball team. She was good at sports – basketball and swimming in particular – and had signed up with the basketball club on her first day. The next day, she'd played a game with a few boys in the club, which both demonstrated her skill and gave her the chance to make a few friends.

Now, with Lin Hao-Sheng's eyes fixed on her, there was no way she could drive to the basket. She was just about to pass the ball when a lane opened before her. She stepped into it and sank another beautiful layup. Her heart exulted, but she was also confused; why had her opponent suddenly relaxed his defense? Looking back at the other players, she found her answer.

Chang Kai-Hsin was walking past the basketball court. Turning her gaze to the court, she flashed a smile as dazzling as spring flowers, while her waist-length hair swayed like an alluring black wave as she moved.

Chang Kai-Hsin was very attractive – Li Chia-Mei had known this before she arrived at the school, but the fawning treatment she received surprised her. Scanning the boys around her, Chia-Mei found every pair of eyes trained on Chang Kai-Hsin, the basketball match apparently clean forgotten.

“What are you looking at?” Li Chia-Mei felt they were spoiling the atmosphere.

“You're new here, so you probably don't know, huh? She's our goddess. Whenever she appears, we can't help but stare,” said Chao Hsun-Ching.

“She just smiled at me!” Li Tien-Kang's face filled with joy.

“Don't flatter yourself! She was looking at me,” said Wang Cheng-Hao.

Li Chia-Mei looked at Lin Hao-Shen, whose gaze was still on the spot where Kai-Hsin had just been.

“You fancy her too?” Li Chia-Mei nudged his hand with her elbow.

Lin Hao-Sheng smiled shyly, then deliberately changed the subject. “Aren't you two in the same class?”

Chia-Mei nodded.

“Chia-Mei and Kai-Hsin in the same class? I didn’t know that! That’s awesome. Chia-Mei, you’ll have to help us!” said Wang Cheng-Hao.

“You mean, help you go after Kai-Hsin? No thank you.” Chia-Mei immediately put a stop to that idea.

“The thing is, we can only see Chang Kai-Hsin from a distance, we can’t get any closer. There’s no chance – we’d need more than divine intervention!” laughed Li Tien-Kang.

Chia-Mei was surprised. “How do you know if you haven’t tried?”

“I declared my love for her in sixth grade,” said Li Tien-Kang.

Wang Cheng-Hao and Kao Yu-Pi both whooped spontaneously.

“You were rejected too?” asked Chia-Mei.

“Not just us. Everyone’s been rejected,” said Kao Yu-Pi.

Chia-Mei’s gaze drifted to Chao Hsun-Ching. “Me too,” he nodded.

“And you?” Chia-Mei looked at Lin Hao-Sheng.

He shook his head, but adoration was written all over his face.

“I can’t believe she struts like that!” said Chia-Mei, keeping her admiration to herself.

“She doesn’t strut at all. Kai-Hsin’s very sincere, and very clever,” said Lin Hao-Sheng. “She knows we all fancy her, and that if she says yes to one, everyone else will be hurt. Actually, her rejecting us is good for everyone.”

“Really?” Chia-Mei was doubtful.

“Really.” Kao Yu-Pi picked up the conversation, “Kai-Hsin is like Chrysanthemum, young and tender, soft and beautiful, and she has a kind heart. She hides her true feelings to avoid hurting anyone.”

“You didn’t know that she likes Tagiole?” Chia-Mei was surprised.

“That little schemer? That can’t be right!” Chao looked stunned.

“I’m not surprised you were all rejected,” said Chia-Mei, realizing the situation.

“I wouldn’t believe that Kai-Hsin likes Tagiole even with a gun to my head,” said Li Tien-Kang, “Tagiole is frigid and arrogant, she never even looks at guys, and she’s so negative. She’s not like Kai-Hsin at all. Kai-Hsin’s lovely, she can’t possibly like her.”

“You can say that again! Sniper likes her so much, and she pays him no attention until another girl starts chasing him, and she blocks the way. That kind of wanting to love, but not daring to is so hypocritical. How can Kai-Hsin possibly like her?” said Wang Cheng-Hao.

“Well, Kai-Hsin said that Tagiole knows the difference between good and bad and doesn’t pretend. The reason she can’t say yes to Sniper is because she’s been hurt in the past, and the hurt is still with her. She likes Sniper, and she only pretends to be cold to cover her inner pain. Kai-Hsin believes her feelings are too complex, and that she’s not like Chrysanthemum, who’s basically love-struck, and can’t do anything but smile like an idiot.” Chia-Mei repeated what Kai-Hsin had said a few days before.

“What exactly happened to Tagiole? I have no idea. Which volume is it in?” asked Lin Hao-Sheng.

“Kai-Hsin seems to see Tagiole differently to us? Have we been looking at different editions of that manga?” asked Kao Yu-Pi.

“That’s why I say you don’t understand Kai-Hsin at all!” said Chia-Mei.

“So how come you understand her then?” asked Chao Hsun-Ching. “You only just arrived.”

“Kai-Hsin’s father and my father are friends, I’ve known her since we were little. We were in the same class in first and second grade. Then my father’s job took us to Taipei, but our families stayed close. Before my grandmother passed away, we would come back every winter and summer vacation, and Kai-Hsin would invite me to stay with her for a few days. And she used to stay with us whenever she went to Taipei. You know the movie ‘*Girls*’ – we were just like that!” Seeing the stunned look on the boys’ faces made Chia-Mei feel good.

“You were *Girls*? That takes some believing!” There was disdain written all over Wang Cheng-Hao’s face.

“From your looks and personalities, it’s hard to imagine you two being friends! You’re having us on,” said Li Tien-Kang.

“Yeah, Chia-Mei. Stop bigging yourself up!” Chao Hsun-Ching teased.

Then Chia-Mei whipped out a small knife and thrust it toward them. Chao Hsun-Ching played along, grabbing the knife and wailing, “We plead for mercy, Warrior Lady!”

“Great knife work,” Li Tien-Kang chuckled appreciatively.

Chia-Mei stared at Chao Hsun-Ching, “Don’t you dare hurt me again!”

Lin Hao-Sheng toyed with the knife. “It’s very well made. Did you make it yourself?”

“Kai-Hsin gave it to me,” Chia-Mei grinned. “You probably didn’t know that she’s an expert at card sculpture. She made a whole series of the weapons that Tagiole uses. If you go after her, watch out – she might kill you.”

A few of the boys looked at her in shock and disbelief. Chia-Mei grinned, sank a jump shot and walked off court.

At the end of the day, Kai-Hsin and Chia-Mei left school together.

“Who were you smiling at when you passed the basketball court?” Chia-Mei asked.

“You, of course!” beamed Kai-Hsin.

“I don’t believe you. You fancy someone. Who is it?”

“You’re always asking me that, don’t you get bored?” A flash of joy in Kai-Hsin’s expression, then she turned serious.

“I’m just concerned that you’re relying on your looks, that you’re living in the clouds! If you don’t take boys seriously now, there’ll be no one to bury you when you get old.”

“You make it sound like I’m in my seventies.” Kai-Hsin rolled her eyes at Chia-Mei, “I’m thirteen, not thirty. What’s the hurry? And when I’ve a girlfriend as close as you, why would I want a boyfriend!” Kai-Hsin put on her trademark smile and took Chia-Mei’s hand, “Come on, I’ll take you for a drink.”

Chia-Mei turned her head and called out playfully, “Lin Hao-Sheng, Kai-Hsin wants to take you for a drink.”

Kai-Hsin tensed, tugged on Chia-Mei's sleeve and whispered: "What are you doing?"

"You're blushing!"

"You're so annoying!" Kai-Hsin glared at Chia-Mei.

"So I'm annoying, so what?" Chia-Mei pulled a face and started to run.

Kai-Hsin ran after her.

Chia-Mei ran as fast as she could. She didn't notice the girl walking towards her with her head bowed. The two ran straight into each other.

Chia-Mei immediately apologized, but caught her breath when she saw the expression on the other girl's face.

She had never seen such an expression of hurt before. It was the kind of piercing despair from which you can find no way out.

The girl hurried away without saying a word.

"She's crying," Kai-Hsin observed.

"I wonder why?"

"Perhaps she split up with her boyfriend?"

"I don't think that's it." Chia-Mei looked troubled, apparently touched by the girl's tragedy. She frowned. "It's something more tragic than a break-up."

"Perhaps a death in the family?"

"Who knows."

Kai-Hsin and Chia-Mei talked as they headed to a supermarket.

The supermarket, located on the ground floor of a twelve-story building, was owned by Kai-Hsin's father. It was spacious, clean, and bright, and featured a large seating area with floor-to-ceiling windows in the drinks section that was very popular with customers.

As soon as Kai-Hsin stepped into the store, she heard her brother's voice: "Help yourself to a drink. Take whatever you like."

Kai-Hsin's expression stiffened and she muttered: "Kai-Teng's paying for everyone again."

Chia-Mei felt a bit awkward. "But don't you pay for me all the time?"

"I only do it for you. See how many people he's paying for? One of these days, he'll bankrupt us."

Chia-Mei quickly scanned the group – eight people, including Kai-Teng. Some had drinks, some had snacks, and others had instant noodles. The table was piled high with food and drink. One boy went to fetch another Coke, and called out, "Anyone else want one?" Three put their hands up, as if they were in their own home.

"Don't your parents mind?" asked Chia-Mei.

"You know how my mother spoils him. My father's too busy opening another store to pay attention!"

"Didn't he open a new store last year? Your father's better at business than he was at being a cop."

"That's what he says too – that if he hadn't been shot, he would never have known he had a gift for business."

The drinks section was full and the noise was deafening. Kai-Hsin picked up two bottles and said, "Let's go to my place."

Kai-Hsin's home was on the eighth floor. Chia-Mei hadn't been for a long time.

"Ma, you need to talk to him, he's always got a crowd with him in the store, eating and drinking for free. It's not right." Kai-Hsin complained to her mother as soon as she was through the door.

"They're all friends, don't be so mean." said her mother, who was concentrating on the computer screen.

"They're taking advantage of him. None of them are real friends."

"If your brother were more like you, with good grades and good friends, he wouldn't be doing this, would he?"

"You've spoiled him."

"Don't I spoil you too? Or does mail-ordering Japanese outfits for you not count?" It was only when Kai-Hsin's mother looked up from the computer screen that she saw Chia-Mei.

"Hello, Auntie."

"Ah, Chia-Mei," Kai-Hsin's mother greeted her with a warm smile. "It's wonderful that you've moved back. You don't know how happy Kai-Hsin is!"

"I don't need you to say whether I'm happy or not!" Kai-Hsin glared at her mother.

"OK, OK. The Japanese dress and boots came, they're in your bedroom." Kai-Hsin's mother shook her head, though her smile persisted.

"It's crazy buying things without trying them on first, they might look awful. You must be loaded to spend so much money!"

"You're my only daughter, what's wrong with spending some money on you? I just want you to look beautiful, my little princess."

"Stop calling me 'little princess'. It makes me feel sick." Kai-Hsin sneered, rolling her eyes at Chia-Mei.

"Let's go to my room."

"Chia-Mei," Kai-Hsin's mother called out, "Can you help me with Kai-Hsin? If she keeps throwing temper tantrums, she'll end up all on her own."

"I don't care." Kai-Hsin snapped before going into her room.

"She's getting more and more rebellious," Kai-Hsin's mother sighed, "I don't know what to do with her." Then, taking Chia-Mei's hand and pulling her to the sofa, she asked, "Is your mother all right?"

Chia-Mei nodded. But her mother was nowhere near all right.