

*The real trick to life is not to be in the know but to be in the mystery. The unknown holds more potential than the limited options of a crisis plan.*

Wen Bao Zhu

## CHAPTER 1

### 14 JULY 2020, TUESDAY

### NEW YORK CITY, U.S.A.

Lying naked on a massage bed with a towel wrapped around her thighs, Chloe Franklin inhaled the sharp scent of almond oil on her body. Her mocha-latte skin shone with it.

“Would you mind turning onto your back now?” asked the therapist in a soft whisper, careful not to break the trance.

“Sure, in a minute,” Chloe replied in a mumble, dictating her own comfort. *Who says that being a popular, in demand talk show host is an easy task?*

One *single* brilliant idea had landed her both a lust-worthy job and a bottomless bank account. Her late-night show *Retro-Rate* was based on a mischievous yet constructive concept: dig up the personal and professional mistakes made by celebrities before they were famous, and then use simple inspirational self-help techniques to offer sympathetic advice, whether it was wanted or not. In other words, *Retro-Rate’s* outline was ‘uncover the dirt, but be nice about it’.

Chloe’s career as a TV personality had taken off in 2014, and had accelerated ever since. She’d made over twenty million dollars in four years, and had learned a thing or two on how to spend her cash with style. The essential price—for being who she was—had been paid long ago though, not to mention the emotional costs, and taxes. Overnight, the show had become an American hit, and in less than six months, her ratings had shot skyward, attracting both domestic and international audiences. Thrilled, the executives of *C the World TV* had given her a five-year contract in no time, and had eagerly consented to pay her a six-figure salary.

Now she could schedule appointments at the Cowshed Spa in Soho House, and be pampered by a professional massage therapist twice a week. She could keep herself toned to sensual perfection with personal trainers, and could show herself off at expensive restaurants, then drop in at the hottest club of the moment in the Meatpacking District.

“Are you ready now, Ms. Chloe?”

“Not yet,” she shook her head, eyes closed. “Just slipped into reverie.” *Liar. There’s always an issue that bugs you.*

The only thing that interrupted her ritual of well-earned self-indulgence was the shocking news she’d heard from a well-placed friend in the network’s newsroom yesterday afternoon. Wen Bao Zhu, the founder of the widely popular mysticism movement *Zhuism*, and one of the world’s most respected self-help gurus, was found dead in her apartment. A few news channels had announced her death officially last night, but there had been no substantial confirmation on how it had happened yet. Obviously, the media were delaying the truth, as everyone jockeyed to get an angle on the story. At the end of the day, most life-style programs—including hers—survived on an array of metrics, public attention being one of them.

Puzzled and deeply sorry for what had happened, Chloe recalled the day she met Wen Bao Zhu in person. This was long before Wen had become a popular, modern-day philosopher though. Right now, like all other chat-show hosts in the network, she fought for every morsel of extra attention, and needed to find a reasonable way of

getting herself involved in the story. *I don't even know her that well. After all, I've only seen her twice in my life.*

Just as she was turning onto her back, an artful idea struck her. No sooner than her shoulders touched the bed, she swung her feet to the floor, narrowly missing the therapist. The game was higher ratings, and any tactic was permissible.

"Gotta run," she muttered unapologetically, and rushed to put her clothes on. Her next show was in two days and she didn't have the luxury to waste a single second. *The manager of the spa will hate me for this. He probably thinks I'm a self-centered hysteria queen already, and a hopeless case when I'm in a hurry.*

She'd learned long ago that some things were to be taken care of now or never. Once dressed, she tipped the therapist an extra twenty dollars for the inconvenience, and quickly passed the reception area. As she stepped out of the building, she raised a hand to hail a cab. In less than two minutes, she was all set.

On her way to the headquarters of *C the World TV*, she reached for her cellphone and put her plan into action. With an e-mail message, she touched base with some friends from the old days. *This is a bit risky though, but I'll give it a try. Deep inside, they probably hate me too. For who I've become.*

In less than five minutes, she was all set again.

**FROM:** [chloe@retro-rate.com](mailto:chloe@retro-rate.com)  
**MAIL TO :** KIRK  
**CC TO :** HEATHER, RANDALL, DORIS  
**SUBJECT :** Urgent-Invitation to my live talk show

*Dear Friends,  
Hope you're all well.*

*I know it's been a long time since we've spoken, but don't be mad at me for not keeping in touch. Believe it or not, I think of you guys more often than you could imagine.*

*I regret to be giving you some terrible news, but it is what it is. I don't know if any of you heard it on the news, but I'm deeply sorry to let you know that Wen Bao Zhu was found dead last night in her apartment. They're saying she committed suicide. I hope the truth of what really happened will be made public in a few days. I want to dedicate an entire live piece to her life's work and reveal all the good things she'd done for us personally. I would be so appreciative if the four of you could be on the show to share what she meant to us all—and the world.*

*Kirk, I especially want to thank you for introducing me to Wen in 2013, though you didn't mean to.*

*Heather, I'm sending you my heartfelt thanks for taking me to the Bitter & Sweet Ivy Center that day. I would have never had the opportunity to be in one of Wen's lectures without you.*

*Randall, I thank you a million times for introducing me to Amanda Walker when I was trying to navigate my way around as a novice model, and I would have never been where I am now, if I hadn't met you.*

*And Doris, thank you very much for giving me this brilliant idea. Without you, the core concept of Retro-Rate would have never been born.*

*By the way, my next show is in two days. Looking forward to hosting you all on Thursday night at eleven.*

*Please confirm if you'll be attending and send an official R.S.V.P to C The World*

*TV, ASAP.*  
*Lots of love-*  
*Chloe*