

# **PROBLEM CHILD**

**Written & Directed by Gregory Kong**

**CHARACTERS**

ALEX - Literature Teacher, 34 years old

ANDY - Surgeon-in-training, 30 years old

PA - Retired businessman, 65 years old

MA - Homemaker, 60 years old

JANICE - ANDY's fiancée, 30 years old

KIEU - Vietnamese hostess, 23 years old

SCENE ONE - Special

**ALEX and KIEU are sitting at Jewel Bridge, Punggol Waterway Park. KIEU is strumming ALEX's guitar.**

ALEX: C Major...E Major, good. Now try G Major, almost like the C...relax your fingers. Ok, now that's not even a chord.

KIEU: C? This E. Eh...(strums)G?

ALEX: Yes!

KIEU: Ahh, guitar hard hard.

ALEX: Not bad, you said you wanted to try. One hour already, want rest?

**KIEU nods. ALEX holds the guitar and strums basics chords.**

KIEU: The bar yesterday, you part of band? Different guitar person.

ALEX: Oh, no my friend was sick, he called me to replace him last minute. I'm actually a school teacher.

KIEU: I...asked you meet today to thank you for rescuing me from scary man last night, pay him money for my accident.

ALEX: Aiya, no need to thank me. He was shouting and kicking the broken Tiger glass at you. Stupid.

KIEU: Bar very dark, cannot see his leg and I trip. The Tiger all over the floor.

ALEX: No not calling you stupid. Calling scary man stupid. Stupid scary man. Let's say it together ok? 1, 2, 3...Stupid scary man!

KIEU: **(Laughs)** Stupid scary man! **(Pause)** You funny, you first one to help people like me.

ALEX: Oh? How long you work at that bar?

KIEU: Singapore 4 months already. Before I work at Thailand, Cambodia, Phillipines, Malaysia, then come here.

ALEX: So many places...how old are you? **(Realising his question)** Eh no I can't ask your age. Err, how long were you working for?

KIEU: I 23 now. One country one year, then I go back Vietnam.

ALEX: Huh, you worked as a bar hostess at 17?

KIEU: Hosss-tess?

ALEX: Oh, hostess is you. Your work. Beer...customer...**(gestures her body)**work?

KIEU: **(Nods)** Dạ, dạ. 5 years. You the first to help me, also the first to help people like me; hosss-tesss.

**KIEU gives a smile at ALEX as the sun sets from the bridge.**

KIEU: You special. Special man.

ALEX: **(Shy)** Look at the sun, it's really pretty.

KIEU: Wah, so nice. **(Takes out her phone to take a picture)**  
You say we can meet here because so pretty. But hot hot.

**ALEX instantaneously takes out a portable fan pointed at KIEU.**

KIEU: **(Laughs)** Special man.

ALEX: What's your name?

KIEU: Kieu Lihn. Kieu Vietnamese means pretty, Linh is **(Starts gesturing at her heart)** inside body.

ALEX: Soul?

KIEU: Dạ!

ALEX: That's really beautiful. I'm Alex Lim, just ALEX. The sometimes guitar person, full-time teacher.

KIEU: Special Man Alex!

SCENE 2 - HOME

**ALEX comes home. His family is finishing dinner. ALEX enters the door.**

PA: What time already? Ma need to wash the dishes you know, you 8pm then come home eat.

ALEX: I ate already.

ANDY: You went Jewel Bridge see sunset again?

**ALEX nods at ANDY.**

PA: Don't know how to tell us in advance? Ma cooked for you also you know.

ALEX: I'll tabao it for lunch tomorrow at school.

MA: (Taking his plate away) No need!

PA: Waste food again. I tell you how many times already, to avoid things like this we need to know where you go, go out do what, what time you come home. Three things only. Even Andy updates us. Not good to waste food, understand or not?

**ALEX keeps quiet at the table.**

SCENE 3 - SECRETS

**ALEX is on his bed and starts a videocall with KIEU.**

ALEX: Hello.

KIEU: Xin chào Special Man!

ALEX: Are you on the way home? Nothing happened at work right?

KIEU: Yea...no. Today good.

ALEX: Okay. Good. **(After a pause)** Maybe we can go for supper?

KIEU: Hmm?

ALEX: Oh err...of course I will pay haha.

KIEU: **(Flirts)** Special man want special meal?

ALEX: Just supper! **(Adjusts himself)** I like spending time with you.

KIEU: **(Pretends to freeze)** Wifi bad. You - like - me?

ALEX: No! **(Ends call and calls again)**

KIEU: **(Picks up laughing)** I prank! Funny Man!

ALEX: I hate you.

KIEU: You like me.

ALEX: So supper, when?

KIEU: No. Say properly first. No worry, I also like you.

ALEX: Really? I keep thinking about you...no! Earlier, you with my guitar...You make me feel special and I like it - like you!

**ANDY, ALEX's brother, barges into the room.**

ANDY: Eh damn noisy! What's wrong with you?

ALEX: Nothing. Close the door.

KIEU: Alex? Alex-

**ALEX ends the call.**

ANDY: Who is that? Wah, Gor got girlfriend already.

ALEX: I said go out right.

ANDY: Show picture leh. You woke me up at 3am.

ALEX: Go back sleep.

ANDY: Okay I guess she not chio, bro I get it.

ALEX: Huh!

**ANDY takes a step to the door.**

ALEX: Here! See? We just met but we're already texting-

ANDY: Why is she at a Siam Diu in her profile pic?

ALEX: Aiya, I show you already. **(ANDY snatches his phone)** Oi!

ANDY: Eh you joking right, you really think she is serious about you.

ALEX: Give it back!

ANDY: I'm looking out for you Gor. She is just playing you. You want a real girlfriend, I can help. See me and Janice together so long already.

ALEX: Bet Janice don't know your ex still visits right! The tattoo all over one-

ANDY: Choi!

ALEX: I saw both of you making out at the void deck, 6 minutes and 37 seconds; I still remember the timer on my phone.

**ANDY closes the door.**

ANDY: You pervert, want wake Ma and Pa up so they can hear is it? Ma and Pa don't like Erica because of her tattoos but she's really not what they think.

ALEX: Then why are you not with her?

ANDY: Erica is still more acceptable than a slut to bring home.

ALEX: **(Pushes him away slightly)** Don't call her that.

ANDY: What's your problem!

ALEX: I thought you don't want wake Ma and Pa up? You shout damn loud. Maybe Erica's name should pop up als-

ANDY: I'm their son. How can I introduce Erica to our relatives? They always praise me to all of them, the first in the family to go Raffles Institution. The first to enter NUS medical school. The first surgeon in the family.

ALEX: Oh my gosh... Janice.

ANDY: Everyone loves Janice. Girl from Hwa Chong, top of her cohort at LSE. She gets promoted next week as an Operational Risk Manager at her bank.

ALEX: Do you even love Janice?

ANDY: **(Silence)** Yea... I love her, and Erica. Janice is Ma's friend's daughter also, it's less messy and relatives won't say anything.

ALEX: Good for you. I want my phone back.

ANDY: I'm worried about you Gor! This whoever you are talking to is trouble, Ma and Pa won't allow it. Have fun with her, at a hotel. Just -

ALEX: No.

ANDY: Did you not listen to my story!

ALEX: You gave Erica up, you still have Janice. I only want one person.

ANDY: But-

ALEX: You are going to BTO soon right? You don't tell Ma and Pa about her, they won't know you're still seeing Erica. Fair?

ANDY: **(Breathes heavily)** You better not bring her home. Idiot.

**ANDY passes ALEX his phone and opens the room door. He stops a foot away from exiting.**

ANDY: And I better not catch you Facetiming her at home again.

**He exits. ALEX lies flat on his bed.**

ALEX: Why are we like this?



SCENE 4 - MONSTER

**PAST - ALEX is 22, a freshman in NTU. ANDY is 18, in his second year at RI.**

**The shower head is on with water trickling sneakily.  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. PA is pounding the bathroom door.**

PA: ALEX! How long more!

ALEX: **(From inside the bathroom)** 5 minutes!

MA: He inside toilet very long already.

**KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.**

PA: Last night 冲凉 already, why morning wake up must bathe again?

MA: Say already he won't listen one! He will listen meh.

**Silence. Water is no longer trickling.**

ALEX: You can bring Andy to school, I'll go school on my own.

MA: 不管他, late 就 late. 你 settle 他。

**MA sits at the dining table and reads the morning papers.  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! The door opens apprehensively  
with ALEX behind it. PA kicks the door, swinging it wide open.**

PA: 几点了? Still want to bathe?

ALEX: **(Tries to get past PA)** At night very hot-

PA: BULLSHIT. Don't bullshit me okay. Means what, you will bathe every morning is it?

**ALEX remains silent, not knowing what to say.**

PA: Andy needs to reach RI at 7:30AM, you know now what time already? 20 minutes to 7.

ALEX: Yea I said I will go myself so you can drive him.

PA: Nonsense lah, you go yourself will confirm late. Otherwise how you go? Grab is it? 很会花钱 horr.

MA: **(From the dining table to PA)** You dunno meh? That's why he can take his own sweet time get ready.

ALEX: **(Replying MA)** My lecture starts at 8:30, I'm taking MRT.

**ANDY sneakily enters the bathroom, clearly having just woken up.**

PA: You know from Punggol to NTU how long or not? You sure you will be on time by the time you get ready?

ALEX: Wait, Andy just woke up? Why you not going after him?

PA: He has been waiting for you to get out of the toilet, now you're going to make him late also. Well done.

ALEX: He overslept! How is it my fault?

PA: He can get ready by 7, you can or not?

ALEX: You're slowing me down. We do this later okay.

**PA asserts himself into the room as ALEX is getting changed.**

ALEX: I'm changing!

PA: Now you blaming me is it? What does me slowing you down have to do with your bad habits?

**ALEX freezes.**

PA: **(Points)** Manipulative. You are trying to reverse the blame onto me. You oversleep nevermind, still bathe and take one hour to get ready, look nice. Go NTU perform concert is it? **(Scoffs)** And then plan to take grab later, say you go by yourself. Eh all these costs, they accumulate okay.

Remember after O Levels, Uncle Chris bought you a guitar? You said you wanted to pursue music. You tell me, can it support your expenses? Too late to start also. I told you, choose something more practical. At least now you study English Literature, can join MOE next time. Still creative work.

**ALEX remains silent.**

PA: Say something ah, you so smart talk back. Say say.

ALEX: Everything I say also wrong. You're not willing to listen to me.

PA: Will you change your habits or not huh?

ALEX: Yea.

PA: Better learn how to get ready faster and save money, save water. I got a word for you: prudence. It means being logical in making choices, practise self-discipline. Can you do that or not?

ALEX: I say yes already right! Then if not yes, say no ah? Okay lorh, I say no. How?

PA: You answer me like that ah? What is your problem? You are in the wrong, you know or not, still dare talk to me like that. I don't need a son if you continue behaving like that.

ALEX: You say one ah.

**Alex freezes, realising his outburst. ANDY sneaks out of the bathroom so as to not catch any attention from the fight.**

PA: Go NS also never grow. You are going to end up like Uncle Chris, I see it. You are rubbish, with all your rubbish habits. LOOK AT ME!

**ALEX looks up hesitantly.**

PA: Inside you are ugly, monster. I tell you now to help you because outside, no one will. You think I'm unreasonable? Last time, I had to help Ma Ma at the barber shop every day after school. Your Uncle Chris didn't help once, every week go play with different girls with his stupid guitar. You want to be like him? Selfish, arrogant. This is our house, you listen to our rules, you hear me or not. You better remember PRUDENCE.

**Lights dim. - PRESENT DAY**

ALEX: Andy's right, Ma and Pa will never accept her. **(Pause)** You idiot. Keep your head down and home will be peaceful, remember? We're almost a normal family.

**(Nodding to himself slowly)** I can take it. They have to be cruel to be kind. Ma and Pa care about me...they love me. I got too close to Kieu, she is just trouble I don't need. Prudence...

Transition - Present Day

KIEU texts ALEX.

"Hello"

"Special Man when you free for special meal?"

Missed Call (5)

"Alex?"

"Wifi good, my message sent"

"I here, you not"

Missed Call (3)

"Where you go"

ALEX looks at his phone and ignores. As text is running, ALEX goes about his routines around the house, exiting and entering, and exiting again.

SCENE 5 - DOORBELL

**JANICE is set to arrive for dinner. ALEX is marking papers at the table.**

MA: Faster help bring these to the table. Janice is coming soon.

ALEX: **(Looks at PA seated at the end)** Pa, Ma needs help.

**PA stays unmoved, the papers covering his face. ANDY carries out a big pot from the kitchen.**

MA: **(To ALEX)** Can help? **(Sits down and talks to PA)** Janice wants to discuss the wedding plans later.

PA: That's fast.

ANDY: We've been together since Uni, very long already.

PA: Time flies so quickly.

**PA looks at ALEX laying the table.**

PA: **(Teasing)** Eh Alex, when is it your turn? Andy getting married earlier than you leh.

ALEX: Good for him.

MA: Later want ask Janice if she knows any girl she can introduce to you?

ALEX: No.

MA: **(Disappointed)** Why no? You already 34. You know horr, I read somewhere that if you don't fall in love by 30, you'll be single forever? I saw on Red-deeet or somewhere. You're past your expiry already, beggars cannot be choosers.

PA: **(Jokes)** Alex got fall in love before 30 what. Remember in kindergarten, he proposed to his girl classmate at the playground. Then the teacher told us when we picked you up. Remember Mdm Huang?

ALEX: She made us hold hands every time we crossed the road. I thought only couples hold hands what.

MA: Aiyo, should've kept in touch. Later we ask Janice recommend a friend to you okay.

ALEX: I don't want. It's like how you arranged Andy and Janice together, feels so forced.

MA: Look at today, they're still happy and married soon. You always say you don't need our help.

ANDY: Ma, it's ALEX's choice. Let him decide.

MA: Aiya not nice to end up alone you know.

ALEX: What if the person I like is different?

**ANDY looks at ALEX.**

PA: You like who?

ALEX: I'm just giving a what if scenario.

PA: Then why different?

MA: How different?

ALEX: Am I allowed to be with someone from a different country?

MA: Tell you already, beggars cannot choose. You just find one chinese girl here-

ALEX: **(Testing Ma)** Oh then other races leh? Malay, Indian, Ang mo?

MA: Aiya don't lah, Chinese still best. The rest too difficult. Maybe Ang mo also can? But they very different from us also.

ANDY: **(Cutting in)** I think Janice is on the way. Come Alex, let's go downstairs and wait for her okay.

**ANDY brings ALEX away from the table.**

PA: **(Scoffs and raises his pappers)** Always like that, want to be different and special. Music career, marry girl from different country..

ALEX: What's your problem?

ANDY: Oh no...

MA: We only trying to help you, why you get so upset?

ALEX: I'm already doing everything you want me to do, why must you also choose who I'm with?

ANDY: Let it go ALEX.

PA: We're looking out for you. You think date girl from different race different country so easy? If you marry someone from the same culture, there will be no misunderstandings at home.

ALEX: Yea that's why Ma does all the house work and you don't even help to set table, just sit there wait for food to come.

PA: I paid for everything; the house, the food. What do you contribute?

ALEX: I pay for the water bills.

MA: \$300 a month only.

ALEX: Andy doesn't pay for anything. He's not even earning because he's still in medical school. So stop talking to me about being behind in life. I'm earning, I contribute, I even do chores. What more you want?

ANDY: Enough lah!

PA: Okay you like to bring other people into arguments so much right? Andy is studying to become a surgeon. In the long term he will be able to earn more than enough to pay us back.

MA: Teacher behave like that one ah.

ALEX: It's not fair. Only I'm being criticised, Andy gets away with what he wants. I've done everything you wanted but you won't ever accept me, even when I follow your dreams.

MA: You ownself choose creative course.

ALEX: You think Andy is so perfect? Everything also better than me? Do you think he is even happy?

ANDY: Shut up!

ALEX: Then why is he still seeing Erica? Every Saturday-

ANDY: Fucking liar! You're dating a Siam Diu prostitute! Teacher somemore!

ALEX: We're not dating!

ANDY: Not dating then fucking ah! I hope you get HIV!

**ALEX slaps ANDY. MA tries to separate the two.**

PA: Enough!

**PA goes closer to ALEX.**

PA: **(Interrogating tone)** What's wrong with you? You want give me heart attack, want me to die is it? And look at his face. You dare slap your brother? Unbecoming. What kind of big brother are you. All the lies you're spreading about Andy also-

ALEX: I saw them together!

PA: So you saw...got no photo?

**ALEX keeps quiet.**

PA: You think Andy like you ah? He is more honest, more upright. Do you see him talking back to us?

MA: And now you're with a prostitute. Nonsense.

**The doorbell rings. The house is silent for a moment.**

PA: We'll go on with dinner. **(Points to ALEX)** You shut up the whole of tonight. Stop spreading lies about Andy. After Janice leaves, go pack your things. Reflect on yourself. You want to be like Uncle Chris, you are no longer my concern.



SCENE 6 - LEAVE

**ALEX is in his room packing his things. ANDY barges into ALEX's room and closes the door.**

ANDY: Before dinner you listed all the things I did with Erica. You happy?

**ALEX remains silent, back turned to his brother while packing his luggage.**

ANDY: You're a fucking pervert to even watch us. Teacher going out with a hooker. You disgust me. What you are doing is worse, no, 10 times worse than me seeing Erica.

**ANDY kicks ALEX's luggage.**

ANDY: We had an agreement. You did this to yourself. Don't come back. You are trouble, selfish prick. Pa is right. You are a monster.

**ANDY heads towards the door.**

ALEX: I'm sorry Andy. I wish I wasn't your 大哥. I wish our roles were reversed, you were always the smarter one. I was supposed to protect you, lead the way. But everyone forgets that I'm figuring all this out alone. I stand up for you when you get into trouble but I get it worse from Ma and Pa for failing as an example to follow. Am I not allowed to fail?

I do what is expected but never what I want. For 30 years that we have been brothers, I did all this alone. As your 大哥, I'm sorry I'm choosing myself. Please forgive me.

**ANDY scoffs and leaves. ALEX closes his luggage and strums his guitar gently. He opens his phone and texts KIEU.**

"Sorry. I'm ready to have supper with you ~ Special Man"

**Lights fade out.**