

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 131

"It's fine. I don't mind." TangShi immediately thought of how it might turn Aunt against Rhea and lately, she was beginning to appreciate her and no longer wanted to see her further hurt. She had stood alongside her when it mattered, even against YuZhi, and they had a strange mutual understanding now. Not quite friends, but not exactly enemies either. It was confusing but in TangShi's heart she wanted to see that girl find happiness.

"I think you're right. It's time. I'm not getting any younger and secrets do no good to anyone, especially family. Now..... About family secrets.... About this delicate matter, I know you told me not to mention it, but..." Grandfather ploughed in and YuZhi raised his hand and shook his head. His mood dropping instantly and a dark furrowed brow replaced a carefree smile.

"I'm taking care of it. It's set for trial but that could take months. In the meantime, I'm taking care of TangShi and keeping her safe. Just let us get through this in our own way. I won't let anyone near her ever again." YuZhi replied tartly. He didn't want to talk about this in front of TangShi. She was already sensitive to this topic and their relationship was undefined.

Other than sharing an apartment and her occasionally letting him close, there was nothing between them. She was hurting and he understood it. Walking on eggshells and letting her set the pace was all he could do for now. He wasn't pushing anything and he didn't care if it took years to convince her to let him in, he would do anything for her.

"The police said his refusal to admit guilt is the only reason it needs to go to trial. If he had confessed he would have been sentenced already as it's such a clear-cut case with enough evidence." TangShi squeezed YuZhi's arm trying to assure him she was okay talking about this. It was getting easier and the shock was subsiding even if the feeling of nausea and worry were ever present. "The detective is reaching out to a previous girl who maybe went through the same thing, but until then Rong Cai isn't allowed anywhere near me in the terms of his bail."

"Disgusting piece of filth! Maybe you two should take a time out and go abroad for a while as this is done. Let me and your uncles run Leng group with ZhengLi and afford you some recuperation time."

"I don't want to run away and hide." TangShi stopped him short with his suggestion, shutting YuZhi down who was ready to agree after thinking about the same thing these past few days. "If I let him chase me out of my own city, then he wins. I want to face this, get through it and not be afraid of him. I want to be there when he goes to trial so I can look him in the eye while he's sentenced for trying to ruin my life." TangShi had found an inner strength somewhere along the line these past days and YuZhi frowned at her, that niggling of silent doubt he had been keeping deep in his chest and never voicing around her.

Afraid she wouldn't be able to stand this or get through it and seeing her as a fragile and vulnerable girl he needed to protect at all costs. He wanted to wrap her in cotton wool and never let anything harm her again as long as he lived.

"Have you taken this month's pregnancy test? Have you given consideration to the fact you may be with a child that isn't YuZhi's? I heard there was no after precautions or proper examinations in that respect." Grandfather came right out with YuZhi's' deep dark fear, making him choke and gawp at him with wide eyed shock, like a kick in the balls. YuZhi regretted always being so open with him and telling him details he now wished he hadn't. TangShi's face tinged red as her blush spread quickly. Her heart flipping a beat and her insides clenched.

A monthly test had been an agreement in their original contract when they went to the clinic and although grandfather never knew about the insemination, he did know about the tests. Even when she got her period they still did one as sometimes women could still bleed while pregnant. In his mind he was being practical and logical and wanting to deal with fallout sooner rather than later. No point beating around the bush.

"I hadn't wanted to think about it. I admit I buried my head and I don't know if he" She couldn't say the words 'used a condom' out loud in front of these men and she tucked her chin down, staring at her mother's photograph for strength. "I'll take a test but I'm scared. I honestly don't know if I could be and I've been trying to ignore it." She swallowed loudly, admitting her foolishness, choking on a new wave of tears as she was forced to face the one thing she had refused to acknowledge in the hopes it would bypass her. She knew it was dumb to try and bury her head over this but she didn't have the mental capacity at the time to think it through.

"No matter the outcome, it doesn't matter. We'll deal with it. In whatever way is best for us. I'll take her to the clinic for a full examination as soon as she's ready." YuZhi's tight tone and rigid expression didn't conceal his conflicted emotions, or his twisting guts. TangShi blinked up at him as she felt his posture stiffen without releasing her from his hold. His arm around her still but instead of soft cuddling, it became a straight and stiff chain holding her tight. Sensing the change in him her heart shuddered in pain.

Despite not really knowing where they stood with one another she knew she still loved him and the thought of carrying another man's child made her sick to her stomach. It would change the dynamic between them and she got a tinge of real fear he might not be able to love her anymore if it was the outcome.

Pushing it away again with haste like every time she had a niggles of doubt over it. No matter how much he said he loved her she knew that this was one thing that could change everything again. No man could accept another's child, especially one conceived like this. She might end up back out in the cold if his heart broke for a second time because of Rong Cai and she honestly didn't know how she would get through that if it came down to it once more.

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"I told you, I didn't do anything wrong so why are you on my ass?" Rong yelled at his father, storming away from him even though this was Rong's office. What had started as a simple conversation escalated quickly with his unstable temper of late.

"She was my best student and the one with a quiet disposition. Now you're telling me she quit because of a drunken affair with you? That makes no sense. She recently became engaged and seemed genuinely happy, so how did it go from that to this?" Master Cai raised his voice, frustrated with his son for the shame he brought upon them by getting arrested and the damage to his school's reputation. The police were blunt about the accusations even if his son was denying them and had shared every detail with him.

"She likes me. She needed to be drunk to admit it to herself because she was scared of rejection. All of this is her jealous ex fiancée's doing because he can't accept we love one another." Rong was enraged at his father's questioning him today. At first he hadn't said much when he got home from the detainment center but after that do-gooder detective came to see him he had been like this. Talking bullshit and spreading lies about what he was meant to have done.

"They had evidence you drugged her, Rong! How can you say this was down to her being drunk? What did you do? Why did you have to go this far? Don't you see what you did wrong or have any concept why this is wrong?" Master Cai implored him, unable to understand his own son in this. Ashamed and shocked and bitterly disappointed in his actions.

"I didn't do anything. Do you know who her boyfriend is and what he's capable of? He's the heir of Leng group, who has more money and power than sense. He's framing me to get rid of me because TangShi wants me. He has her locked up and won't let me see her because he knows she would tell the truth about this whole thing. She wants us to be together." Rong paced back and forth running his hands through his hair in agitation and tugging at the strands every few strokes. Erratic in his movements and behaving manically. Getting madder by the second. His father watching him and trying to curb his own temper but there were too many doubts and questions and his concern rose that his son was spiraling again into another dark phase in his life. They had been here before and thought therapy and medication was helping him.

"TangShi was a sweet and quiet girl who stayed in her own lane. She never caused any problems and kept herself to herself. I don't believe she would stand back and see you wronged if that was the truth." TangShi was a girl he had great affection for and he knew in his gut the liar was not that girl.

"So you're saying I'm lying? That I drugged and kidnapped her to keep in a hotel room all night... Why would I do that? Why would I hurt the girl I want to marry?" Rong laughed, a snarling and terrifying sound that wasn't melodic and clenched his fists.

“Why would they set you up this way and bring your family shame? TangShi is a good girl and if she said you did wrong to her”

“She isn’t the one accusing me! Her idiot boyfriend is. I can’t believe you actually doubt me. You’re my father, you should be taking my side in this!” Rong erupted at him, swiping things from the table across the floor in a crashing sweep that startled his father, and stamping his feet like a petulant child.

His father watched him in silent judgement knowing he had always been a high strung and spoiled child who wanted everything his own way. It had caused so many arguments with Master Cai’s late wife, that their son was so hard to handle and over the years he had behaved inappropriately to friends and girlfriends that always ended up leaving him. It had been hard to admit that their son was sick and she hadn’t lived long enough to see him finally get help in recent years.

“Calm down and stop behaving like a toddler. When will you grow up and face the reality of life? Your actions come with consequences!”

“I’m not staying here listening to this. It’s bullshit. I’m going out.” Rong tramped to the door to leave, kicking fallen objects out of his way with no regard to the destruction he was causing, or that his actions were hurting his father. Master Cai exhaled heavily, held back his impulse to explode too and called after him.

“You are on bail; you are not allowed out. Come back here.” He rubbed his face and stayed where he was standing, gazing around the mess and broken pottery and scattered dirt and foliage of one of his houseplants on the floor.

“I have a curfew, not a jail sentence. I can go wherever I please as long as I’m home by eight. And soon when it’s proven I am not guilty, you can eat your fucking words!” He snapped back at him, grabbing his car keys and swiping a jacket. Making it clear he had zero intention of staying or doing as his father asked. He had always been this volatile but his father could see the signs that he was not as stable as he had been a month back. Questions rising in his gut.

“Stay away from her. I’m warning you if you cause more trouble...”

“Why am I always the one causing trouble?” Rong snapped, lifting his palms skyward in question. Shaking his head in disbelief.

“Are you still taking your medication?” His father changed tact, lowering his voice and almost pleading with him. Afraid of this answer.

Knowing his son always seemed to go off the rails when he stopped taking his antipsychotic medication. He was secretive about it and try as he might he could never be sure Rong was sticking to them daily. His therapist was still an ongoing monthly visit but Rong was a master at faking his behavior nowadays and seeming so normal most

of the time. He had tried monitoring his pills but Rong would make a huge fuss and accuse him of controlling him.

The reason he had entrusted him to run the school was that he thought a focus and purpose in life might help him stay on the right path. He had never imagined he would cause harm to one of his students or he would never allowed him to have any kind of presence here among them.

“Go to hell. Fuck those pills and fuck you.” Rong kicked the door closed behind him after barging through, murmuring curse words under his breath at his father and stalked across the garden to the private carpark inside their boundary. He hated taking his Haldol meds and was done with them again, feeling like all they did was give him shitty symptoms and no real cure. Despising the side effects that caused issues, like lowering his libido, headaches, and insomnia. He felt better when they weren't in his system and he was sure he didn't need them anyway. It had been almost a month now of stopping them and he didn't think it had affected him at all. He wasn't crazy, it was everyone else who imagined that he was. They had problems, not him.

Rong had been in a foul mood since the police showed up here days ago and arrested him and was desperate to see that bitch TangShi to ask her what the fuck she was playing at. He thought they had a relationship and an understanding. Why else would she stay with him that night?

How dare she accuse him of assaulting her against her will. She had no idea the lengths he had gone to make sure they had time alone together and he took real nice care of her while she slept like a baby. The ungrateful slut. He spent so much money on that dinner and that room and she was over there shackled up in her ivory tower with rich kid and sending him to the cells. He couldn't get his head around it and his rage over this had been growing steadily as his medications fully left his system.

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Rong got in his car and wasted no time in driving to the registered address on TangShi's school record. The document he memorized after she started there and would look at frequently in case she updated or changed details. Having been here multiple times over the last few weeks in the hopes of seeing her he knew the way with his eyes closed. Not impressed that she moved into the apartment of that man and thought she had more self-respect that cohabiting with a boyfriend. It made him grit his teeth just thinking about the sordid shit they got up to in that place.

The traffic was heavy, annoying his impatient and restless self, and it was late in the day when he finally got to the apartment complex. He parked in his usual observation spot, near the entrance of the underground parking. A place he had spent many a night sleeping in his car these past weeks just to see her come and go and figure out her schedule. Reversing into a shadowy space that was concealed from view by trees and

buildings so he could watch from across the street and pulled out his cell to call her again.

He had made endless calls, always saying the phone number was not registered but she had never told him she changed it and he was sure it had to be a mistake. Her records at the school were up to date until she quit and it had worked fine the day of the dinner. Maybe her idiot boyfriend had cut off her number or taken her phone away as he couldn't understand why she wouldn't want to talk to him. They were close friends and had seen each other almost daily before that night. He didn't know what her problem was now that she quit school and would never answer her cell.

He sat motionless and bored for the best part of an hour when a familiar black jeep rolled into view and he sat upright, poised and prickly as he narrowed his eyes and peered into the windscreen in hopes of seeing his girl. Tense and stiff, leaning forward and scrutinized the vehicle.

There she was in the passenger seat beside that spoiled rich asshole, looking at him while she spoke and seemed to be acting normally. Not the heartbroken and disheveled victim being held hostage that he expected to see. The pair of them smiled at one another and whatever that jerk said, she covered her mouth and laughed, leaning her head towards him and pushing him in the shoulder playfully. Riling Rong's jealous nature.

Rong's temper rose and that fury in his belly spread to his veins, sending liquid lava pumping to every cell in his body. Burning up with venom and hatred as the jeep paused by the gates, glaring their way while waiting for them to open and then the dark vehicle slid inside as they shut behind them.

Rong jumped out of his car and marched across the street without hesitation, pulling his baseball cap down to hide his eyes and his face mask up. Before they fully closed, he slid in quick, making a swift left to dodge the security guard who was walking back to his glass box office after letting them in. He ducked under a nearby metal rail, rolled across the darkened concrete out of sight and headed for the darkest part of the car park.

He just wanted to see her for a few minutes, to energize himself and figure out what was going on with them. After that perfect night sleeping beside her and holding her close he had been so sure it was the start of something good between them. Only that bastard ruined it by beating him senseless, scaring his angel, and TangShi had fled and left him there alone. Unable to run after her or do anything about it because of his physical state and since then she wasn't accessible. She needed him to rescue her from the grips of Prince Leng.

"YuZhi, give it here. Let me help." TangShi's voice drifted his way and he spun around, getting low behind some park cars. He squatted while running along the back of them until he got level with the area that sweet noise was coming from. Finding peace in the serenity of her melodic tone.

"I'll carry them. You go on ahead and I'll follow. I got it, it's not heavy." YuZhi pulled the wooden box of pictures from the back seat, and the bags of food they picked up on the way home. Aromatic smells wafting up at him and making his belly rumble. Smiling after her at how relaxed she seemed after going for a scenic drive to find a great soya crab seller. The talk about her mother seemed to have distracted her from the obvious mess of their lives and he was enjoying seeing glimpses of the girl he loved the most this evening. Planning on a quiet night on the couch with her. movies and food and maybe like the old days she would want to curl up and get close.

Rong snarled from his concealed spot, hunching low, clenching his fists, and tried to follow them by using cars as shade as they walked towards the elevator station to go up to the apartments. Sticking close as he dared without being seen.

"Evening, Mr. Leng, Miss. Lei." The security at the second entry point nodded to them, recognizing residents by face alone and opened the barriers to let them through to access the elevators. Rong knew he had no chance of going any further. Security was lax at the entry to the car park but not when you got over here. He had tried to access this many times and even claimed to be a delivery driver at the main entrance on the other side of this building before and always failed.

"Evening. You guys have a good one." YuZhi nodded and TangShi smiled their way, walking through and pressing the first elevator closest to them. TangShi pulled out her apartment access card and leaned against YuZhi absentmindedly as they waited here. Tired and nuzzling into his arm and shoulder to help hold up her weary body while his arms were occupied. It was an impulsive and absentminded habit and it made YuZhi's heart swell with joy.

YuZhi glanced down at her, beaming with the fact she did this without thinking about it and tilted his head to rest his cheek on top of hers for a second. Gauging her response and ready to be rejected but she only wriggled to accommodate him further and stayed put. The elevator pinged open and dislodged them from their cozy posture but YuZhi was content. Happy that she was initiating some physical contact again and taking note of how many times she had this past two days. Each one giving him a sense of hope and expanding happiness that in time he might be able to salvage his relationship with her again.

Rong glared coldly from his spot, a chilling aura of darkness emanating from his still figure. Seeing them close and cuddling up, he cursed under his breath, turning away fast and spat at the ground before kicking the back tire of the nearest car. Hating them for their public show and wanting to rip Leng's fucking face off for touching her. Knowing it was all fake and a lie and there's no way in hell he could still be all sweet and loving to that whore, knowing she was in bed with another man only three weeks ago.

It made no sense to him and he had been expecting to see TangShi being dragged around like a dog, shackled to him and kept as a prisoner against her will because she dared to cheat on her precious rich boy. There's no way a man like him could endure

the thought of his woman with another guy so what the hell was this bullshit he was seeing now. It had to be a show for the public and not the truth of what was happening between them.

As they wandered inside, TangShi slid her arm into the crook of YuZhi's elbow and he automatically leaned in and kissed her on the temple. An impulsive need to shower her with some form of affection, seeing as she was being so touchy but his hands were full and it was killing him to not be able to act on this rare interaction. TangShi blushed and looked away to hide her obvious response but said nothing as the doors slid shut and Rong Cai wanted to put his fist through the nearest windscreen, such was his rage. A growing black hole of toxic hate aimed at that slimy fucker who still owned his woman.

This wasn't the plan. He was supposed to throw her away, cut off their engagement and hate her for the betrayal. TangShi was supposed to realize how much Rong meant to her and come to him willingly, leaving that jealous and possessive controlling CEO behind.

This wasn't fucking it!!!

He wanted to gauge out his own eyes and throw them away for deceiving him with this lie.

This implied she was part of the hate campaign against him, trying to frame him for kidnapping and what? ... Fucking rape? Was she having a laugh? Was she serious? Stupid bitch had no idea how well he cared for her that night. How carefully he undressed her before staging the room and laying her to bed like a princess, being careful not to hurt her in anyway. Admiring her, stroking her face and beautiful body and preserving her innocence for a special day. He had bent over backwards to accommodate her and set that up for their future happiness.

Didn't she understand how much he idolized her and wanted her as his perfect woman, to spend the rest of his days worshipping her? She was so ungrateful, so blinded, and dumb, and he obviously hadn't done enough to break the brainwashing that Leng prick had done to her. It highlighted now to him that he would need to put in more effort to get her back and he should up his ante to seeing her and pulling her home. She needed him to come for her for her own good.

Rong wrung his hands and tugged at his hair, his vision blurring and swimming as angry emotion overwhelmed him and he had the urge to beat or break something. Unable to control the inward spiral of devastation and outrage at witnessing them together. He knew he had to do something more extreme if he was going to ensure TangShi was his. He would have to come up with a better plan, a solid and foolproof one that left no room for that Leng fucker to intervene.

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“Don’t be nervous. It’s just a simple test and it might be negative.” YuZhi rubbed TangShi’s back lengthways, gently warming her and sounding unusually upbeat. TangShi was perched on the seat in the doctor’s office, uptight, and stiff, while she fidgeted with her handbag handle and he could sense her apprehension like a thick fog around her. The doctor had left them alone while he took her urine sample to another room for testing and it was a strained atmosphere.

“What if it isn’t? What if it’s positive and....” Her voice trembled and she cut off mid breathy sniff, her fear getting the better of her. TangShi was already a mess this morning, having worked herself up from anxiety to borderline hysterics in getting here to do this. She was internally shaking so badly she felt like she might pass out and her stomach was tying itself in knots.

“Then it might be mine. We had unprotected sex for weeks, right up until that morning. Try not to overthink it and worry about something that might be nothing.” YuZhi was trying to comfort her even though his own guts were churning with nerves and praying this was negative. It would be easier for both of them if it was. Putting on a brave face for her.

“You didn’t need to come. I know this must be hard for you.” TangShi was steeped in guilt today, for all of this and once again blaming herself. Waking up this morning to be sick again which was becoming normal, devastatingly so given what they were here for, and it terrified her. She knew the signs and she was aware she had many. Feeling like she brought this on herself somehow.

“Stop thinking that way. It’s harder for you because it’s you that’s going through this. I can’t imagine how any of this feels so stop worrying about me and how it’ll affect me. I told you, no matter what, we’ll get through it.” YuZhi appeared calm and unemotional. Being the strong wise voice and shoulder to lean on, while hiding his fear and pain under layers of detached aloof. He wanted to show her she could trust him and hid all of his doubts so deep that it was making him nauseous. So much effort going into his demeanor, tone, and expressions, to assure her he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Right, I’m back. Sorry to keep you waiting.” Doctor Huang wandered in smiling softly. Carrying a clip board under his arm as he continued drying his freshly washed hands on a paper towel and tossed it in the waste bin by his desk before sitting down. “The full blood work up and other samples you gave have been sent to the lab for sexual health testing. We will have results in three days about whether you need any kind of STD treatments. As for the pregnancy test.....” He raised his brow, inhaling deeply to steady his own nerves, pausing for a second to find the right way of saying this, as he knew all too well the entire story around this couple. He had been YuZhi’s friend for years and had not been spared a single detail about the visit today in the phone call last night.

“She’s pregnant isn’t she?” YuZhi cut in with a deflated tone, knowing Huang’s mannerisms well enough to see it. Ripping the band aid off instead of waiting out the agony of his silence. A sucker punch to his stomach.

“Yes..... She is.” He nodded with a somber expression. “I’m Sorry Miss. Lei, I know you hoped for a different outcome.” He leaned over patting her on the back of her hand but TangShi was sat numb and motionless, blinking at him as though she hadn’t quite heard what he said.

“I can’t be.” She breathed out in a whisper, turning wide eyes to YuZhi as they filled with tears and her face crumpled. Her heart shredding with acute slicing pain.

“It’s rare to get a false positive with the tests we use, and I can have your bloodwork double checked to confirm it, but I am certain given your symptoms and examination that you are pregnant. You’re monthly cycle is also late.”

YuZhi had been preparing himself for this since they left his grandfather’s house, and maybe days before. In his gut he already knew the answer so this wasn’t a big a shock to him as it seemed to her. He slid his arm around her and pulled her into his embrace as she was sat beside him. Cradling her head against his neck and rubbing his hand over her hair and cheek to soothe her while she began to shudder and sniff harder.

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay. It doesn’t mean that it’s his we’ll know when you get your dating scan or due date. Right?” YuZhi was trying to be practical and hold onto some tiny ray of hope to come from all of this.

“Right. We can do an early ultrasound and try and date the size of the fetus. After two weeks, an ultrasound usually can pick up an embryo and you have passed three and a bit weeks since your last intercourse. So even if you fell pregnant then, I’ll be able to see something.”

TangShi burst into proper tears at hearing his words. Unable to control the raw emotion that poured out of her and YuZhi encircled her tiny frame fully, pulling her in and hugging her tight while swaying her side to side like a child. She almost ended up on his lap with the force of his getting her closer but she clung on like he was a life raft in a stormy sea, unable to control her devastation.

“Don’t cry, it’s not good for you to get his upset.” YuZhi didn’t know what else to say and the Doctor watched them quietly and gave them a moment. Awkward himself at this very dramatic reaction from her even if he understood it.

“If I can’t see anything with an abdominal sonogram, then I can do an internal ultrasound. Either way we will be able to get an approximate conception date. That might give you a definite answer right away and cut down the stress.” He wrote down some notes on the paperwork for himself and pressed the intercom buzzer on the right side of his desk.

“Nurse Wang, please can you bring me the portable ultrasound. Thank you.”

“Now?” YuZhi was shocked at the fact they wouldn't need to wait and yet never stopped holding onto TangShi and wiping her tears as they rolled down her face, with his thumb. “I don't think she's in any state to do this now.”

“It's non evasive. This machine is nothing more than me pressing a pad on her abdomen and having a look. If we need an internal that's a different set up entirely but it's better to know and give you both peace of mind right now if we can. I don't think we should wait.” The doctor felt he was doing what was the best for both of them and hoped conception was clear. “TangShi I need your bladder full for us to get the clearest picture because of its possible size. So I need you to drink some fluids for me. Are you okay with that?”

TangShi lifted her head, unable to stop her tears but nodded, mumbling through sodden sniffles. Agreeing with him that this should be sooner rather than later and tried to pull herself together. Waiting longer would only torture her mind into insanity and she might not have the courage to come back once they left. This was a shock reaction and now she needed to get herself calm and take the next step.

Sliding out of YuZhi's arm but keeping a hold of his wrist in her two hands, She picked herself back up to a sitting position and shook herself mentally. Needing his support and presence and pushing aside any other thoughts for the time being about the two of them. YuZhi needed to be her rock because she didn't think she had the strength right now to do this alone. She swallowed a few times and took some deep inhales and managed to calm the crying.

“I haven't gone in a while. My bladder might already be full.” She answered truthfully, some sense of logic returning with a stabler mood, and was met with a nod and hopeful smile.

“Well, we can give it a try and see, and if it's not clear we can have you drink and try again. Early on it's hard to really get a good image but we can hope.”

A second later a gentle knock on the door signaled the nurse entering, and pulling in a large, wheeled trolley that was laden down with monitors and machines and seemed crammed full and oversized for such a tiny room.

“Can I get you to go lie on the bed and expose as much of your abdomen down to below your hips as you can for me. YuZhi can assist or he can wait outside?” The doctor was used to women wanting husbands to stay and knew although complicated in terms of relationship, she might still want him here. After all they were married and this might be YuZhi's.

TangShi hesitated, looking from YuZhi to the bed by the wall and the thoughts of knowing for certain if this was his child. Weighing up whether he would handle it if it wasn't and wanting to be selfish and have him take care of her no matter the outcome.

"I want him here." She responded so quietly it was almost a whispering breath and YuZhi smoothed back the hair from her face that was sticking to her damp tear-soaked skin. Calming her, reassuring her that he would do whatever she needed and pulling her up by the hand to lead her to the bed. Confidence in his mannerism even if inside him was a shaking mess.

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He took all his nerves, doubts, and emotion, and locked them up tight in a steel box and pushed them to the tips of his toes. Knowing that no matter the result, he had to stay calm and stable for TangShi. No reaction if it wasn't his. He had to show her it didn't matter, even if deep down it would destroy his heart. She needed him to be strong and stable while she was going through a hellish time and he also needed to still earn her forgiveness. This would not be enough for him to let her go a second time.

"Okay. Let's do this." The doctor wheeled over to the side of the bed on a low stool and waited while she laid down and adjusted her clothes awkwardly. Pulling her dress up and YuZhi used the bed blanket to cover her from the lower hips down to preserve her modesty.

The gel that was squirted on her lower abdomen was cold and slimy, and she squirmed and wriggled while a plastic handheld pad was pushed into her stomach firmly and slid around while the doctor clicked the mouse on the trolley and kept his eyes glued to the monitor. It wasn't exactly comfortable and highlight how much she did need to pee. It felt like endless minutes of what was in reality only seconds, and the only noises from the Doctor were hmmm and ahhh noises to himself. A furrowed brow and deep etch of concentration while he did something with the monitor image.

YuZhi took her hand in his, interlocking their fingers and squeezed it tight, leaning over her on the bed so they were face to face and focused on her eyes, bringing her gaze to him and not the screen. His free hand coming up to brush away the hair across her forehead and he smiled softly, taking in her naturally beautiful face.

"Relax. It'll all be over soon. Don't think about anything." YuZhi leaned in and kissed her on her temple, more to calm his internal war of emotions and the chaotic rhythm of his inner body. Surprising her with the soft affection which caused a huge lump in her throat and she doubted herself for still not forgiving this man and letting him back into her heart. Like this, she couldn't understand her reluctance anymore.

TangShi was strung tight with crippling fear and began chanting in her mind over and over a small wish that this baby was conceived more than three weeks ago. It had to be YuZhi's as she didn't know what to do if it wasn't.

“ahhhhhh, ummm.” The doctor exhaled heavily, a confused and exasperated expression creasing his brow and he wiggled the pad once more and then click, click, clicked at the keyboard and mouse. Seemingly unhappy with what he was seeing and TangShi held their breath.

“What’s wrong?” YuZhi turned his head, frowning with slight concern at him. Sensing this wasn’t good.

“I was hoping on a clear five-to-six-week window for your conception. Ultrasound gives you a date that is usually within a five-day error margin.” He blew out more air and screwed his face up as he peered at the embryo measurements on screen before admitting defeat.

“So?” YuZhi urged, his tension growing and a headache starting with the sheer stress. TangShi fell silent and still and stared at him with a pale pallor.

“I am measuring a three-to-four-week embryo. Your conception date could fall right on the day that...” The doctor lifted the pad and handed YuZhi some paper towels to wipe TangShi’s stomach and yet both stayed frozen and continued staring. “I’m sorry.... I I hoped for something further back.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” YuZhi’s façade slipped and his raw pain slipped out in a raspy tone that made him bite his own lip and drag it back inside to conceal again. Cursing himself for caving and realizing he had held onto a tiny thread of hope.

“So I might have fallen pregnant on that day?” TangShi answered robotically, numb taking over as her worst fear was realized.

“We had sex that morning too. So it doesn’t mean a damn thing, right? It could still be mine? Or it could be for what.... five days before?” YuZhi’s carefully constructed persona was unraveling and he gripped her hand tighter to find some strength to pull himself back together.

“From experience it’s normally a couple days either side of the date we give or spot on. Rather than being a whole five days off. I’m sorry I can’t be more precise. I honestly thought it would be a case of you being around six weeks by now as I know you were trying naturally lately. A lot of women don’t experience as many symptoms as you until the five-to-six-week mark but the embryo is definitely smaller than a month.” His face flushed with heat at his own stress levels rising and felt like instead of setting their minds at ease, he made this worse for both of them. It wasn’t any clearer now than a half hour ago.

“So we have to wait for the baby to be born and get DNA then? Is that what you’re saying? Or will the other type of ultrasound be more precise?” TangShi’s feeble and tearful side was hitting full fervor, and the hysterics were quietly brewing as extreme denial kicked her butt.

The doctor shook his head, knowing the other ultrasound wouldn't make a difference. It was not an exact science and conception dates were always approximate for giving a rough age to the embryo.

"It doesn't matter. Tang, listen to me." YuZhi turned to her, wiping her hair back and cradling her face as the doctor took over cleaning her abdomen for her for something to do. YuZhi string up internally, his heart beating fast but his mindset was calming down. "Either way, this is my kid. It doesn't matter, do you understand? We'll go ahead with the PR plan and the wedding. I'll take care of you and when you begin to show, we'll announce our baby news and that'll be the end of it. No DNA.... No doubts, no questioning it. As far as my family are concerned this baby is mine. We tell everyone it's mine and it will be." YuZhi's eyes misted over and he swallowed hard unable to stress enough that he didn't want this to rip them apart again and he would do anything to stay with her. Even if that meant accepting the baby and loving it as his own without ever knowing for sure. He loved her enough to love the life growing inside of her and he would be its father no matter what. HE could live his life that way and give nothing else to that fucker Rong.

"I can't..... I need to know. I don't want you to do that or out you through that. What if it looks like him?" TangShi began to sob again and he pulled her up off the bed by scooping his arms under her and cradling her tight. His own emotions fraying and the urge to cry overwhelmed him.

"Yes, you can. It's your baby and it doesn't matter how it looks. I'll love it no matter what and we can fix everything and go back to living our life like we planned. Rong will pay for what he did but this kid will never be his, never see him. No matter when it was conceived. Do you understand?" YuZhi's voice turned stern and commanding, quietening her despair and pulling her face back so he could press his nose to hers. Serious and calm as he locked eyes on her again and drummed into her. "I love you. I'll love our baby. I'm not going to lose you over this or push you away, so have a little faith in me."

TangShi nodded, clinging on with desperation and let her tears fall as her body was wracked with grief and yet also relief. Knowing he wouldn't abandon her for a second time but yet it didn't stop the devastating heart break of thinking that she might force him to raise another man's baby.

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"What are you doing, where are we going?" TangShi resisted as YuZhi came to her side of the jeep, took her hand and slid her out beside him onto the path of the car park that seemed familiar. It was a pretty day and the sun was peeking out from behind grey clouds with a promise of sunshine by noon. A gentle breeze pushing around them and giving a sense of tranquility to this already emotional day.

“Distracting you and reliving a happier memory. We both need a time out and figured this would be a nice change before we go home and face this head on. Processing time.” YuZhi coaxed her with him, aware of how sensitive today’s appointment was and the fact they both now knew she was pregnant. He didn’t want to dwell on the what if’s for at least a few hours and aimed for some head space to dodge reality for a little longer. TangShi had been quiet and pensive since leaving and hadn’t even noticed the route he took out here instead of heading home.

“Don’t you have work? You already keep taking time off to accompany me. I feel like lately you rarely go and that can’t be good for Leng group.” TangShi tried to object knowing ZhengLi had been left to cope alone again today but YuZhi didn’t seem to care. He had chosen time with her to make sure he was where she needed him at any time of the day.

“This is more important. Tang, our future, our relationship, is my priority right now. Even grandfather understands that and knows I need some time off. Let me worry about work and you focus on yourself.” He reminded her of the old man’s suggestion to go on a long vacation, with a raised brow and small half smile that etched out his left dimple and she relented. Always weak when those dimples came out to change his whole face into a youthful boy.

“Okay but today only. You can’t ignore work and leave ZhengLi to take your place. Linlin will never see him if he’s doing the work of two of you. She’ll disown me for ruining her love life.”

“Shhhh... let me worry about that. I can handle Linlin. Come on.” YuZhi quieted her with a thumb pressed to her lips while his other fingers were hooked under her chin and led her away from the car, pulling her behind him with linked hands and expelling his demons and woes while out walking with her. They both needed some normalcy brought back after the trauma of these past weeks and that’s what he was aiming for.

The Bund was busy today with a street carnival and renaissance themed fair and TangShi broke into a bright smile when she saw the pop-up carts and booths ahead on the two-kilometer walkway. The little temporary seating areas scattered conveniently and the music swaying gently this way on the breeze. Glancing at YuZhi’s back and strong shoulders as he forged a path for her and filled with a sudden warmth at why he brought her here. She wondered if he was reliving the night they kissed for the first time and how perfect it had been up until that point. Her stomach fluttered with a woosh of butterflies taking off and she stopped fighting this and let him lead the way, touched that he would think of bringing her here today.

Unlike that night when the carnival was low key, relatively peaceful, and spread out, this was a crammed and vibrant space and planned event that seemed to be teeming already in the early hour of the day. A makeshift market set up in the middle who were selling a huge array of goods and foods. A ton of foreign tourists because of the great weather and a busy children’s entertainment area complete with characters in costume.

“This is crazy busy.” TangShi called out as they mingled into the crowd and made their way through red roofed stalls and ducked under low hanging bunting and fairy lights. TangShi’s inner sunshine mood starting to uncurl and look out at all the awesome things to see and experience and she started to forget her woes. Her dark mood lifting and her eyes grew wide at everything around her. Returning to the girl who had shared the fun with him here last time.

“Tang, come here.” YuZhi pulled her into him and slid his arm around her shoulder in a protective manner, turning his body slightly to cocoon her with his own and keep her shielded as they managed through the densest part of the crowd. “It’s a Jianbing truck, that’s why it’s so crowded here. You want some? Are you hungry yet?” YuZhi knew TangShi loved the Chinese breakfast crepes and it was not noon yet so the perfect time to order. She had skipped eating with him earlier because of her nausea and now he knew that keeping her fed was more important than before.

“Yes, please.” TangShi beamed with excitement, stretching on her toes to peer over the nearest customers and could only make out a tall blue food truck about ten meters away. The smell filling the air and pointing out to her she was starving as her stomach rumble din protest of being empty.

The reminder of being sick this morning as why she hadn’t eaten hit her like a slap in the face as the memory of the test earlier came at her all at once. It was the weirdest and minorist thought that triggered it, even though she hadn’t forgotten. Her mood nosediving once again and she became foolishly tearful and swallowed down a clogging lump in her throat from rising. Her heart aching with the stupid reaction to something so nothing but it felt like it opened the floodgates.

“YuZhi...” She tugged at his sleeve, stopping their progress, turning her face away so passerby’s wouldn’t see the instant tears as they began to roll down her face. Unable to hold it in to stop it as the thoughts tumbled out and she felt instantly fragile and vulnerable and lost. Her emotions hitting her like a slam for no obvious reason and YuZhi glanced down expecting her to be telling him how she wanted her crepe, only to find her sobbing.

“Hey... are you crying? Tang, baby, what is it?” YuZhi cradled her inside his jacket, pulling the side over her face so she could hide and guided her out of the crowd towards the inner edge of the Bund that was quieter than the river railing side. Concern rising and becoming instinctively protective over her. “Tang, talk to me? You were fine a second ago.” He pleaded, checking he rover in case she was hurt and confused at the change.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...” She couldn’t say the words ‘it hit me hard that I really am pregnant’ without thinking of the ‘and it might not be yours’ and choking up again. Her mind back to that scrambled mess she was driving here and pulling inwards once more to hide her guilt and shame from him. Her eyes glazing over as she sniffed it back and clawed to reel it down again. She truly never thought she would be a woman in this situation where she might be carrying the child of a man she wasn’t married to.

“Maybe this was a mistake. I’m sorry. I thought it would cheer you up and give us a time out from reality for a little while longer. I’ll take you home. I didn’t mean to upset you.” YuZhi deflated, feeling stupid for forcing her here right after learning the news but he hadn’t known how else to deal with it. Scared of his own feeling when he sat down to fully process sit and needing to be around her in a setting where they couldn’t think about it just yet.

“No, wait. Don’t. I don’t want to leave.” TangShi cried as he tugged her sideways, still shielding her from prying eyes and she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest. Inhaling his scent deeply and looking for the calm and safety he always brought her before. Needing that now and trying to pull herself back to calm.

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YuZhi hugged her tight, walking her backwards with careful steps to get them out of the pedestrian traffic and rested his chin on top of her head once he had her in a quieter spot. Making her invisible to people walking by and pulling his jacket around her fully so he looked like a hugely pregnant man with four feet.

“I’ll be okay in a minute. We can go for a walk. It’s just everything catching up and so much I have to unpack mentally. It doesn’t feel real.” She mumbled into the safe haven he had created around her with his arms and jacket, cocooning her face in a little tent area and he ducked his head down to beside hers to join her in there.

“I shouldn’t have brought you somewhere so busy. I’m sorry.” He nuzzled his cheek against hers and closed his eyes savoring the intimacy she was allowing and missing this more than anything. His own chest aching with this closeness. He longed for the days when he could touch her anytime he wanted, hold her close and kiss her and desperately wanted that all back. The baby was a hurdle but not impossible to get over and being like this drove home just how much he needed her. In time he knew it wouldn’t hurt either of them anymore and he could lay it to rest as long as he had her.

“Am I selfish for wanting you to do what you said?” TangShi lifted her chin, nudging him away so he had to pull back his head to look her in the eye. Her tears stopping and instead she had a mirroring look of longing in her eye. “To fix us and raise this baby without question? To stay together and put it in the past? To be together again?” Her insides shuddered as she said the words, fear swirling that once it sunk in he would maybe change his mind, that he would realize he couldn’t do what he said.

It was her biggest fear from the second the doctor gave them the results and it had been plaguing her ever since, opening her eyes to the fact she did want to be with him again, more than ever. She had never truly given him up in her heart and had been angry and hurt by him, but not over him. YuZhi gazed at her for a long silent moment, saying nothing in answer to her questions and her nerves rose in terror.

Her stomach churning as his expression stilled to a blank calmness and he searched her face for some sign of something, still without responding to her. Making her antsy as panic set in. TangShi started to tremble, her throat drying, wondering if he regretted saying it now and it wasn't how he felt anymore. That with the reality of a baby that wasn't his, he couldn't keep loving her the same way.

YuZhi lifted one hand and slid it up the back of her hair, entangling his fingers in her ponytail and tugged her face towards his as he lowered once more. His mouth finding her lips with the sudden jerk forward and sinking a kiss on her to erase any doubt she had that he couldn't get past this. It didn't matter to him, none of it.

In his mind TangShi didn't do anything wrong and was a victim of some sick bastard he should have protected her from. He failed her and his burden of guilt would always weight him down. The baby, no matter whose it was, was not her fault either, and he wouldn't lose her for anything in the world after experiencing a TangShi-less existence that almost killed him. Rong Cai would be dealt with but that wasn't an innocents child's fault who never asked to be conceived.

He kissed her gently at first, a pressing of lips to her sweet soft ones, feeling her out and seeking permission to touch her this way. Pushing hers slightly open so he could explore and deepen it and TangShi responded coyly. Unsure at first, but she relaxed into the familiar taste and feel of his mouth on hers and allowed herself to get lost in how good it felt. Churning up raw pain and emotion and old hurt like opening a wound while also applying a healing balm. Tasting him, opening up like a flower and forgetting the tears and heartbreak when joined.

She had missed this kind of touch from him these past weeks, and now she was being freely given it she latched on with a hunger as though she had been starved. Sliding her hands up his abdomen and chest and snaking her fingers around his neck as he relented too. Instinct taking over and hunger from being affection starved by him reigning supreme.

They moved to passionate kissing, where tongues met and caressed without inhibition, and they tilted their head slightly to accommodate one another. Upping the heat and passion and arousing urges neither were prepared for, especially in such a public space. TangShi's hormones heating her body and an aching, throbbing, lower craving in her pelvis snapped her back to the present as the yearning for sex from him clouded her judgement. Her blood rushing fast and her heartrate elevating. Lungs heavy as they both panted with breathlessness from exertion and elevated horniness.

"I can't." She pulled away fast, fear gripping her as memories of Rong's sneering face hit her in the mind's eye like a deterrent. Her skin crawling with the thought of him being all over her and flashes of his face and voice cut through her skull like a blade. Her stomach tightening with the reminder his seed might be inside her, infecting her, and she burst into instant tears again. YuZhi held her close, confused why she had gone so far and then yanked back and not really understanding her burst of tears either.

“It’s okay. We don’t need to do anything. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have kissed you when you still don’t know how you feel.” YuZhi mistakenly thought this was because of his hurting her in the past and TangShi realized that it didn’t matter anymore. Somewhere over the past few days she had stopped focusing on that and started leaning on him again, needing his presence, and right now it hadn’t even crossed her mind. She loved him and wanted it back to how it was, but there was a black cloud of despair standing between them, growing inside of her, and his touch made her feel like she was some kind of dirty sinner who had allowed another man to defile her body. That she had betrayed their love.

“I wanted you to. I miss you..... I want it all back.” She sobbed brokenly, being honest with her heart and grabbing onto him again so she could bury herself back inside his jacket and be hidden from the world in her one true safe place. All her life she had looked for that harbor and found it in him.

“You can have it all back. I told you, didn’t I? I love you and I will do anything to fix what I did to us. You have to trust me; this is only a blimp and we can still have a happy future together. We can take it slow to get back what we had; I’m not going anywhere.” YuZhi’s voice broke, his throat hoarse with the sudden surge of his own emotions and eyes misted over. Heart swelling with love and hope that she really did want them together again. It was the one thing he had been desperate to hear and made everything seem like it could be okay again.

“But you’re not the only one who touched me anymore.... I’m tainted. I’m not how I was. I’m dirty and used.” TangShi cried, pushing her sodden cheek to his chest to close her eyes and lull herself to the rhythm of his heartbreak. Ashamed and spewing out the words she had tried to bury deep. That ingrained self-loathing her father instilled in her breaking free.

“You think that matters to me? I’m not some chauvinistic traditionalist who discards your worth because of that. Tang, I was hardly a virgin. Although what happened isn’t something I want, it’s not your fault, and you were a victim of something awful. You didn’t ask for what he did, you didn’t encourage it. It doesn’t change who you are to me or how I see you. How I love you.” He ran his hand down her hair, twirling her ponytail and decided this wasn’t the best place to be doing this. Pushing her with him so he could baby step her backwards and guided her along the very edge of the path away from the crowds while she kept on crying quietly. Shepherding her to a clearing before turning her into his side so she could walk properly with him and kept pulling her on at a slow space back towards where he parked the jeep. Careful to keep her concealed and thankful he wore his oversized parka to use as a covering for her.

“How can I get past it? How can I forget what he did? It makes me sick to my stomach every time I think of it and now.... with this, in here.” TangShi splayed her hand over her abdomen and gazed up at him with large unblinking eyes, showing the depth of her broken soul and it almost choked him to see he inner pain so freely. Her confusion and fear. “It feels like there’s a black hole growing there, and I can’t be happy with not

knowing if it's his. It feels like a dark mark and some kind of curse. It doesn't feel like a baby, it feels like some sort of disease he placed inside me that will consume me whole."

"Don't think like that. You're distraught and traumatized with all of this. TangShi I wish I could wipe it away and make you feel better but all I can do is keep reassuring you that this baby is ours. It's not a disease, it's not going to hurt you. No matter what. I don't care when it was conceived. It won't change how much we love it. Separate it from him, think of it as yours, ours." He knew that wasn't entirely true and there was a part of him that was broken and in pain at the possibility someone else's child grew inside of the woman he loved. That someone had hurt her in that way and done to her body something they never had the right to do. It angered him on crazy levels and he had thought of dealing with Rong Cai viciously so many times since he found out the truth.

"Is there something wrong with me for thinking that way? TangShi blubbed, ashamed she said those words out loud even if it's how she had been thinking since the test.

"No. I think, given the circumstances, it's probably normal and how a lot of women feel when they fall pregnant after an assault. Maybe we should try some counselling for you. While we await the trial. I didn't realize how much this affected you and I'm sorry for not taking better care of you." YuZhi was devastated.

"You do take good care of me. I don't know, maybe it's just the shock and I'll feel better in time. I'm really tired because I don't sleep and" She exhaled heavily, her fatigue draining what was left and the tears making it worse. Losing her train of thought as her body and mind gave in.

YuZhi frowned at her and began to wipe her face dry with his sleeve and thumb, calming her down without even meaning to just by administering some TLC. Unaware of how assuring his touch was and his stable and non-emotional persona could be. TangShi watched his expression, his flawlessly handsome face, as he focused on righting her appearance and smoothing back her hair. Loving him for being this person and somehow knowing what to say when she didn't know how to feel or what to think.

"Let's go home, I'll run you a bubble bath and make you some food. Maybe sleeping next to me again might help. I swear I won't touch you, but I want you back where you belong. We can vegetate at home all day and then move you back into our bed." YuZhi was mentally a mess too, scared that he didn't know how to help her and already making a mental checklist of things to do to care for her. Asking Doctor Huang for advice, finding a therapist, researching PTSD for sexual assault victims, whatever he could do for her. He would sleep without touching her as long as he had her close, or be, and do whatever she wanted.

TangShi stared at him, suddenly still and quiet and nodded. Soothed by his mere presence and becoming detached from reality in a dreamlike haze of mental exhaustion. Relinquishing control and effort to him because she knew he would take

over and look after her without asking. Thankful for him in this moment, and she allowed him to pull her with him as he continued heading for the jeep, always attentive to keeping her shielded and stopping every few steps to wipe her face and give her a squeeze.

“Let’s get you home, baby.” YuZhi fell quiet as they walked and nuzzled her head against his neck, keeping up the pace and submerged in his own thoughts.

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“What about pancakes, American style? I know a place and I have such a craving for crispy bacon and maple syrup!” Linlin was bright and energetic this morning. Finally getting some quality alone time with TangShi now that YuZhi was back at work and life was calming down enough to resume a normal routine. TangShi was getting to grips with her morning sickness thanks to some herbal medications from Doctor Huang and she seemed to be doing better emotionally too.

“Hmmm. Nothing too strong tasting. I can only eat bland right now. And nothing smelly.” TangShi slid into Linlin’s car, checking her phone and smiling at yet another text message from YuZhi asking her if she was okay. He had been checking in hourly for the last few days whenever he had to go to work, remorseful for not being able to keep accompanying her at home. Acting like the world’s most overprotective boyfriend who would have her wrapped in cotton wool and kept in a glass cabinet if he had his way. He had taken the pregnancy news better than TangShi and had started treating her like fine crystal.

“Turn your cell off if all you are going to do all morning is text your fiancée. I swear you only saw him an hour ago and this is the fifth text from him.” Linlin eyerolled, pulling on her seatbelt and slapped TangShi’s hand when she went to lift her phone again rather than put her safety belt on. Warning her with a flashing scowl.

“Who said it was him?” TangShi feigned innocence, blushing at being caught and then dodged away as Linlin poked her right between the eyebrows.

“Your expression did! You two have gone back to the overly vomit inducing honeymoon stage and it’s really weird. Y’all like hated one another over a week ago and now it’s all love hearts and morning kisses.” Linlin batted at her hands again and ended up pulling her belt over for her as TangShi chose to reply to him instead and got herself another poke in the face. This time in her cheek.

“We’re not back together yet, not properly.” TangShi ignored her fussing but let her clip her in and sent back a ‘on the road for pancakes.’ text to him. He already knew Linlin was taking her out for some air and food after being cooped in all week. Encouraging her to spend time with her friend, although they refused the driver or bodyguard he had installed at the apartment for when he wasn’t home. Linlin preferred to not have big burly men with them for girl’s time.

“Sleeping in one bed. Cuddling up, kissing.... talking about your wedding and your future? I think that’s being back together, don’t you?” Linlin sighed and got them on their way. Eyeing her up with a ‘not buying it’ expression and smirk.

“We’re not having sex.” TangShi shrugged, her face flaming with heat at saying it loud. “I still can’t bring myself to.... So we’re not properly together again.”

“Your tests were all clear. There’s physically no reason not to get it on again. It won’t hurt the baby either if you guys are careful.” Linlin knew this was an emotional hurdle for TangShi, even though she couldn’t remember what Rong did to her that night. She still had all the signs of PTSD that assault cases listed and had begun having lucid nightmares that kept trying to fill in the gaps with the worst-case scenarios. “There’s nothing stopping you from rekindling all areas of your relationship. I mean, we’ve forgiven him. It might help you heal fully.”

“I know.... it’s psychological and yes, I forgive him because I understand why he was like that, but I just can’t. YuZhi keeps asking if I want to see a therapist or some kind of counsellor to help us move past this. I just want to get used to this. I don’t think I can have him touch me that way while I think that someone else’s baby is growing in here. It feels wrong and dirty somehow. Every time we get close to passion, I freeze up and get this horrible suffocating feeling that we’re doing wrong.” TangShi pointed down at her belly. Most days she could ignore its existence and pretend everything was okay, but some days she wanted to stay in bed all day and cry. Her emotions had been all over the place while trying to find mental peace about this baby and she wasn’t there yet. She knew if it had been definitely YuZhi’s she would have been happy and embraced it, but the doubt was killing her.

“Maybe counselling isn’t such a bad idea. What happened was traumatic, even if you have no memories and it might help you accept the pregnancy. I can’t imagine how vulnerable you felt or waking up not knowing what had gone on for those eight hours. I think I would go crazy.... you are handling it way better than I could.” Linlin leaned over and squeezed her friend’s thigh with reassurance, her eyes misting over as she empathized with a heavy heart and wished she could take TangShi’s pain for her.

“Can we drop this. I’ll just get upset and start crying... please.... Talk about something else. Tell me about you and ZhengLi. How are things going since you started dating again? You haven’t really talked about him and always focus on my mess and me.” TangShi, moved in her seat to find a comfier position, avoiding eye contact as she composed the swell of painful emotions that had threatened to rise, and Linlin took the hint.

“My drama is boring and unimportant compared to what you have going on. I don’t want to seem shallow and bore you with the details of my sad love life.” Linlin had been evasive for the past weeks about ZhengLi, quietly simmering since they started seeing each other again and she knew it was mostly her fault. Something small turning big and her gift of making everything worse.

“Why, what’s happening?” TangShi turned towards her in her seat, shifting to eyeball her while she drove, sensing the low mood and monotone hint in her voice. Suddenly alert with a sense of unhappiness in her friend. Linlin exhaled heavily with an exaggerated blowing out of air and shook her head. Pulling on her ‘I don’t care’ attitude but not as convincing as normal.

“I hate him.” She wiped one eye with the back of her hand as a stray tear rolled out unexpectedly and then threw a self-depreciating smile on her face and shrugged at her friend. Surprised at her own stupid reaction from three little words. “He has me so messed up and hopeless that I can’t ever function when we fight or don’t see each other. It’s really unhealthy to be this hung up over a man and yet I can’t help it.”

“Why are you fighting again? Please, don’t say it’s because of me still? I thought you guys had that all sorted out.” TangShi stared at her in wide eyed alarm, guilt seeping in that this was her fault but Linlin shook her head.

“It’s me. It’s all me. I’m so stupid, and jealous, and insecure, because I honestly feel like I can never read him. He’s so infuriatingly cool and laid back when it comes to love and dating and half the time I don’t even know if he likes me, so I start thinking crazy things. He puts up with my mental self as though it’s amusing, but nothing seems to really rile him. I feel like he’s only half invested in me.”

“Are you crazy? ZhengLi is mad on you. He follows you around like a puppy dog when you’re together and he always makes a beeline right for you whenever you end up in the same place accidently. It’s obvious to everyone he adores you. You can see it with your eyes shut. What are you talking about?” TangShi blinked at her in surprise, shocked that Linlin really couldn’t see how much ZhengLi idolized her. To her, it was clear as day. ZhengLi from the first time he ever met her was hung up on her and pursued her like crazy.

“I think there’s another woman.... He played it off like nothing but I saw her. More than once. She’s my complete polar opposite in everyway and yet that’s twice now I was out and happened to see him with her when he said he had family things to deal with.” Linlin’s face crumpled and another tear pushed its way out despite her stubborn wiping, and gritting of teeth, refusing to let herself break. Broken hearted anytime she pictured him sitting across from her at a dinner table in a five-star restaurant two days ago.

“Who did he say she was? What did he say about meeting her? I need details before I hate him too.” TangShi was getting riled on Linlin’s behalf, real anger spiking in her belly and warming her veins. Ruffling her feathers and pushing her to forget her own woes.

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“I haven’t exactly questioned it head on. I sort of told him I saw him out with a girl for dinner, as though I didn’t care..... he said it was family stuff and to ignore it. He played it off so coolly and I’ve been too scared to tell him I saw her with him again. She’s really

beautiful and tall and elegant. Nothing like me. She looked rich, too rich, like pearls and formal gowns for breakfast rich. I don't know what to do if he's started dating other people after telling me we wouldn't. I mean we broke up, right? When you and Maybe in his head we're not serious anymore and he's just dating me and others again since we started over." Linlin was so confused about this scenario and screwed her eyes up in the rear-view mirror to wipe away her make up that was beginning to run. Tired of feeling shitty over second guessing ZhengLi these past few days. Noticing a black car behind them that seemed to be too close and sped up a little. It pulled her out of her own misery with a sense of outrage at idiot drivers who tried to bully you to go faster as it sped up too. Completely pulling her attention as they veered left to change to a turn off lane.

"Uh Uh. I don't believe it. No one is as pretty or amazing as my Linnylin, and ZhengLi will lose his favorite parts if he screws you over. I'll make YuZhi transfer him and send him to Antarctica to work where his bits will freeze over and snap off."

Linlin giggled hysterically at that, to the point it drew tears of laughter, wiping her cheek on her sleeve. Amused by the fierce biting tone of her feeble friend as her mama bear side kicked in as it was such a rare sight. TangShi was normally such a cool and calm person when it came to her own troubles, but when it came to Linlin she too had a fiery side.

"Ughhh look at my make up now." Linlin flashed a quick glance in her rearview as she leaned forward to stare at her panda eyes and noticed the black car was still driving up her ass. Riling her temper so she muttered a curse word under her breath and hoped it would be left behind at the turning.

Sitting back to signal and put her foot to the gas to leave them in her dirt, hating drivers who didn't respect the rules of the road and giving any kind of space.

"I don't know what to do. I love him and I never thought I would find myself in this place with any guy. I didn't think I would ever fall for someone and want exclusivity. It just kills me that I fell for someone just like me and maybe he isn't there with me and ready to commit. That maybe he's already looking elsewhere." This recent lack of confidence and spike in insecurity was a hundred percent worse since they broke up for that few weeks that YuZhi and TangShi had, and it had her doubting everything.

"You have to communicate with him and talk it out properly. ZhengLi isn't the type to lie. He's very blunt and if he was dating someone else he would just tell you. Maybe she is family? Maybe it really is something he had to sort out with her." TangShi stroked Linlin's shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. Wanting to believe in their love and not take it at face value. Linlin pushed her sat nav screen and prodded it a few times, seemingly intent on acting unbothered but TangShi knew this was how Linlin dealt with her problems. Always with that outward 'I don't really care' approach.

“That’s what I’m scared of. My sat nav is trying to reroute us because of traffic.... It’s adding fifteen minutes to our route time when I am already as ravenous as a starved stray.” She frowned at it, turning left and then right quickly down an unknown road and following the onscreen instructions for this food place that seemed an eternity away. The sky turning grey overhead and adding to the muted mood.

TangShi settled back into her seat, her stomach growling now it had been a while since she last threw up and the hunger pang starting to hit. Staring out the window at the passing scenery and chewing on her lip as she thought about Linlin’s predicament. Knowing Linlin was probably feeling far worse inside than she was making out.

“You’re driving yourself crazy not knowing the truth. And you said you’re fighting? So, let me guess.... you’re picking at him for stupid things, being dramatic, and finding reasons to sulk at him instead of asking him right out. Causing drama because you’re scared of the truth?”

“Hmmmmm.” Linlin concentrated on navigating a few winding streets before getting them back onto a larger road that cut some of the traffic works out. Eyes on the road and seemingly disengaged from the conversation as she thought.

“You will make him break up with you if you keep doing that, regardless of another woman. He might think you two aren’t working anymore and bail before it gets messier.” TangShi turned back to her, prodding her in the cheek to shake her out of her aloof behavior and smiling adoringly at the cute and sulky face as she absorbed her words. Linlin was absorbing the advice even if she didn’t like it.

“I know. I know I’m being an idiot but.... What is with this car?” Linlin was distracted again by the same black car showing up in her rearview despite several weird turnings and glanced back over her shoulder to peer at it. Suspicion rising and then losing interest as it fell back two cars behind in traffic. Not able to really see the car well but sure it was the same make as the one which kept tailgating her on the main road. Now the driver had angered her, she was overly aware of its presence and prone to bouts of road rage.

TangShi glanced back, seeing nothing and knowing how impatient a driver Linlin could be she thought nothing of it and sat back around.

“Why don’t the four of us have a double date again, like we used to. Maybe I can talk to him or something. He’s being ever so considerate and nice to me since this whole mess. I’m sure I can pull some truths out of him. Or get a feel for how things are between you both.”

“Maybe. God dammit, this traffic today is crazy. Are we coming up to a festival or something?” Linlin slapped her satnav as it started barking a new set of directions out and detour as they come upon another wall of traffic with lights ahead for construction. This quick breakfast trip was turning into a road trip of stupid length.

“Roadworks.” TangShi pointed out, craning her neck to look up the side of the cars in front and sighed. Her hunger getting insistent and making awful internal noises that made her uncomfortable. Her phone pinged, bringing a smile back to her face as she guessed YuZhi had picked up her text finally. Brightening as she slid it out of her pocket and swiped the screen.

Did you guys eat yet? I hope you wore warm clothes to go out, the rain is coming. Are you feeling any better?

TangShi beamed at his message, knowing he was busy today and yet still finding time to keep in touch and began composing a response. They were startled as rain slashed at the windscreen out of nowhere with its sudden appearance. Thick and heavy like a waterfall opened up over their car and began lashing down. They were getting into rainy season when it was normal to be this heavy and Linlin stuck on her wipers and turned the car off onto the opposite lane, U turning to keep them moving. Not wanting to be out here when the roads were flooded.

“Screw it. Let’s go wherever is open and the first one we see. My stomach think’s I cut my own throat, I’m that starved.” Linlin ignored the blasts and beeps of cars as she made a completely illegal turn and almost caused a bump in the process. Sliding between two vehicles and putting the pedal to the floor to get out fast. Driving past the black car that she was sure had been behind them earlier and she peered in as they passed it, seeing nothing because of the heaviness of the water pouring down her side window.

“If I don’t eat soon, I might eat your steering wheel cover.” TangShi nodded at the orange fluffy circle and got a raised brow from Linlin in response.

“Don’t you dare! ZhengLi bought me this because I kept complaining I got cold hands when driving.” She pointed out and TangShi smiled at her.

“How can you say he doesn’t love you when he buys you such hideous things for your own comfort knowing fine well they’re totally your style. YuZhi would buy me gloves. ZhengLi clearly knows your fake talons don’t mesh well with being covered and bought you something better that won’t end up with holes in the tips.” TangShi laughed at Linlin’s paused expression as she too thought about this and then exhaled heavily.

“Why is he such a bad jerk?” Linlin blew so her lips vibrated in a cute manner and turned the car off onto a new road that headed back the way they came. So done with searching for pancakes, and ready to settle for any kind of food now.

“We haven’t proven that he’s done anything yet.... Maybe have a little faith in him. You’re Linlin Choi.... Bold, blunt, and direct were totally your thing before he came along.”

"I know, right. I've become such a coward over a mere man." Linlin flashed another glance in her rearview, catching a glimpse of black car and screwed her face up and peered harder. Something in her gut telling her that it was the same car but it was so far behind in the back of multiple vehicles she couldn't tell and realized how stupid she was being. Black was a popular color this year and China's roads had thousands of them. In this rain she couldn't even make out the model through the drenched back window and sat back to focus on where she was going.

She had been overly suspicious lately when out and about. Sensitive to everything since TangShi's assault and had began imagining stupid stuff, like cars following them. She knew it was because she was in overprotective mama mode and pushed it aside.

"One thing you will never be is a coward. My fierce and crazy bestie." TangShi tucked a strand of Linlin's hair behind her ear and gave her an air kiss, blowing it at her face with a grin and relaxed back to check her phone to see if YuZhi had responded again.

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"I'm stuffed. What's the plan now? Do you want to go home or go walk this food off and get some fresh air?" Linlin yawned, dabbing her mouth with her napkin and leaned back in her chair to stretch out. TangShi rubbed her now full belly and turned to look at the weather outside the huge glass window of the café. The rain had dried up, and although it was still overcast, it wasn't as grey or cold and the sun was pushing through with hopes of a nicer day.

It had been a pleasant quiet late breakfast, with small talk and happy vibes. Feeling a little more normal and how they used to be before this whole mess.

"I don't feel like dealing with people, so anywhere that people are not." TangShi sighed, relaxing now she was fed and a little tired. Between morning sickness and fatigue it had limited her ability to do much.

"How about driving to Jinshan city beach? It's a little over an hour to get there. We could make it a whole day of girl time." Linlin didn't want to go home either. All she had going on this week was free time since her fashion class was on a break. Being stuck at home made her claustrophobic and gave her too much thinking time to ponder ZhengLi and his mystery woman and she would end up doing something stupid like barging into his office for answers.

"Sounds like a good plan. I could use some sea air and tranquility even if it's cold and wet." TangShi was enjoying dodging life today, knowing YuZhi had set her up so many appointments in the next two weeks related to this fetus and her wellbeing. This felt like a stop gap before reality set in.

"Come on then, breakfast is on me." Linlin made a move first and went to the counter to pay their bill as TangShi stretched out, got up, and wandered out the door. Lost in her

own daydreams about nothing in particular and waited for Linlin in the warmer sunshine. She had made a mental deal with herself today to let everything pass by and spend one whole day not pondering or thinking about her troubles. Enjoy her Linlin time.

“All done.... Let’s go to the beach.” Linlin bounced out beside her, linking arms merrily, and guided her carefully across the busy street to the car park space where her shining orange baby was resting. Happy to be out doing something. Glad that TangShi seemed to be coming through the worst and out the other side and her relationship with YuZhi was back on track. There were still bumps ahead but TangShi was pulling through and it warmed Linlin’s heart to see it. The baby thing wasn’t exactly great but she had faith they would make it work.

Linlin went to slide into her side of the car, turning around with a second glance because a flash of light caught her eye and searched along the narrow road behind them to see what it was. Lot’s of cars parked neatly in line and she assumed it was sunlight on a window or something, noting the furthest vehicle which was black had just shut their door. She waved it off, got in, and got them out of their parking spot in record time. Navigating along the narrow street as she set her sat nav to their new route.

“YuZhi and ZhengLi have a two-hour meeting so we won’t be hearing from them for a while.” TangShi laid down her phone after checking her messages, and yawned, uncurling like a cat and poked Linlin in the temple with a smile. Unusually smiley and fun today and put it down to having better sleep nowadays while back in bed with YuZhi.

“Pffft. ZhengLi doesn’t text me all that much when he’s at work anyway. I haven’t heard from him today.” She flicked her eyes to her mirrors, to check before pulling out and turning off the street, aware of traffic behind them and got to focusing on listening to the directions.

“Didn’t you come from his this morning?” TangShi asked innocently, sure that’s what she had said when she picked her up.

“Hmmm, yeah. We had an argument and I left. I haven’t heard from him since because he tends to leave me to sulk.” Linlin ‘s attention was caught by a flash of black behind them. A car overtaking traffic and ending up two behind them and she checked her mirrors again before moving off in speed.

“Girl, stop making problems and ask him for honesty. Either way you’ll know and then you can decide what to do from there. He already committed to you once, I honestly don’t think he would start dating again without saying something. They have female friends. I mean, look at Rhea.” TangShi pointed out, knowing ZhengLi had a much wider social group than YuZhi did and glad YuZhi didn’t seem to hang out with women all that much anymore. ZhengLi having dinner with a female friend wasn’t all that unusual.

“I know. And I have male friends, it’s just.... I never thought I would be this kind of girlfriend and it’s making me crazy. I want so badly to trust him but after spending years

pushing men away and having multiple dates on the go, I think this is me projecting.” Linlin clenched the wheel, sighing at her own stupidity as she knew this was all on her.

“I think so too and all the more reason to talk it out with him and open up. You never do that with anyone besides me. If you want a future with him then you have to be frank and clear. ZhengLi is about the most levelheaded and easy to talk to guy I have ever met.” Which sometimes baffled TangShi why he was so crazy about Linlin, who was hot headed, irrational, and sometimes a little insane.

“I know, I get it and what is with my steering.” Linlin was distracted by a slight heaviness as she turned, frowning in confusion at her wheel and flashing her eyes over her dash. She wiggled it, a little unsure of what she was feeling. Worried her power steering was giving up but this car was only a few months old and had recently been serviced.

“What’s wrong?” TangShi looked over at the wheel and the dash too, expecting to see something but there was nothing. There were no lights or warning signs and she couldn’t feel what Linlin was talking about.

“It feels odd. Maybe we should head back and call for my car to get collected and checked. You know how paranoid I am about breaking down when we’re miles away from home.” Linlin swung the car into a U turn, heading back down an alley to get them back to the main road and found them in unfamiliar surroundings. Navigating slowly to find the way back out as the sat nav recalculated and her steering got a little worse. Not familiar with these streets and looking for a way to get back to the highway.

“Wait... I feel something. Vibration starting on this side.” TangShi sat upright, stiffening as the sensation moved though the car under her seat and was accompanied by a loud flapping noise that came out of nowhere and scared her half to death. Linlin swerved as her steering hit hard and the back wheel veered them, pulling them into a quiet spot in a dark showy alley and coming to an abrupt halt.

“It’s a flat. God dammit. I have a spare in the trunk. These were new tires.” Linlin yanked on her hand brake with mild hostility, irritated, and jumped out. “Sit tight. I got this. I’m an old pro at changing tires thanks to my old man and his mechanical incompetence.” She waved with a proud smirk and closed the door on TangShi before walking around behind her car and hoisting open the rear storage. Leaning into it to uncover the spare wheel from under the carpet and almost falling in as she stretched out to get it.