

## Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 41

TangShi had a very small blog run by Linlin with occasional artist updates, videos of her painting, and the last posting had been her farewell to China as she ventured to California. She hadn't updated it since because she didn't want to share her failures and sadness with her art fans or admit she had given up on her dream. No one knew her real name or how she looked so no one would connect her to the public TangShi Lei, new girlfriend of Lengs heir. He had obviously recognized TangShi's painting and known it was an Alice Lin.

"I did go but my personal life had some changes and I had to return unexpectedly." She answered with a sober expression which made it clear she didn't want to expand on the details.

"She was granted a full scholarship because of her talent and is so heartbroken having to abandon it and come home. She's not ready to give up studying and really wants to be here." Linlin intervened, pressing the point that TangShi was dedicated to furthering her art. Hoping he could see that by earning a scholarship, she was extremely talented.

"That's really sad. I am sure you had good reason though. Look, today is a formality because we have to do a face-to-face interview, but I can already tell you that I know your work, have watched your process videos and want you in our school. My father already saw your portfolio and agrees. I think you are a good fit for what he teaches here. Traditional meets modern Chinese art. I think you and him could learn a lot from each other."

TangShi's heart elevated to an excited rhythm, blushing, and beaming at the same time and grinned like a child. Her little ray of light and hope which had been extinguished two months ago flickered as it came back to life.

"Really? I can come here as a student, just like that?"

"Your work is hardly unknown. Your attention to detail and your precision and good understanding of composition and color makes your art outstanding as it is. You recognize it immediately, which is a rare gift when your portrait subjects are common things like koi and animals in nature."

Linlin was beaming beside her best friend and felt like whooping for joy. She knew TangShi had it in her to go far and just needed guidance and a push. From day one Linlin had been her champion when it came to her skills and never stopped trying to get her to find her own way on this career path. She knew she could make a name for herself once she got out from under the chains and shadows of her family.

Marrying YuZhi had given TangShi a little more financial freedom as he was generous in that department and YuZhi wasn't too controlling in how she spent her days or time. He wouldn't care if she came to school to further her skills as long as she didn't make

drama or cause headlines for him. Linlin thanked the stars that YuZhi was a pretty decent husband in terms of this, the contract wasn't all bad for TangShi. Her family had kept her as a penniless prisoner, but YuZhi was not concerned with doing the same.

Rong Choi couldn't take his eyes off the pretty TangShi, enamored by her natural beauty and something about her that drew you in. She was shy, spoke carefully in a sweet and gentle tone and conjured up this feeling that you wanted to shelter and protect her. It wasn't that she came across as overly submissive or weak, but it was a vulnerability that made you feel that she needed to be loved and cared for. A hint of sadness or maybe loneliness that you couldn't pinpoint.

He wasn't shocked at all that the artist behind the soft and tranquil painting was this girl standing here, it somehow matched her, and he found himself wondering if TangShi was single. His hopes lifting that she might be someone important to his future.

Linlin could see the way he was appraising her friend and narrowed her eyes, suspicion moving in but kept quiet as the two continued to talk about her work and the school. He led them on a small tour around the building and gardens, casually meandering, as Linlin fell behind to observe them and let TangShi ask what she needed to. She wasn't really rooting for TangShi to find an admirer, but she thought he might be useful as a distraction and something to make YuZhi feel competitive over. She knew this could get interesting, especially now YuZhi knew that TangShi was his sweetheart of eight years ago. It wouldn't hurt YuZhi to see other men desired TangShi and he might lose out on her if he stayed aloof and distant with her for the next two years.

Linlin had made TangShi relive yesterday's scene a million times on the drive here. Extracting every detail about how YuZhi reacted, what he said, and was even more sure that the man was definitely not as indifferent about it as he made out. Her hands were evidence that under the cool exterior, he was caring enough to fix her up, tend to her, and even had words with his aunt this morning. TangShi had heard them arguing in the breakfast room before he left for work and the very clear orders he gave, that Aunt RuiZi was to treat TangShi like a beloved niece from there on in. The bullying was to stop and he was going to make sure of it.

"I think I'll like it here. I'm excited to start."

TangShi's voice brought Linlin back from her daydreamy thoughts and she zoned back into the pair in front of her, checking her watch. She was shocked to see they had been wandering for almost an hour already. So lost in the serenity of this place while they two had become acquainted and she could see TangShi was comfortable in this man's presence already. That was rare for TangShi.

"The new semester starts in thirteen days, so your timing is impeccable. I'll email you the list of supplies you'll need and your class schedule. We run it pretty much like a regular school, and most students bring their own lunch and snack for breaks. There are six students starting, you included, for this term so it's small and manageable."

TangShi was glowing all over and Linlin warmed at her little happy face. Her hearts welling with maternal pride that her little lamb was finding the joy in life was once. Her passion for her art shining through and it always animated her in the cutest way.

“I’m so excited I can’t even tell you. “

“Welcome to the Cai institute of fine art. I hope you’ll be happy here and look forward to an amicable relationship for the next three years.”

Rong Cai was looking forward to spending five days a week getting to know TangShi better. She intrigued him, and there was a definite attraction to her that was rare for him. He liked how easy she was to converse with and be around. In only an hour he was truly smitten by her. He was still single at thirty-one because he had been waiting for the right girl to show up all these years, and his heart was hopeful that he may have just found her.

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“Here, take my hand and relax. Lift your chin up, you look pretty, stop fidgeting.” YuZhi gently scolded TangShi as he helped her out of his black Lotus Emira. His boy toy that he rarely got to drive nowadays due to needing his blacked-out chauffer driven SUV to avoid the press. It was low and hard to slide out of when wearing heels and a satin dress, so he had to tug her up and catch her to set her upright. Being the attentive date tonight.

TangShi inhaled heavily, her nerves frayed about this dinner and tugged at her dress to make it longer, aware it was showing more leg than she was used to. It was one that Rhea picked out for her in a recent shopping outing, seeing as they were still making a point to hang out once a week for the lingering nosey reporters.

A fitted navy shift dress that clung to her curves and brought out her nice figure but was shorter than what she was comfortable with. Formal enough for a family dinner, but dressy enough for an upmarket restaurant in the late evening. Paired with killer silver heels that were slowly destroying her feet and a matching clutch bag. She was so stiff because she felt like she was on display.

Xiaosu had spent an hour on her hair and makeup in case they were photographed, so she was red carpet material tonight. She felt like she was playing Barbie dress up, but YuZhi had taken one look at her and wolf whistled when he arrived at the house to collect her. For the first time he had openly complimented her without a hint of malice or untruth, and she had been blushing ever since.

YuZhi was in a black fitted roll neck under a black open suit jacket, dark grey jeans, and black boots. He was going for casual tonight, even if he should have made more effort. He looked suave and mysterious; his usually ultra-smooth sexy self that was always camera ready that came with good genes and a great face. His hair styled like always

which suited his features perfectly. He had come from the gym so had ditched his work suit for something comfy as he knew tonight was going to be painful enough.

“Come on. The faster we go in there, the faster it’s over. Try feeling as confident as you look. You’re knockout in this dress.” YuZhi had to tug her away from the car as she was reluctant to move, and he could sense her growing nerves, despite her intensified blush at his words. The past week had seen them being less conflicted with one another and developing a mutual understanding and amicable way of interacting. He was trying to not be such a jerk, be patient with her, and show her some warmth and TangShi was trying to believe it was real. Having been someone who was rarely given compliments and care growing up, she was finding it hard to trust this massive change in him.

“Linlin said she would be here. I don’t see her.” TangShi resisted, pulling his wrist back to stop him leading her on and shook her head when he nodded, gesturing her to move.

“We can wait for her inside. I’m sure we’re first here anyway.” He tried pleading, not really wanting to drag her with him when the car park was already busy with people wandering about. It was cold out, dark, and the mosquitos were already biting.

“Uh uh.” TangShi caught the handle of his car with her free hand and held on, looking like a scared child who was about to put up a fight and YuZhi, despite his irritation found himself laughing at her. Amused with her cuteness, he reached up and bopped her on the end of her nose with his fingertip. TangShi recoiled, the heat of her face spreading further and tried to ignore the crazy heartbeat in her stomach and flutters he had been causing since he picked her up.

“What? You think they’ll eat you in there if she’s not here. Am I worthless as a protector?” Her big-eyed timid look was melting his frustration at not moving, and he rubbed the back of his head to relieve his agitation. He hated standing around in public because he knew it was a matter of time before some passing citizens would recognize him and take pictures. Not that it would be a bad thing being caught here with her, it would add to their cover story and news about tonight would leak faster.

TangShi felt sick. It had been a long time since she saw her family and things at the Leng’s were not exactly a happy environment. She would have to sit at a table with mostly people who didn’t like her and despite YuZhi seemingly putting down his battle weapon when it came to her, she wasn’t secure in his presence. She needed Linlin to be there. She needed to feel that one person was going to be on her side and swoop in to help her if she needed it.

“Call her. We will wait as long as she is close. If she’s not, I’ll carry you in there if I have to.” YuZhi leaned in, an edgy tone to make it clear he wasn’t playing and smirked when she turned from doe face to glaring at him. A little sass on show at his threats and he looked away to hide his amusement. Somehow that fierce hint of fire she sometimes popped out with was a mood enhancer lately. He just wished she used it more often when dealing with people like Aunt RuiZi.

TangShi pulled out her phone from her bag, shaking his hand free so she could do it and called Linlin.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. I’ll be there in like a minute. I was caught in traffic and some ass is up my rear revving at me like he doesn’t want to live. Soon as I stop, I may have to dent his car. He seems to be following me.” Linlin answered without giving her a second to speak. She was pissed, glaring at the yellow Lamborghini behind her who was blinding her with his high beams and cursed him out over her music before sticking her middle finger up in the center of her windscreen hoping he could see it.

“We’re standing near the door. I’ll wait for you.” TangShi sighed a breath of relief, knowing she was close, and turned away from YuZhi to watch the entrance, rubbing her arms to combat the cold. She jumped when YuZhi hung his jacket around her shoulders in an unexpected move to keep her warm and again had to deal with another eruption of internal butterflies and her insides going to goo. It seemed any hint of him being nice and TangShi melted inside.

“She has three minutes, tops.” He warned, pacing away to lean on the bonnet of his car, casual model pose with a foot propped up on the bumper and pulling out his own phone to scroll.

TangShi sighed with relief as the small orange VW beetle came rolling on in, loud and invasive, much like Linlin herself and screeched around the car park to find a spot. She was tailed by the yellow car that she complained about and it did seem to be following her closely. Linlin spun around in a U turn finally separating from it and abandoned it in a spot before jumping out and marching TangShi’s way. Her face thunderous as she glared at the car who had gone to the far corner at the opposite end and reversed in smoothly to another spot.

TangShi walked towards her to close the gap but caught sight of YuZhi heading off from the bonnet and making his way to the car that just came in. She hadn’t said anything but maybe he had seen the reckless driving and was going to have a word. TangShi gawped after him, aware Linlin too was staring in confusion until the familiar figure hopped out in all his glory and TangShi sighed.

“It’s ZhengLi Kim.... I should have known. You’re about to meet YuZhi’s best friend and assistant. Your idiot driver is his ultimate bromance.” She pushed Linlin in the curve of her waist as a warning to play nice, even if she was mad as hell.

“I don’t care who he is. I’m going to smack him in the face for driving like that.” Linlin was brooding as they watched the two men walk together, back towards them, and ZhengLi threw a devilish grin at Linlin. Looking her over from head to foot and liking what he was seeing.

“We finally meet. YuZhi here has told me you’re Linlin Choi. I’m....”

“The idiot who can’t drive and thinks having an expensive car gives him the right to drive like a jerk and get up in people’s space. Yeah, I met you. Maybe you should stay at my rear seeing as you like it so much and that way I don’t have to acknowledge you!” Linlin sassed him right out, not caring one bit if it was YuZhi’s friend, turned on her heel with a hair flick and sashayed off dragging TangShi by the hand without a backwards glance.

ZhengLi stood in open mouthed admiration for this mouthy little hellcat until YuZhi swatted him in the shoulder and brought him back to reality.

“How many times have I told you to not drive like a schmuck. Way to go, pissing off the best friend right before we have this dumb dinner. Like I need bad moods and drama like I need another hole in the head.”

“Hey. I was trying to catch her attention to tell her that her taillight was out. For once I was driving carefully!” He defended himself, but YuZhi just shook his head and motioned for them to follow. “She’s pretty sexy though. Just my type and spirited too. I need that girls WeChat.”

“I think it’s more likely she will draw blood if you dare try and ask for it. She’s the most terrifying miniature girl I have ever met.” YuZhi mocked but he was only half joking. For a tiny thing Linlin had big person energy and she had enough attitude that TangShi had never needed it. He could sense from the briefest of encounters the girl was trouble with a capital T if you crossed her.

Linlin dragged TangShi at speed, stopping only to check with the maître de where they were to be seated and didn’t wait on the men to catch up. She was in bossy mother mode, here to shield TangShi from the idiot family and act as support and dampener with her evil stepmother. Linlin had come ready for battle, knowing fine well YuZhi’s aunt, uncle, and grandfather were going to be here too, and she didn’t have any sort of good impression of them either. No one in this family circle was treating her best friend the way she deserved and tonight, she was not going to keep quiet if they did anything to her. She would be a lady as long as they were nice to her girl.

“Sit here. Next to me.” Linlin commanded and pulled out a seat at the table that was close to a pillar so TangShi would be shielded almost in a corner. Her plan was to hem her in a corner where they were less likely to single her out.

“Nope. She’s mine tonight. Here.” YuZhi caught TangShi’s arm from behind and pulled her over to the seat on Linlin’s other side, where she would be between him and Linlin glared at him for a long silent moment. “She’s my date, not yours.” He raised a brow and challenged her with a long look of his own.

“Fine, but I’m watching you. Don’t think I don’t know that she hasn’t exactly been treated like the princess she is for the past couple of months.” Linlin warned him.

“I think I just fell in love” ZhengLi mocked, blowing a kiss at Linlin before walking around the three of them and plonking himself in the seat Linlin had first picked out for TangShi. It put him right next to the feisty mini girl. Linlin turned her glare to him, locking eyes in a battle of wills and yet sat down slowly and deliberately without blinking or taking her focus of his for a second. ZhengLi had to admit as an intimidation technique it was effective and he swallowed a little harder than normal.

“Feel free. Means your close enough all night to stab you with my cutlery should you annoy me further. I’m ordering steak...it comes with the sharpest knives.” She turned away and picked up her napkin, whipping it his way to unfold it and narrowly missed his face.

“Terrified and turned on. I think we should date.” ZhengLi applied the charm and smiled as brightly as he could while dodging almost losing an eye.

TangShi was so busy staring at them both in bewilderment that she allowed YuZhi to maneuver her into a seat he pulled out. He slid her in against the table before sitting down next to her with a sigh. Already he was regretting inviting ZhengLi, but because TangShi had invited Linlin he thought it would look less odd. Normally ZhengLi was a good companion and slotted into formal duties like a pro. When it came to women, he was a rogue and without YuZhi’s family presence to keep him in line he was being his usual shameless self.

“You’re a hooligan” Linlin flicked ZhengLi’s arm to tell him to move away from her, tutting loudly, and he beamed back at her with delight. His eyes twinkling with mischief.

“You seem like the type to sort me out. Maybe it’s fate. A hooligan like me might need someone to kick him into line.”

The air sizzled between them as sparks flew. Both good looking in their own way and could acknowledge that each of them was high on the attractive scale, but Linlin was pissed at this maniac, and she wouldn’t back down. Normally ZhengLi would be her ideal type of man to have fun with, but he had given her a bad first impression and she was the mother of all grudges. ZhengLi on the other hand was enamored with this small fiery goddess and he wanted her as his next plaything. He could only imagine what a demon she would be between the sheets.

“Is your friend mentally okay?” Linlin turned to YuZhi with a serious tone, complete blank expression and YuZhi shrugged.

“I ask myself this every day. I still don’t have the answer.” He mocked, raising a palm and not offering any help to his friend.

“Linlin, behave. Look.” TangShi interrupted and nudged her gently, motioning across the room at the figure of Grandfather being led by aunt who had her arm in his while helping him walk over with his stick. He was getting on in age and his mobility was in decline.

YuZhi got up as soon as he spotted them and went to take over bringing his grandfather to the table.

“Relax. This isn’t my first rodeo.” Linlin assured her before turning a scowl on ZhengLi. “That goes for you too. Behave! I will maim you if you don’t.”

“Agree to dinner and I’ll be good all night. Might even help warm up the Leng’s to your sister here.” ZhengLi’s raised his brow with a cheeky wiggle and got another scowl from Linlin.

“I don’t need your help, or your date offers. I’m not desperate. I’d rather stab myself in the eye with a shrimp fork. Now shut up.”

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YuZhi came back to the table with his grandfather in tow, missing the bickering as it quieted down and they all plastered on merry smiles. His aunt and uncle behind him and everyone stood to make the perfunctory greetings. Showing respects for their elders, bowing as they were seated. The Lei family was almost right behind them and soon the whole table was settled with the addition of Mr Lei, his wife, and Juefeng, TangShi’s sister, after a second round of polite welcomes while TangShi avoided looking family members in the eye.

Juefeng sneered at her half-sister although she tried to conceal it and hated how much she appeared to have changed. She was dressed in designer clothes and her hair and make up was different to the TangShi she knew. Her hair had been cut into long stylish layers and had some natural lowlights added. Her skin was looking healthier and glowy, with a professional application of makeup, and her nails were manicured and stylish to match her outfit. Juefeng hated it all and slammed her hands onto her lap to conceal her jealous reaction as she sat down. Like this TangShi was passable as a rich daughter of the Leng family and it angered her more so that YuZhi seemed relaxed beside her in a companionable way. She had hoped his obvious dislike on the day she left would continue and grow once he was stuck living with her. There didn’t seem to be any obvious friction between them now.

TangShi spent the duration of the dinner in silence, her eyes on the courses of food that were served to them and listened into the idle chatter among the seated. She made sure she concentrated on eating and trying to remain invisible in case anyone should notice her.

Linlin occasionally tried to talk to her quietly but knew that TangShi was so out of her comfort zone in this setting that she wouldn’t really interact. She was the queen of reverting inside her own shell sometimes. YuZhi however had become hyperaware of her beside him, could sense her shrinking into herself and had been watching the Lei’s and their attitudes towards her for the last hour with growing resentment. Concluding that everything Alice had told him eight years ago, held merit. They didn’t act like they

were pleased to see her or missed her after all this time. Instead, there was a cold distance between them and her, and he could have sworn he had caught sneers from the two women while TangShi kept staring down. He was biting his tongue not to say anything but the longer they sat here the worse his temper was getting.

ZhengLi and he shared a couple of glances towards one another, that confirmed ZhengLi agreed and could see it too, and this strange protective instinct in him fired up somewhere from his soul. He finally had enough of seeing her like this.

“You’re quiet. Are you tired? Unwell? Sit up, show the table your pretty face.” He coaxed her loud enough that the girl opposite him who had been making eyes his way in an unconcealed manner would hear. He tucked his pointer finger gently under TangShi’s chin to lift it up and force her to stop stopping down. “Stop staring into your lap. I want to see you when I talk to you.” He coaxed with a warmer tone, encouraging her.

“She’s shy. She doesn’t do social gatherings very often and turns into a scared little mouse. She needs to acclimatize by coming out for dinner more often.” Linlin smiled warmly, making excuses for her, and deflecting conversation away. Protecting TangShi like she always did and swooping in to always shield her from criticism.

“We should double date regularly and help her get used to it.” ZhengLi offered, winking at Linlin when seeing an opportunity, who rolled her eyes and ignored him.

“I’m fine. I’m just enjoying my food and listening to everyone talk.” TangShi offered in a low tone and quickly glanced up at YuZhi. She sat back trying to lift her chin and look confident like he was asking her to and immediately caught her stepmother’s direct stare. That hint of disgust and intolerance and could have sworn she heard her tut.

“Nice to see you settling into your new life and looking so.... Polished. If only you had taken such care about your appearance when you lived at home, we might have taken you out more. Who knew you could be almost pretty?” Mrs. Lei raised a catty brow, her disdain subtle in her smiley tone, but her words left no doubts. YuZhi was a seasoned people reader and disliked her instantly when she sat but now, he began to internally rage and despise her with a passion. Hating her snide remark given TangShi didn’t look all that different to the day he took her from their house. He hadn’t given her much attention at their previous encounter but now she was on his radar, and he could sense TangShi’s apprehension to reply was not unfounded.

“Maybe if they hadn’t kept you like a beggar and earning your own money to clothe yourself...” Linlin mumbled under her breath, so it was barely a whisper but TangShi, ZhengLi, and YuZhi all caught it as TangShi nudged her under the table to hush.

“Thank you. Being a public interest meant I had to care more. I do try now.” TangShi deflected, but YuZhi hated that her response which was probably conditioned from years of living with them was self-deprecating. His flash of temper grew from a small warm spot in his belly and erupted into his chest a bit like a growing fire.

“There was nothing wrong with how she looked or dressed before. She’s a natural beauty who doesn’t need designer clothes or expensive haircuts. She’s not just pretty, she’s beautiful, even as she was.” He snapped, losing his calm control momentarily and letting his words rasp out.

Aunt RuiZi caught YuZhi’s eye with a flash and scowled a warning at him that his edgy tone was disrespectful and that in her opinion his words were wrong. She had been another one who felt TangShi was a plain mess on arrival and couldn’t believe he was defending her. She shook her head to warn him to back down and narrowed her eyes to scold him. YuZhi bit his tongue knowing he should relent but she made him madder.

“Nothing wrong with self-improvement. She looked great before, and great after.” ZhengLi was the master of diffusion when the time called for it and he raised a glass with a grin and clinked his fork against it. Raising it high to pull all eyes to him. “How about a toast. To the meeting of two notable families who will be joined by a joyous union. The coming together of two great names in Shanghai and future business alliances. A big wedding, a happy event, and hopefully some future Leng babies.”

“Here, here” Linlin joined in, helping move them from uneasy bad feeling, even though she knew this was all fake and for show, but all she cared about was getting the focus from TangShi before she threw something at these awful women. She was about ready to jump up and rip hair extensions out of the hags opposite had YuZhi not spoken first. YuZhi had impressed her though and cemented in her heart that under that coolness, he was a good guy after all.

Grandfather raised his glass and commanded with a loud ‘Here, here’ in response and no one dared to defy him so quickly joined in. It was a mix of moods, mostly concealed disdain around the table, minus the four sitting to one side who were ready to end this and leave.

YuZhi hated all this, hated the formality and that it was a necessity in this play of a story. He had been over this crap before they even started being hounded by the press weeks ago.

TangShi was desperate to go home and hide and ZhengLi and Linlin were both hoping to cut loose with their best friends and find a bar to shake this experience off. This formality didn’t need to be repeated anytime soon as no doubt the netziens would soon have gossip swirling that the families dining together were a sure sign of an impending marriage. The public opinion about them dating was mostly positive now Rhea seemed to be happy and also rumored to have a new famous boyfriend. Things were going to plan.

They were halfway there. Next was an engagement party, a big one to show that the Leng’s had money and status and were overjoyed about this union, and finally the wedding would be the last curtain call. After that they could relax and have a relatively normal life until TangShi gave birth to an heir. Once she did that, she would be free, and

a quiet divorce could take place and give them some time before announcing a separation. It seemed so easy, but it was a lot of jumping through hoops.

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Dinner progressed as before with conversation dying away to business, polite small talk, and obvious boredom from Grandfather. Dessert was eaten in near silence and YuZhi couldn't take anymore hateful stares from the brat facing him, towards TangShi anymore. If he had to endure one more sly scowl he would end up dumping his wine over her head.

"We have plans, so we four really should be tying this up and saying our goodbyes. It's getting late." YuZhi announced loudly, sitting up and throwing his napkin on the table so he could lean and see his grandfather from his angle. He had always been a confident member of his family and had no qualms about drawing all attention.

"Oh, you young ones and your night life energy. Don't get into trouble." Grandfather had always favored him and was weirdly tolerant of YuZhi and ZhengLi's wild behavior of the past and their ongoing love of frequenting clubs. He saw it as a man's pursuit and a way to let off the stresses of working in their line of business. He himself had been a frequent drinker and fun lover when he was young.

Juefeng scowled at her sister one more time, hating that all through this meal her husband seemed attentive and caring and not at all how he was when they met that day. She hoped it was an act and that at home he treated TangShi like trash. She didn't deserve happiness. Her mother was equally hating on her stepdaughter from her own seat, pondering over the fact the young master seemed to like her and couldn't fathom what was wrong with him. TangShi's father could only see money and opportunity and was smug that he had passed her off with little drama and no one was displeased about it.

ZhengLi was pleased with the new plan. He knew it was probably just a ruse so they could all leave, but he liked the idea of a foursome and a bar. If he could get this wildcat to mellow with a couple of drinks and let her claws down, maybe she would take him up on the date offer. And tonight, his only goal was getting her number.

"We should get going too. I have medication to take on a schedule and I'm feeling weary." Aunt RuiZi excused herself and with one show of breaking this up, it seemed everyone who had been poised to leave all nodded in agreement and started readying themselves to get out of here. It spoke volumes that no one here actually enjoyed this or wanted to linger longer.

"We'll head first and get out of your hair. Let you say your goodbyes and make any plans between you about our future engagement date." YuZhi got up and bowed to all the elders at the table, leaning down to catch TangShi's hand and helped her slide her

chair back as she got up. He pulled her with him, gesturing for their friends to follow and they all said their goodbyes as they walked past the remainder of the table.

“Run.” ZhengLi joked when they got far enough away not to be heard and Linlin and TangShi both exhaled heavily, glad it was over without any drama and felt instantly lighter.

“That was awful.” Linlin lassoed TangShi around the waist with her arm and gave her a squeeze, wiping away any trauma from that dinner. “You did well though. Managed to sit and eat without being cursed out or insulted for almost two hours. Guess they were on their best behavior tonight.”

YuZhi flashed a frown down at TangShi, hearing Linlin’s words and that prick of anger spiked in him again. Every confirmation that her family treated her like garbage, made him hate them all the more. He said nothing but tugged her hand so she was pulled up next to him and made a point of keeping her close as they navigated their way out. To onlookers he was an adoring boyfriend who needed his girlfriend close and touchy.

“How about we actually do go and get some drinks to get over this stifling affair. I could use something stronger than wine and we need a dancefloor to let off some steam.” ZhengLi offered and despite still thinking he was a complete jerk, Linlin perked up with the option of a fun night. She was never one to turn down a good night at a club.

“I’m game.” She winked at TangShi who seemed to shrivel against YuZhi as though somehow she expected him to refuse on her behalf.

“I don’t drink all that well. Or go to clubs often.” She mumbled waiting for his refusal because she didn’t expect him to want to hang out with her by choice. She looked up at him expectantly when he said nothing and raised a brow as if to urge him to talk. She caught his eyes on her as she lifted her chin and the weird soft way he was looking at her as though he had been lost in thought.

“Drinking will help your tolerance and I’ll take care of you if you get drunk.” He offered as way of an answer, making it clear he was into this idea too. He hadn’t meant it when he said it but now hanging out with these three seemed like a better option than going home. TangShi was rendered mute because it was not what she expected.

“Parteeeeeeee. I have waited so long to be able to start taking you out in Shanghai, my little buttercup. I can’t believe I am finally going to corrupt my angel and get her clubbing and drinking. Let’s make a real Shanghai woman out of you!” Linlin shook her arm in jubilation and then danced off ahead full of glee and excitement, while ZhengLi automatically followed, his own face a beaming grin.

“What if I make a fool of myself.” TangShi bit on her lip, eyes wide and mumbling anxiously as she studied YuZhi’s face. He shrugged as if it didn’t matter. His mood was

returning to calm and relaxed the further they got away from TangShi's family and the promise of a good night, and he smiled softly.

"Everybody does. The trick is to get drunk enough that you don't remember it the next day. Come on, I'll teach you how to get hammered and make sure you get home in one piece." He let go of her hand and instead slid his arm around her shoulders, feeling happier as the night air hit them and watched Linlin taking off at speed across the carpark before tuning and throwing her handbag at ZhengLi's head with accuracy. He had no idea what warranted it but assumed it was well deserved. The two of them were running around like children on a playpark already and neither had drunk more than one glass of wine with dinner.

"Maybe I should just drink one or two." TangShi's nerves peaked aware she was out of her depth when it came to all of this and knowing she already made an idiot of herself the night she told him about the bridge. She was used to being the stay home, invisible black sheep, not a social butterfly.

"If I'm going all out, then so are you. ZhengLi is no fun at being a drunk buddy and he's distracted. I don't think he'll be all too interested in keeping me company while Linlin is around. You have to take responsibility for me and be my drinking mate tonight. It's sad to drink alone and I refuse to do it." YuZhi leaned down with a constitutional wink, feeling playful and enjoying this aura they were building between them of possible friendship lately. TangShi wasn't bad to hang out with and he wasn't against it anymore.

She was like that sweet naïve friend that you wanted to introduce to all the things the world has to offer, just to see their reaction and joy, while still feeling protective and responsible for them. He wanted to be there to watch her try a few firsts and figured it would help pass the next months ahead of them with less stress.

"I'll trust you." She uttered solemnly, a serious look on her cute face as though she was telling him her life was in his hands and it hit him sort of weird in the chest. Aching at his heart, tugging some forgotten emotions to the surface as a memory flashed through his skull. A similar response to him whisking her out onto the streets of Beijing to sample street food so long ago and it knocked him for six. Her big doe eyed look of fear and wonder back then was so like now as she stared up at him with so much innocence as she had uttered those same words. It almost choked him as the vision clenched his stomach into knots and made his insides erupt like a hundred butterflies taking flight.

It made him uneasy for a moment and aware that Rhea had never made him react like this in all these years.

"Let's go. I'll show you how to have fun and kick back." He deflected his own emotions away, putting them down to nothing but being overworked lately, and focused on getting her into his car for a night of stress relief.

## **Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 45**

“Selfies!!!” Linlin pushed in behind YuZhi and TangShi on the dancefloor, holding her phone up high to capture while on tiptoes above the three of them as they huddled in then waved frantically at ZhengLi to come over. She was picture happy tonight, more so the drunker she got because she wanted to document TangShi’s first night partying with her. It was a long time dream of hers to have TangShi live a normal life of a twenty odd year old girl in Shanghai and she never for a moment thought a contract marriage would be the key to achieving it.

“Stop taking so many.” TangShi giggled but still smiled and posed as YuZhi pulled her in beside him with an arm around her shoulders to get in on screen, sticking his two-fingers up in a V sign as the three of them were caught for all time on Linlin’s cell. He was an old hand at selfies and having pictures taken and seemed to have no bad angles. ZhengLi wandered over with his tray in hand and a new round of shots and motioned them all to sit. Frowning at his click happy date and her reel of way too many pictures of tonight.

“You missed it!” Linlin accused, waiting for him to lay it on the circular table in the center of their booth before hauling him down beside her and forcing him to take one with just the two of them. He sighed, smiled, and obeyed. Willing to appease her in anyway because he was having way too much fun in her company.

They had been here for a couple of hours already and the four of them were at the merry drunk stage and getting more so. Companionable atmosphere had grown between them all and it had relaxed TangShi completely. It felt like four good friends out for a normal weekend session. ZhengLi and Linlin had gone from enemies on the battle front to comrades in arms and were trying to outdrink one another and flirting heavily while doing so.

TangShi was trying to be reserved in her alcohol intake, but the more relaxed YuZhi became with his, the more he encouraged her to keep up. He had no problem seeing her get drunk as he was confident he could handle his booze and wouldn’t let anything happen to her. He wasn’t old fashioned or overly sexist and believed women should be able to kick back and have fun as much as men did.

“Here.” YuZhi handed her a tiny flaming shot glass very carefully and motioned her to watch him before trying it. “Blow, Tap on the table, and down.” He raised a brow at her and then did exactly that to show her what he meant. Blowing the flame from the top of his liquor, tapped the base on the polished marble surface, and then swallowed it down in one flick back of his head before turning it upside down and thumping it on the table. It was a practiced move and he seemed very skilled at drinking. “Your turn.” He winked at her, stuck close by her side like he had been all night and she nervously chewed her lip as she fiddled with the hot little glass. So far she had stuck to the less alcoholic cocktails but ZhengLi was pushing shots for the last two rounds. One she refused already, and she was tempted to try it.

“What if I don’t like it?” She queried and was met with a cheeky smile that brought out YuZhi’s dimples. His hair was a little messier than earlier, his outer jacket discarded, and he seemed casual and approachable when he wasn’t so immaculate. She wasn’t aware that in the last two hours her faith and trust in him had expanded hugely. They were no longer awkward or stiff sitting here together but seemed very much like old companions.

“No one really likes it. Burns going down but it gets you smashed, and everyone likes that feeling.” He lifted the base of her shot with his fingertip to motion her to do it and she obliged by following his instructions. Eyes glued to his the whole time as though seeking instruction or approval and he didn’t blink or look away.

Blow, tap, and drink, and then she coughed like a maniac, thumping her chest with a balled fist as the warm foul and bitter liquid burned all the way down her throat. A taste that was so strong it made her eyes water, and she did not like it at all.

“Good girl.” YuZhi rubbed the top of her head with genuine affection like she was a puppy dog who had performed a command. TangShi giggled at how proud it made her feel. She was tipsy or maybe more for sure and felt light and giddy. All her woes had fluttered away on the breeze and her inhibitions were starting to follow. She liked this joyous feeling, and she actually liked this venue.

The busy club was more welcoming than the one Rhea had arranged the last time she drunk, it was darker, had separated booths, and sections that kept dancers and drinkers apart. It was big and crowded but it felt small and intimate with its clever design and layout.

She had seen Mr Cheng wandering around talking to customers and assumed this was his club, the one she knew YuZhi frequented. It felt private and safe even though it was full of people, but no one seemed interested in them at all and hadn’t caught anyone sneakily taking pictures either. She was sure she had spotted an A list celebrity in a far corner from one of Xiaosu’s dramas and wondered if Cheng made sure this place was a confidential place for famous people to relax. YuZhi didn’t seem to care about being seen in here and if he frequented it for years, no pictures of this place had made it onto the internet.

“Want to try another one?” YuZhi queried, leaning forward to scoop a different glass with a new shade of liquid inside and handed her one. This wasn’t on fire and smelled sweet and sickly as she took it from him. “You’re only allowed one of these though, as I’m afraid it might mess you up.”

“What is it?” TangShi squeaked nervously looking at it with obvious suspicious and realizing on closer inspection it was green.

“Absinthe. Don’t drink it yet. Look. Do this with it.”

YuZhi pulled his glass forward and lifted a strange flat metal thing from the tray and laid it over the top of his glass, it had small holes in it like a sieve and he picked up a sugar cube from a bowl on the table and laid one on top, so it was suspended over his drink. He grabbed a small water jug and poured a tiny amount over it so it trickled on the cube and filtered into his drink before placing the jug in front of TangShi.

“Let it dissolve a little and as soon as the absinthe turns cloudy, tip it in and use the spoon to stir the sugar away completely. Don’t down it but drink it slowly. That’s how you drink Absinthe.” He demonstrated by waiting for a moment and then doing what he said and mixing the last remnants of the cube into his drink. Tanghin copied him exactly with her little glass and then both of them lifted in unison and took a sip of the strong liqueur.

TangShi Coughed and wretched and screwed up her face in distaste. Visibly shuddering as it went down and couldn’t hide her abhorrence of this awful stuff.

“Eww, it’s like sweet aniseed and tastes disgusting.” She wretched and patted her chest to alleviate the burning while YuZhi chuckled under his breath at her.

“You get used to it but congratulations on being initiated into the seasoned drinkers club.” He patted her on the head again, smiling at her for at least tasting it even though she put it down and pushed it away with a head shake. It wasn’t for her and YuZhi drank his up seemingly entertained with her reaction. He had been so patient with her tonight, acting like a teacher of sorts and enjoying watching her try some drinks for the first time. She had an expressive face, and he found her mannerisms irresistible.

“I’m drunk.” TangShi blurted out as the woozy feeling hit harder, coming over her like a heavy cloak. Her shot obviously working fast, and slumped back against her seat so her flopped to his shoulder. She was instantly lifeless, swaying her foot to the low music drifting this way that barley covered nearby chatter of other clubbers.

## **Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 46**

“You’re a lightweight. I need to up your tolerance by bringing you here a lot more.” He continued drinking from the beer he had placed aside, done with shots for now as he knew how to pace himself. He relaxed back to watch Linlin and ZhengLi who were now on the dancefloor pushing one another around, propping a foot up on the corner of the table so he was angled against TangShi to provide a better cushion for her. He knew that tonight those two would be going home together as their sexual chemistry was off the charts. Two free spirited party animals who were obvious about fancying each other.

“What if the clinic is successful this time.” TangShi broke in, knowing they had an appointment in two days so drinking after that wasn’t wise until she knew if she fell pregnant. “I can’t get drunk and frequent clubs if it is.” She pointed out with a sigh, her mood deflating at the thought of it, and lifted her feet to wedge in the bar under the table

to prop them up like his. She was feeling ultra-relaxed now and warm and cosy by his side.

YuZhi was a surprisingly comfortable companion who had kept his promise of taking care of her tonight. He had stuck by her and been the guide when it came to booze and what to order. He had even danced with her a couple of times and proven he was a smooth mover. She felt like she could let her hair down and trust he would get her home just like he promised.

“Maybe we should skip it this month and go with the flow. Have some down time to go out and have fun. There’s no rush, we have two years and work has been a nightmare lately. I need the stress relief.” He shrugged, mellowed by alcohol and turned his head to see the little face that was now tucked in against him and concealed by shadow. She looked sleepy and smiley and he had the urge to hug her.

“Hmmm..... I hate going there.” TangShi sighed, being honest with this new liquid bravado in her stomach an YuZhi tensed a little. Guilt gnawing at him that his choice made TangShi uncomfortable, but it was a necessity he could do nothing about.

“Me too, but the alternative isn’t plausible. Rhea would never forgive me for sleeping with you.” He took another swig of his beer and pushed down rising questions that were nipping at the back of his skull.

TangShi giggled inappropriately at his words and poked him in the cheek with her pointer finger. Reverting to a playful child.

“But you sleep with me every night.” She laughed at her own joke and YuZhi chuckled at her innocence, genuinely amused by how cute she could be when she was drunk.

“You know what I mean. We share a bed which is no different to sharing a couch, while both unconscious. Besides, it keeps things straight, less messy. No sex means less chance of emotions getting misplaced. It’s better this way.” He had told himself this a million times and yet had purposely avoided telling Rhea that grandfather had made them share a room and one bed from day one. He knew it would only upset her and cause doubts even though he never touched TangShi when they slept.

“Why didn’t your grandfather approve of Rhea as a wife and mother to your heir? The public lover whom everyone adores and she’s .....lovely.” TangShi slurred, always curious as to why he had never married his girlfriend or made moves to fall pregnant so his family couldn’t refuse it. He was respectful of his grandfather’s decisions but why did he let them date and then change his mind.

“It’s complicated. My grandfather has a pretty reasonable grudge against the Cheng family. I forced his hand by making us public so he couldn’t stop me from dating her, but he refused to agree to engagement or marriage and forcing a baby into that situation wouldn’t have gone the way you think. He would have disowned it... I thought in time

he would change his mind, until he introduced me to your family, and I knew he hadn't." YuZhi's tone soured, and he shifted to pull his foot down, drinking more of his beer, obviously frustrated with the memories.

"Why? He seems so loving towards you and it would still be his grandchild. I thought he liked Rhea?"

YuZhi downed the remainder of his drink, his own head swimming a little and shook his head. Sobering with a little dip in his good mood and feeling weirdly inclined to open up to TangShi properly. He wasn't someone who spoke about his personal issues with just anyone, usually just ZhengLi so it was a weird feeling to want to tell her. She had this way about her that pulled all sorts of emotions from him and a need to share. Maybe he was just drunk and overthinking it.

"My dad, the night he crashed.... He caught my mother having sex with Rhea's father. He was mad as hell, driving recklessly, on a call to my grandfather telling him he wanted a divorce when he swerved off the road and ended up in a ditch. My grandfather has never forgiven the Cheng family and sees Rhea as part of the problem. He lost his son because of an affair, so he tolerated her but always made it clear he would replace her when it was time for me to marry."

TangShi was rendered speechless and sat upright with a start, blinking at him with a shocked expression. Her heart chumping into her chest with the shock of his story.

"I'm so sorry. I never knew... Wow, that's pretty...a big deal." His words sobered her enough to realize how much of an issue that was and couldn't imagine how much grandfather must have been against Rhea to prohibit any future for them both. She could empathize with his grief and heartbreak and didn't want to judge him too harshly. She assumed YuZhi understood it too, hence why he never outright defied him with a pregnancy or wedding.

"Ironic really. It was because of what our parents did that Rhea, and I grew closer than before. We were both hurt and ashamed and she carried the guilt of me losing my father. She tried to support and comfort me as a friend. My mother..... she committed suicide two months later because she couldn't live with my father's death. Guess she loved him and regretted it in the end." His words trailed off quietly, sitting forward to stare down between his feet as he picked at the label of his bottle and TangShi's soul ached for him.

TangShi was silenced and her heart tore in two. Realizing why YuZhi was the type to conceal his pain and emotion and keep women at arm's length. His mother betrayed them all and then left him to fend for himself in the aftermath. His trust must have been destroyed and his once happy family devastated. She knew that a couple of years later the Leng family had a plane crash that saw a huge chunk of them perish. He had lost so much.

She had known his mother died in that time frame, but the press implied she had a long ongoing health issue. Nowhere had it been made public that she took her own life and TangShi automatically slid her arm in his and rested her head against his shoulder to comfort him. Not knowing what else to do but wanting so badly to give him something. To show she was feeling for him and truly sorry for what he lived through.

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. I don’t ever talk about them.” He shrugged, picking up a new beer and took a swig to distract himself from the wave of raw emotions threatening to spew out. Something he had learned to control over the years. Leaning forward further to dangle it between his knees while TangShi stayed cuddling against him. He was becoming acclimatized to her touch and presence and didn’t mind having to hold hands or be this way with her anymore. It was reassuring, like he had a constant warmth and haven by his side who didn’t judge him for things he didn’t tell others. He knew deep down that TangShi wasn’t the type to hold the truth against him given how crappy her family situation was.

“I can see why your grandfather is so against it. He blames her whole family and somehow it would be a betrayal to your father to have a Cheng grandchild as heir. I understand it. But why is your aunt so pro Rhea if her brother passed that...” TangShi was even more confused by that.

“She doesn’t know. My grandfather told only me. And I told Rhea. My sister and family have no clue why my father died that night, other than it was an accident and my mother took her life because of her grief. Rhea doesn’t know it was suicide either.”

## **Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 47**

“I promise I won’t tell a soul, not even Linlin.” TangShi leaned back and made a crossing motion of her heart which softened YuZhi’s mood, and he smiled gently at her, leaning in to bop his forehead against hers in a show of affection. Swaying a little due to being drunker than he thought, yet glad he had offloaded some of this onto her. It felt nice to tell someone and not immediately feel anxious they saw you differently or would take on more guilt like he thought Rhea would have back then. Only ZhengLi knew all the details of everything.

“You know, I’m sorry about being such a jackass to you the first couple of months. If I had known we would be friends in time, I wouldn’t have made life hell for you. I feel like an idiot for making you suffer. For being cold when you’re..... like this.” He was truly apologetic and regretted all the times he deliberately goaded her or created situations to cause her upset or stress. She had turned out to be the sweetest girl he had ever met and probably the most genuine heart he had come across and it bothered him looking back that he abused that sort of girl. Even not knowing she was Alice; he had been able to see that TangShi was a rare find. Not many girls were so gentle natured and forgiving as she was and undeserving of anyone treating her poorly. His desire to protect and shelter her lately grew stronger the more he got to know her.

TangShi shrugged and smiled at him. Pushing all of it into the past and exhaled softly. She was someone who had learned to let things go in her life or else the grudges would weigh her down.

“I can understand why the situation made you hate me. My father never gave me a choice and I had to abandon school and come home which made me resent you too. I never knew about any of this until two days before we got our marriage license. I don’t hold it against you, I too wasn’t that nice to you.”

“Are you serious?” YuZhi was shocked by that confession. He had known for weeks before marrying her all about it. He had agreed to give two years of his life on the understanding he would marry Rhea one day. It’s the only way he could get his grandfather’s approval for the future he wanted, by compromising on a timed deadline instead of a lifetime marriage. He still hadn’t told Rhea that children between them might not be a doable thing though; grandfather still hadn’t agreed to him having any other kids beyond one with TangShi. He was a stubborn old coot and not yet ready to relinquish that clause.

TangShi didn’t get a chance to reply because Linlin dived on them awkwardly, like a heavy bomb of human bones and skin and almost killed her in the process. Clambering all over them as she tried to crawl between two closely sat bodies and injuring them mildly in the process. TangShi shoved her by the ass to the back of the seat to assist her.

“Picture time!!” She sang loudly in TangShi’s ear before rolling over the backrest and jumping behind the seating booth to get between them. She leaned forward pushing them together so she could fit her head in between them awkwardly. “Zhengy...take one... come on, bubba!” She motioned and cooed at her drunk playmate who sighed and obediently trotted over, pulling his cell out of his pocket to do as he was told. It was clear he wasn’t as drunk as her and was humoring her requests.

“Why do we need three thousand pictures tonight?” he raised a brow at her in question and she waved at him in annoyance.

“Ughh, for my WeChat moments. Stop talking and start doing.” She flapped her hands, ushering him to obey and ZhengLi nodded. Muttering under his breath about the weirdness of women and making sure he zoomed into their faces only and cut out their pretty private club in the background. He rarely took pictures, and this was weird for him.

“Okay, on three. One! Two! ...” ZhengLi positioned his phone sideways and got ready to click when Linlin suddenly darted back, grabbing the back of YuZhi and TangShi’s head systematically and bopped their faces together with speed and force neither saw coming. The result was a startled pair jumping at the contact and turning towards each other in reaction, which meant a full face on collision as ZhengLi snapped the shot. It

was a mildly painful experience and as soon as she released them, they both darted back with shocked expressions.

“Woohooo, let me see.” Linlin whooped in glee at her naughtiness and climbed over, pushing them further apart ungracefully so she could retrieve his phone. Almost getting TangShi in the face with a stiletto heel in the process.

“Linlin!” TangShi smacked her leg as she scurried away and rubbed her face where YuZhi had smashed lips against her in that painful encounter. Her face flaming with heat and feeling the blush creep up her skin. It was an intimate accident, and her heart was flipping over at the assault. Suddenly unable to look him in the eye as shyness overtook.

“She’s worse than him!” YuZhi too was rubbing his chin and lips where they had been bang pressed for a millisecond and yet he could taste the peach tinted lip-gloss from TangShi’s lips, and it wasn’t entirely unenjoyable. He wasn’t too phased about having inadvertently kissed her as it wasn’t like he hadn’t kissed many in his lifetime. It was not on purpose and no big deal; besides he had kissed her a hell of a lot more eight years ago.

It was a brief meeting of mouths, completely closed and flat faced into one another but YuZhi still got a weird feeling in his stomach about it. A gnawing of guilt and something else.

“Oh my god...look. You two totally kissed!” Linlin smiled like a mischievous brat and turned the phone to flash them a picture. It did look in fact like they had briefly pecked one another on the lips for the picture. Linlin was obscured behind them where you couldn’t really even make out her hands clamped on the back of each head. It did look like a candid kiss shot of a couple. TangShi blushed even harder and fidgeted with nails while biting on her lower lip.

“Shut up. You are mentally about his age, you know that.” YuZhi laughed at her antics, unbothered, and sat back while scooping his beer and handing TangShi a half-drunk cocktail she started before shots to stop her picking her crystals off her manicure. This had sobered them both a little and culled their heart to heart.

“ummm, I think I have more maturity than this wild thing.” ZhengLi hooked Linlin from behind and scooped her into his arms for a back hug, pressing his chin on top of her head to annoy her as she wiggled and tried to throw him off.

“You two can both go to hell. TangShi loves me just the way I am. It’s being youthful and fun loving. You’re just mad because I got a priceless kiss shot and she looks more attractive than you in it.” Linlin gloated, waving ZhengLi’s phone in the air, and then pulled it back to open the WeChat app. “Totally putting it on my moments.”

Linlin was oblivious to the fact it wasn't 'her' moments on WeChat and uploaded it with a smile for her mutual friends of her private account to see. She tagged the club and posted it with 'Love's young dream' as the title. Happy with herself for another memory that they could laugh about another day. She was abuzz with how close TangShi and YuZhi seemed to be tonight and very pleased with her mischievous trick.

"Enough of that. More drink, less talk." ZhengLi snatched back his phone and slid it into his pocket, hooking her hand and hauling her back with him. Intent on getting all of them so drunk they wouldn't be able to see straight. "I'll go get another round!"

## **Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 48**

"You two look so cute together, you know?" Linlin cooed at YuZhi who was casually lounging in the corner of the booth, his arm stretched out along the back of the chair while dangling his beer bottle from it. TangShi was tucked into him under it, her head on his shoulder and completely out cold from far too much alcohol consumption and the late hour. It was almost two am and all four of them had gone far beyond the tipsy stage of drunk.

"That's because I'm handsome, and she's pretty." YuZhi smiled, confident in his own attractiveness, still not slurring anywhere near like Linlin was as he had higher tolerance and still had his wits about him. He dipped his chin to check on TangShi, watched her breath slowly and deeply for a moment and then went back to drinking his beer, comfy like this and not too bothered about being used as her cushion. She was peacefully and blissfully unaware of the noisy club carrying on around her.

They had enjoyed the night so far and Linlin and ZhengLi had finally progressed to kissing and cuddling in the chairs opposite him. Making out every so often and getting handsy until he told them to go get a room, worried TangShi was uncomfortable with the show. He knew this would probably be a short-lived affair as he knew ZhengLi wasn't the settling type, but Linlin didn't seem to be either. Two birds of a feather.

"What about us? Don't we look cute together?" ZhengLi had her in his arm, almost a choke hold and prodded her in the cheek with a mischievous wink before pulling her phone from her hand to scroll the pictures of tonight. There were a million selfies of the two of them, more of them as a group and an alarming lot of sly TangShi and YuZhi shots. He sent the best Linlin, ZhengLi smooch one to his phone that caught them both at their best angles while enamored with one another.

"Obviously we are the far superior hot couple, but I have to give my girl some love. Look at her. Angelic little lamb just cannot handle booze." Linlin slid out of ZhengLi's embrace to stagger over and awkwardly bent to kiss TangShi on the forehead, almost falling on top of her if it wasn't for YuZhi's fast reflexes. He caught her by the waist with one hand and managed to hold her upright until she straightened again and the danger of squashing TangShi passed.

“Leave her alone. She did well for a nondrinker and the fact we plied her with about a dozen shots. She’s lucky she’s still alive. I’m proud of her.” He jested, leaning in to brush her hair back from her forehead where Linlin messed it up and managed to make her stir with his touch despite Linlin’s kiss having zero effect.

“Where am I?” TangShi mumbled, not quite aware of her surroundings as she came to and tried to sit. Dazed as it all came rushing back to her and she blinked around to get her bearings. YuZhi helped her up until she was able to prop herself into a semi straight position while she rubbed her eyes to remove blurriness. She had no idea when she passed out, only that she was nowhere near as drunk. YuZhi watched her coming around properly and brushed her hair back out of her face as he appraised her from his lazy point of view. She was tussled and sleepy looking and irresistible to him like this; it brought out a fierce protective instinct.

“I think it’s about time we think about heading home. I have work tomorrow and you look done.” YuZhi was reluctant to go as he was having a mellow time, but it was late, and ZhengLi would stay until he passed out and bail on him tomorrow otherwise. They had important business at the moment, and neither could afford a day off.

“We should. We have that noon lunch meeting.” ZhengLi wasn’t as gone as Linlin and still had some semblance of wits about him, pushing her onto the seat when she flopped onto his lap so he could get up to make her move. Catching her by the hand and hauling her with him, grabbing her bag and waving it in her face to signal it was home time.

“Come on crazy. Your bed is calling to you.” He bopped her on the forehead with it and jumped back when she lurched up unexpectedly.

“You better take her home and tuck her up in bed like the princess she is. Or I’ll come for you Leng!! Linlin swayed on unsteady legs, pointing YuZhi’s way with a scowl and a black tipped talon, which earned her a pat on the head from ZhengLi.

“Okay tiny terror, he’s well and truly scared, so can I please escort you home now. I thought you were a seasoned drinker? I may be the one tucking certain princesses into bed at this rate.”

“Don’t be so mean.... YuZhi is nice to me.” TangShi tried to defend him, but it came out like a childish breathy statement as she hiccupped then giggled at her own weirdness.

“I think home is probably for the best.” YuZhi got up, shaking his head at the state of both and helped TangShi to her feet too. Evaluating whether he might have to carry her and was surprised to find her nap had sobered her enough that she seemed capable of walking again. She had zonked out on him for a good forty minutes while he watched his friend play Romeo and listened to the music in the club, lost in his own head and glad of the break form life.

"I need the bathroom." TangShi yawned, head spinning around to navigate the direction it was in while YuZhi hooked her hand in his and nodded ahead.

"That way, it's by the door so we will pass it. Come on." He tugged her lightly, entwining fingers snugly to keep her close, so she started to follow and picked up her bag and his jacket with one hand. Aware how tired he was now he was upright.

They walked off leaving ZhengLi to deal with Linlin who had decided she wanted one more shot before hitting the road. They made their way out into the dark and quiet hallway which housed the doors to the bathrooms and cloakroom before the main entrance.

"Meet me here when you're done, I'm going to tell Cheng we're leaving and to pay the tab for tonight." He watched her walk into the first door marked with a symbol of a female and turned on his heel, assured she was not going to fall over or pass out.

TangShi spent a little time in the toilet, freshening up her face with some cold water to wake herself fully, patted on her cheeks in a bid to become alert again. She was dizzy, felt slightly surreal with a merry mood. The sleep had done her some good, but her feet were now killing her in her high fashion shoes, and she was looking forward to going to bed. It seemed like today was about three days long already.

She wandered out into the empty corridor on fragile legs, limping a little from a newfound blister and caught sight of YuZhi at the far end where the bar curved round to let people in. He was talking to Mr Cheng, and she turned away to wait on him.

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The door at the other end opened with a gust of wind, and a dark figure slid in, blowing in to give her a chill and the smell of oncoming rain. The glimpse of view showing the duskiness of the early morning sky outside which distracted her from the entering person. It was only when her eyes trailed down to glimpse the human walking this way did she realize she knew the figure and face of this woman and she was marching right for her with intent, at a fast and angry pace that made TangShi step back timidly.

"Rhea? What are you doin..." TangShi never got the full sentence out of her mouth, registering surprise in her tone, before Rhea slapped her hard across the face with such force that it knocked her sideways. TangShi was stunned, clasped her burning cheek in reaction with her left hand and stumbled against the bathroom door which stopped her fall. Blinking back up at the red eyed and tear stained woman in utter shock, she managed to slide up the shiny surface but kept her distance as tears pricked her own eyes. She had no idea what was going on.

"What the hell, Rhea?" YuZhi's hostile tone pulled TangShi back to reality from shock as he stormed in between them, pushing Rhea back by the shoulder where she seemed to

be gearing up for a second attack. She was poised and filled with hatred and aggression, wild eyed and staring down TangShi as though she was her worst enemy.

He turned to see if TangShi was okay, instinct pulling him to her and cupping her small face with a gentle hand to lift it up to him. His face was ashen, and his eyes narrowed with a brewing storm of emotions and rage as he checked to see how bad it was. "What the actual fuck are you doing? Why would you hit TangShi of all people? For what?" He snapped over his shoulder at Rhea.

"Let go of her!" Rhea spat, grabbing him by the back of his sweater with a vicious clutch and hauled him backwards so he let go of TangShi's face and stumbled to right himself before turning on her and grabbing her wrist. His grip firm as he unhooked her without a care if he hurt her and threw her hand aside coldly.

"What are you doing? Are you out of your fucking mind?" YuZhi was beyond angry, seething at her and couldn't wrap his head around why she would storm in here and do something like this. She wasn't prone to violence, or erratic behavior and this was in no way acceptable to him.

TangShi's legs were shaking violently and she was too shocked to say or do anything except stand there and rub her face to try and calm the swelling aching pain and the burn of what she assumed was a handprint on her cheek.

"You're supposed to be my friend!" Rhea spat accusingly at TangShi, pushing YuZhi to one side so she could face her down, but he stepped back between them right away. Lifting his arm to create a barrier between them and shielded TangShi from another attack.

"Whatever you're pissed about, aim it at me. She's done nothing wrong so what the hell are you going on about?" It made no sense to him and judging by the mess Rhea was in, her hair ruffled, her make up streaked down her face and smudged, he could tell she had been crying so something had set her off. The subtle stench of alcohol from her was similar to his own so was clearly drunk and could explain some of this, but not all.

"This.... THIS!!" She snatched her cell phone from her handbag, dumping it open on the floor, so the contents spilled out and thrust her phone in his face to show him something. Her movements aggressive and hurried. From her angle TangShi could see it was a photograph. The one Linlin took earlier when she forced their faces together and made it look like an impromptu kiss. "Your best friend posted this bullshit right here. What happened to all this being fake and not crossing boundaries which could damage our relationship? What happened to trust? What happened to not being able to stand her, YuZhi?" Rhea screamed at him, almost deafening with a high pitched shrill and threw her cell into his chest when he attempted to take it.

YuZhi blew out his breath and took a moment to reel in his own anger and calm himself. Otherwise, he knew this would escalate and he didn't have the energy for it. He

scooped to pick it up and turned off the screen before holding it back out to her, a quick glance over his shoulder to check TangShi was okay and gritted his teeth at seeing her puffy red face on one side swelling still. She had hit her hard and he was not happy about that at all.

“You talk about trust but storm in here smacking people before asking me what this even is? It’s not what it even looks like and even if it was, we broke up. We agreed not to do this shit. You knew there would be a need for me to convince people that I love her and sometimes, that involves shit like this in public.” YuZhi was trying to keep his voice low and stable, trying so hard not to lose his temper with her but the burning rage of him hitting TangShi was making it hard to hold onto it.

“How can it not be what it looks like? You’re kissing her and your best friend is posting it to his public WeChat account for the world to see!” She yelled at him, slapping the phone out of his hand with spiked fury, so it fell in the floor and kicked it away like a tantruming child.

TangShi trembled watching this and tried to pull herself together, to help clear up this misunderstanding. She knew she was to blame in this, and he shouldn’t be taking the brunt of it on his own.

“Rhea it’s not what you think. It was Linlin playing around, and she pushed us together. It’s not...” Her voice quivered as she moved forward with upraised palms, hoping she was showing her sincerity.

“Shut the hell up! Don’t talk to me. You backstabbing bitch.” Rhea lurched forward at her, tears streaming once more but YuZhi caught her by the shoulders and harshly shoved her back a step to put her back on her feet where she previously was.

“You touch her again, I swear, Rhea, you’ll see another side to me. And don’t talk to her like that.” It was a real threat, born of fierce protective instinct and anger and intolerance to people bullying TangShi.

“You’re siding with her? Over me!” Rhea bawled at him, a new fresh wave of tears yet her voice was forced out through gritted teeth.

“She hasn’t done anything to defend or side with. You’re blowing something out of proportion that’s nothing and don’t even deny the only reason you’re maintaining a friendship is to keep tabs on me. Don’t talk to her about friendship, Rhea. She doesn’t owe you any loyalty. Besides, she’s telling the truth. It’s not how it looks, and you need to calm down so I can explain.” He was losing his patience; aware people were wandering to the open end of the corridor to see what all the yelling was and caught sight of ZhengLi pulling Linlin back with force to quell her hellcat tendencies at seeing her friend in a scenario. She was battle ready and had a face like thunder which translated to ‘I’m gonna kill me some bitch’.

“Me calm down? What about you? Isn’t this all getting to be a little too regular, hanging out with her, cuddling up? You sure it’s an act, YuZhi? It’s getting hard to tell anymore!” Rhea had been torturing herself with insecure fears for weeks and had gotten drunk tonight when he didn’t answer her calls all day. Something he had started doing lately due to her incessant need for his reassurance, which only made her a hundred times worse. He kept telling her they needed to cool off and stay apart and instead she had begun to desperately cling to him for fear he was slipping away.

“You’re suffocating me and making constant demands. I’m just trying to navigate this, so no one is hurt, and we all can live peacefully. She’s my friend, nothing more. That picture is innocent and you’re blowing it way out of proportion.” He tried for cool and calm again, aware he needed to bring her down from her own hysteria and could feel TangShi behind him cowering. Stuck between them and wishing he could take TangShi by the hand and walk out.

“End it. Be done with this shit and let’s publicly announce we’re back together. That it was all a mistake. Tell your grandfather it’s over, we can’t do this.” She grabbed his arms and clung to him like a drowning woman finding a lifeboat. Sobbing as her heart broke in two and shredded her heart to bits. Blinded by tears and sniffing as her emotions broke free and YuZhi tensed up aware they were attracting an audience and how this looked.

“You’re drunk and being erratic. Go home, sleep this off and we will talk tomorrow, just the two of us. You’re causing a scene and this place isn’t completely safe. You need to sober up.” He was trying hard to make her listen, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“Come home with me or I’m coming home it you. I want to sleep beside you tonight! I miss you, I miss us.”

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TangShi had a physical reaction to her words and the way she was wrapping herself around YuZhi, turning her face away as her heart constricted in pain. She knew this was because of her own stupid feelings for YuZhi, and even though she genuinely liked Rhea before this. In this moment though she resented her presence and wanted her to leave. Resented the way Rhea just wanted to toss TangShi away like she was a worthless rag and no part of YuZhi’s life.

“No. I agreed to his deal. I’m not doing that to TangShi either. Imagine the shame this would cause her and her family. The press would go crazy, and she would be labelled a home wrecker. It’s just drama, Rhea. It would damage Leng Groups reputation too and my grandfather would hate you more.” The fact she couldn’t see that made him irritated and unable to sympathize with her like this.

“I don’t care. You’re supposed to love me. So prove it.”

“Stop it. I’m not doing this. If you’re not leaving, we are. I won’t do this tonight.” YuZhi caught hold of her hands and tugged them off his clothes, pushing her back to stand her on her feet so anyone lingering wouldn’t have an opportunity to take pictures. He turned to wave at ZhengLi in the distance and motioned a call sign with his hand, implying he should call her a driver, and then turned back catching a quick glimpse of TangShi stood solemnly by the bathroom door.

TangShi’s face was pale, her expression nervous with wide eyes and yet she stood silently and patiently out of the way so as not to make this worse. YuZhi immediately wanted to scoop her up and hug her, especially with the painful imprint of Rhea’s hand on her delicate face. She was killing him by looking vulnerable and wounded, without even trying.

“ZhengLi will make sure you get home. Go sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow.” YuZhi commanded her with a tone he reserved for dealing with employees who were making him angry. Motioning for TangShi to follow him. She did so at speed and skirted around Rhea in a wide berth to make sure she wouldn’t reach her a second time, afraid of angering her further. YuZhi lingered close to Rhea until TangShi passed him too, in case he had to intervene, and then followed her out the door without looking back.

“You walk away, and we really are done, YuZhi Leng! You hear me? You leave now, with her, and go screw a future with me. I’m not playing.” Rhea screamed after them, desperation taking over and killing her sanity, shrew like in her screaming. She picked up her bag and the spilled contents of makeup, keys, money and phone and threw them after him in a childish tantrum.

“I’m not biting. Go home.” YuZhi turned and shrugged her way, aware she had always been a spoiled diva type. Pushing open the door with one hand and holding it so TangShi at his side could leave. He made sure not to touch her or do anything to provoke Rhea further and then followed TangShi outside and let it go. He knew he shouldn’t just abandon her when she was like this, but he had no alternative. He wasn’t about to leave TangShi alone to get home and staying would make things worse.

“Are you really leaving her there?” TangShi asked with a trembling voice, her whole body shaking with adrenalin at what just happened. She was shellshocked and emotional, like she had just encountered something traumatic.

She shivered and then flinched away in guilt when YuZhi automatically slipped off his jacket to put on her and glanced back at the club in case Rhea followed them.

“Uh uh. She won’t like it.” She shook her head and pushed it away cautiously. Rattled by Rhea’s behavior and intimidated that she might erupt again if she saw. It had been harmless and innocent tonight, but now she felt like she behaved in the worst way and caused all of this.

“Yes, and I didn’t ask for her opinion on who I give my jacket to. It’s cold, and you need it.” YuZhi ignored her gesture and forcefully put the jacket around her before tugging her forward to close the buttons so she couldn’t shrug it off again. “She’s drunk and being unreasonable. If I stay, it will erupt, and I can’t deal with her like that. I’ll say things I don’t mean like she has just done.”

He knew Rhea was spitting venom to make him react how she wanted and could brush it off. She had always been a control freak in her own way, and this was her emotional blackmail to get him to toe the line. She had used similar over the years when they fought, and it no longer worked. He also knew her temper and what she was like drunk, that staying was the worst case scenario. He pulled out his cell and text ZhengLi to make sure he would see her home, worried that she might refuse to let him once YuZhi was gone.

“I’ll get us a car.” He muttered to the bewildered looking TangShi and opened the app to do that while waiting on ZhengLi’s reply, glad to see there was an uber a minute away and their wait would be minimal. The best thing for both of them right now was to go home and get out of sight.

ZhengLi responded with assurance and told them to leave. That he had Rhea in a seat and was calming her down with some honey water and Kleenex, but that Linlin had stormed off to the bar in a rage and was refusing to sit with her. He didn’t tell TangShi though as she would want to go back in to retrieve her friend and the situation would erupt again.

“Let’s go home and sleep. It’s going to be okay. I’ll talk to her tomorrow, and she’ll apologize to you for this. You didn’t do anything to warrant this so stop stressing over it.” He reached out and gently stroked her face, in two minds about calling Cheng to come out with an ice pack when the taxi rounded the street and pulled into the carpark. He hesitated, looked at her face and then the car and decided he could better tend to it at home.