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YuZhi pushed thought aside and acted on impulse. All that male testosterone on display and making sure that marking his territory was clear so this ghoul would stay away from her. He stepped the distance between TangShi and himself and swooped down with intent.

Catching her with a hand on each hip and tugging her into his body, he tilted his head, slid her close, and delivered a pecked kiss on her mouth that brought her to a shocked standstill. TangShi's hands instantly landed on his shoulders in response as she gasped at his maneuver and became frozen still. YuZhi didn't relent his hold and held her there for a long minute, more than necessary for a platonic peck on the corner of her mouth. Aware that the jerk would see it only from behind TangShi and assume the kiss was more passionate than it was.

He held his mouth to TangShi's, her nose pressed to his cheek and only pulled away a hairsbreadth to separate them when he felt her starting to panic. Both breathing heavily and unmoving from their statue like positions.

Rong Cai snarled at the show of affection, turning away as soon as YuZhi leaned in and kissed her and stormed off back inside, slamming the gate as he went and cursing out that asshole Leng under his breath. He spent all this time trying to get close to TangShi, being the gentleman, the friend, and this rude ass swoops in and publicly kisses her like he owns her. It made him crazy.

YuZhi waited, until he heard the smash of the metal gate clanging as it closed, and mentally high fived himself. Too immersed in his pissing contest to feel anything about kissing her this time. He knew it was petty and immature, but something about Rong rubbed him up the wrong way. He hated how he fawned over TangShi whenever he saw him with her.

He was now aware of the way TangShi was gawping at him with labored breathing, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted in shock and felt guilty. He knew he shouldn't have sprung that on her like this, but damn that guy needed a clear message to back off. He would maybe stop harassing her.

"YuZhi?" TangShi uttered nervously, her words coming out strained and quiet as her voice wavered and YuZhi loosened his grip on her. Leaning back to give her breathing space but not fully letting go.

"I'm sorry. I just missed you a lot these past few days and that guy knows how to rile me. It was for his benefit. I'm sorry, don't think too much on it." YuZhi apologized, mumbling his excuse, turned, taking her hand in his and led her back to his car. Fully aware of how flustered she was and yet he wasn't sorry at all.

"If Rhea saw that..." TangShi caved, her own sense of guilt eating away at her and allowed YuZhi to lead her and deposit her in the jeep before she fully calmed herself down. Blinking his way as he got in too and they both put on their seatbelts.

"She needs to get used to things that are nothing to do with her." He answered under his breath, not quite loud enough for Tang to hear yet she caught it, only just.

Unlike that time they kissed properly, YuZhi seemed unaffected and like he had not done anything at all wrong this time. While TangShi's heart was racing, butterflies were going wild in her stomach, and she was lightheaded. Her thoughts hectic over the way his soft lips had pressed to hers and she couldn't remove the memory of how he felt and smelled when that close to her.

It was a nothing kiss, a literal pressing of his closed mouth on hers and yet TangShi was completely knocked for six. Maybe because she was aware her feelings for him were growing stronger the longer she was around him, that the simplest of touches were starting to be meaningful lately. So this one blew her mind.

"Tang? Did you hear me?" YuZhi snapped her out of her dazed state by putting his hand on hers as they drove home. Making her flinch in surprise because she wasn't aware she had zoned out.

"What?" She balked his way, unsure what she missed and tried to pull herself together. Knowing she was being weird and should ignore that peck as nothing, the way he seemed to be doing.

"I said where to? What do you want for dinner? Japanese, Western, Korean?" YuZhi really was not overthinking it at all, and happily focusing on what to put in his stomach. Maybe because this time was with intent and in his head had a purpose, whereas the last time, was purely emotional.

"Ummmmmm..... you pick. I don't mind." She turned away to stare out the side window, pressing her palm to the cheek that was shielded from him to cool her temperature and tried to bring back her sense of calm

"I fancy sushi. We'll go hit a Japanese restaurant then. Also, did ZhengLi give you the schedule for the upcoming events we need to attend. He said he would put in a brief about each, so you know exactly what to expect and wear. Use your credit card and I'll sort out the bills." YuZhi was already focused on other things, and she tried to regulate her breathing to sound normal.

"kayyy." She answered halfheartedly, her mind elsewhere. Unable to figure out YuZhi's two extremely different reactions to the same thing.

“Hey, you okay?” YuZhi reached out and planted his hand over her head, cupping the top gently, his thumb rubbing her hair as he turned her to him, and she smiled impulsively.

“I’m fine. I just..... I didn’t expect the kiss, after what happened” She didn’t want to bring up the last time as he had abandoned her for days after.

“I’m sorry. Although, you should get used to the occasional peck given we will be expected to do it sometimes. Red carpet events normally have some degree of photographers demanding kiss shots. It’d be weird if we never do it.” He shrugged, letting go of her to signal a turn off and went back to focusing on the road.

“Right, of course.” Her face flamed again, her breathing raspier as she hit a full-on flutter and YuZhi side eyed her with a small frown.

“You can’t act like that if we ever do it in public, Tang. It’s obvious I don’t kiss you if you freak out and clutch your pearls.” He smiled, a mischievous look on his face, amused at her, and TangShi reddened further.

“It was unexpected, if I had known...maybe I wouldn’t be so flustered.” She tried to excuse her obviously weird behavior.

“Should I pull over and do it enough times I can no longer shock you with it?” YuZhi winked, playful at how much this was turning her into a sweet virginial mess. He never thought TangShi would be overly prude to a peck, given eight years ago he had his tongue in her mouth around an hour after meeting her.

“What?!?! NO!!” TangShi squealed it at him, thinking he was serious and slid away with wide eyes and raised palms as though he was going to maul her to death. Mortified, embarrassed, and excruciatingly shy.

YuZhi burst out laughing, reaching out to catch her pointer finger in between two of his and shook her hand to mock her. Eyes on the road, but his genuine warm laugh echoed around them and lightened the mood. TangShi rarely heard him laugh and when he did it, was the most melodic sound. He had a sexy voice anyway, but his laugh was particularly nice.

“You’re so easy. Relax. I promise next time I have to do it; I’ll warn you first. It shouldn’t be something we have to do often but maybe we should do it a few times to stop the shocked reaction. You look about ready to cry or faint. Was it really that bad?” YuZhi headed in the direction of his favorite sushi bar and kept glancing her way as she returned to sitting properly and straightening her dress. Smoothing her hair in a bid to calm back to a normal level.

“Sometimes, I really don’t trust you.” She joked, smiling at him with a reserved shyness and got a wink in response. YuZhi reached out and smoothed his hand over her head and down her ponytail.

“You can always trust me. I promise, Tang. I’ll always protect you even if sometimes my methods seem a bit weird.” YuZhi was back to serious and scolded himself mentally, that if there was ever a next time he should prewarn her before lunging on her.

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“Stop fidgeting, you look amazing. Relax.” YuZhi picked up TangShi’s hand in his lap and pulled it to his, glancing up at ZhengLi who was typing into his phone. A bored expression on his face. “Linlin still not replying?” he pushed ZhengLi’s foot with his to attract his attention and got a glare in return.

“For a girl who’s neither dating me nor interested in doing so, she gets crazy if I take a date to an event. Even when it’s forced by my parents. It’s not like she’s coming alone. She had a date arranged first.” ZhengLi was frustrated at Linlin’s hot and cold this past couple of weeks. One minute she wanted him, was all over him, and the next she was pushing him away and telling him she had a date with someone else. Not that he was particularly bothered if she was taking someone else, after all they were both free agents and hadn’t even had sex. She drove him crazy but for some reason he couldn’t seem to cut her loose.

“You two are strange.” TangShi shook her head at him. “The way you both behave, why are you not dating? You spend as much time together as YuZhi and I do.” She offered as way of advice and ZhengLi raised a brow and smirked her way.

“Is that you admitting you two are actually dating now?”

YuZhi shoved his foot again, a warning frown to shut up, and went back to calming TangShi’s nerves. Interlacing their fingers and pulling her attention to him. TangShi blushed at ZhengLi’s remark and said nothing.

“Rhea might be there. Just act normally, you two are publicly best friends and she has the sense to not make a scene at something like this. Stick with me all night and you’ll be fine. We’re in love, remember? So don’t freak out with me paying extra attention and being more touchy than normal. Eagle eyes and constant photographs being taken means we have to play our roles faultlessly.”

TangShi’s nerves were tight, and her heart rate was unusually high. She as breathless and anxiety had formed a knot in her stomach that was making her uptight. Soothed by him she nodded, smiling gently.

“I can do it. I’ll be fine.” She said the words for herself, more than him and then swallowed hard and clutched his hand with an iron grip in a bid to calm herself.

This was the first time she had ever worn a ball gown type dress, and in white it was particularly eye catching. It had the basis of a wedding dress in the skirt, but the top was encrusted with gems and sparkling stones in a fitted bodice and cap sleeves. So she was elegant and princess like. Linlin had chosen it for her, to suit her body shape and normal romantic style of clothes she wore. It was hell to move around in, but the length afforded her flat shoes that were hidden since she hated heels when she could avoid them.

YuZhi and ZhengLi were in formal black tuxedos, only with black shirts, bow ties and sashes. An all one tone look that was trendy while still being traditional. They were both handsome and perfectly groomed, clean shaven with similar styled hair, and TangShi felt lucky to be accompanied by both. They were the kind of men who drew attention and not just because of how they looked. They both had this combination of 'dude' aura, cheeky masculine postures, and yet 'confident boss' about them.

"Where is your date?" TangShi asked in interest, knowing whoever it was had a hell of a night ahead if Linlin caught up to them. For a girl that denied she had feelings, she was crazy possessive of ZhengLi and didn't care if tonight he was under orders from his father to have a pretty conglomerate heiress on his arm for his family business. Linlin was being a hard case again and flaunting another man in front of ZhengLi as punishment for neglecting her of late, but it wasn't having the desired effect. TangShi had come to know ZhengLi a little better and while he was a laid back and funny playboy, he was immune to games and manipulation. He always seemed unbothered by her tactics and could usually guess the reason behind them. They were an infuriating pair.

"Meeting me inside. I refuse to be photographed with a date on my arm for fear my father announces my engagement. I wouldn't put it past him." He grimaced at the thought of it and then glanced up at YuZhi with an apologetic grin. Knowing fine well it was a touchy subject.

They arrived at the event, pulling up to a grand venue hall, and disembarked quickly. Swept up in a mass of flashes on the curbside and scrambling people as they were swept onto the red carpet in a flurry of movement. YuZhi keeping his grip around her and shielded her from the chaos as he got her into the clearing unscathed.

It was a fast walk to an area with a branded backdrop and commands were thrown to them from all directions to look this way and that. It was an overwhelming experience and TangShi pasted a bright smile on her face and remained poised while under pressure. YuZhi kept his arm around her the entire time, smiling, guiding her, nodding in the direction they were expected to look while lights popped in their faces. He pulled her with him in several directions and they posed, projecting a happy couple before finally someone in a suit ushered them past to another walkway to leave the press behind.

It was a surreal experience for a girl who had hidden her entire life and been pushed to the shadows. Someone who doubted her own looks and self-worth and it left her dazed

and giddy. Tonight she felt like a princess and YuZhi on her arm gave her courage to lift her chin and walk around with him happily as though she belonged here.

TangShi was merry and slightly tipsy after an hour of being given glasses of alcohol. Having been guided around to meet so many men in suits and mingle with beautiful rich couples and known celebrities, she was relaxing enough to no longer be as reserved. ZhengLi passed them a few times with a pretty girl in a red dress on his arm but Linlin was nowhere to be seen and TangShi wondered if she had bailed at the last minute. She had no texts or missed calls and knew later she would find out why she wasn't there. She spotted members of Linlin's family in passing, even Grandfather Leng, but he was whisked away in a flurry of his burly security men before they got to him.

"You okay? You look tired." YuZhi leaned in, ducking to her face and took her empty champagne glass from to replace with another. They hadn't been drinking much but it was considered rude to wander around without a glass in hand. So she had been sipping them sporadically and mostly nursing it.

"I'm fine. Enjoying listening to you talking. You always sound very competent and like a real CEO when we meet business acquaintances."

"I fake it, baby. Besides, they only want to talk to me so they can eye up my pretty date." He winked at her and led her to another group of people who were waving his way. A nod and wave gesture to signal he saw them.

"TangShi, YuZhi!!! There you are!!" A shrill slurring voice stopped them both in their tracks and they turned in unison to see Rhea stumbling their way. TangShi was closest and despite YuZhi moving to catch her, it was TangShi who was flopped on, arms wrapped around her shoulders as Rhea tugged her in for a tight embrace and kissed her sloppily on the cheek. She reeked of strong alcohol and her weight was enough to start pulling TangShi down.

"I've been looking for you. I missed you soooo much. I wanted to see you, Tang!!" Rhea was intoxicated to a level where she was not able to control her own behavior anymore and TangShi couldn't miss the veil of sarcasm in the shortened version of her name. Blinking at her unsurely and looking to YuZhi for help.

YuZhi frowned, his posture stiffening as he tried to extract her from TangShi, to relieve the most of her heaviness, but she clung on and pushed him away.

"Rhea, you're drunk, let me take you somewhere to sit down and get you some honey water to sober up." He lowered his voice.

"No!!" She pulled TangShi's arm into her own and slumped her cheek on TangShi's shoulder, gripping her and pushing between the two of them with purpose. "I want to dance and drink with my bestie. We girls have the best fun without you here... go away. You're not needed." Rhea pushed YuZhi's arm off and tried to shove him in the

abdomen, attracting eyes of nearby guests and he became aware of how badly this looked.

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“Rhea, let’s go take you somewhere quiet, huh? You can dance with TangShi later. You need to lay down.” YuZhi didn’t know what else to do except usher them together out of sight, aware that this would cause a huge scandal by morning if she continued to act out and make a fool of herself. Being this drunk and acting like this would do untold damage to her image, given she had a huge following of young women.

“Uh uh. TangShi comes with me... because she’s the sure-fire way to get you to follow and give me your undivided attention, Mr. Leng!” Rhea reached out one finger, wriggling it and poked YuZhi in the shoulder playfully, laughing at her own mannerism and then clinging to TangShi once more. YuZhi’s mood nosedived, and he tensed up all over.

“I’ll take you. We can get something to drink and have a rest.” TangShi tried to help, tugging Rhea with her even though it was obvious YuZhi wanted to separate them. “It’s okay, I can take her.” TangShi nodded to him and made to move but Rhea grabbed YuZhi’s wrist and hauled him back to them.

“Nope. We three have to go, all together like one happy little family. Right, YuZhi? Because we can only be happy if you have TangShi tagging along in life, Right? Because you care for her..... you protect her... You only care about your sweet little Tang!” Rhea was slurring, her tone changing to bitter and YuZhi could sense the meltdown coming. His head beginning to throb with the stress she was causing.

“Right, she’s my fiancée after all. So that’s a given. Come on.” YuZhi’s own voice was rigid and harsh, trying to conceal his anger at her. He caught her by the elbow and turned, tugging her to follow while TangShi kept her up on the other side and they made to exit without attention. It wasn’t that easy, and he was aware of cameras straying this way.

“Do you know, Tang?..... uh I hate that he calls you that! It’s not her name, you know!!” Rhea snorted, distaste obvious as she spat out her words and then glared at first YuZhi and then TangShi. “I liked you, I did. But now, I feel like you might be a sneaky little seductress who’s trying to destroy my life. I completely underestimated you. Hats off to you, Miss. Lei for being a manipulative and yet highly skilled actress of the worst kind.” Rhea hauled her arm out of TangShi’s and turned on her. Her make up smudged, her lipstick smeared and her expression sour. TangShi took a hold again and kept them moving. Aware this shouldn’t be seen and getting anxious about the drama she could feel unfolding. This was Rhea from the night she slapped her and yet she had no idea why she was like this again.

"It's okay, come on, almost there." TangShi ignored her remarks and kept her cool. Inwardly questioning how someone who claimed to be her friend could say these things to her. To accuse her when she knew she wasn't doing anything.

"Rhea, stop it, I'm warning you." YuZhi snarled under his breath into her ear, pulled them at speed, nodding to passing guests who looked their way and pasted a pleasant smile on his face while doing so. TangShi was trying to remain the same, following his lead but Rhea slurring in her ear, fighting to be let go was making it difficult and she didn't know how to react. It was obvious two friends were escorting a drunk girl out and raised many eyebrows.

"Of course, I shouldn't upset your precious wife, right?" Rhea hissed at him.

YuZhi found them an empty room not far down the first corridor that seemed to be a side sitting room for this hall. No one was in here but stacks of bottled water to be replenished in the hall suggested they might get privacy if this was a temporary storeroom.

"Go ask for some lemon or honey water and we will sober her up." YuZhi instructed TangShi, eager to get her out of the picture, as he pulled Rhea from her arms and turned her to maneuver her into a seat. Rhea launched at him head on though and wrapped her arms around his waist as she buried her face against his chest. Bursting into tears and wailing like a wounded child.

"I Love you. Don't keep doing this. Make her go away and we can be here, just us. Like we were before. She can leave and we can be together again."

TangShi was startled and looked away quickly as her own internal battle of jealousy reared its ugly head and she tried to swallow it down.

"Rhea, for god's sake. Stop it." YuZhi snapped at her, yanked her off and plonked her own in the seat behind her with a little force. "What the fuck are you doing? Do you know how stupid this is tonight? Here of all places! Where's Lu Jeng? Isn't he your date? Why the hell has he left you alone like this?"

"No. I didn't want him, I told him not to come. I only want you. Make her go away." She reached for him again and he batted her hand away with zero patience for this woman he no longer recognized.

"I'll go get the water." TangShi didn't wait to witness more, aware that this was only going to improve if Rhea was less drunk. She didn't want to hear love confessions or see her clinging to YuZhi. It only pained TangShi's heart and reminded her he would never feel this way about her.

TangShi was quick, scurrying out and easily found a server who fulfilled her request for a drink. She was only a few minutes before hurrying back and dodging photographers

as she slid back into the dull room unseen. She came to a halt as she saw YuZhi on his knees in front of Rhea's chair, her hands in his, their heads tilted together as he softly spoke to her and tried to reason. A completely different atmosphere as he had turned on the softly softly approach and it made TangShi's stomach turn over. A pain in her chest at seeing him this way with another woman.

"You can't be like this. It will cause you so much backlash if you're filmed this way. Your image will be stained. It could mess up a lot of your contracts and sponsors, Rhea. The public opinion can be brutal and end careers for the most minor things, you know this. You have to pull yourself together for all our sakes."

"I can't. I told you already." She sobbed again, sniffing and swallowing hard.

"Here." TangShi moved in, attracting their attention as she walked forward and held out the glass of water for Rhea.

The sight of her returning seemed to flip a switch in Rhea's demure and calm state, and she suddenly hauled herself up, turning furiously at TangShi. She grabbed the glass from her hands with a sharp tug and threw the cold sticky liquid in TangShi's face. Hitting her with icy shock as TangShi gasped and stumbled backwards. Unprepared for an assault and blinded by the flavored water for a second.

Lifting the glass in the air, Rhea made to throw it after her, but YuZhi caught her wrist in flash speed. He grabbed the glass from her hand as TangShi blinked their way in shock, wiping her eyes as it ran down in little rivulets and made her make up run.

"Rhea, what the..." YuZhi exploded, and tugged her back to sit her down but she fought him. Wriggling and twisting and screaming at TangShi. Shoving his arms away and using her legs to force his knees back.

"I hate you; I hate you!!! I want you to die. I want you to go back to the hole you crawled from and never show face again." She was hysterical, spitting venom TangShi's way.

YuZhi dumped the empty vessel on the table but kept a firm hold of her wrist. His temper bubbling on high and he took even breaths to cool down before he did or said something he would regret. The impulse in him to pick her up and dump her ass flat on the floor was overwhelming and his fury at TangShi getting targeted was making him irrational. TangShi attempted to mop up the water from her dress, aware her hair was falling down over one eye and that she must look awful now.

"I'll go." She mumbled, mentally trying to remember where the nearest bathroom was and how to get out unseen.

"Stay right there. Rhea, you have lost your fucking mind. Sit down!" He growled his last command and pushed Rhea into the chair harshly, using more strength than he ever would on a woman, pulling out his cell and pressed it to his ear. He put one hand on

Rhea's shoulder and held her down so she couldn't get back up even though she was trying.

"Zheng, I need you. First door, corridor on the left by the fountain. Bring something to clean up TangShi and someone to take Rhea home." His mood seemed stable, but he was inwardly seething. Trying to gain control of this situation.

"I'm not leaving." Rhea crumbled in her chair and let her head roll to one side. No longer fit to resist as all her energy drained and YuZhi let go.

"Yes you are. I'm done with this bullshit, Rhea. I'm done with you attacking Tang because you cannot get your shit together. This is never who you were, and I don't know if I never really knew you and this is something you hid for a long time, or if you need help that I'm not qualified to give. Either way, you're leaving. We will deal with this when you're sober." YuZhi turned away, taking a moment to calm his own self and think before shaking himself off.

Rhea jumped to her feet as he moved to tend to TangShi and hauled him back from behind in a fit of jealousy, grabbing his arm and pulling him sideways so he lost his balance. YuZhi grabbed at the arm of the chair and yanked himself free, shoving her away in reaction and scowled at her.

"What about you? Were you always like this? You care so little for me now and switched all your attention to some bitch who has been in your life for five minutes." Rhea didn't back down but came at him with unbridled venom. YuZhi's temper flared from being manhandled, having her scream in his face and insult Tang that way, and he let rip without meaning to.

"Five minutes? Try eight fucking years, Rhea. She's Alice! do you really think that she doesn't matter in this? I'm who I always was but if you treat me like shit then expect retaliation." as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could take them back and knew he said the wrong thing. Groaning internally at blurting this out. Rhea's eyes widened as it registered who Alice was and the truth of what she meant to him when he was younger.

"What?" She faltered, her words clear and shocked and TangShi didn't know whether to stay or run. Rhea's glare came to her in question, and she recoiled with the intense hatred in that look.

"Alice? From Beijing, from that ball? The girl you left the night your father died?" Rhea seemed to have a moment of clarity. Her mind putting so many things together and getting flawed results as she spun on YuZhi, grabbing his lapels. "The kiss was real, wasn't it? All this time, the reason you have been dodging me was because you and her..... you're having sex, kissing, going on dates, right? Because she's the one that got away and you hid this from me. You've been lying and hiding the fact that she's the

girl you want. FUCKING TELL ME!" Rhea escalated from babbling to outright yelling into his face again and YuZhi hesitated.

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He knew he couldn't lie about a kiss even if it wasn't the one she was talking about and threw a glance at TangShi who was pale faced and trembling by the door. This was over her head, and she had become rooted to the spot and mute.

"We have never had sex. You know this. And we're not dating, we're hanging out as friends because there's no law against that. That kiss that night wasn't a kiss. We explained it already and it wasn't a lie." He deflected by using specifics to dodge a truth she would erupt at. He knew this was not a night for complete honesty as she was a ticking timebomb already.

"Do you have feelings for her?" Rhea probed, suspicion breaking through as she emotionally crumbled. Pushing him back a step with a hostile shove and a vengeful look in her eye. Her temper rising and YuZhi tried to unlatch her hands from his jacket, sensing the building eruption of tension between them and knowing he needed to diffuse it.

"I care about her, as I should. She's my friend, the girl who is stuck in this situation like I am. You have male friends; this is no different." He tried to soothe with his tone, aware TangShi was backing off and seemed like she didn't know what to do when the door behind her clicked open and ZhengLi slid in. YuZhi sighed with relief, aware ZhengLi was one of the few who could handle Rhea, given he had known her since birth too.

"Let me go. When you're sober, we can talk it out, but not here, not like this. We need space to calm down. Let Zheng take you home." YuZhi managed to pull her hands from his clothes as she faded into a dreamlike state. So much going on in her head as she tried to process the new information. Strangely detached and numb as a reality sunk in on her that she never expected.

Alice was a girl she despised all these years for being one memory YuZhi seemed to cling onto. It had never made sense to her why one night had touched his life in such a way and how amazing could this girl have been. Now knowing TangShi was her, her loathing of the girl grew and suddenly it all made sense in her scrambled mind.

YuZhi walked towards TangShi to make sure she was okay, his heart aching by how lost and scared she looked. Overwhelmed with this situation and caught the widening look in ZhengLi's eyes so fast, behind TangShi, as they connected with Rhea behind him.

He turned in time to see her scoop up the glass and throw it straight at TangShi's head. A look on her normally pretty face of ugly hatred and toxic venom. Intent written all over her. A split second, a moment of unleashed fury on Rhea's part and YuZhi dived in front

of TangShi. Catching her in his arms and shielding her into a bear hug so it collided with the back of his jacket, against one shoulder blade and shattered into a thousand pieces. Some flew past his right shoulder with momentum, and he turned TangShi with him to make sure nothing touched her, while the rest fell down his back and crumbled behind his feet. He cocooned TangShi against his chest, his hand over her head and the other on her back, cradling her. Fury growing and his last nerve snapped completely.

“Are you okay?” YuZhi looked down, reacting first as protector before his anger fully engaged. TangShi nodded numbly, shellshocked that Rhea would go as far as trying to harm her that way and let go of YuZhi’s clothes so he could release her. Trembling all over and her eyes filled with moisture as she bit on her lip to curb her tears. YuZhi brushed her cheek with his thumb to comfort her, his heart wrecked with the unconcealed heartbreak.

ZhengLi rushed forward and dusted him down, inspecting him for injury and guided TangShi gently towards the door. Knowing he needed to get her out before Rhea would calm down. This was only going to escalate and ZhengLi couldn’t let that happen to anyone in this room. They were all his friends.

“Go, out there. My friend Cheng will take you to his car, he’s waiting.” ZhengLi nodded with a soft voice, gripping YuZhi’s upper arm for fear he would turn on Rhea if he let him go. He could feel the rising hostility in him, and his stance and expression were grim.

“I’ll be there soon.” YuZhi added, motioning for her to go, trying to hold himself still for TangShi’s sake. Both men turned towards the now sobbing Rhea, standing like a broken woman in the shadows of this room. No remorse at all for what she tried to do, and it switched something inside of YuZhi off. He had no pity for what he could see in this moment, only a growing dislike for her.

As soon as the door clicked shut, YuZhi shook ZhengLi off, walked to her and lifted her chin with one finger. Cold as ice, his emotions locked up tight by what she just did and that normal persona of YuZhi Leng that he was famed for on full show.

“You and I are done. I know this is partly my fault, and I’m sorry, but life dealt us both a shitty hand we had to deal with it. What you just did, I can’t forgive. I don’t know you anymore and alcohol isn’t an excuse, Rhea. You could have seriously hurt her, left her blind and disfigured..... or worse. We’re over, Rhea. Done. The end.” YuZhi’s words were delivered slowly, with perfect clarity and no emotion present at all. The tone he used when shutting down conflicts at work, and it put the fear of god into her. She had never met this version of him.

“You don’t mean that...You’re angry, and we’ve all drunk too much champagne. I’m sorry, it’s just...” She began to plead, breaking down and realizing she made a grave mistake.

“You don’t hurt people like that. I forgave a slap, but this.... I can’t. What’s next, huh? A push down a stair, hit her with your car? You need fucking help.”

“YuZhi, go. Leave her with me. Take TangShi home.” ZhengLi interjected between them, knowing this wasn’t going to solve anything and only aggravate things. He knew YuZhi’s temper well and these past months observed how irrationally protective he was of TangShi. This conversation wasn’t going to end well if he stayed.

“You don’t mean it. We’re not done, we’ll never be done. You’re mad at me but you won’t be in a few days, you’ll see. We’re getting married. You agreed.” Rhea clung to him, desperate and broken now her fury dissipated and began to cry. Genuinely afraid by a version of him he had never directed at her.

“No, we’re not. I mean it. These past months you’ve pushed, manipulated, threatened, and demanded and made me doubt my feelings for you. It’s like I have seen a whole other you that I don’t like and couldn’t imagine a life with that as my wife. This here, made it clear. I can’t be with someone who does this shit, especially to someone innocent like TangShi. I feel like I never really knew you. That all these years have been a mask and I was blinded and never scraped below the surface.” YuZhi stepped back, his expression blanking out as she made a grab for him, but he caught her wrists in a vice like grip and tossed them off with strength, so she stumbled and ZhengLi caught her.

“You’re wrong. I’ll apologize to her. It’s just me being stupid and drunk. Go, get her. I’ll make it right.” Rhea was back peddling, sobering by the second as reality crashed in around her that YuZhi really was tired of how she had been for months. “She’s my friend. She’ll understand and forgive me. It never touched her, and she forgave me for hitting so...”

“You won’t go anywhere near her, ever again. Do you understand me? TangShi was never someone you saw as a friend, and you abused her nature. This, us, this whole situation... it’s over. We’re done. Don’t call me anymore. Make this a clean break and get on with your life. I don’t want to do this with you.” YuZhi had numbed out his heart and closed the door on his feelings once and for all. Lacking empathy for her in this state and although he wasn’t sure how he would feel in the morning, right now he meant every single word.

“Leave. I got this.” ZhengLi pushed him away by the shoulder as he turned Rhea in his arms and cuddled the sobbing girl, who was reaching out to try and grab at YuZhi. Mumbling the words No, and please, between heartbreaking gulps and sniffs. ZhengLi felt for her but knew this was for the best. He had watched them as couple for three years and never had faith in them being a forever thing.

YuZhi was only invested so far, and Rhea was too clingy and possessive to make it work long term. The cracks had started long before TangShi turned up. YuZhi had been

able to brush it off when it only affected him, but TangShi added a layer that he couldn't ignore anymore.

YuZhi turned on his heel, didn't take one look back and walked off in search of TangShi to take her home. His heart cold and his mind set.

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TangShi wandered into the apartment ahead of YuZhi, pulling off his suit jacket he had draped on her when leaving the event and dropped it carefully on the counter of the kitchen. YuZhi walked in behind her, throwing his keys and cell on top of it and caught her by the elbow before she got any further.

"Hey, you okay?" he pulled her back to face him, scrutinizing her mood and appearance now they were home in decent lighting. The drive back had been quiet and tense as they both got lost in their thoughts and didn't want to say much in front of the limo driver. He wasn't a usual driver for YuZhi, so they had kept it for getting home.

"I'm fine. Tired, a little rattled, but I'm okay. What about you?" TangShi reached up to touch his shoulder that had taken the brunt of the glass and he shrugged it off, pulling her in against him and gave her a hug. Cradling the back of her head against him and burying his face in the nape of her neck. Wrapped up in a bear hug as they both released the pent-up tension they were harboring. TangShi sunk against him, sliding her hands up around his back and they stood that way for a few minutes. Quietly breathing in slow unison as they both unwound the stress of that encounter.

"I'm fine. No injuries. Listen, Tang, nothing she said was true. Don't take any of it to heart. I don't want you feeling bad or guilty over Rhea's tantrum. She made her own choices, and this is about her and me and our messed-up relationship. It's nothing to do with you or anything you have done. I'm sorry about tonight." He tilted her head back with a finger under her chin so he could look her directly in the eye, smoothing back the hair that had fallen down from getting soaked. Guilt eating him at how innocent she looked when ruffled and tired after the hell of tonight.

"Will you see her tomorrow and smooth things over again?" TangShi was torn about her own feelings. Having Rhea act that way and attack her had been a shock and shaken her to the core. Now she wondered if they were ever friends at all and didn't really want to care anymore about Rhea Cheng. Linlin would never treat TangShi that way and she knew it meant Rhea never cared about her. YuZhi was right about them never being friends.

"No. I ended everything when you left the room. Told her it was done. We are done." YuZhi let go of TangShi and paced past her into the kitchen to make coffee, wound up and exhausted but still angry about tonight. Every time he pictured it in his head he wanted to break something. He couldn't believe the girl he knew all these years could be so violent and vindictive.

“What? What do you mean, over?” TangShi gawped at him and followed. Unsure what exactly he was implying.

“The plan for two years from now. Her and I. It’s finished.” He shut it down quickly not willing to elaborate anymore but TangShi couldn’t leave it alone.

“But you love her, she’s your long-term girlfriend. You’re supposed to eventually marry her.” She stated on automatic pilot, her heart rate upping and her nerves growing in her belly even though she didn’t know why.

“If I’m being honest, this was a long time coming. I know the media painted us to be this perfect couple, but we had our problems and some of them were huge. This was the straw that broke the camel’s back, and I can’t keep ignoring the reality of it.” He waved a mug in TangShi’s direction to ask if she wanted coffee too and set about the task when she nodded. Trying to focus on doing something, rather than thinking more.

“So, it’s really done? No future plan, no thoughts of dating her again when you’re free?” She didn’t know how to feel about that because Rhea was the one thing that always stood between them, like an invisible barrier. An end goal for him. Without her and the plan, she didn’t know what would happen when her time with YuZhi ended.

“I thought I loved her. All these years as her friend, then her boyfriend, I ignored a lot of red flags about us. I cared about her, and I wanted her to be happy, but if I’m being honest, I didn’t really put effort into our relationship. I went with what she wanted and worked so much we spent minimal time together anyway. Rebelling against this marriage, was more about being forced against my will to do something, other than about screwing up my future with Rhea. I didn’t realize it until now.”

The honesty in that statement made them both look at one another and stare in pensive silence for a moment. The air heavy with tension.

“Didn’t you live here together? Have a life? Maybe it’s because you’ve forgotten what it was like that you’re only thinking of the bad stuff now, because you’re upset.” TangShi gestured around, sure she had heard Rhea say this was where she slept every night, but YuZhi shook his head. TangShi didn’t want this sudden knee jerk reaction from him if he was going to regret it and cause himself pain. She was scared for him that it was impulsive, and he would live to regret it. Her heart was terrified to put any hope in place that he might no longer be bound to another woman.

“My grandfather was never cool about us, and a part of me thought I was respecting him by keeping things on the date level and not moving. When I look back, I never wanted to move forward because it suited me how we were. I had my date when I needed her, it kept things simple, but could live my life without having to consider her plans or commit all the way. I knew she loved me enough to put up with anything as long as I came when she clicked her fingers, and I didn’t rock the boat. I thought I was content and that was how it was meant to be.” He had been thinking a lot on the long drive home, about

all of this and tonight he had some kind of lightbulb moment that he had ignored for a long time. She had switched something off in him, and it had widened a crack and let a lot of negativity out that he had pushed aside for a long time.

“You’ve been friends your whole life, maybe you’re just mad at her tonight and not seeing it clearly. After some sleep you might feel differently.”

“It’s more than that. It’s been there in my head for months now. The worse things got between us. I’ve hidden a lot of it from you. The calls, texts, the drop ins to my office, and the constant demands and emotional blackmail. Rhea has been clinging on and making life hell for me since we got married but she’s so good at projecting that kind and loving girl on the world that I wanted to believe it was all fallout and would pass in time.” YuZhi sighed and watched the percolator filling the coffee jug, pushing their mugs aside and leaned down to rest his arms and face on the cool worktop. Exhaling with a long blow to try and ease the building headache.

TangShi came around, hating seeing him like this and rubbed his back and shoulder, trying anything to comfort him because he made her heart bleed. She knew he was confused and frustrated, and she didn’t want that tiny flicker of hope to grow when her gut said none of this was real. He was drunk, even if he didn’t seem it, and angry. Tomorrow was a new day.

“It’s understandable. She loves you so much and this contract, this thing between us, it would drive any sane woman crazy. I can’t begin to know what it feels like to see the love of your life being taken away for two whole years.” TangShi’s biggest flaw in life was her huge empathy for people’s pain that allowed her to justify so many things.

“I get that, I do. It’s hardly a picnic for me either to have all my plans and relationship upended and told I was to marry a girl I didn’t think I had ever met. We had plans on how to deal with it, to stay apart, but she never stuck to them. She made it worse for all of us.” YuZhi got up and walked off, wired and tense at the same time and needed some breathing space. “I felt like I owed her, and it was all wrapped up in thinking she was the one. For being there for me when I needed someone, and I convinced myself my care for her was love. I don’t think it is, not in the way she loves me. I can’t change that now that I’ve finally realized it.”

“What makes you think it isn’t love now? After all this time? Don’t make decisions while wound up and angry.” TangShi waited where she was, leaning one hand against the counter and watched him pace around as he loosened his bow tie and hauled it off, took his sash from around his waist and tossed them on the couch before undoing his top buttons and yanking his shirt out of his pants to loosen him up. Her heart racing at his words but using all her willpower to stay blank and be a friend in this.

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“How can it be love when every time I see her name on my phone, I want to ignore it? I’m agitated seeing it. Every time I meet her in person lately, I get irritated with her. And anytime she says or does anything to you, I feel like I hate her.” He finally admitted what he had been afraid to say out loud, for fear he sounded like a heartless bastard. Knowing that it was always there lingering, and he had tried to avoid it. “Does that sound like a healthy relationship based in love?” he looked past her, seeing the coffee machine had stopped and walked back to finish his task. Brushing past TangShi.

“No, it doesn’t, but I’ve never really had a relationship with mutual romantic love, so I don’t know how to compare or help you figure it out.” She blushed, knowing her words sounded immature and pathetic and YuZhi glanced up at her. He pondered her for a minute, saying nothing as he thought about the fact her confession somehow made him feel better. He couldn’t pinpoint why and poured them some black coffee and pushed it out of his head.

“Here.” He slid one to her and took his own to the couch. TangShi lingered to add cream and sugar before following him, dying to get out of this dress but feeling like he needed her company more than she needed to be comfortable. Rustling after him in her puff of fabric.

“I’m sorry she ruined our night.” YuZhi sat down and laid his cup on the center table.

“I was only there for you anyway, so I don’t mind. It was fun before any of that, so it wasn’t entirely ruined.” TangShi shrugged, not caring that they left and happy to be home instead.

“I have no idea if it was caught by reporters. I guess we will find out in the morning. All hell will break loose if they figure out it was a jealousy fight over you and I.”

TangShi froze as she sat down, mulling over what that could mean for their perfectly executed PR story these months and gulped down her coffee to stop the knot forming in her throat. Stressed over it already. Not sure if it came out that Rhea wouldn’t tell the press the truth.

“My grandfather will have a fit. Rhea did us no favors.” YuZhi slumped his head back on the top edge of the couch and relaxed into a casual pose, wanting it all to seep away and yet glad he had her here beside him. ZhengLi would deal with Rhea, get her home in one piece, and call him in the morning to report, but having TangShi safe at home was already calming him down.

“I need to go change; this is awkward.” TangShi admitted defeat while perched on the couch unable to get comfy because of twenty layers of net and voiles which were like sitting on a pile of slidey clothes and too bulky to sit back. YuZhi looked her over and smiled, gestured to her room for her to go.

“You were beautiful tonight, even after she did that. I’m sad to see it come off.”

“Beautiful it may be, but practical it’s not. I’ll be a few minutes.” TangShi wandered off as YuZhi drunk his coffee and got up to stretch out his tense body. It was almost one am already, and he knew they should both get some sleep. As much as he wanted to stay and talk to her all night, until his head stopped buzzing and his mood fully simmered, she looked beat, and he felt guilty for keeping her up.

TangShi returned in cotton pajamas quickly. Her hair taken down and brushed and her face fresh and free from makeup. Looking like the girl she normally was and stopped when she caught YuZhi staring at her. He seemed lost in thought, standing in the middle of the room and then walked towards her with an odd look on his face. Seemingly intent on something.

“What’s wrong?” TangShi hesitated and flickered down in question as he slid her hand into his, leaning in close so their heads almost touched.

“Sleep with me tonight.” He uttered the words so softly, so smoothly, that TangShi thought she misheard him and blinked up in shock, meeting his eyes on hers with perfect focus. His handsome face showing no hints of joking with her. Taken back with the one request she didn’t expect she was unable to formulate words. “I miss sharing a bed with you, and I want you beside me.” His voice was low, and husky, and his exhaustion was evident.

“I..... um...” TangShi swallowed hard, flustered, not knowing how to take that request. She was unsure if this might be a rebound thing that men do, but it might also be a need for comfort. She didn’t understand or want to jump to conclusions. His expression was telling her nothing. “I don’t know if we ...” She faltered, her voice dying mid-sentence, suddenly overly nervous that he might want something physical, and she wasn’t ready. He only just broke up properly with his girlfriend.

YuZhi reached up with his other hand and traced the shape of her jawline with his thumb. Sending her skin into overdrive as it goosebumped all over, her body clenched up inside, aware how intimate this was and instantly scared that this might be too loaded and a mistake. He wasn’t thinking clearly.

“You’re legally my wife. Surely it’s not a big deal seeing as we slept in one bed for months already. I’m not asking you to have sex, just be there. I got used to you and I don’t like the fact my bed feels too big now. I miss the tiny person who stole half my mattress.” YuZhi knew he was drunker than he thought, and this was probably a bad idea given how not himself he was tonight, but he didn’t want to go in there alone to sleep. She made him feel better and kept his thoughts calm. He wanted her beside him like she used to be, where he could wake up at any time and the sound of her gentle breathing would lull him back to sleep. He had become dependent on sensing her presence. TangShi felt like security while the rest of his life was a total mess.

“Okay.” TangShi answered without looking at him, too shy to do so, hesitating but unable to refuse him. Her face getting hot while it spread to her hairline. Her heart wanted more, even if her brain was telling her it was dumb.

YuZhi didn't wait on her changing her mind, smiling softly at her before turning and pulling her with him to his room. Fingers interlaced as he walked on in a suave confident swagger that made her tremble. He didn't bother with lights, just guided her in and then let go before pushing her to the bed by the waist as he walked off to change. No words, no hints at what was to come.

TangShi hurried over to it, yanked back the duvet and dived in before he could see how crazy anxious she was, how many doubts and conflicting things were going off in her head. She quickly shifted over to the side she used to sleep on and turned her back to the center in a bid to pass out as fast as possible. Hoping if she was out cold they wouldn't have any weird or awkward encounters and he could sleep it off.

After a few tense minutes of staring at a dark wall, she bristled when she sensed and heard his soft footsteps coming back from the bathroom, where he didn't shut the door or turn on a light. Aware of his every movement and then held her breath when the bed dipped, scrunching her eyes closed.

His weight shifted, moved in, and the covers were tightened as he got under them. TangShi focused on breathing normally but her breath and heart rate were erratic. It felt like the first time again that they shared a room only this time instead of repulsion and fear of her mean husband, there was nerves and anticipation. She was close to an all-out nervous breakdown.

YuZhi scooted over right up behind her, which was something he never did. Smoothing her hair to the pillow and down to one side out of his way and then pulled her back against him so he could spoon her. Sliding his hand around her waist and getting comfortable with her in his arms. Nestling into her and kicking his leg over hers under the sheets so she was completely held.

“YuZhi?” She gasped impulsively. Feeling trapped even though it also felt really good. Safe and secure as his warm body heat was comforting but her mind was grabbing at reasons not to do this, while flashing her images of Rhea.

“Shhhhh, sleep. Trust me. I won't do anything.” He whispered it softly into her ear, so close it tickled her neck and cheek and she shivered. YuZhi then seemed to relax behind her and go limp. She was hyperaware of him the entire time, too tense to do anything except stay still as a statue. She waited pensively to see if he would do anything else for what seemed like the longest time until his unmistakable deep breathing pulled her out of her own head. Blinking as her eyes adjusted and tuned into his complete lack of movement.

YuZhi was asleep already. Out cold, breathing like he did when he was far off in dreamland, and she glanced over her shoulder to make sure. Amazed he could pass out in under five minutes but then again he had drunk a lot tonight. His face so near she almost bumped noses and could about making out his flawless features in a serene expression. Holding her tight, cuddling like this was the most normal thing in the world to be doing and yet she didn't think she would sleep at all now.

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"Here, Dude. One more to sign and we can call it a day. I'm beat and I feel like I haven't had a decent night out in a month. I'm having withdrawals." ZhengLi dumped a folder on his desk before walking off to drag forward a seat from the lounging area and sat down with a sigh. It was already eight pm and he was fed up with work. It'd been a grueling month.

"It's been less than a week. I think you may need an intervention."

"Pfft. You're as bad as me, well you were until you settled down with the little wife." ZhengLi poked fun, aware of the fact that work was the main reason that YuZhi had calmed down with nights out, but there had also been a decline in party time since he married TangShi. Even when he didn't like her all that much, he still went home instead of coming out to play.

"Getting married was the start of grandad handing me more responsibility. Don't overthink it." YuZhi kept on typing on his laptop, not lifting his eyes and screwed his face up over the details in the document he was compiling. This was his third attempt at writing a proposal this evening, but he wasn't focused and his mind kept straying.

"How is she anyway? Haven't seen her since the Sheng Hai charity night." ZhengLi had taken Rhea home and dealt with her that night and hadn't done anything but work here since. Late nights. Early mornings, and two all nighters meant zero socializing.

"Good. School is great, she's great, life is currently quiet seeing as it never blew up and Rhea dodged a massive bullet." YuZhi got annoyed with his last paragraph and back buttoned the whole thing to delete it. Giving up when the start of a headache was brewing.

"And Rhea? Still not a peep."

"After the first couple of days of being ignored, she's left me alone. I think she assumes I need space and hasn't accepted I was deadly serious." It wasn't often they had any down time lately to even have these conversations, so ZhengLi was curious.

ZhengLi felt like his entire life for the past week was figures, data, and planning permission forms. He barely saw YuZhi at all during the day when they were up to their necks in details over this new build. He hadn't spoken to Linlin either, given she was

blinking him after not showing up to the event. He knew he should reach out and make the effort, but he had no time. He missed her, but he had to figure where he was heading with her before he called her.

YuZhi stopped what he was doing and checked his watch, frustrated he wasn't done but caving at the hour.

"Let's pack it up. I promised Tang I would cook dinner and I'm already late." He closed his laptop and slid back, retrieving his jacket and swung it on as he got up.

"When are you two going to stop skirting around one another and admit that your marriage is a little more genuine than you realize." ZhengLi grinned, lifting up his feet to perch on the surface right before YuZhi walked around and pushed them off with his hand. A glare and a head shake at scuffing his three thousand dollar desk.

"Because it's not. We have separate bedrooms." YuZhi reminded him, even though he did convince her to sleep with him that night he hadn't asked her again in case she got the wrong idea and felt pressured. YuZhi hadn't arranged anymore clinic visits yet either as he wanted some downtime to figure this mess out with Rhea and let some time pass before he even got his head around fatherhood. Home was stable for now, and TangShi seemed happy. He didn't want anything to change.

"So change that. Make a baby the old-fashioned way and who knows, maybe stick together after the contract ends." ZhengLi was blunt and to the point and got a frowned face of a response.

"I'm leaving. Enjoy your early night. Maybe give Linlin a call and put the girl out of her misery so she stops moping around my apartment in hopes of seeing you. She's slept over three nights in a row." YuZhi pointed out, raising a brow as he gathered all his papers and put them in his case.

"Ahhh so that's why there are separate beds."

YuZhi picked up his file and smacked ZhengLi on top of the head with it for his smart-ass remarks and refused to respond. Him and

TangShi and sex was a weird topic and not one YuZhi wanted to think about. He was still mulling over his very final break up and getting used to thinking of a future with no Rhea. He didn't want to jump into sex with TangShi and ruin everything in some impulsive rebound move he would regret. Sex with someone like TangShi was never going to be a means to making a contracted baby. She was a girl who seemed like emotions would be needed and he couldn't sleep with her as though she was a baby making machine with no feelings.

"Goodnight." YuZhi blanked him and left. Leaving him behind to do whatever he was doing and not getting into it. ZhengLi never stopped making remarks about Tang, but

this wasn't that simple and YuZhi couldn't figure out if he had feelings for her or cared about her the way he did with Rhea once upon a time. He made the mistake of tying himself to one woman he ended up not really loving the right way and wasn't about to jump into a second mistake with another girl. Especially not TangShi.

YuZhi drove home and got up to the apartment in record time. Eager to see her and hoping that Linlin had finally gone home. It wasn't that he didn't like the girl, but sometimes he liked his space and the serenity of just TangShi and him doing their thing in his apartment. She would paint or read while he worked, and it felt nice and domestic, and homely. Linlin on the other hand was chaos and would make mess, a lot of noise, and needed constant entertainment, much like ZhengLi did. In terms of a pairing, they were a match made in heaven.

"Tang, I'm home. Did you eat without me?" YuZhi called into the apartment as he walked in, kicking off his shoes and throwing his jacket aside. No sign of her in the kitchen or lounge and he went off in pursuit of her. The place was quiet, but all the lamps were on, and he could smell food in the air as if she cooked already.

"Here." TangShi walked out of her bedroom in shorts and a t-shirt, her hair damp from taking a soak in the tub and lit up at seeing him. "I made food, it's in the oven." she padded past him to go serve it and got a genuine smile as she did so. YuZhi glad to be home and always happy to see her.

"Nice look." He nodded at her long naked legs, her ass pert in the summer attire and then had to pull himself away from staring too long, aware that it was borderline pervy. Checking her out as if he hadn't seen her in pj's before. He had to admit, TangShi had a nice set of legs and a good figure, and he wasn't immune to it. He was a hot-blooded male after all.

TangShi pulled the dishes out of the oven and served them onto waiting plates. Tonight she made pork cutlets and chili fries, with a side salad seeing as YuZhi liked to order it when they went out sometimes. TangShi was pensive, aware she was gauging his mood to look for the right timing to tell him something, well two things, and didn't want to ruin his appetite. She made something he liked and was waiting for him to eat in hopes of smoothing over the bad mood she was anticipating.

YuZhi took them to the table and set up their places, content with this routine when he had time to come home and felt TangShi's eyes following him. Picking up on the fact she didn't seem as relaxed as normal and paused mid task.

"What's up? Why do I feel like you have something to say?" he sat down and waited, watching her as she too pulled out her chair and slid in opposite him.

"I have an art gallery thing coming in three weeks which means spending some time with Rong Cai away from the school to set up my work. It's only a couple of days but he will be the one driving me back and forth to the venue." She swallowed hard, knowing

how much YuZhi disliked him but since that day he kissed her, Rong Cai had been distant and overly polite towards her. His back off message seemed to have worked.

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“Hmmm.” YuZhi gritted his teeth and picked up the fork in front of him, trying to not react like a jealous moron and aware it was making his mood evaporate. His stomach churned but not with hunger and he had to curb his impulse to say ‘over my dead body’, knowing he was being unreasonable. Acting like her dad and treating her like a possession.

“Are you okay with that?” TangShi probed, picking up her own cutlery and started cutting her food to avoid looking at him. “There will be other people around to help and I will probably only see him alone on the drive. It’s a two day show and no late evenings.” She held her breath, waiting for a verdict, tense as hell.

“Sure, whatever.” YuZhi knew he sounded sulky, but he also knew he had no right to interfere in her school or work. TangShi was an adult and capable of making her own decisions. “Just don’t trust him. Don’t let him bully you or I’ll break his face.” He added in afterthought then pushed food into his mouth before he said anything else. Simmering and unable to do anything because he knew he shouldn’t be this way.

TangShi watched him for a second, knowing it was probably best to drop that subject before he changed his mind and disagreed, besides, what she had to tell him now was probably worse. She readied herself with a deep inhale and let it out.

“Rhea came to my school after I was done today.” She mumbled it fast in a rush of words because she had no courage any other way and saw him pause his fork midway to his mouth. His eyebrow twitched and his jaw tightened. His eyes darkening as the new information seeped in.

“What did she say? What did she want? Did she do anything to you?” YuZhi was on full alert, putting down his cutlery as TangShi shook her head and placed hers down too.

“She wanted to clear the air and apologize.”

YuZhi snorted. Bad mood intensifying and not even falling for Rhea’s games.

“She thinks she can crawl to you, and I’ll forgive her. Don’t be fooled. This is a tactic because she can’t get to me. Don’t be manipulated.” The thought of her kissing up to TangShi put a sour taste in his mouth and he got up abruptly to go fetch beer from the refrigerator before he got even more agitated with thinking about it. “She’s not your friend and whatever she said, it’s bullshit.” He still hadn’t lost his anger toward her.

“I know. I didn’t go with her like she wanted. I told her I had plans. We only spoke for a few minutes, and I left.” TangShi had made the emotional break and cut the ties with

Rhea after that night. Standing up to her at the school gate and telling her she was leaving with little regret over it. No longer obligated to be her friend or care about her when she could do something like that. TangShi maybe wasn't someone who had a lot of self-worth, but she knew when someone wasn't genuine and should be avoided. She knew what a friend should be.

YuZhi, picked up a beer and then his temper snapped. Holding onto it best he could but somehow he had finally met his last nerve when it came to Rhea. The audacity of her games and tricks to manipulate what she wanted, by trying to sway TangShi because she knew she had a forgiving temperament. He marched around the table startling TangShi and bent down fast, scooping her face so he cupped her cheek and ear and pulled her to tilt her chin up to him. Fastening his eyes on her, one hand on the table to hold him bent over so they were almost nose to nose.

"Don't trust her, ever. Don't go with her, don't listen to her. No matter what sob story or tears she pours, she's lying. She's a class A actress with a lifetime of getting what she wants from people. I really am done with her, and I need to know that no matter what you won't be drawn in. You don't need to have any kind of contact with her from now on."

TangShi swallowed hard, his face so close they were sharing air and she could only nod in response to his somber expression and deadly serious tone. Affected by his presence more than his words.

"I mean it. Promise me. Rhea isn't your problem, she's mine. Keep your distance. I don't trust her anymore." After that night YuZhi no longer knew how far Rhea would go to hurt TangShi. She was a threat to her, especially now he had called everything off, and he wouldn't stand by and watch her do anything to try and separate them.

"I promise." TangShi whispered quietly, intimidated by how serious he was being and starting to waiver at this intimacy. YuZhi stared at her, scrutinizing her expression for a long while before leaning in and placing his lips on her forehead in a gentle kiss. Startling her with the sincerity in it. Brushing his mouth against her warm skin and closing his eyes as he self-calmed with her touch, inhaling the unique scent that was TangShi and melting her to the core with his softness.

"You mean a lot to me. I don't want you to get hurt or caught up in this. Let me deal with her and if she shows up again, don't talk, just leave. Call me and I'll come." He warned, his tone softer now, that edge of anger fading away. He let TangShi go after running his hand across her face with a featherlight touch igniting goosebumps. She was momentarily stunned and speechless and could only nod.

"Okay, let's eat. I'm starving and looking forward to a movie on the couch with you. Can't remember the last time I had time to do that"

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 79

ZhengLi was glad of the early night and headed off shortly after YuZhi did, mind on plans for tonight as he scrolled his WeChat to check in on Linlin and see if she had uploaded any posts this evening. If he knew she was out and about he would drop on by and see her after too long apart. It had been an endless quiet week without her and try as he wanted to deny it, he was more than aware he had more than average fondness for his little hell cat.

ZhengLi, got home and showered in record time. Checking his cell multiple times for a response from his earlier texts to ask her if she wanted to meet up, and her location posts on her profiles but Linlin was still blanking him. He had no idea why she was being this stubborn and if it was because she wanted him to chase her. If it was then it was working. Her lack of response was making him crazy.

After drying off and getting dressed into casual but smart attire and a leather bomber jacket he gave up stalking her social media and phone YuZhi instead.

“Dude, get TangShi to ask Linlin where she is tonight. She’s ignoring me.” He admired himself in the mirror as he finessed his newly styled hair, checking out his sharp appearance and put his car keys in his pocket. He was intent on tracking her down, energized with the fact he was free to party, and sorting this out face to face to end this silent standoff. He didn’t want to waste his time running around looking when he could be spending it with her instead.

“I already know where she is because she dropped by to see us about twenty minutes ago. She’s heading to Le Baron on Donghu road with some friends. If you’re quick you can catch up.” YuZhi was eating dinner with TangShi and had no intention of either of them going out like Linlin asked. They were having quality time at home.

“You’re the man. Enjoy your evening with TangShi. See you at work tomorrow.”

ZhengLi hung up, smiling to himself and splashed on a little of his designer aftershave with one last look over his outfit and out he went. Focused on his task and stubborn about seeing her tonight to figure out why she was still sulking.

He abandoned her mid date, sure; he then worked like a maniac for the last two weeks and didn’t have time for her before he was forced on a date to a public event. Something as a daughter of a wealthy family she should understand. He couldn’t work out why she had gone cold, blanked him and refused to respond to any of his messages on any platform the last couple of days. He knew he should have contacted her and played Romeo a little, but this weird battle they had going on dictated it was her turn to chase, so he hadn’t.

Why she ghosted him over the event and then bailed and never showed up at all, was perplexing him. Date or not he had intended to ditch her to go be with Linlin and get rid of whatever guy she brought. They weren’t even a real thing but friends, who kissed,

with the possibility of more but he still would rather hang out with her than any other girl he knew.

As he got into his sports car his cell started vibrating and he yanked it out in hopes she had finally caved, seeing one of his friends names flashing on screen and it deflated his optimism.

“Yo, Jie, what’s up?” He absentmindedly started his car and adjusted his seatbelt.

“Where you at? A bunch of us are going to Dream, you wanna come?” Jie was buzzing for a good night out and ZhengLi was always the soul of any party.

“Make it Le Baron and I will.” ZhengLi smirked to himself in his rear-view mirror and pulled out, pushing his phone into the cradle so it activated his hands free.

“Really? Cool. There’s maybe five of us but two more of the girls will come if they know you are. You won’t have a problem getting a hook up that’s for sure.” Jie was busy waving a thumbs up at his current group of friends signaling ZhengLi was coming, and just as predicted the two girls who had been undecided shot up and grinned with excitement.

“Don’t get their hopes up, I have my eye on a prize already. See you there.” ZhengLi ended the call and got moving into late night Shanghai traffic with a happier mood. His head free of the days drama and workload and looking forward to taming his spitfire kitty cat. Linlin was a hard nut to crack, and he missed her when she wasn’t firing back at him or causing mayhem with her presence. Life was all around too quiet. This was by far the longest sulky silent mood he had encountered from her.

It took him a half hour to drive from where he was to the Le Baron nightclub, and he parked his car nearby before strolling in. He caught sight of Jie and his crew right away, as they were huddled near the door in a booth. Neon blazing lights, heavy thumping music overhead and a smoky atmosphere from a fog machine set the scene. The place was bumping and full and it was hard to make out if any of the dancers nearby were Linlin.

Jie spotted him and waved him over, drawing him over to their seating with an already full table of drinks and pushed a beer his way. It was too loud to talk over the current song choice so he nodded to all present, ignoring the overly dramatic waves from the girls opposite and looked around to see if he could spot the one girl he wanted to see.

“ZhengLi, baby. It’s been a while.” ChuXuan, one of their party and a girl he previous had a short fling with slid over and draped her arm around his shoulders, purring up close to make her intent obvious and he shrugged her off.

“Not tonight, honey, I’m here to relax.” He kept his eye on the dancefloor knowing it was the most likely place for Linlin and pulled out his cell to check her updates again. She

was a serial selfie poster when she went out yet tonight there was not one single picture. There hadn't been for a few days. It stressed him out that she had gone social media silent. Maybe she was sick, or something was wrong. It hitched up his worry and anxiety and he looked around for the third time.

"I can relax you. I have ways and means." ChuXuan leaned in close, running her tongue over his earlobe as she slid her body up against his in a suggestive manner and crossed her leg over the top of his nearest one. Her arm draped on his. Full on flirt initiated and making it clear where her sights were set tonight. ZhengLi, ignored it, used to women like this pawing all over him and usually it wasn't something he bothered about. He was happy for the attention normally and always one to take up a pretty girl up on an offer, only lately his itch was for a small pink haired she devil, and this was unwanted attention.

"Yeah, maybe later." ZhengLi slid her leg off with a casual maneuver and sat forward with his beer bottle to get her face out of his ear. Irritated with her but not wanting to be overly rude. Looking up as he did so to gaze around the club once more and froze on the spot when he locked eyes with the small but openly staring figure about six feet in front of him. It felt like time stopped as they locked eyes and ZhengLi's insides flipped over.

Linlin was dressed in a black boob tube dress with a frilled-out hemline over that perfectly formed sexy figure. Her usual bold make up, and smokey eyes homed in on him, only her hair was now a darker shade of deep magenta bordering on purple. Her focus on him was like a laser beam, questioning, accusing, but her facial expression was not anger or deathly intent. Instead that of genuine unconcealed hurt that caused a stabbing reaction in his chest, and he swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable.

It made him hesitate for a second as he realized it was her, the one person he had been looking for. Waiting for the explosive moment she marched over and laid claim to him in volcanic Linlin fashion like she normally did when a girl got too close. Actively anticipating it and slightly pleased she found him entangled with competition to incite her jealous streak and then gawped when she turned on her heel and walked away.

ZhengLi sat staring after her for a full thirty seconds, blinking in disbelief that instead of coming over and making a scene, she slunk away into the shadows and didn't utter a word to him. His heart sunk and his stomach clenched as real apprehension kicked in that this was different from her normal MO.

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 80

Linlin stalked back to her booth to her friends and swiped up her coat, no longer wanting to be here. Her throat aching and her heart pulsating with pain after witnessing ZhengLi cuddling up with some bimbo across the club. She had come here tonight to forget him. Tears close as they pricked her eyes and yet she refused to break down and make an idiot of herself. She had decided to let him go and cut him loose after a long week of

thinking this over. He was too unpredictable, too good at messing with her head and making her feel like she never knew where she stood, and she couldn't deny it anymore.

ZhengLi had gotten under her skin and into her heart without any effort and her crazy reactions and jealousy over him were proof that she was falling hard for the worst kind of playboy. He brought out her insecurity and craziness and made her chase after him and beg for his time and attention like she wasn't worthy. She had never been in this situation before, never wanted one man to be exclusively hers and yet somehow it happened. Never had to plead to be the center of someone's attention and she hated how it made her act.

"Linnyboo? Wait up." She was heading for the door after making excuses for abandoning her friends, saying she felt unwell when he caught up with her in the corridor to the exit. Catching her by the elbow and pulling her aside to let people pass. "You not going to say hello?" ZhengLi leaned down to her smaller frame trying to look her in the eye, but she dodged him. Wriggling her arm out of his grip and remaining cut off and blank. Putting up an invisible barrier between them that was so obvious he let her go and gave her space.

"You seemed busy so..... enjoy your night." Linlin's tone was deflated, hoarse as her emotions spiked and she wanted him to go away before he saw her cry. Her heart crumbling at seeing him again and hearing him use his pet name for her broke her in two. Knowing he couldn't spare her time lately but would happily make out with some other woman in a club had told her everything she needed to know. She knew she should leave and forget him.

"She's just someone I know. Nothing was happening. I came to see you. YuZhi told me you would be here." ZhengLi had a weird sensation in his gut, a mild panic sweeping up, making him nervous. Throwing his usual playful banter aside because he was getting strong vibes this was not the time for it and diving into serious explanation. Linlin was being off and weirdly distant, and he didn't like it.

"Yeah, looked like it. I need to go." She slid out from beside him and pulled her jacket on over her dress, but ZhengLi followed, a sense of utter fear overtaking him.

"Are you mad at me? Linlin, stop. Talk to me." His tone dropped to serious, his cute name abandoned because he felt like he was losing her, and genuine concern etched all over him. Mr. Suave and in-control fizzing away to reveal the ZhengLi that only YuZhi ever got to see. Who he could be when it was needed.

"Why would I be mad? I'm nothing to you. You don't even have time or inclination to reply to me or call and it's not like we see each other anymore. You weren't even attracted enough to sleep with me, so...." She tried to hide the bitterness in her tone, but it leached out anyway. ZhengLi swallowed hard, regretting not making more effort if he knew this was really how she felt. He had assumed it was all another push-pull game

of them driving one another crazy and Linlin being dramatic. Punishing him. He never thought for a second she was cutting him loose for real.

ZhengLi was momentarily at a loss for words, having never been in this situation before. His stomach churning up and a very real uptight tension growing out of control in his heart at the thought of not seeing her anymore.

“Look, you’ve got this all wrong. I’ve been working crazy hours. I thought you didn’t want me to call. I haven’t tried to sleep with you because” He really didn’t know. At first it seemed fun to make her want him more by not caving. Building the sexual tension between them. He figured they would last longer if sex was delayed and then..... something always held him back from taking the step and he never examined it. “Don’t go. I really did come to see you. I miss you. I’m sorry I haven’t been around and haven’t been in touch. I’ll make it up to you, I won’t do it again. Come on, why are you being this way?” He was floundering, not knowing what to say as he had never had to persuade a girl in his life to give him a chance. This was all new. He had never cared enough to want a girl to give him a second chance or to stick around. He was normally the one to end things. He could tell this wasn’t a trick or a game to manipulate a response either, he could feel her seriousness in pushing him away.

“I thought you liked me, but I don’t really feel like you do. I’m just a toy when you’re bored. Some plaything to pick up and drop when there’s nothing else.” The sentence broke her willpower to hold back her pain and her eyes misted up with tears. Hating how pathetic he made her when she had literally done the same thing to men for years and had intended to do it to him.

“You’re not a toy and I do like you. More than the average woman. Come on, weren’t we having fun and keeping things casual? What is this now?” ZhengLi was genuinely confused backtracking in his head if he ever missed signs. Pleading with her and fighting the urge to grab her and hold on.

“It’s not fun. It’s hell. You mess with my head and make me second guess myself constantly. I feel invisible around you sometimes and I’m scared to check your WeChat for fear of seeing you out having fun with other girls and feeling like shit over it. I know I have no right, that we’re not a thing but you completely knocked me over and now I can’t handle how this feels. I’m doing this for my own sanity.” Linlin had drunk enough to let her inner thoughts freely spew out. The vulnerable caring side of her that she reserved for only TangShi in the rarest of moments. The soft way of speaking, the hints of truth and real emotion. Things she would never have admitted or said to him sober, and the tears came with the confessions.

“What are you saying?” ZhengLi’s chest tightened, an impulse to wipe away the droplets on her tiny face, his own heart throbbing with a new inner pain for him. She was talking about him messing with her head, completely unaware of how much she screwed him up and stayed on his mind when she wasn’t in his life. Like, right now, being this way

and he felt like he was having a mental breakdown with how to fix it. Genuinely afraid of letting her walk away.

“Nothing. I’m going home. I don’t want to see you anymore.” Linlin couldn’t do this. She knew she couldn’t hope for anything and being this close to him was unbearable. ZhengLi had wormed his way into her soul and for the first time in her life Linlin had real feelings for a guy. She didn’t want to compete or cling on and become some needy jealous psycho who spent her life pushing other women off him.

“Don’t go....., Linlin, please.... Let’s date if that’s what you mean... properly. I’ll do better, I’ll be different. It’ll be different. No more games.” ZhengLi’s blurted words came out in an impulsive rush as she moved to walk away, his panic overtaking and his heart racing. His palms instantly clammy as nerves suffocated him. He had no idea what he was doing, other than stopping her from leaving him.