

Priceless Baby 471

Chapter 471: You Already Have One

Xu Xiyan had not been aware that the poll was already over, and was surprised to hear from Xue Yating that the results were out.

"I don't really care. Like they say, if you don't get what you want, that means you'll be getting something even better."

She had known she would lose. She wasn't exactly famous—how was she supposed to compete with the list superstars?

Xu Xiyan was entirely nonchalant about the matter: the role was either hers, or it wasn't. The results did not affect her in the slightest because she had not expected to get the part.

"Wow, I love your positivity. I'm liking you more and more with every passing minute. Oh, how I wish I had a sister like you!"

After spending time together, Xue Yating found that she really enjoyed being with Xu Xiyan. Xu Xiyan was like a wise, caring older sister, despite being only a little older than Xue Yating.

"Oh, you already have one."

Xu Xiyan smiled shyly. It wasn't a one-sided friendship; Xu Xiyan, too, had accepted Xue Yating as a friend.

"I'm so glad to hear that."

Xue Yating happily slid a hand around Xu Xiyan's arm. "Jing Xi, do you have time? Why don't we go shopping together?"

Xue Yating was envious of the girls who went shopping together, hand-in-hand. She was always alone when she went shopping—the assistant and the bodyguard trailing behind her didn't count—and she found it dreadfully boring.

"I'll have to take a rain check on that. I have to report to the set later today to wrap up my scenes," said Xu Xiyan apologetically.

Xue Yating was both sympathetic and understanding. She said, "Okay, we'll go shopping when you have the time. I really, really want to go shopping with you."

Xu Xiyan hurried towards the movie set as soon as she stepped out of the Xue residence.

They would be shooting Xu Xiyan's final scene for "Red Sleeved Beauty." It was also the last scene of the day.

Meng Jinxin's maid, Yao Yue, had been secretly helping Wei Yuting regain the Emperor's affections. Thanks to Yao Yue's help, Wei Yuting reclaimed her status as the Emperor's concubine, and was now Meng Jinxin's equal.

Meng Jinxin was furious. In her anger, she ordered for Yao Yue to be beaten with a cane 100 times as punishment.

Yao Yue was beaten to death. In her final moments, she coughed out a mouthful of blood before finally closing her eyes.

"Cut!"

After Huang Guoqiang, the director, shouted "cut," he signaled to everyone on the set. "Very good! That's a wrap for Yao Yue!"

As soon as she heard the words "that's a wrap," Xu Xiyan got up and wiped the fake blood from her mouth.

"Jing Xi, congratulations! That's a wrap, all your scenes are done."

The production crew swarmed around her to congratulate her.

After removing her makeup, Qi Liya stepped forward and gave her a gentle, encouraging hug. "Jing Xi, your acting was wonderful."

"Thank you, Ms. Qi."

That had been the last scene for the day. The production crew began to pack up; just then, someone cheekily called for the director to hold a wrap party.

Huang Guoqiang saw that Qi Liya hadn't left just yet. He seized the opportunity and said, "Jing Xi finished all her scenes today. Good work, everyone. I'll be treating everyone to dinner tonight, and I want to see all of you there. We'll have dinner together."

"Awesome! All hail the director!" someone shouted joyfully.

"We'll suck him dry and make him regret it," another joked.

Everyone was excited. Qi Liya had been about to leave, but Xu Xiyan grabbed hold of her hand. "Ms. Qi, this is a rare opportunity for us to eat out together. In fact, this may be the last time I'll be able to have dinner with everyone here. Won't you please join us?"

Qi Liya could not bring herself to turn down Xu Xiyan's passionate request. "Well, okay. But just so you know, I'm only going because you asked me to."

"Thank you so much, thank you. This humble servant is deeply honored to know that the Emperor's concubine finds her to be worthy of her time."

Xu Xiyan gave a dramatic curtsy, sending Qi Liya into loud peals of laughter.

Not everyone was happy with Director Huang's offer to buy dinner. Zhao Ruiqi, walking behind Xu Xinrou, said enviously, "Who does that Jing Xi think she is? Why is the director buying everyone dinner just because her scenes are done? She's only playing the part of a lowly palace maiden."

Chapter 472: Ulterior Motive

Wen Li snorted disdainfully. "It's so obvious what's really going on between her and the director. She says she's innocent and all, but if this isn't proof of a scandal I don't know what is!"

"Exactly! Guan Xiaoling wrapped up her scenes the day before yesterday, but the director didn't throw a party for her," said Zhao Ruiqi, seething with envy and resentment.

Xu Xinrou was just as upset, but she kept her feelings from showing on her face. "You should study your script instead of spending your time and energy on idle gossip. Put in a good performance, and the director will give you a leg up in the industry."

Zhao Ruiqi did not think that was fair. "Ms. Xinrou, I know my acting needs work, but what about Jing Xi? She's a terrible actress, her acting doesn't hold a candle to yours! She's just playing the part of a palace maiden. Why is Director Huang giving her special treatment?"

Previously, when Jing Xi had been suspected of murder, most directors would have offered her part to someone else at the first opportunity.

But Huang Guoqiang had merely given Jing Xi time off. When the dust had settled, he immediately asked her to return to the set to continue shooting her scenes.

"Okay, that's enough," warned Xu Xinrou.

Zhao Ruiqi was now part of her clique, which meant Xu Xinrou had to be extra careful about what Zhao Ruiqi said in public. She did not want Zhao Ruiqi to get her into trouble.

Deep down, however, she had been keeping tabs on Xu Xiyan. She knew very well that Director Huang had been giving Xu Xiyan preferential treatment—it was clear as day to anyone who wasn't blind.

She did not believe for a second that Xu Xiyan and Director Huang's relationship was strictly professional.

The actresses were in the middle of removing their makeup when Xiao Ge, the set PA, ran over to inform them of the dinner venue.

Zhao Ruiqi pouted. "Ms. Xinrou, are we going to the wrap party for Jing Xi?"

"Of course we're going! Who knows, we may be able to get something out of it!"

Xu Xinrou gave Wen Li, her assistant, a significant look. Wen Li immediately took the hint.

Everyone was now gathered at the Celebrity Hotel, the venue for the party. Huang Guoqiang had reserved two luxury private rooms.

The main creatives and the principal actors took one of the rooms. The regular staff and the less important actors took the other.

Xu Xiyan ended up sitting next to Zhao Ruiqi, unaware that Xu Xinrou had arranged for them to sit together.

As the director and the investors—the important people—were all in the other room, everyone in Xu Xiyan's room quickly relaxed and enjoyed themselves.

Zhao Ruiqi took it upon herself to make sure everyone's cups were always full. She eagerly poured out drinks and wine for everyone.

Her usual disdainful attitude towards Xu Xiyan had done a 180; she was suddenly overly friendly, and kept urging everyone in the room to toast Xu Xiyan.

Xu Xiyan politely declined everyone who tried to toast her. "Sorry, I don't drink."

Xu Xinrou and Chu Yuhe had sabotaged her once, five years ago, and they had done it by plying her with alcohol. She had since learned her lesson, and was wary about drinking around people she didn't entirely trust.

"How about a soft drink, then? You're the guest of honor at this party, we're celebrating the successful completion of your scenes. You have to drink up, or the rest of us will feel guilty about drinking."

Zhao Ruiqi knew how to get other people to drink. She was being especially pushy now because Wen Li had tasked her with a special mission.

Everyone in the room was now waiting to toast Xu Xiyan, and she could not refuse them all. She was left with no choice but to raise her soft drink in a toast and drink it.

Halfway through the dinner, Xu Xiyan got up to go to the bathroom. She'd had a little too much to drink.

After relieving herself, she was about to exit the stall when she suddenly heard Xu Xinrou's voice from just outside the door.

"Is everything ready?"

The voice that spoke up next was Wen Li's. "Don't worry, everything's set. Little Zhao will take her upstairs, and the rest will be history."

"She lucked out and escaped five years ago, but this time, we'll teach her a lesson she won't forget."

Xu Xiyan waited for the click-clack of high heels to fade into the distance before coming out of the stall.

She gave a wry laugh.

Xu Xinrou and Wen Li had been talking about her, she was sure of it.

Was Xu Xinrou trying to sabotage her again?

With that same ol' trick?

That would explain Zhao Ruiqi's strange behavior: she had been trying her best to ply Xu Xiyan with drinks because she had an ulterior motive.

So their plan was to drug her, take her to a hotel room, and get a man to take advantage of her?

Why was it always the same clichéd trick? Would it kill them to be a little more creative, for once?

Chapter 473: A Taste Of Your Own Medicine

Xu Xiyan checked her reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks were still a normal, healthy pink, and she felt perfectly fine. She counted her lucky stars: she hadn't been drugged yet.

She calmly returned to the private room, and found that Zhao Ruiqi had already refilled her empty cup.

Xu Xiyan guessed that her drink had been spiked.

Once she sat down, Zhao Ruiqi lifted her own cup for a toast. "Jing Xi, you finally finished all your scenes. We'll miss seeing you on the set. Here's another toast—I hope we'll be able to get together again in the future."

What a load of bull!

Xu Xiyan snorted inwardly as she raised her cup with a beatific smile on her face.

Zhao Ruiqi stared at Xu Xiyan's cup. She was shouting like a maniac inside: Come on, drink it! It's going to be such a "fun" and "exciting" night for you!

The cup was almost at Xu Xiyan's lips when there was a sudden ke-rack!—it was the sound of a phone hitting the floor.

Zhao Ruiqi watched the new phone she had bought for 10,000 yuan hit the floor. Sh*t! She felt as though she had been punched in the gut.

She set her cup down and hastily bent to retrieve her phone. Xu Xiyan seized the opportunity to switch their drinks.

"The phone's okay, right? I hope I didn't break it," Xu Xiyan asked worriedly as Zhao Ruiqi picked up her phone. In actual fact, she had deliberately dropped it, but she wasn't about to admit it.

"Oh my god, look at this crack on the screen! It's a new phone! Why am I so unlucky?! Ugh..." It pained Zhao Ruiqi to see what had become of her new phone. She could not stop sighing.

"Oh, that's probably just a sign of good luck coming your way. Out with the old, in with the new! Come on, let's have a toast—to a change of luck for you!"

All of Zhao Ruiqi's attention was now on her phone. She downed her drink without a second thought—all she wanted now was for her bad luck to go away.

The dinner was now coming to an end. Many of the male production staff were already drunk. Xu Xiyan put a hand to her forehead. "Qiqi, I feel so dizzy!"

She got up unsteadily. She looked like she would fall over any minute, if it wasn't for Zhao Ruiqi supporting her.

Zhao Ruiqi was also feeling light-headed from the spiked drink. She brushed it off, thinking it was just the white wine she had been drinking.

"Jing Xi, if you're feeling dizzy, I can take you upstairs to rest. Director Huang booked a room, in case any of us wanted to refresh ourselves."

"Okay, sorry for the trouble."

Xu Xiyan leaned against Zhao Ruiqi, and let her steer her out of the private room.

Zhao Ruiqi led Xu Xiyan to the elevator and pressed the button for the 11th floor. It took her some time to figure out the floor plan and find the room Wen Li had booked: Room 1128.

Once they were inside the room, Zhao Ruiqi tried to get Xu Xiyan onto the bed. Suddenly, her own legs buckled under her and she fell onto the bed, together with Xu Xiyan.

"It's so hot in here! I'm burning up!" Zhao Ruiqi mumbled.

Xu Xiyan sat up from the bed and turned to look at Zhao Ruiqi, whose face was now flushed. Zhao Ruiqi was no longer thinking clearly; she began to tug at her own clothes.

The drug was working!

Hmph, you wanted to sabotage me? Well, here's a taste of your own medicine!

Xu Xiyan decided it would be unprofessional to leave without making sure everything was in place. She removed all of Zhao Ruiqi's clothes—stripping her naked—and pulled the blanket over her.

She dimmed the lights, leaving just enough light for it to be "romantic," and then quietly left the room.

Xu Xiyan did not immediately leave the hotel. She hid in a dark corner; she wanted to see what kind of man Xu Xinrou had arranged for her.

After waiting for about 15 minutes, a man appeared in the corridor.

It was a fat man, to be precise, and one who looked very familiar. It was Mr. Li, the fat, piggish investor from five years ago.

Xu Xiyan had to admit she was impressed—in all the wrong ways. This disgusting man had apparently continued to lust after her since his failed attempt to bed her five years ago.

Five years ago, Mr. Li had missed out on his "night of fun" because something had come up at the 11th hour. He had never stopped regretting it.

This time, Mr. Li had made for the hotel at full speed after receiving the call. He had learned his lesson and did not dare waste a single minute.

Chapter 474: Like a Ravenous Wolf

Mr. Li used a spare keycard to unlock the door to Room 1128. He opened the door and entered the room, hardly able to contain his excitement.

The room lights, dim and hazy, made the place seem especially sexy and romantic.

He immediately began looking for his prey as soon as he was inside.

He spotted someone under the blanket on the large bed: it was a girl, her long black hair spread over the pillow.

Mr. Li sprang into action. He immediately removed his clothes, brimming with excitement. In a flash, he had shrugged out of his clothes and was now naked as the day he was born.

He had mastered the art of shedding his clothes because he had done this many, many times.

“Heh heh, I'm here, my little beauty! You naughty girl, you left me hanging for five years!”

Mr. Li pounced upon the girl on the bed like a ravenous wolf.

Back downstairs, the party in the private room with the production bigwigs had ended. Xu Xinrou said goodbye to Huang Guoqiang, and left the room with Wen Li in tow.

Qi Liya and her assistant, Xiao Ke, were the only ones left at the dinner table. The main creatives of the production had taken turns toasting Qi Liya, and she was now terribly drunk.

Xiao Ke helped Qi Liya get to her feet. She was about to take her away when Huang Guoqiang, looking anxious, stopped her. “You shouldn't drive, you've been drinking too. How about this—I booked a room upstairs. Why don't you take her there and rest up? At least wait till she's awake and fully alert before you go.”

“I'll do that. Thank you, Director Huang.”

Xiao Ke was short, and not particularly strong. She was having a lot of trouble trying to keep Qi Liya, who was completely drunk, steady on her feet.

Huang Guoqiang decided he had to step in. He handed Xiao Ke a credit card. “I'll help her. Why don't you help me settle the bill instead? My PIN number is 851010. When you're done, come look for us in Room 1106.”

Xiao Ke was dumbfounded. She gaped at the credit card for about two seconds: Why was Director Huang's PIN number the same as Qi Liya's birth date?

But she did not ask any questions. She obediently handed Qi Liya over to Huang Guoqiang, took the credit card, grabbed her coat, and made a beeline for the cashier.

Huang Guoqiang took hold of Qi Liya and helped her out of the private room. He did not notice the figure crouched in a dark corner—it was Wen Li, who had stumbled upon this scene quite by accident.

Wen Li stealthily followed after them. She saw Huang Guoqiang and Qi Liya enter the hotel room together.

She inwardly cackled with glee as she snapped photo after photo. She had assumed that Qi Liya was some kind of pure, innocent fairy, but now she knew she had been far off the mark—the actress was sleeping with the director!

All she had to do was release the photos, and Qi Liya's reputation would go into the gutter. No one would dare go up against her dear Xinrou after that.

Wen Li was careful not to alert them. She left quietly; she would contact the media and the paparazzi in the safety of her home.

She would tip off the paparazzi and have them catch Mr. Li and Xu Xiyan in bed the next morning—the news would blow up and send the entertainment industry into a gossiping frenzy.

[Jing Xi caught sleeping with investor!]

[Qi Liya and Huang Guoqiang are having an affair!]

The headlines in the entertainment news section were going to be absolutely scandalous!

But Wen Li had not realized that she was a spider in someone else's web: Xu Xiyan's.

Xu Xiyan had turned to leave after Mr. Li entered Room 1128. That was when she saw, quite by accident, Huang Guoqiang helping Qi Liya into Room 1106, which was in the opposite direction.

She had wanted to go up to them to ask if Qi Liya was feeling all right, but had been distracted by the sight of Wen Li tailing them and surreptitiously taking photos.

Xu Xiyan immediately understood what was going on: if Wen Li released her photos, the entertainment industry would explode with juicy gossip.

Wen Li left as soon as she was done taking photos. Xu Xiyan, on the other hand, made her way towards Room 1106. She pressed the doorbell.

Huang Guoqiang assumed it was Xiao Ke. He opened the door and was surprised to see Xu Xiyan. “Huh? Jing Xi, you're still here?”

“Course I'm still here. I couldn't leave without checking on Ms. Qi.”

Xu Xiyan entered the room without waiting for a reply—just in time to see Qi Liya puking her guts out as she clung to the side of the bed.

Chapter 475: Surprise Bedside Visit

Xu Xiyan quickly grabbed a trash can and placed it before Qi Liya for her to throw up in. She rubbed Qi Liya's back as she turned to look at Huang Guoqiang. “Director Huang, please get me a bottle of mineral water.”

“Oh, sure.” Huang Guoqiang finally recovered from his surprise. He quickly found the bottle of mineral water that the hotel provided free of charge, unscrewed the cap, and handed it to Xu Xiyan.

After Qi Liya was done puking, Xu Xiyan gave her the bottle of mineral water. Once Qi Liya had gargled and rinsed out her mouth, Xu Xiyan helped her onto the bed to rest.

Xu Xiyan took the trash can to the bathroom to clean it. When she returned, she said to Huang Guoqiang with a serious, no-nonsense expression: “Director Huang, it isn't safe to stay here. You have to get another room for Ms. Qi.”

“What's wrong?” Huang Guoqiang asked, surprised.

“I was in the corridor just now, and I saw paparazzi tailing you. They've already taken pictures of the two of you entering this room. My guess is, the two of you will be in the headlines tomorrow. I think you

may even receive a surprise bedside visit from them tomorrow morning. You know how they do things: 'hi there, surprise, we caught the two of you in bed, now smile for the camera!'"

Xu Xiyan was the only person bold enough to explain a serious problem to Director Huang in such an off-beat, lighthearted manner. He could barely keep himself from bursting into laughter, despite the severity of the situation.

Huang Guoqiang smiled at her as he poked her forehead. "Well, I'll be damned! You saved my ass, you little devil! Okay, I'll go book another room, right this minute."

"I'll go. You're too famous, you'll attract too much attention!" said Xu Xiyan, laughing. She hurried out of the room.

After Xu Xiyan had left, Huang Guoqiang walked over to the bed to see how Qi Liya was doing.

This was a rare opportunity for him to be alone with Qi Liya, and Huang Guoqiang was reluctant to waste a single second of it. He watched the face of the sleeping woman, his eyes full of tenderness.

He could not resist reaching out and lightly caressing her rosy cheeks with his fingers. He touched her reverently, as though she were a rare, priceless treasure.

Qi Liya found his touch ticklish. She suddenly opened her bleary eyes, catching Huang Guoqiang by surprise. He immediately withdrew his hand, quick as lightning.

She closed her eyes again, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Huang Guoqiang put a hand to his chest as he let out a low sigh of relief. That had been a close call!

It wasn't long before Xu Xiyan returned with Xiao Ke. With the help of Huang Guoqiang, they moved Qi Liya to the room next door.

It was a twin room that Xu Xiyan had booked under her name. She and Xiao Ke stayed with Qi Liya the entire night.

Early the next morning—just as Xu Xiyan had predicted—Celebrity Hotel was swamped with reporters, all of them competing to be the first to break the news.

The reporters who had come after hearing about the potentially juicy gossip were divided into two camps: one group made for Room 1128, while the other surged towards Room 1106.

The reporters opened the door to Room 1128 and swarmed inside, their cameras flashing away as they snapped photos of the man and woman occupying the large bed.

Mr. Li was awakened by the sound of the camera flashes. He sat up on the bed, naked, and finally noticed the reporters standing before him.

He reflexively covered his face with a hand. "Stop that! You can't take photos! Get out! Who let you in?!"

Zhao Ruiqi woke up at that. She sat up; the blanket slipped away from her, exposing her naked upper body to the reporters, who continued snapping away.

Zhao Ruiqi realized she was completely nude; on top of that, she was being photographed by reporters. She covered her chest in alarm and let out a long series of shrieks.

Mr. Li turned his head, saw the unfamiliar face beside him, and gave a loud shout of surprise. Where was Jing Xi?

He had slept with Jing Xi last night, hadn't he?

Who was this?

The reporters who participated in the raid for Room 1128 were extremely pushy and ruthless. The reporters outside Room 1106, on the other hand, were a lot more well-mannered—they were trying to get the scoop on two very important people in the industry, after all. They did not mind waiting.

After what seemed like an eternity, the door to Room 1106 finally opened. The reporters could hardly contain their excitement; they raised their cameras, ready to capture proof of the affair.

The first person to come out of the room was the renowned director Huang Guoqiang. The reporters surged forward to interview him: “Director Huang, what is your relationship with Ms. Qi Liya? Did the two of you spend the night in this hotel room together?”

Chapter 476: Sleeping Together?

Huang Guoqiang frowned. He adjusted his suit and said nonchalantly, “What are you talking about? I don't understand.”

The reporters were all trying to look over his shoulder to see if Qi Liya was in the room. To their surprise, right after Huang Guoqiang walked out of the room, he was followed by the main creatives of his production crew: the scriptwriter, the cinematographer, the production sound mixer, and the editor.

This was evidently the morning after an all-night script study session with the main production staff. Where had the tip-off about Huang Guoqiang and Qi Liya sleeping together come from?

As the group of reporters stared in confusion, Huang Guoqiang began walking away, his head bowed in serious discussion with the scriptwriter regarding future plot changes. He looked so earnest and professional the reporters could not help feeling guilty about taking up his valuable time.

The reporters remained frozen in place even after Huang Guoqiang had disappeared down the corridor with his production crew in tow.

A few moments later, the door to Room 1107 opened. To everyone's surprise, Qi Liya emerged from the room, followed by Jing Xi and Xiao Ke.

The reporters stood with their mouths open. If nothing had happened last night, what was up with that photo that had been leaked on the internet? The photo of Huang Guoqiang entering a hotel room with his arm around Qi Liya?

Although the photo did not actually prove anything, the reporters had a natural talent for jumping to conclusions with their overactive imaginations.

One of the reporters wormed his way through the crowd to interview Qi Liya. “Qi Liya, it looks like you didn't spend the night with Director Huang Guoqiang. How do you explain this intimate shot of the two of you?”

Qi Liya stopped walking. She looked at the photo the reporter was showing her on his phone: it was a photo of Huang Guoqiang and her entering a hotel room. She laughed in an open, easy manner as she explained: “Last night was Jing Xi's wrap party. I accidentally had too much to drink, and Director Huang helped me to my room. I don't know who took this particular photo, but I don't think it really matters. I have plenty of similar photos on my phone, taken during my spare time. What, are you interested in other such photos?”

The answer was watertight, but the reporter was not one to give up easily. “But there's a rumor going around the internet that Director Huang is trying to woo you. Is it true?”

Qi Liya's smile grew even more radiant. “Are you serious? Director Huang would never choose someone like me. If he tries to court me, I'll marry him, right away. He's a mature, reliable man and an accomplished director—anyone would jump at the opportunity to mooch off his fame and reputation!”

The reporters knew she was right: who wouldn't want to mooch off someone like that?

If the rumors were true, Qi Liya and Huang Guoqiang would be married by now.

By this point, the reporters had all arrived at the same conclusion: the photo was not proof of a one-night stand, as they had initially assumed. Nothing had happened last night; they had come all this way for nothing.

The three women began to walk away. The reporters immediately ran after them, shouting questions along the way. Since they were already here, it would be a waste not to seize the opportunity to interview Qi Liya, the famous list actress, and Jing Xi, the popular newcomer.

“Qi Liya, why are you still single?”

“Qi Liya, is it true that you had your heart broken a few years ago?”

“Jing Xi, are you good friends with Qi Liya?”

“Jing Xi, now that you've finished shooting all your scenes in ‘Red Sleeved Beauty,’ will you be joining the production of ‘Root of Evil’ next?”

Outside the hotel, the production crew was waiting for them in the minivan. The women got into the vehicle and drove off, leaving the pesky paparazzi and reporters behind.

On the way to the production set, Xu Xiyao received a call from Ma Haodong, who said to her cheerfully over the phone, “Jing Xi, congratulations on getting the part! Don't forget to buy me dinner!”

“What are you talking about?” Xu Xiyao was puzzled by the sudden congratulatory phone call.

“You've been chosen for the part of the female lead in ‘Root of Evil,’ didn't you know?” Ma Haodong continued, without bothering to wait for her reply, “We'll be able to act opposite each other again. I can't wait!”

Xu Xiyan was even more confused now. “Brother Dong, you must have gotten mixed up. They chose Yang Qiong for the role, didn't they?”

Chapter 477: All Over

Xu Xiyan knew that Yang Qiong, the famous martial arts actress, had won the poll. The votes for Yang Qiong were double the votes for Xu Xiyan; it wasn't even a close contest.

The lead female role had definitely gone to Yang Qiong, so why was Ma Haodong congratulating her now?

“Nope! That Yang woman cheated, they caught her vote spamming and disqualified her. You were second in the poll, which means you're the real winner!”

“What? Are you sure?”

Xu Xiyan felt sorry for Yang Qiong: the actress was popular enough to win the poll, fair and square. Why did she have to cheat and risk it all?

News of Xu Xiyan winning the lead female role for “Root of Evil” quickly spread throughout the entertainment industry—along with the less-than-savory news about Yang Qiong cheating on the poll.

Many in the industry were envious of Xu Xiyan. They were quick to point out that she did not deserve the starring role, that she had only gotten lucky because her competition had messed up.

One man's luck was another man's misfortune...

Zhao Ruiqi was inside an apartment, kneeling beside Xu Xinrou's feet and sobbing her eyes out. “Ms. Xinrou, I know I messed up. Help me, please! Save me!”

Xu Xinrou was furious. She smashed her tablet and gave Zhao Ruiqi a vicious kick. “You useless piece of trash! I told you to drug Jing Xi, but what did you do? You slept with Mr. Li instead because you thought it would be a shortcut to fame and success!”

She had carefully planned for Xu Xiyan to be defiled by Mr. Li. The reporters would catch them in bed, and Xu Xiyan's reputation would be ruined forever. But that wasn't what had happened.

Xu Xiyan had not only escaped unscathed, she had gotten lucky and landed a starring role!

The reporters had caught Zhao Ruiqi sleeping with Mr. Li instead, and everyone was now talking about the scandal. Huang Guoqiang had booted her from his show as soon as he heard about it.

“That wasn't my intention! I spiked her drink, I swear, I don't know why we swapped places. When I woke up, the room was full of reporters, and I had no idea what was going on. It was an accident! Ms. Xinrou, please, you have to believe me! If you don't help me, it'll be all over for me.”

Zhao Ruiqi did not have anyone backing her; she had relied solely on sucking up to Xu Xinrou, who had kept her baited with small favors and rewards. Xu Xinrou had been keeping Zhao Ruiqi around to use as a scapegoat at the crucial moment.

But before that could happen, Zhao Ruiqi had destroyed her own reputation and future. Not even Xu Xinrou could help her now.

Xu Xinrou had ordered Wen Li to spread the rumor that Jing Xi was sleeping with Mr. Li, but the reporters had caught Zhao Ruiqi and Mr. Li in bed and the rumor had died a quick death.

Jing Xi's reputation had not suffered in the slightest. On the contrary, the fake rumor had actually helped boost her popularity: everyone was now looking up her name on internet search engines.

The internet was full of comments condemning Zhao Ruiqi for her shameless act. Everyone wanted her to drop out of show business.

A large number of netizens rallied behind Xu Xiyan, who appeared to be a victim of Zhao Ruiqi's mess. Others did not particularly care one way or another; they were only joining the discussion for the juicy drama.

[Zhao Ruiqi? Who? Ew, what a shameless woman!]

[She's ugly and flat as a runway. She's a total nobody. She must be desperate, she sold her body and dignity just to get ahead!]

[Disgusting! She tried to smear the reputation of my darling Xixi, and it backfired on her. Serves her right!]

[Yang Qiong's even worse, she tried to cheat on the poll. Ugh! Jing Xi totally deserves to be the leading lady for "Root of Evil." Can't wait to see her performance!]

[If Jing Xi doesn't become famous after this, then there is truly no justice in this world [Like] [Like] [Like]]

[Eh, I think this is just a PR stunt for "Root of Evil" and "Red Sleeved Beauty." The directors probably planned the whole thing!]

[I heard that Ni Yun will be composing and performing the theme song for "Red Sleeved Beauty." It'll be Ni Yun's first classical-style song, I can't wait to hear it!]

[Hey guys, did you hear? Ni Yun just released a new single!]

Chapter 478: Secret Romance

[I downloaded it as soon as it was out! It's amazing! I'm going to the record store later to buy a physical copy for my collection.]

[I'm so in LOVE with Ni Yun's songs! You HAVE to watch the music video, it's sooo romantic!]

Xu Xiyan scrolled through the comments: the gossip surrounding the two TV shows had turned into a discussion about Ni Yun's new song.

According to the statistics on music streaming sites, 1.28 million users had listened to Ni Yun's new song "Maybe" within 12 hours of its release. The number of downloads hit a record high, and the song immediately rose to the top of the New Release chart.

The song also generated a record number of comments and reviews on the internet.

[It's soooooooo good!]

[I love Ni Yun's songs, gotta collect them all...]

[Hey, did any of you notice there's actually a female lead in Ni Yun's MV this time around? This is new, none of his other MVs have a female lead!]

[Who's the leading lady in the MV? She's so pretty!]

[Is that Jing Xi and my prince Mu Chenguang in the MV?]

[I watched the MV, and now I really want to be part of a super dreamy romance!]

[Ni Yun actually chose Jing Xi to be the leading lady in his MV? Wow, she must have earned a ton of brownie points in her previous life to be so lucky. What did she do, save the world or something?]

The popularity of the “Maybe” MV shifted all interest in Jing Xi and Ma Haodong to Jing Xi and Ni Yun instead.

One reporter tried every trick he could think of to get her to spill the beans on Ni Yun, but Xu Xiyan deftly side-stepped all of his question. The enigmatic Ni Yun was now even more elusive and mysterious.

Xu Xiyan privately wondered whether she had, as the netizens had suggested, saved the world in her previous life. That was the only explanation for her miraculous luck in this life: what had she done to deserve her chance to meet Huo Yunshen?

She had been the first person to listen to the song “Maybe.” As soon as the song was released to the public, Xu Xiyan immediately shared the song on her Weibo.

She listened to the beautiful melody and the irresistibly magnetic voice, and saw, with her mind's eye, Huo Yunshen's stoic face and charming eyes.

Oh, he was truly a real-life Prince Charming, and it felt wonderful to be in a secret romance with him!

Xu Xiyan was in such a good mood she immediately agreed when Fang Xiaocheng asked if she wanted to meet up.

The two of them met up in the private room of a BBQ restaurant. Fang Xiaocheng gaped at the food Xu Xiyan had ordered: there was enough to feed a party of seven or eight. She asked, “Is it payday for you? What's with all the food?”

Xu Xiyan had ordered enough food to cover the entire table, and had even asked the waiter to uncork a bottle of red wine. She was determined to get happily drunk with her friend. “I don't have to wait until payday to treat a good friend to a meal, do I?”

She laughed and added, “I can't help it. I'm in a good mood today.”

“Yes, I can tell. A woman nourished by love is like a flower in full bloom,” said Fang Xiaocheng with a teasing smile.

She deliberately put on an exaggerated thinking face as she asked, "Oh wait, I seem to recall someone sobbing their eyes out not so long ago, wailing about her broken heart and swearing to never fall in love again for the rest of her life. Gee, who was that, I wonder?"

Xu Xiyan blushed. She covered her warm, tomato-red cheeks with her hands as she shot Fang Xiaocheng a Look. "Okay, that's enough. Don't ever bring that up again, I'm warning you."

The pork belly sizzling on the BBQ grill was now fully cooked, and the two women dug in. Xu Xiyan chewed on the grilled meat as she said, "Orange, do you remember the first time we ate barbecue? I still remember the taste. I told myself then, I need to work hard and make a ton of money, enough money to afford to eat barbecue every day."

"I remember. Back then, I had no idea your life had been so difficult that you'd never tried barbecue before. I mean, you were from the wealthy Xu family, for goodness sake."

Fang Xiaocheng picked up a piece of grilled meat with her chopsticks and placed it in Xu Xiyan's bowl.

Xu Xiyan lifted her wine glass and clinked glasses with Fang Xiaocheng. She threw back her head and downed her wine.

The red wine had a bitter aftertaste, and it burned her throat a little, but Xu Xiyan was filled only with sweet, treacherous happiness. "Well, all my dreams and wishes have come true. This is the life I've always wanted. From now on, I won't have to be jealous of you and Dazhi, ever again."

Chapter 479: A Terrible Thought

"Yup, I'll be the one doing all the envying in the future. I'll be jealous of your super handsome husband and your adorable daughter. Yanyan, you're living proof that God always leaves the best for last. You've waited so long for your happiness. You have my blessings."

They toasted each other, and happily dug into the grilled meat.

They had not gotten very far into their meal when a group of unfamiliar men barged into the private room. The men made a grab for Xu Xiyan, moving quickly and without hesitation.

Xu Xiyan had been caught off-guard. By the time she realized what was happening, the men had wrapped their hands around her arms.

"Let go of me! Who are you?"

Xu Xiyan struggled, knocking over the wine bottle and BBQ grill with her feet. The wine bottle and grilled meat rolled onto the floor.

Fang Xiaocheng saw the men drag Xu Xiyan out of the private room. She quickly ran after them and tried to grab hold of Xu Xiyan. "Hey! What are you doing?! Let go of her!"

The men were violent and ruthless. One of them kicked Fang Xiaocheng, sending her toppling to the floor. They whisked Xu Xiyan away.

"Yanyan..."

Fang Xiaocheng got up from the floor. She ran out of the BBQ restaurant, but Xu Xiyan was nowhere to be seen.

Just then, Fang Xiaocheng felt a chill rise from the soles of her feet; it crept upwards, all the way to the top of her head. A terrible thought occurred to her: this had to be a kidnapping. What was she to do?

Those men had rushed into a public building and snatched Xu Xiyan away in broad daylight. They were worse than thugs. Was Xu Xiyan in danger?

Frightened, Fang Xiaocheng thought of calling the police, but she knew it would be some time before the police sent someone to investigate.

Fang Xiaocheng was worried sick for Xu Xiyan. She needed all the help she could get.

Fang Xiaocheng suddenly thought of Huo Yunshen and the number he had left her. He had told her that she was welcome to dial the number any time she needed help—he would do his best to help her, no strings attached.

She had assumed then that Huo Yunshen was just being polite, and anyway she had not been unlucky enough to have to call the number and ask for his help. But now Fang Xiaocheng did not hesitate to dial the number. She would take whatever help he could offer; it was better than sitting around twiddling her thumbs, waiting for something to happen.

The number Huo Yunshen gave Fang Xiaocheng was actually Yi Xiao's. Yi Xiao answered his phone, and was surprised to hear that it was Fang Xiaocheng. As soon as he learned of what had happened to Xu Xiyan, he immediately reported it to Huo Yunshen.

Huo Yunshen was frantic with worry when he heard that Xu Xiyan had been kidnapped. He wheeled himself out the door without bothering to change his clothes or shoes. At the same time, he issued an order to Yi Xiao: "Get someone to look for her, quickly. Find her, and make sure she's safe, as soon as you can!"

"Young Master, I've already sent a few men to investigate. We should be hearing from them soon."

Yi Xiao always knew what Huo Yunshen wanted. He knew what needed to be done, and when.

Huo Yunshen had not even reached the front door of his mansion when Yi Xiao's men reported back with their findings. They had checked the surveillance video for the BBQ restaurant, found the suspects' vehicle, and tracked it to a private estate.

But security was tight in the estate; it was difficult for someone without authorized access to see what was going on inside.

Huo Yunshen inwardly seethed. Someone had been bold enough to lay a finger on Xu Xiyan in broad daylight. Whoever it was probably had a death wish.

Huo Yunshen wanted badly to take several men with him on a rescue mission to save Xu Xiyan, but his wheelchair would slow everyone down. His best bet was to send his most efficient man to execute the rescue mission.

Who should he send?

The best man for the job was—Ye Xun.

Huo Yunshen already knew Ye Xun's real identity: he was an outstanding member of JS, and his codename was Dark Dragon.

Ye Xun was soaking comfortably in his bathtub when Huo Yunshen called him on his phone.

He glanced at his phone, and saw that it was Huo Yunshen's number. The last time Huo Yunshen had called him, he had asked Ye Xun to help pick up Ying Bao. What was it this time?

Ye Xun lazily raised the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

Chapter 480: Hypocrite

The voice that sounded over the phone was grave and icy. "Dark Dragon, Jing Xi is in danger. Her coordinates have been sent to you. As Supreme Commander of JS HQ, I hereby task you with this honorary rescue mission, to be carried out without delay. No mistakes. Disobey me, and you will be punished according to JS law!"

Before Ye Xun could process all that, the call ended.

His brain remained fried for a few seconds. Hold on, who had that been on the phone?

Huo Yunshen?

And he had called him Dark Dragon?

And wait, what else had he said? Supreme Commander of JS HQ? Honorary rescue mission?

There was only one person in all of JS who could give out honorary missions as Supreme Commander: Zeus.

Uhhhhhhhhh...

Ye Xun was sure he had been hearing things. The call couldn't have been from Huo Yunshen. It didn't sound like him. He checked the number again—okay, it was definitely Huo Yunshen.

Ye Xun's mind was in a jumble: Oh my god, I thought he might be Zeus, and now I finally know for sure!

Huo Yunshen is Zeus!

Master Zeus personally contacted me and gave me a mission!

Oh my god, what did I do to deserve this honor?

Wait, what was the mission again?

He was supposed to rescue someone ASAP... Jing Xi?

Ye Xun's jumbled thoughts finally sorted themselves out. The gravity of the situation dawned upon him.

He was an elite member of JS, and all his training had not been for nothing. Ye Xun was quick to adapt and respond to any situation: it took him less than 10 minutes after receiving the call to prep his gear, arm himself, and walk out the door. This was the highest level of speed and efficiency.

There was no time to lose, so he hopped onto a motorcycle and sped towards the private estate, located in a hilly area of Peijing.

Xu Xiyan was tossed onto a large, soft bed. Her hands and feet were tied—she looked for all the world like a trussed chicken. She struggled in vain to get up.

Who were these people?

What did they want with her?

These were the questions running through her mind when a fat balloon of a man entered the room. It was Li Dazhuang. He waved the other men away. "Leave us."

Xu Xiyan knew that voice. A chill ran down her spine. Was the person who had kidnapped her Mr. Li, the head of Lianzhong?

With great effort, Xu Xiyan turned her head to look at the obese man. She said, surprised, "You did this, Mr. Li?"

Li Dazhuang clasped his hands behind his back as he paced the floor before the bed. There was a flicker of lecherous amusement in his eyes as he studied Xu Xiyan, who was still lying on the bed. "Bingo. I asked my men to invite you over."

Xu Xiyan snorted. "Is this how you send an invitation?"

"My apologies, Ms. Xu. Those men of mine are unsophisticated brutes—they may have been a little crass with their invitation," explained Li Dazhuang. He made no move to untie her, however.

"Why did you 'invite' me here today, Mr. Li?"

Xu Xiyan was trying her best to stall for time as her fingers worked furiously behind her.

"Ms. Xu, you should know by now that my love for you is sincere. I wanted to ask you out five years ago, but I let that opportunity slip away. Now that I've been given another chance, we should get to know each other better this time around, don't you think?"

He had always thought of Xu Xiyan as a juicy piece of meat, one that he had drooled over for many years. Finally, the day he had been waiting for was here—he would finally be able to devour her!

Xu Xiyan inwardly rolled her eyes: "my love for you is sincere?"

He was married with kids, but cheated on his wife at every opportunity. This man knew nothing of sincerity. He was a hypocrite.

Ugh, he's so disgusting I think I'm going to hurl!

Xu Xiyan suddenly felt the mattress sink to one side: Li Dazhuang, the massive landwhale, had jumped onto the bed beside her, creating a small crater around him.

A greedy look crept over Li Dazhuang's face as his fingers, adorned with red rubies, stroked Xu Xiyan's cheek.