

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 121

TangShi stayed where she was letting it out, crying into her own arms as she self hugged and sniffing back the carnage for a long while. Afraid to go out and face those screens once more but knowing she needed to. Knowing she couldn't leave this all to Linlin and she needed to be stronger to face this.

"Tang?" Linlin gently knocked on the door, quiet and gentle as she spoke, knowing her friend was crying. Checking the handle and finding it locked so slid down on the outside and sat against it instead, guessing TangShi needed some thinking space. Linlin had wanted to follow her at first but had given her time alone while she scooted through the remaining footage, saving her the agony of doing it. "I watched it all for you." Linlin wiped her own face, the trickle of angry and sad tears which had soaked her face through watching the CCTV.

"It shows you passing out completely and he carried you. Down a hall right to the hotel room and in without any response from you. You were a completely useless sack of no movement whatsoever. It's pretty clear you had no concept of anything going on and the actual room itself has no cameras. What we have though is enough for the police. We have him drugging your drink, taking your cell phone from you, and then physically carrying your lifeless body to his own booked room that he set up in advance. We have the report and the booking form and all the CCTV. Please think about going to them. We can't let him get away with this." Linlin whimpered, her own heart aching and yet she couldn't imagine what TangShi was feeling.

"I should have listened when you said to get my body checked. Maybe they would have found more.... I just didn't relay believe he was capable of ..." She couldn't bear to say it, her head throbbing, her insides contracting and without warning she gagged and had to thrust herself back to the toilet to get her face in before she threw up again. Bringing up nothing but bile and clear fluid as he had already emptied what little she had eaten today.

"Are you okay? Open the door." Linlin could hear her being sick and knew it was probably a direct reaction to having it laid out all in front of her so clearly. That she couldn't outrun what he did. He basically drugged, kidnapped, and abused her.... this man in a position of authority whom she trusted. Linlin was sick on her behalf, riled up with anger and despair and an urge to hunt him down and cut his genitals off. A bubbling lave of hatred and venom coursing up and swearing to serve this asshole with some real cold revenge.

"I'm okay. I just... it's raw. I can't process sit." TangShi choked, her throat burning from bringing up stomach acid and wiping her face to pull herself back together. Being sick again somehow stopped her tears and brought her emotional state back to calm and she slid across the floor to unlock the door before moving back again because she wasn't sure if she was done. Linlin leaped up to her fete and quickly came inside to start

brushing her hair back into a ponytail to look after her and found a washcloth for her face.

“Let’s go to the police. I wanted to confront him so badly. I thought I had it in me and that my anger would be enough to find the courage, but after seeing that....” How confident and unfazed he was about slipping something in her drink and blatantly handing it to her. “I’m scared of him. Of what he did. I feel like I never knew him at all. I don’t know what he’s capable of if he can do something like that. I don’t think confronting him would make him sorry.... he’s crazy.”

Linlin exhaled with relief, a huge weight lifting from her chest and she scooted TangShi into a hug. Hauling her close and snuggling against her to bring her security. TangShi was trembling all over and felt unusually warm.

“Good girl. Let’s do that. Let’s go right now instead of calling them here. The sooner he’s picked up the better”

“I can’t go there.... or be seen going there. What if someone takes a picture? It might start all kinds of rumors.” TangShi’s eyes widened in horror at the thought of something like this getting out. AT people knowing she was unclean, and someone had invaded her body without consent.

“You’re right, I’m sorry for not thinking that through. I’ll call them. We can have officers come here.” Linlin had never had to report anything to the police in her life and wasn’t even sure how this process worked. Unsure if wealthy people called the regular number.

“Wait..... Is it safe to just randomly ask the police to come? Aren’t there particular contacts for people like us, in the media, famousso it doesn’t get out? What if they’re seen coming here and it affects your family too?” TangShi had heard Rhea mention this before and YuZhi over something trivial, about having to be careful about who exactly was involved in anything related to the Leng Group family as most would kill to get a newsworthy scoop to sell. That they had a certain contact or calls were made through a department for anything legal. She was confused and didn’t want to make this worse. Her head foggy and fatigue kicking her butt the more she tried to think.

Reputation was everything in China and no well-known family would want uniformed police showing up at their residential address. It could always be misunderstood.

“Normally I would ask ZhengLi what to do, but you....” Linlin stopped talking knowing this was probably not the best time to bring him up or point out she didn’t want his help. Hating herself for realizing how reliant she was on that waste of space and how every time she said his name it still hurt like a bitch.

TangShi sat for a long moment, her face blank, her manner calm, and her focus zoned out as she thought this through and knew one way or another it would get back to them

anyway. She thought she could do this alone, but the rug had been ripped out from under her feet and the next step terrified her. She had never dealt with police or anything as scandalous as this before. Even if they spoke to a discreet detective, she was under the care of the Leng family, and they would want to speak to her Fiancée at least. It would all come out and then what?

“Call him. Ask him to see you, but don’t tell him why. Just make something up until he’s face to face, and you can show him. I don’t want to be there.” TangShi wasn’t ready to have any kind of connection to YuZhi and didn’t really want to see ZhengLi either. She was steeped in shame and unable to really figure out how to feel all while still reeling from the heartbreak and humiliation of the way both of them treated her. A million thoughts making her emotionally fragile, and it all kept coming to one detail... Rong Cai might have sexually assaulted her. It’s all she could focus on. That he violated her, and she wasn’t the same as before.

“I don’t want to leave you alone, Tang. How about I put you to bed with some sleeping pills for now. You haven’t slept and you look beat, and he can come here while you nap? You won’t have to see anyone, and he can help me report this. I’m sure they won’t need to talk to you at first. ZhengLi will know what to do.” Linlin wasn’t going anywhere while she was this way.

“Okay. I don’t feel so well..... I don’t think I’ll need meds to sleep. I’m dizzy and exhausted and I want to lie down anyway. I think maybe sleep will help me with feeling sick.” TangShi legs trembled and turned to jelly as she got up, so she had to cling to Linlin. Her mind swimming and her face flushing with heat that had been lingering for a few days now. Uptight and sick to her stomach with a thumping sore head and a sense of surreal dreaminess moving in. She knew it was probably shock at seeing him pour something into her drink or just the slap in the face of reality. “Wake me up when he’s gone, so you can tell me what he said we should do.”

Linlin kept her mouth shut, wanting so badly to say something about ZhengLi being expected to apologize and grovel after this but didn’t. She knew TangShi had a whole lot of mess to come when YuZhi found out she was innocent all along and that she had left her suffering for over a week and dealing with this by herself.

Linlin was raging at both men, and then more so for ZhengLi’s lack of presence in her life since this happened. The odd text to relay something to do with TangShi but other than that he had completely avoided her and not once called. Hating on them both for all this hurt and confusion and letting them down when they thought they were the men who might be there to support them through life’s trials. Oh how wrong they were and Linlin stuck her chin up and men tally scolded herself for ever believing one man might be worth the effort.

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ZhengLi wandered into YuZhi's apartment with a heaviness on his chest that was suffocating, unable to really shake this awful feeling of shame and guilt that slowed his steps and weighed down his posture. YuZhi was standing in the kitchen making them food after he told him he was on his way as he needed to see him. Oblivious to what ZhengLi was about to tell him and ZhengLi braced himself for the worst of reactions. Hating to be the one to do this.

"Hey, bud. What's with this late evening guys night? You seemed tired today and thought you were heading home for an early one." YuZhi was in a pretty neutral mood. Never really okay since breaking up with TangShi and he hated being in this apartment nowadays, but he was trying to move forward with his life. He was glad ZhengLi called him to come over as he was starting to regret the early evening here when these rooms held all her memories, and he was sure in certain places he could still smell her perfume. It was a unique kind of torture since she left.

"I don't know how to say this so..." ZhengLi furrowed his brow, swallowed hard and then dumped the brown envelope on the counter between them. His inability to come up with the right way to broach this eating at him.

"What this? I thought we agreed to leave work until tomorrow and both have a much-needed break." YuZhi frowned sliding it away and carried on making Ramen instead.

"It's about TangShi..... please just look." ZhengLi's tone was husky and low, his eyes slightly reddened and YuZhi glanced from him to the document in hesitation, seeing the somber and almost emotional state of ZhengLi. Confused why he was getting vibes of something being wrong and it pushed aside his impulse to refuse.

"What about her?" Despite telling himself a million times a day to put her out of his head, he couldn't stop himself when he felt like something might be wrong with her. "Did her injury turn out to be worse than a sprain?" He grabbed at the file thinking it was a hospital report and hurriedly yanked it open, concern taking place of heartbreak and hauling out the papers to read.

ZhengLi stood watching him, too gobsmacked with everything Linlin showed him this afternoon to formulate words. His mind a mess of shame and regret but also anger and pity. Knowing they failed their friend and pushed her aside while she had been going through hell and left her to fend for herself in finding evidence to face this monster.

ZhengLi had sat in his car for a long while, unable to really forgive himself for abandoning his girlfriend and his friend. Because of his dumb pride and loyalty he had been blinded. He knew YuZhi was about to feel a thousand times worse in this when the truth was laid out for him.

YuZhi read the first paper which seemed to be a hotel booking form for that scumbag Cai and clicked on the date right away. Unsure if ZhengLi was trying to tell him something and confused as to why he would need to. It was already over.

"This is from the day before. You're saying she planned to stay with him even before the dinner? That she was having an affair?" His hands started shaking and his heart shuddered thinking there was more pain to be had, not really swallowing this as truth, but ZhengLi shook his head.

"No, read the next one..... don't jump to any conclusions until you see what else I have to show you." ZhengLi slid into a bar stool and propped his elbows on the table, supporting his head as he tried to let it all sink in. Staring down at the black granite and exhaling slowly to try and ease his stress.

YuZhi flipped to the next papers; a three-page file from a lab and froze as he scanned the name and results, a swirling of realization coming over him as he had to start over to read it again. Momentarily unable to process what he was seeing, and he screwed up his face and scanned one more time.

"GHB? Isn't that..." His voice broke in his throat, raggedy and harsh. His skin paling as coldness overtook him and his mind scrambled to make sense of this.

"Date rape drug. I have CCTV from the hotel too. TangShi didn't do anything, YuZhi..... She was drugged by him until she passed out and he carried her to a room he booked in advance. He planned this. She did nothing wrong." His words were like a death sentence to YuZhi's heart. A piercing awful pain that stabbed him in the guts and ripped up through his body to his brain. "It's all on film. Even him spiking her drink while she seems sober and taking her phone away from her. She tried to leave and passed out. She didn't know what was happening and she was left at the mercy of that asshole all night. Linin told me she woke only seconds before you walked in, as she was running to the bathroom to vomit, confused, panicked, and scared about where she woke up."

"That asshole..... drugged her. Carried her? He" YuZhi could barely get the words out, his throat closing and his eyes filling with moisture as his lungs caved in. Running the end of the sentence through his mind was enough to make him lose his sanity.

YuZhi experienced swimming and spiraling confusion and pain as this sunk in and the flashes of her tearful begging face hit him like a smack in the forehead. She kept saying she didn't know and couldn't remember, tearfully staring at him for some kind of help. She begged him and he left her there with the guy who assaulted her, in that room. He walked out and abandoned her with the scum that had done awful things to her.

YuZhi covered his mouth as his insides upchucked with violent reaction and had to spin to the sink as he emptied the contents of his stomach. Throwing up with shock from the depths of how bad all of this was and his part in causing Tang more harm. The girl he swore to cherish, love and protect and he turned on her and left her in the clutches of some sadistic rapist who drugged her.

"Jesus Christ." ZhengLi sprung to his feet and ran around the counter to come to him, patting his back and grabbing a glass to get him water. "Are you okay?"

“What have I done?” YuZhi choked out the words through another bout of gagging, his insides crumbling to dust and his chest heavy with the inability to catch his breath. “Is that why she came to the office? To tell me? Why didn’t I let her tell me?” YuZhi couldn’t stop the tears which fell in dramatic fashion. Running down his nose and dripping into the sink where he was still bent over. His head woozy as a dizzy spell hit him and he had a full physical reaction to his own regret.

“What we both did. We were so sure she hurt you because she couldn’t deny it and accepted blame. We both have a lot to be sorry for but what matters most right now is making sure that fucker gets nowhere near her again. We need to make him pay for what he did to her and make sure TangShi is really okay.” ZhengLi pulled him upright, grabbing a napkin to dab his mouth and forehead which had turned clammy and damp and frowned at the obvious despair etched on his friend’s face. Hating seeing him visually distraught.

“I need to see her..... I need to ..” YuZhi knew that he had a hell of a lot of groveling and begging to do. His heart near exploding with agony as he thought about what she must have been going through this past week without him.

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Afraid, alone, knowing she had been locked up with a scumbag who did god knows what to her for endless hours. Just the thought of it, of her being in that room vulnerable like that made him spin back to the sink and upchuck another bout of liquid and food remnants. Gasping through the gags before his legs gave out and he slumped down, sliding against the kitchen cabinets with a thud as he ended up on his ass on the floor with his knees bent in front of him. Propping his elbows on his knees and cradling his head as he tried to regulate his erratic breathing.

“I went to detective Kim and gave him copies of everything while filing the report and opening the assault case. He’s going to see TangShi tomorrow to take a statement and take it from there. He’s going to be discreet but it’s a very obvious case and we might have to pull PR in to cover all bases to keep this hidden. Rong Cai won’t get away with this.” ZhengLi squatted down and held the napkin to YuZhi’s head, shaking his own and sighing heavily.

“We really screwed this up.” ZhengLi’s remorse reached as far as his relationship with Linlin too, and her words from that first moment. Telling him to trust her judgement, that TangShi would never. They were eating at him like a brain worm. She had been right, she had known, and yet ZhengLi had ignored his own heart and yearning for Linlin and pushed her away too.

“I hurt her..... I left her. Punished her and pushed her out of every part of my life. Why couldn’t I trust what I knew about her to second guess it? Why couldn’t that doubt that was there be what I focused on instead of the pain?” YuZhi was caught in his own head,

his words soft and not real questions for ZhengLi, but more of a self-criticism. Thinking to how much he hadn't wanted it to be true and had asked her to tell him it wasn't.

"TangShi didn't know at first either and believed she cheated. What we did is wrong but not unforgiveable. What we do from her on now matters a lot more. We can't leave her to deal with this alone. You need to bring her home and protect her while this is investigated." ZhengLi had told Linlin that no matter what he would do anything in his power to see TangShi righted over this. And that he would do anything to be forgiven by both of them.

Linlin had coolly looked him in the eye and told him he could go deal with the police report. Neither accepting his words nor refusing them and he knew it wasn't going to be a simple case of sorry for her either. He doubted her best friend, and hurt her, so Linlin wouldn't let him off easy. ZhengLi had been missing her like crazy but when focused on YuZhi's emotional state it was easier to tell himself he couldn't see her.

"I need to go see Tang, right now. I don't care if she hates me, throws me out, or refuses to see me. I'll stand outside and wait for however long it takes. I wasn't there when she needed me, but I won't let her down again. I'm such an idiot." YuZhi pushed his head back against the wall and stared blankly at the ceiling.

"It's late. Linlin said she was in bed as she's been sick lately, not sleeping. Maybe it's best if...."

"What? Sick? Is she okay, what's wrong with her? I'm not staying here if you tell me that." YuZhi was on his feet in a flash, his thoughts a blur and the only thing he knew was that gate that had been holding back, all the longing and craving her had been unleashed and a tidal wave was hitting him hard.

"YuZhi, be smart about this. She's already a mess and you showing up at stupid o'clock after everything that's happened won't help. She's hurting and you are probably the last person she wants to see right now. She's processing a lot."

"What am I supposed to do? Knowing this now...knowing what she's going through? Knowing she's sick." YuZhi despaired, pushing ZhengLi aside so he could go find his car keys and shoes. It's all he needed.

"We can go over there tomorrow with detective Kim and give her support while she makes her statement. I think for now at most, send her a message. If she's awake she'll reply. If she's not we see them tomorrow." ZhengLi knew TangShi wouldn't readily let YuZhi back near her after what Linlin said today. The girl had been crushed one too many times by her life and this one was the deepest scar.

"I told her I didn't love her anymore." YuZhi turned on ZhengLi unexpectedly, his eyes misted over as a tear trolled down his cheek and his heart broke all over again. "What must that have done to her?" He tugged at ZhengLi's jacket, almost like a lost child

would, begging him to understand why he couldn't stand still here. "At the very least she needs to know I didn't mean it. That I love her so much that my life has been an empty mess without her."

ZhengLi shifted his gaze to the floor between his feet, swallowing hard. Choking up too at how painful this was to witness.

"Call her and let her decide if she wants to see you. I don't think you're in the right state to comfort her face to face. Give her the choice."

YuZhi didn't hesitate but pulled out his cell phone and swiped to his block list, even that detail causing a wave of self hatred to swell up at his own stupid behavior.

"Wait. Here. She changed her cell number because Cai kept harassing her." ZhengLi reached into his pocket for his own cell remembering why Linlin gave him a new number earlier.

YuZhi's expression snapped from one of sadness to instant fury, a furrowed brow growing deep and a scowl emerging as it really sunk in that Rong was still going after her after everything he'd done. An inner volcanic anger surging up like molten lava. Turning towards the door and moving to storm off.

"I'll kill that mother fucker. You're right, Tang won't want to see me, I wouldn't either, but I can spend tonight taking my anger out on that bastards face for a second time. Making sure he never goes near her again." YuZhi pushed his phone back into his pocket with intent, riled up and fierce, and ZhengLi grabbed him with force and swung him back towards the living room before marching him backwards to the couch. Knowing once his friends psycho switch was flipped he could get himself in a whole lot of trouble. It was a rare thing but not unheard of.

"Hell, No! We involved the police so let them do their job. Let's do this right." ZhengLi stayed bent over him bearing down to keep him in place. "Look, I too want to smash that fucker's face in, but it won't help TangShi in the long run. Be smart about this and think of the bigger picture. Your family name, hers, and even the spotlight on that Cai prick. Think of what the media attention would do to her and what the world knowing what he did would cause her." He was grasping for anything to calm him down and change his course of action.

"I have to do something." YuZhi crumbled, his anger still simmering but his overwhelming guilt eating him up, making everything raw. Back to being an emotional wreck who couldn't stop seeing her tear-stained face in his mind's eye and ripping his heart apart all over again.

"Give her breathing space. Take time to let this sink in and I'll show you the CCTV footage when you clam down. We need to approach this from a different angle and think about protecting her. If it gets out, which it might. What happens if he denies it and

wants it to go to trial? We need to be logical here and figure out the best steps for TangShi in all of this. That's what we can do for her. Maybe even take her away from Shanghai for a while in case this erupts."

YuZhi calmed down as sense got the better of him and he nodded in deflation. Knowing what ZhengLi was saying was right, but it didn't make any of this easier. It's not like he could step back into TangShi's life, take over and whisk her away. He wasn't even sure TangShi would ever want to see him again, especially after how he treated her at Leng group. YuZhi sunk back into the soft cushions as ZhengLi exhaled with relief at his submission and sat down beside him, sensing the dying breath of his hostility fading away.

"Rip up the divorce papers, get her ring back. Reinstate her finances and anything else she needs. Undo everything I fucked up for her.... I'll even move out and let her live here if she can't stand to be around me. I want a bodyguard and a driver and car for her. She needs constant protection." He leaned his head back on the rest, suddenly exhausted to the core and knowing he shouldn't wake her up at this hour. He should let her sleep, give her that luxury of escape where she could forget all of this for a little while and do what ZhengLi said tomorrow. "From here on in, I do everything I can for her to make up for what I've done to her. Even if she never wants to come back to me, I won't let her down a second time."

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TangShi sat motionless on the couch, silently awaiting Linlin showing in the Detective who she assumed was who rang the bell a moment ago. She tried not to fidget with her nails as she swallowed hard and concentrated on deep breaths to calm her nerves. All night she had tossed and turned, going over the statement she would have to give today, and she wasn't looking forward to going through everything again. Even with blank spaces it somehow had begun to traumatize her now she knew the truth.

Her dreams had been a torturous mix of nightmares and flashes of memory, and yet she still was none the wiser to what actually happened once she was in that room and she didn't want to know. If Rong was arrested and gave testimony then the details were not something she felt she was strong enough to face if he admitted what he did. Right now it was somewhat of a blessing that she couldn't remember anything, and she wasn't sure she would have the mental strength to get through knowing the facts. Like this there was always a tiny glimmer of hope that he did nothing to her, and it gave her a miniscule of sanity to get through it.

"Ummm Tang, It's not the detective it's ..." Linlin's voice faded out as she walked back into the room, followed by someone taller and TangShi blinked up towards them. Her face paling and blood running cold when she noted it was not one, but two taller men, right behind her. ZhengLi first with a somber expression as he locked his focus on her face and nodded lightly with a warm smile hello. An aura of apology and awkwardness.

TangShi's pulse almost stopped when YuZhi walked in behind him with caution, his eyes scanning the room and coming to rest on her quiet face as she sat here waiting patiently. He hesitated, a flip in his stomach making his chest tighten and he wasn't sure how he should approach her. Swallowing hard and his palms getting clammy, but she didn't visually react at all.

"Why are you here?" She asked blandly, moving from looking at them to her hands as she smoothed out her simple dress. Her demeanor poised and calmed as though this was nothing.

"Can we have a minute alone." YuZhi gestured to her, looking for permission to get the other two to step out. Nervous and uptight and trying to read her blank expression.

"What for?" TangShi shut him down, spotting Linlin sliding sideways to ZhengLi where she caught his leather jacket sleeve and tugged him with her.

"We'll go make coffee. Take your time. Don't mind us." Linlin knew that despite being angry at YuZhi, she shouldn't interfere with the conversation they needed to have and ZhengLi and her had some words to talk through of their own. ZhengLi didn't object but followed her with haste, catching her by the wrist and sliding his hand down to hers in an attempt to hold it but got slapped away.

YuZhi watched them leave before proceeding, moving into the living room and hovering by the arm of the long couch where TangShi was sat.

TangShi exhaled heavily, irritated that Linlin would do this without asking her and sat upright with a stiff flinch.

"I'm sorry, Tang..... I don't know what else to say. How to undo everything. I'm really sorry. I know those words sound empty and flat and underwhelming compared to everything, but I really am sorry." He clawed for the best way to apologize always being pretty useless with sentimental words and expressing his emotions. YuZhi stammered as he tried to formulate something more meaningful.

"I don't want your apology anymore. I don't even know why you're here." TangShi was closed off and numb to everything. The shock at seeing him fading fast and instead a darkness settled over her heart leaving it in empty cold shadow.

"Tang, I know I royally screwed us over. I wish I could undo the past week. If I knew then what I ..."

"Right. If we both knew then what we do now, maybe you wouldn't have left me there, but we didn't, and this is what it is. Why are you here? What do you want?" TangShi wasn't in the mood for heartfelt conversations and regrets. She checked her watch knowing the detective would show up soon and exhaled heavily, tapping her nails on her watch face and looking around at anything but him. Scared to let him open the

wounds in her heart while she needed to stay strong to get through this interview. She couldn't fall apart now.

"I'm here to give a statement about showing up at the hotel. The text, what happened. The detective knows I'm coming here. I assaulted him but he never pressed charges... although he might after this..... That aside, I'm here for you. To support and take care of you. To make amends." YuZhi moved to the single armchair sensing she didn't want him close and slid down to perch on the edge. As much as he was craving to go over and hug her, he could read her very strong stay away signals. It hurt his heart, but he understood why she didn't want him near her.

"I wouldn't put it past him. He's scum. I don't doubt this is going to escalate when he finds out I reported him." TangShi spat the words with bitterness a hint of hurt showing through in her strained tone and YuZhi flinched, longing to be nearer her to comfort her. Seeing her like this, all the anger and hatred pulled away from his now perfectly focused sight, he could see how thin she had become, how pale and he had to clench his fists to fight the urge to go to her. She was fragile and vulnerable and trying to be strong. It broke him inside.

"I should have done worse. For what he did..... I regret stopping when I did. Are you okay? I mean, physically. What about your foot.... and your hand?" YuZhi glanced away, down at his lap as guilt consumed him and made everything heavy. Regretting so many things these past days and not sure where to begin. He had replayed so many times the few scenes between them and how much he had added to her pain.

"Both are fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine." She answered robotically, a slight sarcastic laugh at the end which only highlighted how not fine she was. Her eyes misted involuntarily as she forced them out and had to sniff back a wave of emotion.

"I know you might not want to hear this right now, or care, but..... throw away the divorce papers. The apartment is your home, you can go back anytime, and I'll move out if that's what you want. I reinstated your cards and your bank account, and I left your ring in your old bedroom at home. I have a driver and car for you for when you feel able to go out and I'll make sure you have a bodyguard at all times, always protected no matter where you are."

"I don't need or want any of it. Right now, I honestly don't care anymore. Divorce me, what difference will it make." TangShi really meant it. She had become so entrenched in this mess that she had stopped being able to feel anything beyond cold disconnect. Her mind and heart numb from shock and betrayal after a lifetime of hard knocks, and it had finally snapped something in her soul. An accumulation of growing too big for her. She could only experience emptiness and a sense of loss, but the tears had stopped falling and when she woke up this morning it felt like all her purposes in life had flown away on the breeze.

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YuZhi swallowed hard to curb the knee jerk wince of pain in his gut at her words, knowing he deserved it but it still stung. ZhengLi had told him a million times this morning to give her time and understanding. That she was processing a lot and she was hurt and defensive. That he shouldn't antagonize her or give her a hard time or pressurize her. He was trying really hard not to break down in front of her as it was, but he hated seeing her this way. This wasn't his sweet sunshine girl.

"Come home. Please. Where I can take care of you and make sure you're safe through all of this. This is only the start before the police take things further and things might get messy or go public. I want you where I can take care of you."

"I managed pretty well without you lately. I can take care of myself. It's not my home anymore. I don't have a home." TangShi got up, agitated with his nearness and the slight waver in her emotions with his soft words and promises. Hating that he was trying to win her round as if he did nothing at all but despising her weak heart more for being moved. His apologies were slicing away at the thick black crust that entrenched her soul and she didn't want to weaken.

"If you want to leave Shanghai for a while, I'll take you anywhere you want. An extended break, whatever you need." YuZhi was trying to ignore the negatives and her pushing him away and instead focus on solutions to help her.

"I want to leave anyway, but not with you. I think maybe Linlin and I need to go for a long extended vacation when this is dealt with and I can figure out what to do with my life." TangShi had not given it much thought, but she did like the idea of not being here for a while and knew Linlin would drop everything to go with her.

"Tang, please, I'm really trying here. I know you're mad and hurt. That I fucked up and I'll do anything to make up for it. Just don't push me away like this. I want to fix things. I don't want to lose you." YuZhi stood up to follow her to the window where she was heading, holding himself back. His palms itching to reach for her and hold her close. Craving her and fighting himself to hold back.

"I'm not asking you to try. I just want to be alone to think for a while. To figure some stuff out."

"I can figure it out with you. You don't need to leave me to do that." YuZhi's voice hitched, a slight hint of desperation as panic rose in him at the thought of her going somewhere far without him, and he had to regulate his raspy breathing to remain calm. A sense of rising dread swirling form inside.

"Can you really ever touch me again? Knowing what he's done to me? Can you promise it's not what you'll think of when you come near me or try to touch me?" TangShi turned to him, her face flushed as a single fresh tear rolled down her cheek. A slight tremor in her stomach as she waivered and her words came out in a soft calm and heartbreaking

way. Truly believing she was damaged goods now and her self worth had dropped even lower..

“I..... I love you. We will get through all of this. It might not be easy at first but..”

“So, No? You can't can you?” She cut him off, her stomach twisting.

“That's not what I said. Of course I can touch you. You didn't do this to us.” YuZhi stepped towards her closing the gap between them and lifted his hand automatically to wipe the tear from her face. Pausing mid air as hesitation hit hard and he faltered about whether she wanted his touch or not. Knowing he no longer had the right to reach out and do it.

TangShi stared at his midair posture and snorted, a strange sound that was somewhere between a laugh, a snort, and a sob. Pain slicing her chest.

“Yeah, looks like it.” She pushed his arm away with a shove at his elbow, marching past him to walk away from his suffocating presence and gasped as she was yanked backwards into his arms. YuZhi hugged her from behind in a vice like grip, burying his face in the nape of her neck and wrapping her up so tight she couldn't catch her breath. Enveloping her with need and pouring his soul into this touch he needed so badly for so long.

“That's not why I stopped. I wasn't sure if you would let me touch you.” YuZhi closed his eyes, inhaling her unique scent and sinking into the warm familiar feel of her, highlighting with acute pain just how much he had missed her. His heart swelling with an ache that threatened to suffocate him, and he knew he would have to use all his willpower to let her go again. This was his home, right here, wrapped up with her wherever she went.

TangShi stood frozen and unresponsive. Not moving a muscle and not reciprocating his touch. An inner anger and heartache swirling together so her body recoiled inwardly at his familiar presence, and she flashed back to standing in his office when he told her didn't love her anymore. Her hand throbbing at the memory of his cruel removal of her ring before he pushed her down. Choking her up and pushing a pain back to the forefront that she had managed to simmer down low the past couple of days. Despite longing for this, she couldn't stand it.

TangShi caught his wrists harshly and shoved him off with all the strength she could muster, tears filling her eyes as the agony grew outwards and upwards and her body felt like it was pulsating. Shirking him off as though his touch sliced and moving away fast to get the burning feel of his touch off her skin. Wanting to hate him rather than submit to him.

“I don't want you to touch me. Go home. Leave me alone. You said we were done, that you didn't love me. You told me to get out of your life. So why are you here? Because

the story changed, and you realized I was never that person? You should have known that from the start!" TangShi turned on him, the damn breaking loose and the tears cascading down like a waterfall as the words rambled out in a hysterical way. Gasping for breath and unable to control the tidal wave he brought out of her. YuZhi's face crumpled.

"I didn't mean it, baby. I was in pain and I was heartbroken and lashing out. I should have known, you're right. I always thought I could be objective and rational with most things in life but...my mom, Tang, she taught me that sometimes true love can be screwed up and you betray the one you love most in a moment of weakness. Didn't I do the same with Rhea? I fell in love with someone else while I was meant to love her. I admit it... I have insecurities, I have doubts and they colored how I saw all of this. I stupidly let those blind me from what I knew about you in my heart, and I pushed you away and hurt you."

TangShi cried openly, knowing in her heart she too had doubted herself and what she'd done that night and she could understand why he thought it too. She had accepted blame and in turn given him more reason to doubt her. It didn't change how cruelly he had treated her, or the way he abandoned her when she needed him though and those were the things she wasn't ready to forgive.

"How can I trust you to ever be there for me again?" She whimpered, shuddering as she tried to take calming breaths to control the cascading tears. Holding her heart which was swelling to bursting point in her chest.

"Because I learned a lesson from this, and I'll never doubt you again. Just give me a chance."

"I don't know I..." TangShi gripped her head and raked her fingers against her skull, unable to think clearly anymore when confused and consumed by grief His presence making everything tumble down so that she no longer knew how to feel.

The doorbell chime rang loud and clear and interrupted them, cutting the conversation short. Both spinning their heads towards the main hall and TangShi knew she had to pull herself together to face the Detective.

"I'll get it, sit." YuZhi caught her wrist as she started to move that way and lifted his other to wipe tears from her cheek with his thumb, pulling her close for a second so she held her breath. So naturally it made her flinch and stare at him in wide eyed surprise. "I'm still your husband. Whether you like me or not. You can push, but I'm not leaving you again. I know you love me, and you need to know I still love as crazily as I did. That I'm sorry and I won't stop making up for this. I'm not going anywhere without you." He let go of her and ran his hand over her head and down her hair with a gentle touch. The way he always did, and she turned her face away so he wouldn't see how her expression crumpled and new tears broke free. Such a simple affectionate gesture that reminded her of how safe and warm a world with him was. Grinding her down.

TangShi didn't answer but walked off to pick up the tissue box and sit down where she was. Leaving him to go let the Detective in and tried to pull herself together. Pushing thoughts aside of her and YuZhi and focusing on the one task she had to get through today because it was the least agonizing. The start of the mess that was about to come into her life. Deep down she knew that everything may have felt like a nightmare so far, but the reality was that hell was about to break loose after today and she should brace herself for what was coming.

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"I know you don't think this is the best idea, but what YuZhi and ZhengLi said made sense, baby girl. This is where the public expect you to be and the place YuZhi can keep you safe now they've arrested Rong Cai. My parents don't exactly run a tight ship in terms of security at home and with them coming back soon you won't get space the way you can here. YuZhi will look after you in ways I can't." Linlin felt like she was deserting her and throwing her back into YuZhi's arms after everything even though this was furthest from the truth. This just made more sense for her.

"I know." TangShi answered quietly, her eyes straying around the apartment that she once loved as home and yet it now felt cold and sterile. Unsure she had made the right decision.

"Excuse me, ladies." ZhengLi came in behind them wheeling TangShi's largest suitcase with balanced boxes on top and one under his arm as he slid past them towards her old room. YuZhi was close behind him with a similar load and they both offloaded her things back where they once came from. Everything she owned and had moved out two weeks or so ago was being brought back again by them.

"My grandfather wants us to go see him in a couple of days when you're settled again." YuZhi smiled her way, still walking on eggshells around her, still shocked he had managed to convince her to move back here finally and afraid of upsetting her. He was seeing it as a ray of hope, a light in the dark, and clinging onto the possibility that in time she might forgive him. Having her back here was a start and if he had managed to salvage friendship and love from the train wreck of their beginning then he was sure he could earn forgiveness and trust this time around.

This was the best place for her. A closed and secure complex with high security as standard. Closed parking, closed access for nonresidents, and fitted with the best security cameras and gadgets throughout the entire building. Only rich people lived here and guests were made to sign in at the first-floor security desk. He would be here in the evenings and during the day she was not planning on leaving until the case against Cai was resolved.

"I'm tired. I might unpack, take a bath and go to bed. You don't need to stay with me, I'll be fine." TangShi turned to Linlin, still not properly communicating with YuZhi a whole

lot yet. She didn't feel ready to interact with him and had been avoiding it all together and knew she couldn't keep Linlin hanging on as third wheel.

"I can stay and help." Linlin offered but TangShi shook her head and pushed her towards the door with a soft sigh.

"The sooner I start trying to go back to normal the better. I have things to sort out." TangShi wanted head space. Rong Cai had been arrested yesterday morning and was detained for now, but it wouldn't be long before he was out on bail. That thought scared her enough to agree to coming back here because despite her feelings about how YuZhi treated her, she still felt safest with him and knew he wouldn't let anything else happen to her. She didn't trust Rong's mental state at all anymore and knew he was a man who would stoop to inhumane levels.

"I can help her." YuZhi wandered back out of her room, free of the baggage and ZhengLi followed behind.

"Come on, princess. I'll buy you dinner and take you on a date. Leave these two to unwind and reacquaint themselves." ZhengLi wandered by Linlin, hooking an arm around her waist as he passed and was met with defiance and struggle as he tried to pull her. Wriggling and trying to shove him off as she was not too big on forgive and forget just yet. ZhengLi ignored her futile attempts, bent down and hoisted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, laying claim to his wild woman before waving their way and marching off with her. Linlin cursed him out loudly and slapped his shoulder and back yet she didn't really fight to be free. She was enjoying how hard he had been chasing her again these past few days and she was softening slowly to all the charms and sweetness that made her fall for him in the first place.

"I don't need help." TangShi turned away from YuZhi when the apartment door closed, leaving them alone. She had been dreading this moment of just the two of them together, afraid she would weaken and cave.

"It's a lot to unpack, two of us will make it faster." He offered and was met with a blank expression and a stubborn shake of her head.

"You said you had work to do. I want alone time. I don't want help." She turned away from him to go to her room but YuZhi caught her by the wrist and stopped her mid step.

"Is this how we're going to be from now on? Living in one space but dodging one another? I miss you, tang. I miss the way we used to cohabit effortlessly and life felt right." YuZhi's tone was strained yet soft and he was overjoyed about her being here even if it also pained him that she was close but so distant now.

"I don't know. I can only go with how I feel. Right now, I feel like I want to be alone, that's all." She slid her arm out of his hand and turned to him with a slight side glance.

"I'm sorry if you think I'm being ungrateful. I don't know what else to say." She couldn't explain the feelings inside because she didn't even understand them herself.

"I don't. I understand why it's like this and I'm grateful that you came home. Honestly. You have no idea how ecstatic I am to have you here, even if it's sleeping apart and we start again as friends. I just hoped you would give me a chance to try and fix things." YuZhi dropped his gaze to his feet knowing that he was pushing her after promising he wouldn't but he badly wanted to be able to walk over to her and wrap his arms around her like before. He missed being able to touch her, hold her. He missed everything about her. Being this close again reminded him of how much he lost and he had no one to blame but himself.

TangShi stood for a moment, unsure what to say or how to act when he seemed to be trying so hard but she couldn't put her wall down no matter how she tried. It wasn't just him but everything right now and it felt like her life was in stasis and everything was up in the air. Her floor had been ripped out and yet she didn't know how to fly.

No more school, the impending trial against Rong, their relationship being over. Her ability to paint had died during all of this because stress had killed her love of drawing. It felt like nothing was permanent and she had no stability. Her security shattered and what she thought was all mapped out in her future had all turned to dust. She wasn't even sure what would happen with their contract now or the baby she was meant to conceive.

"I really didn't want to bring this up because it's not appropriate timing but, the Leng Group annual ball is next weekend and I have to go. As my very famous fiancée they'll expect you to be there but I can go solo if you don't want to." YuZhi rubbed a hand across the back of his neck and hairline, feeling awkward for even suggesting this but he couldn't keep ignoring it while his aunt was breathing down his neck about it. The PR schedule had already been messed up with their two weeks of being apart.

"I'll think about it." TangShi shrugged, not wanting to let him down but neither in the mood for it. It felt like unimportant details compared to her current life problems.

"You hungry? I could cook something. If you don't want help to unpack then maybe I can feed you."

They both stood motionless and silent for a second, staring at one another as TangShi seemed to be thinking it through and eventually she nodded. Knowing she needed to try and give a little or this would be hard to deal with as a living situation. "Do you have any wontons? I could handle some soup and wontons." TangShi hadn't had much of an appetite lately. Nausea plaguing her constantly and anything strong tasting or smelling had been making her gag. Her palette could only deal with light tastes and no spice while being this way and she put it down to her emotional state.

"I can go get some wantons from that place you like. Will take me twenty minutes tops. May as well order soup there too. Anything else?"

"Red bean paste rice cakes? I have such a craving for them the last couple of days. I don't know why." TangShi blushed, feeling like she was being demanding but it was the first time in a fortnight she had wanted real food without forcing it.

"Sure. I won't be long. Can you set the table and we can eat together?" YuZhi hoped the chat about food was loosening her up, not liking her shyness, and that if he kept on being normal maybe in time she would relax around him again. He knew she didn't trust him anymore and he got why, it just sucked. Seeing her this way as though they were strangers skirting around each other.

TangShi stood still and watched him leave, in two minds about sitting together but knew it wasn't an unreasonable request. She had to stop being angry at him at some point but it didn't mean she was going to jump back to being his girlfriend or sharing his bed. It was just dinner in their shared space. It didn't mean anything.

TangShi padded through to her bedroom to change into comfortable clothes before setting the dining table. Sighing at the familiar space that had once been where she slept every night before she moved into YuZhi's room when their relationship changed. Now it seemed cold and empty and her gaze wandered around the untouched shelving, baby pink bed linens, and white dresser as her eye landed on a familiar red velvet box placed there. Her heart flipping over as she caught sight of it and her stomach churned with a flutter of emotion.

She swallowed hard, recognizing the ring box right away and wandered to it like a moth to a flame. Unable to stop herself as she picked it up and clicked it open without hesitation. Her bright sparkling princess cut engagement ring twinkled back at her, dazzling in its perfection, causing both a sense of warm sentimentality and yet slicing heartache at the same time. A memory of happiness before mayhem and she closed it again fast before the tears began to fall. She didn't know why it was so hard to rewind and let YuZhi bring her back to him, but it was and something was holding her back. This ring brought home her reluctance and yet she couldn't fathom why.

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A feeling deep inside that this wasn't an easy fix and slotting back into life with him was never going to be the same again. He hurt her and it cut a little deep and she needed time. A sixth sense that this was the calm before the storm and somehow worse was yet to come. Her gut kept telling her not to get too comfortable as her roller coaster ride was far from over.

Her cell phone began to ring, distracting her from her thoughts and she spun around expecting to see Linlin's name on the screen as she checked in. Instead it was

Detective Kim and her hand trembled with apprehension when she reached for it. She picked it up, took a deep calming breath and answered him with a bright hello.

“How can I help you detective Kim?” She tried to sound more upbeat than the last time they met, when she had sobbed through an hour of questioning and statement writing. Embarrassed that he saw her at such a low point.

“Miss. Lei, sorry to call you at this hour. Mr Leng said you would be moving back to his residence this afternoon so I hope you settled in well. I was glad to hear you two were trying to reconcile.” The detective knew about the breakup and her living situation because YuZhi had explained everything that happened.

“Yes. YuZhi has gone to collect food for us while I unpack.” TangShi ignored his hints that were getting back together.

“That’s good. Okay, so the thing is, Mr. Cai will appear before the judge tomorrow to set bail. There’s a very high probability he will be let out as his family are not exactly financially struggling. We’ve taken his statements and formally charged him so I wanted to give you a head’s up that he will be allowed home and that if he tries to contact you then you should let me know right away.” The Detective had seen scum like him over the years and could see the hints of obsessive behavior, worried that Rong might try and come after her while free. He had been angry as hell to find out TangShi accused him of so many things and that kind of mindset usually led to stalking.

“Did he confess to everything? Did he admit to what he did while I was unconscious?” TangShi’s throat closed, her voice cracking and it became hard to swallow as fear consumed her. She had dreaded the moment she found out for sure what he did in that room. No longer able to hide from it.

“He’s denying everything. He claims you two had a drunken one-night stand of which he can barely remember a thing. He doesn’t care about CCTV or lab results and deemed them false.” Rong Cai’s story hadn’t change one bit, he was clinging to his so-called innocence, and TangShi’s heart sunk, feeling like this was Rong’s way of admitting he had sex with her. She didn’t want it to be true but she couldn’t deny it was highly probable.

“Do I need to be there tomorrow?” TangShi had to sit down as her legs turned to mush and her head woozy. Overcome by a low heat spreading up from her toes and bringing her nausea back.

“No. Your lawyer assigned by Mr. Leng will be there on your behalf. You should stay home and take it easy. The Lawyer will call you and let you know the outcome after he’s been up before the judge. We’re hoping he’s detained but I really can’t see refusal of bail to be honest. He’s known as a normally upstanding contributor to society and this is seen as a first offense despite the testimony Miss. Rhea Cheng gave us about previous

behaviors. None of that can be used without contact from his previous victim and the specifics." Detective Kim had been unable to track down his last victim at all.

"Okay, thank you for letting me know. I don't plan on going out anytime soon anyway."

Detective Kim stayed on the line for a minute more, making polite goodbyes and such and TangShi hung up the phone with a heavy heart and a new sense of dread. The last couple of days had somehow felt surreal and lighter after reporting everything to the police but she knew that the moment would come when reality hit and the repercussions of it would come back to haunt her.

Rong was probably mad as hell and gunning for her now that she was ruining his life. She was no longer going to be safe wandering around Shanghai like before because he knew where she lived. His reputation and freedom would be damaged and she knew he would seek some kind of payback.

"Tang, I'm back." YuZhi called out as he let himself back into the apartment with bags in hand. Whistling to himself and in a merrier mood as he walked back up here knowing she was home with him. The food hot and ready to eat and was surprised to see the empty room and table devoid of settings. He laid them on the counter and went in search of her, impulsively needing to check she was still here.

"I'm here." TangShi walked out to meet him, waving her phone at him as they met at her door. "Detective Kim called me. I'll set the table now." TangShi brushed past him unaware of how pale she looked and how red rimmed her eyes were and YuZhi caught her with an arm across her abdomen. Stopping her with a gentleness and leaning back to lock eyes on her. His concern growing with how she seemed.

"What did he say? Are you okay? Are you upset? Talk to me." YuZhi's protective instinct kicked in and he turned her towards him, sliding his hands up to her shoulders and cupping them gently as he scrutinized her face for hints of tears or sadness.

"Rong Cai will probably get bailed tomorrow. He told me to take precautions. I don't need to be there but he said I should stay home and safe." TangShi sighed heavily, suddenly tired and slow with the weight of this. Life felt undeniably slow lately.

"I'm not going to work anyway, so we can spend the day here sorting out your luggage and doing whatever you want." YuZhi's inner temper notched up a little at the knowing Rong Cai would probably eb out again but he hid it from her and smiled instead.

"What? Why aren't you going to work? I thought you were busy?" TangShi blanched at him blinking at him like he had two heads. Knowing his workload was always insane and he usually couldn't randomly take a whole day off.

“Because I want to be here with you and take your mind off it. I told you, I’ll make everything up to you and I’m not going to waste time. You need me here, so here I’ll be.”

“I don’t need you to skip work. I can have Linlin here tomorrow...” TangShi started to refuse him, guilt rising up about messing with his work schedule but YuZhi cut her off.

“I’m your husband, even if you don’t like that fact anymore. And I love you. Even if you don’t believe me about that either. Let me take care of you and be the person you lean on again, prove my worth. I’m not going anywhere and no matter how long it takes, I won’t stop trying to get you to forgive me. We were happy together and I know we can be again. I’m holding onto that and I plan on reminding you of it.” YuZhi slid his hands up and cupped her face, trapping her hair against her ears and pulling her towards him so she could only obey and step forward. Inches apart and staring eye to eye from differing heights. “I lost you because I’m an idiot, but I don’t plan on losing you twice. Humor me and let me stay home with you. It’s all I can do to stay sane and stop myself from going to that courtroom tomorrow and ending that bastard’s life.” The tiny snarl in his tone hinted at his seriousness and TangShi relented. Her heartwarming with his very real threat and she swallowed down a rise of gushing emotion and softness towards him.

TangShi stared at him, taking in his tired face, and shadow of stubble. The slight dark circles under his eyes, his more pronounced dimples than normal, and the ruffled appearance even though his hair was styled like always. She couldn’t quite pinpoint what it was that made him seem like he hadn’t slept in days but she was sure it was mirrored in her face too. An aura of life being ripped apart and trying to get through without falling over.

“Fine. But you’re cooking all day and I’m unpacking alone. Don’t get under my feet. Now where’s my food, I’m hungry.” TangShi shrugged out of his gentle hold, her tone bold but only half serious. Uncomfortable with his close proximity that seemed too intimate and pulled back to give him a wide berth in search of what she could smell. Knowing touch and close interaction would be her undoing so she would avoid it as best she could form now on.

Her stomach rumbled with insane hunger now the scent of fresh food was drifting her way and making her forget everything else. That undeniable chicken broth scent and yet there was also a beef hint as though he had bought more than just plain soup and wantons after all. She also smelled the sweetness of rice cakes and honey and her mouth began to water. Her sense of smell sensitized due to being famished.

YuZhi watched her walking into the kitchen and reminded himself to back off and calm down. He knew he would only scare her away if he kept pushing and he was going nowhere without her ever again. His lawyer would update him on that asshole tomorrow and they would take it from there. He had to go slow, take baby steps and prove to her he was worth giving a second chance to.

YuZhi hadn't broached a specific topic in all of this but the Detective had when she left the room to wash her face the day of the statements. Ever since he pulled him aside to talk it out it had been plaguing him but he couldn't bring it up with her. TangShi hadn't mentioned it, and Linlin hadn't either. A dark swirling fog lingering in front of him but he was scared to ask because he didn't know if he could handle the answer.

No one had mentioned birth control after she had gone to the hospital for the toxicology tests, or any kind of morning after pill. No one had screened her for STD's either and he knew that was a conversation they needed to have. He didn't want to broach the subject and he knew it wasn't something Rong Cai would openly answer either, about whether he used protection that night. TangShi and YuZhi hadn't used any together because TangShi was trying to conceive, and now he hoped to god that her period came like normal and it would push aside any other complicated mess from this incident so they could get back on track with their lives.

Seeing her pale, knowing she had been sick on and off this past few days and now craving foods while her appetite had been awful, he hoped it was all just a coincidence. He didn't know how he would feel if it wasn't.

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"Hey, Granddad, we're here, where you at?" YuZhi called out in the empty sitting room off grandfather's living quarters, expecting him to be close as he had asked to see TangShi now life was quieter. Leading the way with her walking shyly behind him as he ventured towards the closed bedroom door. Still distance between them, but since the announcement of Rong Cai's release on bail two days ago she was more inclined to stick to his side and have him around again.

"I'm here." Grandfather wandered out, a bright smile on his face and dressed in a casual grey lounge suit today. His white hair shining and combed back and his beard neatly trimmed. For a man in his seventies he was still the picture of health despite needing a walking stick which he used more as a weapon sometimes.

"You wanted to see Tang so I brought her to visit, finally." YuZhi smiled guiltily, eyes flicking to his left as TangShi edged by and sat on the nearest couch without response. She was in a simple baby blue dress and tan sandals today, with a cute cream furry cardigan and was starting to look a little healthier after a few days of being home. Her pale pallor warming up and her appetite had improved greatly, bringing back some of the chubbiness to her cheeks. Her mood was a little more level and she was no longer pushing him away constantly.

"I did. Now I hope this nonsense is behind us and you two have reconciled?" Grandfather raised a haughty brow, prodding YuZhi in the shin with his stick that was a little rough and eliciting a flinch.

“Ouch. Ummmm kind of, I’m working on it.” YuZhi dodged a second jab and moved fast to sit beside TangShi to avoid it, only leaving a gap between them so she could have her space. Always aware about never crossing her boundaries.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Grandfather frowned and then pointed at TangShi with his stick before seating himself. “Is my grandson not trying hard enough? Tell him what he should do!” he barked with open accusation, a rough gruff manner, and YuZhi sighed, knowing he should have expected this.

“He’s trying hard. I’m just needing some time.” TangShi mumbled the words, intimidated by the old man who had never really shown her any affection or consideration in the past. Not sure if he was mad at her or YuZhi and recoiling not herself.

“Then what’s the problem? You’re married already so work it out. We still have a public wedding to plan too. You already told me it was real love and you were throwing away the contract.” He huffed, knowing all the details of the past weeks but not seeing them as a real issue.

“Grandad, please. Just give us some time. It’s not that simple.” YuZhi defended TangShi, sinking down in his seat and trying to not rile the old man further. He was a loving old brute but his manner was often harsh.

“Hmmmmmm.” Grandfather huffed, brewing over the words and frowning from one to the other in his open frustration. He wanted them to stay married and go back to the happiness his grandson had shown him weeks back before this awful mess happened. He wanted babies and didn’t like waiting.

“You said you had something to tell TangShi. You know, her mother?” YuZhi was trying hard to change the subject but trailed off as Xiaosu entered with a beaming bright smile, carrying a tea tray laden with snacks. The teapot was already set up in here with cups and she added fresh leaves from the container she was carrying to the boiled water.

“Thank you, XiaoSu.” YuZhi and TangShi smiled in unison, pleased to see this ray of sunshine who was always missing in their lives since they moved. XiaoSu nodded with happiness and turned and left them to it. Happy to see them back together in one space again after the rumors from Aunt that they were divorcing already.

“Yes. You’re right. I do. I wanted to share some old photos of her. Bring me the box from the windowsill, YuZhi.” Grandfather tapped his wooden stick on the floor to bring the attention back to task and nodded towards his veranda.

YuZhi got up obediently and wandered over, bringing back a small antique wooden chest and placed it in front of him on a low side table, opening it for him with care. A creaky and rustic styled box that was full to the brim of old pictures.

Grandfather leaned over, peering in and gestured for YuZhi to take the contents out, which he did without question. Lifting piles of old photographs that were yellow aged and curling at the corners. Most were black and white pictures but a few were in color and most seemed to be amateur images taken as holiday snaps. So many people in some many eras.

YuZhi flicked through them for a moment as Grandfather eyed them up, tapping his finger on the backs of some and nodding to TangShi for him to hand them over. YuZhi walked back to sit beside her and she leaned in close to see them as he slowly flipped through trying to locate the ones in the right timeline, thankful most had the year they were taken written on the bottom left.

Various faces of people that held resemblance to his other family members, random strangers, some celebrities from back in the day, and faces he knew well in more modern images. There was an array of adults, children, and teens mixed in.

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TangShi eyed them up with interest, her heart beating fast as she scanned the pictures and looked for anyone that might resemble the idea she had of how her mother might look. Checking the year for any of her mother's timeline and sliding them from YuZhi to peer at closely. Invested and concentrating hard, holding back so many feelings as she searched her out.

"Your mother was such a special girl who visited our family a lot in her younger years. We were close with the He family and I adored having her stay with us anytime the school was on a break. She was a loveable and sweet ray of sunshine and I always hoped that she would one day marry into my family." Grandfather uttered softly; his eyes set on the pictures in their hands but he seemed like he was lost in memories far away. Smiling softly to himself and it was obvious he had genuine affection for a girl TangShi had no memories of at all. It broke her heart more so to know she missed out on someone so precious.

"I never knew her. She died giving birth to me and my father has never told me anything about her. He treated her name like a black mark and I was forbidden to ever bring her up. I know literally nothing about her or their marriage." TangShi admitted, lowering her eyes in shame because it was the normal reaction whenever she mentioned her mother. Still carrying that heavy burden of guilt over her death.

"Your father..... the least said about him the better, was never worthy of her. Your mother was very much like you in terms of prettiness and gentle nature. If you turn them over, the names are on the back. Look for YuYan." Grandfather waved his fingers at YuZhi and he did as he was told, turning them and singling out any that had the name YuYan amongst them and handed them to TangShi.

“She was only young when the Lei family announced her marriage to your father. Rumor has it that he had pursued her for a long time and gained nothing but rejection until that point and her family were not on board with an arranged marriage.” Grandfather’s tone turned sour and he screwed his face up. “She never wanted to marry him at all, yet she did and they always denied that it was forced. I remember her tears on her wedding day, she looked miserable as though her life was ending. She had her heart set on marrying your Uncle Lui, YuZhi. Was infatuated with him.” Grandfather exhaled heavily, reminiscing about his lost son who was YuZhi’s father’s brother. He had died in the plane accident a few years ago. “In my opinion she was too young for marriage. Barely a woman at all and only beginning her life.”

“Then why did they allow it and what about the He family? TangShi has never heard from them in all these years so knows relatively nothing about them either. I don’t remember them from my youth so what happened to them?” YuZhi leaned forward to scoop more pictures from the box and began sorting them in the same way and sliding out any for TangShi.

“You wouldn’t. There’s no one left. Much like the terrible tragedies inflicted on our family, the He line met similar fates before you were born. They didn’t have many offspring to begin with and bad luck took what few there was over the years. When you were a baby YuYan’s parents died in a car accident and her grandmother was left to decide her fate. She passed away in the first month of YuYan’s marriage, leaving only her.” He was saddened by the retelling of this depressing story and TangShi was overcome with a confusion of feelings. Knowing she was truly the only one left made her feel strange, a little hopeless, and somehow sad. People she didn’t know but it still upset her to know there had been an entire family she had never gotten to know.

“My father has never even told me that I had no family left. Only that they didn’t want to know me because of my mother’s death. I think it would have given me peace in my heart to know they weren’t denying my existence but had passed away before I was born.” It was painful to say the words and struck her like a slice to the abdomen, but it now also made her mad. Knowing her father’s cruelty had extended to making her believe she was unloved by relatives that had abandoned her. It was all a lie. A horrible and nasty untruth to cause her pain.

“No, he wouldn’t. The He were a wealthy family and your mother inherited everything as the last remaining heir. Her death meant her assets and money would have gone to you and your father equally, but over the years your father dwindled away the inheritance and his business and had nothing real to show for it. He sold everything left for you to support his failures. This marriage between you two is to save the Lei’s from bankruptcy. He has nothing left except a façade and you were his bargaining chip to save his own ass.”

TangShi gawped at grandfather in shock, shocked by what he was telling her so bluntly. Unknown to her all these years with their lavish lifestyle and snobby behavior, was that they were actually broke and in debt. She couldn’t get her head around it at all. She

wondered if her stepmother knew about it and how she would react if they really did end up penniless. It seemed like some kind of Karma.

“You’re saying TangShi was left half of her mother’s estate and her father has lost it all. All of it? She’s been treated appallingly her whole life and never got a penny and yet it was hers by law. He really is the worst kind of human.” YuZhi’s temper riled, picturing that slimy weasel of a man and his insides churned with simmering anger at how much wrong had been done to her all these years. It’s not like YuZhi could fight to get what she was owed if they had nothing left fighting for.

“Your father is a cruel man with a gambling addiction and no sense. I watched you grow up from afar and always wanted to do something for YuYan’s memory. Arranging marriage was the only thing I could think of to save you from your circumstances, save you from drowning with that despicable family who never treated you as worthy.” Grandfather relaxed back with a heavy outward breath, seemingly exhausted with bringing all of this up and getting himself riled up as he remembered her mother’s memory. “There was a scandal, well, a rumor.... that the marriage was a fast and forced affair because she was with child, but I knew her well enough to know she would never willingly lay with that man. She had tried everything to outrun him and he was rather obsessed with her. Her grandmother was a domineering old woman but she would never have pushed her into a loveless marriage without good reason. She was still a child herself in her eyes.” Grandfather’s shake of the head and sad expression clawed at TangShi’s chest and she suddenly felt breathless.

A heaviness settling over her heart and stomach. Her mind swirling back and trying to fill in the gaps and put the pieces of the jigsaw together which didn’t fit the story she had been force fed by her father since birth. Shocked by these revelations but then again, not. She had always known her father was a selfish and cold person and she had often doubted the love he spoke of when it came to her mother. Why he always hated TangShi so much if she resembled her.

“How old was she?” TangShi’s voice was trembling, low and husky and she kept flipping the pictures nervously trying to pick out a face she recognized but her eyes were blurring so much that she couldn’t focus on them. Her mind a scattered mess.

“Nineteen, and they had to wait until her legal age changed before he could wed her. It was a very rushed and quiet affair for a family so well-known and wealthy. Steeped in scandal and speculation that your father was after her money and forced himself upon her to ensure their marriage.”

“You think Tang’s mother was forced to have sex with him and then marry because she fell pregnant?” YuZhi choked, eyes widening in disbelief that Lei was so much worse than he fathomed and grandfather nodded his disapproval. His eyes darkening and it was clear this was raking up old scars and regrets for the old man.

TangShi paused, her body running cold as she shuddered and couldn't help thinking of the nature and behaviors of Rong Cai. Believing there were really men who did those kind of heinous things fueled by their own greed and selfishness. Tears welling up in the backs of her eyes and she swallowed hard, taking deep breaths to hide her sudden distress from YuZhi. Realizing how thankful she was to have him in this moment, because she might have ended up like her mother and pushed to marry a monster had she been single and alone to face her father's wrath. It didn't bear thinking about.

"She was a good girl with a shining bright future as an artist. She was madly in love with Lui, and she hoped that when she was old enough he would court her. The affection was mutual but they never once dated because of her young age. Everything changed so quickly and she was cut off from our family from then on and Lui left for the military to nurse a broken heart." Grandfather had so many tales he could tell, so many sad and joyful stories and he knew over time he would share what he could with TangShi. Now he knew she would stay in his family and he was no longer afraid to form attachments to her.

"My father acts like she was the love of his life and hates me because she died giving me life. Now you're saying she never loved him and was forced to be by his side. He forced her to fall pregnant so he could trap her?" TangShi knew it wasn't exactly unheard of given the fact she herself was in a contract marriage but her mother's situation sounded so much worse. Back then being pregnant out of wedlock carried more weight than now and her family name and honor would have been destroyed.

"He's always been a spoiled and selfish man. He wanted her and your birth took her away from his clutches. You were of no use to him other than the wealth that should have been yours. You are the only remaining He in Shanghai so it's not like he had to play nice to keep what she left you."

"So that's why you were adamant it had to be TangShi?" YuZhi was finally catching onto why he had been so stubborn about this months ago and no amount of begging changed his mind. He had never understood it when Shanghai was filled with wealthy families with better reputations.

"I promised her that one day she would be a part of our family and bringing her daughter to the Leng fold was the only way I could fulfill that before I died. An heir that is both He and Leng. I'm getting old and I wanted to see my grandson settled with the right girl and our family begin to grow again. Two cursed families would be given new life."

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TangShi didn't know what to say. Her heart beating fast as she digested this and stared down at a picture of just two girls in her lap. Her hand trembling as she held it. A face so much like TangShi's in subtle ways but not completely a mirror image to her. Her mother was pretty and youthful and looked so much younger than her friend, who resembled Aunt RuiZi. A strange sensation in her gut because she was finally getting to

see the woman who had been a huge part of her all these years but yet was also a stranger. Pained by her story.

She knew nothing of her personality, her likes, or her world. She hadn't even known her face, but she could see her own smile reflected back and it brought her a strange sense of belonging. A tug at her soul, a familiarity when she looked into her eyes and a warmth growing in her belly. Despite the sadness of her history, the face could pull a sense that everything was going to be okay. She seemed strong and optimistic and TangShi tried to draw from that.

"She was pretty." She sniffed as a tear escaped the corner of her eye and YuZhi automatically slid his arm around her to comfort her, moving close and pulling her head against his shoulder with his palm. Cradling her in and forgetting his no touch ban that was self-imposed while he tried to earn her trust back. TangShi didn't reject him but instead leaned in and made herself comfortable, reveling in the security of that familiar touch that she had missed all this time. Needing it right now.

"You look very much like her and you have a similar nature. She was a little bolder and braver than you but also a gentle flower. I think if you had a better upbringing with a loving family you would have flourished as she did and been her complete replica." Grandfather still missed that happy and carefree child and it tugged a knot in his chest as he pictured her beaming smile in his mind.

"I wish I knew her. That she had lived longer." TangShi couldn't hold the warm tears in and even though she wasn't properly crying, they kept rolling down her cheeks and she had to use her sleeve to dab them away. A sense of dreaminess enveloping her at finally seeing a face she had wanted to know for a long time.

"Your father remarried quite quickly after she passed and she was saved a lifetime of unhappiness with that man. I know the marriage between you two was forced but I always hoped some affection would grow. Knowing YuZhi's character and hoping you had the same sweetness of your mother.... I placed my faith in the fact you were like Lui and YuYan. Two souls that belonged together. I may be an old stern dictator to many, but I am a soft romantic at heart." He grinned at that, a wily ear to ear kind of smile and YuZhi chuckled at him, shaking his head.

"Old scheming miser more like. A man who keeps secrets close to his chest. You could have told me about all of this a long time ago you know."

"It wouldn't have changed your attitude or mind. You believed in your relationship with the Cheng girl, and I knew it was all kinds of wrong."

YuZhi fell silent hating to admit that in that he was right. After years of refusing to acknowledge them or approve of them, and here they were. He was even right about falling head over heels for this He girl beside him and he sighed as he looked down over the top of her head. She was cradling a picture of two women in her hands and staring

intensely at it. One of them seemed to be her mother, and the other was his aunt who made him screw up his face and look again.

“RuiZi and YuYan were close?” he pulled the picture from her hands carefully and held it up for his grandfather to see.

“Yes, for a while. Until YuYan married and broke Lui’s heart and then she refused to ever forgive her. Blaming her and hating on her for doing that to her brother. Your Aunt was young, more so than YuYan was, so we never shared any of the truths about the marriage with her for fear she would march into the Lei house and cause mayhem. RuiZi can be a complete volcano when riled and there was nothing we could do to change anything.”

“They were friends.... And Does she know I’m her daughter? Is that partly why she hates me?” TangShi burst out in a rushed fashion, an incoherent thought passing through her brain like a knee jerk reaction.

“I never thought of it, but maybe. She knows you are her child, yes. We’ve never discussed it though.”

“Maybe you should. Tell her everything.... and I think maybe it’s time you told her the truth about Rhea too. About dad. Why you were so against Rhea being part of this family. She’s not a kid anymore and her attitude to TangShi is based in misunderstanding and being kept in the dark. It’s not fair to TangShi.” YuZhi implored him, hating that all these years he had shouldered secrets with his grandfather and never been able to offload to the woman who was like a second mother to him. He wanted nothing more than for his Aunt to accept TangShi and start over, showing her the side that he knew growing up who did possess a heart and affection.