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The connecting thud hit low down on the back of his head; a mighty crack and shuddering vibration ran through the bar, hurting TangShi's palms, wrist and forearms with the reverberations. TangShi stopped dead, poised, and for a second she didn't think it had any impact on him as he stood still. Nothing happening and the world seemed to fall eerily quiet.

Rong stared at Linlin for a long, paused moment, as she lifted her chin and made eye contact while struggling to breath and watched as his eyes glazed over and roll back into his head. His body crumbling from solid and poised to seemingly a fluid thing and he collapsed into a heap on the floor, crumbling away. His collapse revealed TangShi standing with a bar over her head, heaving in air with rapid breaths and a traumatized, scared shitless, expression on her face.

It took them both a second to realize he was rendered completely unconscious and to pull their heads together before they lost this opportunity. A sense of relief lightening both of their heavy chest weights.

"Untie me...no, wait. Tie him up. He has those cable tie things... look" Linlin nodded at the white cords sliding out of his inside pocket and peeking at her from this angle. He looked dead the way his body was awkwardly positioned but she could still see the movement of his chest to show he was breathing. "In movies they always leave the bad guy and run and he always gets up and comes after them. We have to tie him up." Linlin rambled as her own hysteria rose, still crunched forward because of stomach pains from his assault. A sense of urgency growing inside of her.

TangShi dropped the bar, moving to auto pilot and seemingly in shock and jumped over him, pulling the cables from his coat and slid one out from the pile. She had never used one before but it seemed straightforward and she quickly figured out how to slot one end in the other and pull tight.

Pulling his legs together first and securing his ankles together with one with a great deal of awkwardness. She had to push his body over, struggle with his weight, and haul him around to get his hands together behind his back the way he had done with Linlin and secured then there too. The whole time her heart racing and stomach churning with fear in case he woke up and attacked her.

"I think..... that's done, right?" She looked up at Linlin for confirmation, her nerves so frayed she couldn't think straight, tugging the ties to make sure they were secure. Linlin nodded.

"Look for something sharp to get these off of me. We need his car keys too and his cell." Linlin was a little more pulled together than TangShi was and knew she needed to take the lead. In life she had always bene the one to guide TangShi and tell her what to do in

her weakest moments and knew she needed her now. Still suffering from the aftereffects of whatever he did to her, and her aching stomach, but it was improving.

TangShi did as she was told and scrambled around his body first, searching his pockets hectically for his phone and something useful. Finding nothing at all except more ties and a bottle of clear fluid. She held it up to Linlin and waved it.

“I think this is what he used on you to knock you out. We should take it.” She knew the hospital might need it to identify properly what had been given to Linlin if they needed to give her something to counteract it, thinking ahead and being hopeful..

“We should make the bastard drink it and be done with him.” Linlin snapped, Using her feet to try and kick at his lifeless body. Hating him for everything he had done to them and unleashing some of her own building rage. Shock wearing off with the drowsy effects of whatever was in that bottle.

“I’m going to try the car.” TangShi got up and ran at full speed to the parked black car. Hauling the door open and spying his bag on the passenger seat. She yanked it open without hesitation and much to her relief found a phone and a pocketknife on top of money and clothes. She wondered if he had been the one to stab the tire on Linlin’s car and made it that they pulled over with a flat. He must have been watching and waiting and timed it just as they left the café.

TangShi came back to Linlin at speed, pulling her forward and cutting the ties around her wrists first with the small blade, gasping in horror at seeing how roughed up and sliced they were from the pressure of trying to get her hands out of the plastic by herself. Red rings of smeared blood and bruising ruining her pretty wrists.

She released her then handed her the knife as she got to work at finishing untying the rope she had started earlier. Linlin worked one arm free and out and tended to her ankles, keeping one eye on him the whole time, still very scared about him waking up as they worked in urgency. He looked secure but she just wanted to get TangShi and run to safety. The instinct so strong it was making her fingers fumble on her task.

Linlin was released after a few minutes of tugging and TangShi helped her up on unsteady feet, her body swaying and loose Still. Dizzy as she got upright and realizing she was far from recovered fully. Linlin held on around TangShi’s shoulders and they hobbled towards the black car at a fast pace, leaving him in the dust as he began to groan and move around.

TangShi flicked her glance back in horror, seeing him come to and hurried Linlin towards their escape.

“You can’t drive. It has to be me.” Linlin pointed out as TangShi tried to lever her into the open passenger door.

“Look at you. How can you drive like this? We don’t need to go far, just away from here while you call the cops and we find out where we are. I can do that. I can try.” TangShi pushed Linlin in without further argument, having learned the basics of driving as a teen even though she never went onto pass her test. Linlin relented, slumping in and TangShi closed the door after handing her the phone and ran around the other side. One eye on him as she dashed as fast as she could.

The keys were still in the ignition, much to her relief and she started it quickly. Her hands shaking, her vision blurry and she took a long calming breath to get her brain to work on the mechanics of getting going. Pulling up her lessons from an instructor years ago and mentally going through the steps.

Linlin lifted the cell to call the cops and held the phone to her ear as TangShi pulled out slowly. Rong caught their attention as his body rolled sideways and he sat up, shaking his head and looked around him in disorientated weirdness. It was obvious he was dazed and there was a trickle of blood running down the back of his neck. A scowl appeared on his face as he spotted the slow, moving vehicle, recovering fast, and he started to fight his binds and gnash his teeth, kicking out across the floor to break them. Furious at finding himself bound up.

“Something tells me we should have used more than one on his hands and feet. I don’t think they’ll keep him. Drive.... drive.” Linlin’s fear exploded at the way he was rubbing his ankles at odd angles to stretch and snap the restraints and her gut said he would be free soon enough. They weren’t thick and he was a big guy with obvious strength and way more know how than them on how to snap them.

TangShi floored it. Screeching and burning rubber and kicking up dust as she put the gas peddle to the floor and drove forward, looking for a way out. The car lurching and giving her a fright with the sudden burst of speed at her fingertips.

There were huge double doors ahead of them and even though they were closed, she didn’t ease up the speed but instead went crashing through them with force. Too wound up and afraid of him coming that she didn’t stop to worry about what would have happened if they had resisted instead. Splintering the old wood and showering the car with debris but they kept moving forward with momentum and Linlin clung on for dear life as she swung them around a corner and headed for what looked like a gate to open road. The buildings all around them seemed derelict too and they were well concealed in a place neither girl had seen before.

“Hello, hello?” Linlin was straining to hear the voice on the other end of the phone call but the signal was dropping and breaking the up because of their location. She got no further than being asked what service she needed. She couldn’t hear them and doubted they could hear her either. The phone disconnected by itself as the signal dropped right off and she clenched it in frustration.

“Our signal sucks. We need to get away from these buildings and out onto a main road. Go that way. We need open air and no interference by whatever these pylons are.” She pointed ahead, towards a gap between more huge factory buildings but there was signage indicating a way out. The sky overcast and dull and the clouded atmosphere made this place feel like some dystopian reality where no humans dwelled.

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TangShi followed direction, driving fast, barely able to control the car well due to inexperience but they were managing to get out and she was slowly relaxing at being able to do this. It was a blessing this car was automatic and didn't require a lot of skill. Breathing out heavily and swallowing hard, finding ways to self-calm and stop her body from shaking so violently.

“You can do it. We got his, Tang. Just stay focused and calm.” Linlin encouraged her, tapping at the phone again and exhaling with a heavy sigh at the lack of any kind of signal at all.

“Are you okay? How's your stomach? How do you feel?” TangShi turned to Linlin not daring to take one hand off the wheel to check her temperature but still worried about her pallor and overall wellbeing.

“I'll live. As soon as we get out of here I am booking myself in for a long stay in the VIP ward of Shanghai East International Medical Centre. I'll treat it like a vacation stay. You better bring me grapes.” Linlin joked, clutching her abdomen which was finally dulling down but she was sure he had left permanent bruising and maybe cracked a rib. IT was as bad as her worst kind of period pain.

TangShi threw her a half smile, teary eyed and relieved they were free and slowed down the speed as they approached the turn out for fear she would make them crash. Linlin checking the phone for signal repeatedly and trying again while TangShi navigated the windy road and kept them on track.

A red car screeched out behind them, pulling both their attention with the noise and sudden appearance, zigzagging across the road in an erratic manner and TangShi gawped at it in her rearview. Seeing the manic driver as he pulled up close behind them and tried to ram their car from behind. Rong was smashing his fist into the center of his steering wheel and blowing the horn at them like a madman, bouncing around in his seat and screaming something at them that they couldn't hear. His face was puce in color, veins throbbing in his temples and he looked ready to commit murder.

“It's him.... Oh my god...it's him. He had two cars. What do we do?” TangShi wailed, turning to look over her shoulder and putting the foot to the floor once more in sheer fear of his behavior. Linlin spun around, hitting her head rest with an open palm in frustration and screwed up her face at his insane jerky mannerisms.

“God dammit, he’s pissed as hell. Okay, stay calm.... Focus on the road, keep up the speed. Oh my god, oh my god. Think Linny, think.... What would ZhengLi tell you to do right now?” Linlin had no idea what to do. This seemed somehow worse, having the maniac driving a metal box he could use to smash them off the road and potentially kill them, instead of being held captive in a warehouse. Clenching her fists and tapping her feet as she tried to think.

TangShi swerved left, spying an alleyway between buildings and hoping the narrow space would offer them protection so he couldn’t get beside them to nudge them over. Cursing herself inwardly for not securing him properly and threw a wide-eyed look of ‘help’ at Linlin.

“We need to switch. I’m the better driver and you don’t know what you’re doing.” Linlin rambled, making a decision and knowing she would be better off in charge. She pulled TangShi by the arm forcefully, no hesitation, and shoved her forward against the wheel so she could climb onto the seat behind her and perched awkwardly above her. Using every ounce of strength and energy she had in her to do it.

“What are you doing?” TangShi squealed, barely managing to keep the wheel straight as she was forced forward on the slippery seat.

“Keep your foot on the gas and slide away, soon as my foot covers you can move it.” Linlin made the maneuver quick and easy, grabbing the wheel and steering them while TangShi did exactly as she said. Relinquishing her seat and moving but not letting up on the gas until Linlin’s foot shoved her off it. Linlin floored it and pulled away from that asshole faster than TangShi did.

Switching from auto drive to manual and upping a gear to give the car more vroom. This was a dual control vehicle and in manual mode it had more torque. Linlin had always been a fast and crazy driver and for once it seemed to be paying off as TangShi wriggled around looking for the discarded phone and found it under her butt. Putting distance between them and the car but reaching dangerous speeds.

She hauled it up, staring straight at the screen and its one bar of signal and almost whooped in joy as it began to climb with them getting further from the warehouse. Pressing the last number redial and held it to her ear and waited. Scrunching her face up and clenching her knees together as she crossed her fingers and hoped to god they could get through now.

TangShi glanced up just as they rounded out of the dark alley, having to swerve because of bushes near the exit onto a road. Linlin didn’t slow down. Only instead of a clear path to freedom, a huge arctic truck going almost as fast as them was right in their path, head on, and Linlin squealed before slamming the wheel to a hard right to dodge the oncoming collision and slamming her foot to the break. Throwing them hard and fast and attempting to control the car as she lost it completely on a slick surface.

The last thing TangShi saw, was metal bars of a signpost, the scraping rush of foliage and debris, wood, and dirt coming down over the windscreen and roof to obscure their view. The scream of both girls in unison as they tensed up and clung on for dear life. Skidding into obstacles as the car plunged into a man-made ditch before they came to a sudden vicious halt and she was flung forward. Smacking her forehead on the dash with a jerking blow which rendered her completely unconscious.

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TangShi blinked open her eyes, her head throbbing from the impact, her eyes blurry as they rolled around inside her skull and she slowly came to. Aware of her body being heavy and still, warm and somehow relaxed, as nausea swirled and her head thumped so painfully she couldn't move properly.

"Linlin?" She mumbled with effort, woozy and disorientated and reaching out to feel out her friend beside her. "Are you okay?" Knowing the crash would have hurt her too. Only she found she wasn't sitting forward at all but lying down and flat on her back and there was a hum of noise gently pulsating around her while her hand paused in midair finding nothing close. Confusion rising as she turned her head and forced her eyes open properly.

"It's okay Miss. Lei. It's okay. Just relax and stay still while we finish tending to you." A sweet female voice drifted, gently washing over her, and was accompanied by a warm soft palm on the back of her hand that helped ease her arm down and laid it on the soft platform beside her body. Bringing TangShi to the present and aware she was staring at a ceiling with a large fan, and the beep, beep, of machines was close by.

"What's happening?" TangShi could barely talk properly, her voice was slurred, and raspy. Her throat burning and any attempt at moving made her vision swim. Confused at how she got here.

"You're in Parkway Health Medical Centre. You were in a car Accident and brought here as we're the closest to where you were. Your guardian is on the way. Don't be alarmed, you are completely fine." The sweet and gentle tone soothed her panic but TangShi couldn't relax. Tensing her body to move but gentle pressure kept putting her back where she was.

"What? We..... Linlin? Where is she? Rong Cai.... the man who was....."

"Shhh, now. You had a nasty knock to the head and have a moderate concussion. The MRI showed nothing serious though and a few days rest will see you right. The woman you came in with is in another treatment room. She's fine too. A little banged up and being treated for minor toxins in her system and a mild concussion." The nurse continued tending to TangShi's superficial wounds on her body, wiping away dirt and debris to fully inspect each one and finding nothing too deep. TangShi was coming out

of a state of numb and starting to be aware of her surroundings through her hazy fog as her senses re-engaged.

“How did my guardian know to come..... I have no phone. I couldn’t call them.” TangShi blinked with pain, making little sense, her eyes adjusting to the whiteness of the room slowly and it made her eyes water. Her brain slow to process as though she’d been asleep for days.

“You were recognized by the paramedic who brought you in. You’re a famous face in Shanghai, Miss. Lei. And your fiancée is very well known. Other than that we would have had no clue as you have no ID or phone and the car was unregistered. The cell you had with you was a throwaway.”

“Phone..... Car? We crashed! His phone, he was chasing us.... Did a man come here too?” TangShi’s fear rose up in her throat, her body tensing as she gripped the sheet below her hands, remembering his vacant eyes and the wild expression as he pursued them. Instant terror rising as she strained to sit up but the nurse was quick to hold her down once more.

“Only two of you were brought here. I heard there were two male drivers at the scene but neither have arrived here. They may have been taken to another hospital. I don’t know anything but the police are in the relatives room waiting for you to be able to talk.”

“I’m pregnant? What about the baby?” TangShi was slowly recovering her memories as all her woes and worries slowly came seeping through as though she was filtering them one by one. Remembering the impact, and not sure if she hurt her body or just her head. Remembering the confessions, the chase, the fear. Mild panic stirring her up once more.

“We were informed by your guardian you were. The doctor did an ultrasound while you were still unconscious and the baby is fine. Everything looks healthy and normal and you sustained no abdominal issues. We just need to keep you calm. You were out for quite a while and have a pretty substantial bump on your head. You’ll have to stay to be monitored.”

TangShi exhaled with relief, sliding her hand to her belly and covering it instinctively, filled with warmth. A tear rolling down her cheek with utter relief and a sudden intense ball of emotion growing inside of her. The urge to sob even though she was happy and the memory of Rong admitting he never touched her came slicing through it all. Making her think of how YuZhi would react when she told him and suddenly she felt like she needed to do it right now.

“My guardian, when will he get here?” TangShi was confused about how long she had been here or how far away from home they were. She had no idea where Rong took them at all.

"They said he was on route about ten minutes after you got here." The nurse applied some band aids to minor cuts she had cleaned and took TangShi's hand. Feeling for the girl, who was pale and trembling and had been through an awful ordeal.

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TangShi's tears let loose. Knowing YuZhi was coming and she was okay, the baby was okay, and everyone she cared about was here, or coming. It's like a dam opened up and she began to tremble as drips ran down her cheeks and soaked the pillows under her head. Her body jerking with the sniffs and gasps as she cried it out. Relief, shock, gratitude, for waking up safe. Her nightmare ordeal hadn't been a dream and so much pent-up mess was now flowing out with need for a release.

"TangShi? TangShi? Where is she? Where's my girlfriend? I'm YuZhi Leng, I talked to you on the phone." A husky strained male voice came echoing her way from the corridor. The sense of urgency and familiarity making her turn her head at his panicked tone and she could almost taste his hysteria in trying to find her.

"YuZhi? I'm here." She called out to him, straining an already raw throat as the suited figure of her handsome man came sliding in the open doorway with fumbling steps. Rushing and looking ruffled and distraught. His tie was loose, his jacket open, hair disheveled and his normally pulled together façade was rumped and wrinkled as was his shirt. He looked like hell.

"Oh my god. I'm here, baby. I'm here. Are you okay? Are you hurt?" He flew to her side, cupping her hand in his and bent down smothering her face as he tried a hug in an awkward position and somehow squashed her nose against his chest and yet still managed to get his arms under her and squeeze her. YuZhi's emotions on full display as he sniffed back the worried tears he had been keeping at bay. His body trembling with both adrenaline and fear at not knowing how hurt she was or what had happened until he got here.

Feeling like he was going crazy driving here to get to her after the cops called him and said they found them. YuZhi broke down, covering her fragile tiny body with his and pushed his face against her cheek as he cried too. Never in his life had he been so scared or overwhelmed and he couldn't contain his relief at finding her alive. He had almost knocked the policeman over downstairs as they tried to give an update in his haste to find her.

YuZhi and ZhengLi had found Linlin's car abandoned by the café they must have eaten at not long after leaving MinXo Corp. The boot open, a flat tire, and TangShi's cell phone lying beside it with a cracked screen. No one had seen anything and the complete disappearance of the women had pushed them to file a police report in urgency, afraid something had been done to them both. They managed to track Linlin's cellphone just as a call came in that the women had been found and hightailed it here like maniacs.

"I'm okay. My head hurts, but I'm fine. I'm really okay. Just cuts and bruises." TangShi pushed his face back so she could look at him, tracing her fingers across his sharp jawline and wiping his wet cheeks with her thumb. Adoration overwhelming her and the wounds between them of the last weeks seeping away like dust on the wind.

He furrowed his brow at her, scrunching up his face as he scanned hers and traced out the grazes and bruises on his skin, hating the bastard Rong Cai with a passion for hurting her. Seething inside but he kept himself together to be strong for her. She looked so vulnerable and pale that he thought his chest might explode with the agony of seeing her so fragile.

"Tang.... They told me Rong Cai is in critical condition. He might not make it. He drove headfirst into a truck. The driver of the arctic walked away with minor injuries but Rong is messed up. Really messed up."

"He might die?" TangShi blinked at his statement, not sure how to feel except numb and somehow heavy, taking a minute to really process it. Her mind laying out the very real truth that the man's life might ebb away because of the choices he made today and yet no guilt or heartache came to her. That ingrained automatic self-blame, failed to initiate. For once, her own self-preservation meant more.

"They cut him out of his car and sent him to another hospital for immediate surgery. If he lives, he'll be detained and held in prison until this goes to trial."

"Am I evil for hoping he doesn't make it? Am I a bad person?" TangShi uttered the words robotically, her stomach bubbling up as she tried to repress her anger and hatred for him but she couldn't hold it down. A venomous desire to have him wiped out of her mind for all eternity taking over. "I don't want him overshadowing my life anymore. I don't want to live in fear that he might get out."

"No. Because I hope he dies too. For everything he's done, he should rot in hell. And I don't even feel bad for saying it. If I have my way, he'll never see the light of day again." YuZhi straightened up, composing himself and wiping his face as a colder expression moved in. An anger for that sadist fuck and what he'd done to his beautiful girl. "The police are downstairs and will need to take statements. If he lives, we'll put him away for a long time. Don't you worry. He can't get out of it this time. I won't ever let him get near you again." YuZhi meant it. After this she'd be lucky to get ten seconds of alone time a day without guards, drivers, and YuZhi protecting her. He would never leave her unshielded as long as he lived.

"There's something you should know.... while he had us there....." TangShi scrunched up her face, trying to control the emotions of what to her was an insanely happy confession and YuZhi frowned. Scared of what she was about to say. Not sure he could hold himself together if she told him Rong had done something unspeakable to her while he held her prisoner. "He said he never touched me that night. Nothing sexual."

“What?” he blinked in surprise, not expecting that at all.

“He was obsessed with keeping me pure because he thought he would marry me. He actually thought I was a virgin and got so angry over it. The baby is yours. We never had sex.” TangShi let it all out in whoosh of relief, a heavy burden lifting from her heart and soul and she reached out and touched YuZhi’s startled face. Soothed by his sudden young boy expression of wide eyes and poised lips as words died on them.

“He didn’t? It’s mine?” he answered her in a breathy exhale after a moments pause. Relief flooding him, his eyes misting over again and his insides unclenching the terror of thinking she had something awful to say. Lifting her hand to his face and pressing her palm to his cheek in sheer happiness.

“It’s ours. I’m sure of it. He was crazy, but he went mad when he thought you had gotten me pregnant. He wanted to get rid of it. He knew it couldn’t be his. He told me so.”

“I know I said it didn’t matter, and it wouldn’t have but” YuZhi broke down for the second time, crumbling against her as he scooped her up and hugged her tight, raw emotion pouring out and half squeezing her to death. Crying softly with her face cradled against his and thanking the powers above for giving him this one thing. Something he had told himself he would accept in time and get over, and now his heart was fit to bursting because it was his baby after all. This made everything okay.

“YuZhi, I want to see Linlin now. She saved us. I would still be there if she hadn’t helped me. She’s hurt because of me. I have to see her. The baby and I are fine because of her.”

“Tang, just rest a little longer and relax. Linlin is with ZhengLi and being cared for. You’ve been through a lot and Linlin is fine. She’s really okay. She’s on a saline bag and resting too.”

“Then take me to her and I’ll rest beside her. Please, YuZhi. I have to see her. I won’t relax until I do.”

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YuZhi relented, knowing he could never deny her anything and waved to the nurse who was still nearby and cleaning up the trolley from dressings. Knowing he was being unreasonable expecting her to stay still and be good but all he wanted to do was wrap her up in cotton wool and pamper her.

“Can we wheel her to the other private room and have them together? I don’t want her to get out of bed.” YuZhi turned a stern look on TangShi as she made to protest and she simmered back down, knowing when to pick her fights. Her head was aching still; she was dizzy and her body was trembling and not a hundred percent capable of walking around.

“Ahh yes. I’ll go check if we can do that and make sure Miss. Choi’s treatments are done.” The nurse turned and walked off, leaving them alone and YuZhi interlaced his fingers with TangShi, staring at her intently. Leaning in close against the bed and sliding down into a seat he pulled up behind him.

“What?” TangShi nestled back down into her mattress, glad of being able to lay down while feeling so messed up. Hating to admit that he was right and she needed to stay in bed for the time being.

“I love you. Today scared me shitless. I don’t know what I would have done if you didn’t get away from him. If he had hurt you or taken you away from me and I couldn’t find you. I was losing my mind when we found Linlin’s car like that.”

“It’s over. Stop thinking like that.” TangShi turned on her side to stare at his face wishing she could wipe away the fatigue and stress lines that seemed to be etched on his face right now.

“Let’s get married right away. Soon as you recover. Not a big thing, or a PR planned event. Something small and meaningful and for us. To make this real. I don’t ever want to lose you.”

“That was out of the blue. We’re already married.” TangShi smiled at him, relaxing and yet touched by his words. Tiredness flooding her body and feeling like she had been running a marathon.

“Not really. I’ve been thinking about it since we got back together. I married you for all the wrong reasons, in a cold way, and our relationship became a scripted play. I don’t want to keep doing that. I’m marrying you for love, so we can be together and create a happy family. We don’t need the show and I don’t want one. I don’t need you in the public eye anymore. The certificate we signed was meaningless, but our wedding will be real and we can have a fresh start, the three of us.” YuZhi slid his free hand onto her belly and gently stroked it’s flatness with his thumb. Overcome with a warm internal happiness that made him choke up. Meaning every word.

“Miss. Choi, is waiting for you, Mr. Leng, Miss. Lei.” The nurse interrupted them, pulling their attention away from their discussion. Leading in another caretaker with her and they started to prep TangShi’s bed to move it while YuZhi stepped up and back but kept hold of her hand. Eyes on one another and smiling softly. TangShi agreeing to everything he just said.

“Let’s do that. What you said.... let’s start over and be happy. Rip up the papers and forget all the agreements of before. I want that more than anything.” TangShi’s eyes welled up and her heart expanded with love for him. Catching his eye as they smiled adoringly at one another and he squeezed her hand in his.

“Let’s get you well first. Some time out to recuperate and deal with all this mess. Once it’s all behind us, we’ll get married any way you want. No one can stop us. I’ll make you happy, Tang.”

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ZhengLi stroked back Linlin’s hair as he watched her toss and turn on the bed, unable to get comfy because of her pain. Her body bruised and sore and still not herself even after being treated for mild chloroform poisoning. Nausea plaguing her and an infernal headache that was adding to her distress.

“I can ask them for more pain meds.” ZhengLi was perched on her bed to one side, staying close and watching her like a hawk, being his usual cool self even though internally he was chaotic. So many emotions about today and seeing his girlfriend bruised and sick and suffering from a concussion. He had the urge to find that motherfucker and beat seven shades of shit out of him for every tiny mark on her body.

ZhengLi wasn’t one who normally showed a lot on the surface, always preferring the smooth wise guy persona but this was proving difficult. When it came to Linin, he became irrational and over protective. He wanted to take away her pain and wipe every mark, cut, and bruise from her skin because seeing them was agony.

“No. They said it’ll ease off. Nothing broken or ruptured, just banged up. I’ll be okay in a couple of days. This bed is so firm it’s borderline abuse on its own.” Linlin tossed the other way, huffing loudly and close to tears with the frustration of it.

“They can give you something else. Come here, stop moving so much.” ZhengLi shifted down to lay beside her and slid his arms under her body and around her, unable to watch her any longer. He stretched out alongside her, snuggling her close and tight and soothing her restlessness. Sensing a lot had to do with anxiety and fallout from what they had gone through and instinctively moving to wrap her up. Smoothing down her hair in rhythmic lulling fashion and pulling her into his abdomen so her ear was level with his mouth.

“When can I go see TangShi?” She mumbled in a petulant tone, annoyed that he was keeping her stuck in bed now the saline drip was finished.

“I told you. You’re not moving a muscle. TangShi is fine, she’s with YuZhi and her injuries were less than yours. YuZhi will bring her when he can.”

“I’m fine. I just hate hospitals and I can’t settle until I see she’s really okay.....” She knew she was talking to a brick wall. If there was one thing she knew about ZhengLi, he was stubborn as hell and almost never backed down. “They said Rong Cai might die. Do you think he will?” Linlin changed the topic, knowing his nonresponse was deliberate ignorance because he wasn’t changing his mind. Her eyes misted over, thinking of that

monster and shuddering at the memory. Hating the instantly curling of fear in the pit of his stomach at even saying his name.

“If there’s a god. That bastard should pay for everything he’s done.” ZhengLi held her tighter, scrunching up his face and curbing the need to punch something. His fury at thinking of what she’d gone through today heavy on his soul. “You only need to stay here tonight. Tomorrow they’re discharging you both. You can come stay with me and I’ll take care of you while you recover fully.” He batted away talk of Rong Cai knowing his temper could only handle so much.

“Are you sure it won’t cramp your style if I do that?” Linlin retorted impulsively, her deep seated insecure fear he was seeing other women springing out at her while at her most vulnerable and she bit her lip, cursing herself for saying it out loud.

“What are you...?” ZhengLi frowned, confused by her response but was cut off by the door opening and TangShi’s bed being wheeled into the large space.

“Hey, you two. We’re room buddies for the rest of the day. Sorry to invade but this one wouldn’t rest until we came here.” YuZhi came in beside the bed, holding TangShi’s hand and Linlin squirmed and sat up, sliding free of ZhengLi’s embrace, ecstatic to see her friend, and he too shifted to sit up beside her but kept one arm around her waist. Overly aware of her every movement and always double checking her injuries.

“How you feeling?” Linlin was first to ask TangShi, stretching to peer over at her and watched as they positioned her bed parallel to hers. Mother hen instinct moving while visually searching her over for signs of anything and seeing nothing much. Just fatigue and the same minor cuts and bruises as her.

“I’m fine. Sore head, a little tired. Everything fine. What about you?” TangShi was glad to see color back in Linlin’s face and that she seemed practically back to normal.

“I’m doing better. Just wanna go home and sleep on a comfy bed in a better decorated room. I am not fond of these either.” She sighed, tugging at her hospital pajamas, avoiding ZhengLi’s eye even though he got up and sat back on the side of the bed now they had company. YuZhi mirrored his pose on the foot of TangShi’s bed and the four of them were left alone by the nurses. The room falling quiet for a moment.

“You guys still need to talk to the police.” YuZhi pointed out but ZhengLi shook his head and lifted his cellphone, waving it YuZhi’s way.

“Detective Kim said they’ll swing by in the morning before discharge and do it then. They need a rest first and time to process and get over the shock. There’s no rush while Cai’s outcome doesn’t look good anyway.”

The four of them fell silent again for a second as the gravity of that statement sent a weird mood through them all and it was Linlin who finally broke the silence.

“His father never did anything wrong and yet he’s the one who’ll carry this for a long time. It could potentially ruin the school, their reputation How does someone so normal and nice, end up with a son like that?” This had been on her mind since she woke up. Master Cai had always been a nice and polite gentleman and TangShi had only spoken well of him.

“Who knows. Mental health can fall on anyone I guess. I’m sure we can keep it out of the press for all our sakes.” YuZhi tried to be diplomatic knowing this kind of talk could upset TangShi and ZhengLi groaned as his phone rang and distracted them all. Buzzing in his hand because he was still holding it and tensing at the name flashing on screen.

“I have to take this. It’s my mother.” ZhengLi got up, his expression falling and had been dreading this call all day. Lately she was calling him every single day, at least twice and always with demands over his love life.

Linlin’s eyes followed him as he got up in a hurried fashion and left the room quickly. Suspicion rising because his family seemed to call a lot lately, and every time he left the room to take their calls whereas before, he always answered in front of her. Her gut tightening and sending her into insecure overdrive and she bit on her lower lip nervously and started picking at her nails. Trying to hide her urge to cry and pasted a smile on her face as she looked back to TangShi.

“Yes, mother. How can I help you?” ZhengLi paced into the hall, checking the door had shut behind him and exhaled heavily as stress started settling in. Uptight and antsy that Linlin might hear him and annoyed his mother had the worst timing.

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“I called your office and they said you weren’t there. I told you I was sending by today Mia to take you for Lunch. How can I do that if you don’t inform me when you’re out. The poor girl is standing in your empty office.”

“Mom, really? Now you’re sending her to my workplace and forcing me to have lunch with her. Can I please organize my own love life?” ZhengLi clenched his fist, shaking his head at the audacity of the woman who seemed to forget he was in his thirties already, and quickly glanced back at the room before wandering further in case they could hear him. The last thing he wanted was Linlin upset on top of everything else.

“No, you can’t. You think we don’t know what you’ve been doing these last weeks? Your face shows up in plenty of pictures in the gossip columns. Some trashy third-rate hospitality company heiress always on your arm. Is that really all you’re capable of?” Her words were delivered with stinging disappointment and shocked ZhengLi to the core. Thinking his relationship with Linlin had been concealed all this time as his parents weren’t one to read trash rags and had never mentioned her.

His mother had seen pictures of some purple dyed hair, slutty dressed creature on his arm of late. Always the same girl despite his years of multiple 'playmates' and she had been bitterly disappointed that he was settling for some classless hussy. Having done a check on who she was, she had found Miss. Choi had a reputation not unlike her son's past misdemeanors and that made it worse.

"So is that why you're now trying force me to marry into the Huang family? Because you found out I have a girlfriend you don't approve of? Nice, mom!" ZhengLi's anger swirled in his stomach.

"You have a responsibility as my son to marry a girl of a good standing. Even if you are the youngest. This is about our family name. And That girl is never going to measure up to the respectable Kim name."

"How about I marry a girl I love and you can cut me off and disown me from the Kim family, so I don't tarnish its perfect name. I'm not doing this today, mom. So have a nice lunch and I'll talk to you in a few days. I'm busy here." ZhengLi closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and thumb, his head aching already and knew she was only just getting started. He had no doubts if they figured out he had a girlfriend, a serious one, they probably did a background check on her.

"Love? Don't be ridiculous. It's a passing fleeting feeling and doesn't always guarantee a long and happy marriage. This is pure and simple lust because a wild playmate is currently fun, but her loose behaviors will be the end of you. A good pairing is the most important thing. A woman who matches you in every way."

"Well, I guess I'm lucky I found one. Who matches me in every way and is the best pairing I'll ever find. One who forgives me my loose behaviors of the past because she understands me. I'm not doing this anymore. I played along knowing in time Mia would cut me loose when she realized we weren't going anywhere but honestly, after today, I'm done with this. I'm not going to do this to Linlin. I love her."

ZhengLi had been shaken to his senses when they found their women missing today. The agony of not knowing where she was, what happened, if she was okay, and then the call she had been in an accident had almost ended him. The fear was unlike anything he'd ever felt in his life, had almost paralyzed him in terror, and he was wasting time and hurting her by allowing his family to push him around like this in the name of duty. He couldn't do it anymore, not when he thought of how helpless and tiny she looked in that bed when he first walked into her room.

Battered, bruised, pale and exhausted. He almost cried and knew for the first time in his life he would willingly take all her pain himself so she wouldn't feel it. Linlin was the girl he would sacrifice everything for. Despite her tough outer shell, she was a scared, sweet, and loving soul who had been deprived the right kind of love and security her whole life. Much like him.

“What is that supposed to mean? Stop being childish and come back from wherever you are for a lunch date. I won’t cancel Mia. Don’t leave her waiting.”

“I’m not coming back. My girlfriend went through hell today and is in the hospital and that’s where I’m staying until she gets out. And when she does, I’m going to ask her to move in with me and get married. I won’t give her up. You can tell Mia whatever you want.”

“No, you’re not. Don’t be ridiculous. I won’t allow it and neither will your father! Stop this nonsense and come home, I want to see you.” ZhengLi’s mother lost her temper, her tone loud and scathing and designed to put him in his place. Hating that of all her children, he was the one she had the least control over.

“Yes, I am. Linlin is the one. If you want to cut me off, do it. I’ll happily be a trashy, third-rate hospitality son in law and forget I was ever a Kim. I’m sure I might actually finally know what happiness is. She’s my future, so either accept it or get out of my way.” ZhengLi didn’t wait for his mother’s response, knowing he already had set a light under her and fire and fury were only going to escalate.

He cut the call and turned his phone off before walking to the nearest wall and pressing his forehead to the cold surface and slumping slightly with a sigh of despair. His stomach tied in knots and suddenly nauseous with the expected fallout. Knowing he just ignited so much family drama once more, like he did when he chose to work as Leng Corp assistant CEO over his families own business. They had caused him to have a stomach ulcer over that period of time.

He flipped around so his back was supported against the wall and blew out his breath in an exaggerated way. Tension filling him up and then rubbed his temples and stood up straight. Knowing the only way to get through this, was the same as he did before. Brush it off, push it out of his head. Regret nothing.

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“Pull yourself together. You’re girlfriend needs you. You have nothing to feel sorry about.” He shook it off, pushed his anxiety over the call aside and swallowed it all down to go back to that chill and confident mask he always wore. Pasting a smile on his face so as not to worry his princess and wandered back into the room.

“It’s the best option for the next few days. Think about it at least.” YuZhi was in the middle of trying to convince Linlin of something as ZhengLi strolled in casually and slid onto the bed beside her. Pulling her into his arms as he nestled against her cushions which were propped up so they could sit comfortably. He needed to feel her after that shitty phone call and she was always the grounding force in his life. She had no idea how much he needed her or that just seeing her face and smile could change his whole mood.

“What is? What are we talking about?” he butted in, unwinding with her warmth.

“Me moving in with TangShi until I’m healed. Seeing as he’s hired an entire security team, drivers, and talking about a housekeeper that cooks. It’s tempting but he’s a bossy ass and I don’t much like him becoming my dad.” Linlin crossed her arms carefully, so as not to make her rib and abdomen pain worse while being sassy and ZhengLi screwed up his face.

“Are you trying to steal my woman away from me? She’s moving in with me. I’m capable of hiring all those too.” He tutted at his best mate, not worried about losing his Kim inheritance, given his wage as assistant CEO to Leng group was hefty anyway.

“I never agreed to that either.” Linlin poked him in the peck with her pointer finger, giving him an odd look that concealed something and yet ZhengLi picked up on it and gritted his teeth. His suspicions that she knew about Mia growing like a boulder in his gut.

“Where else is my future bride going to live.” He nudged her back gently and leaned in to try and catch her eye but she dodged it, acting like she never heard him. Definitely going into sulk mode, and he sighed.

“I’m not talking indefinitely. Just for the next week or so while they recover. You can come too and share Tang’s old bedroom. After that you’re free to set up your love nest wherever, but we want them cared for and safe while we work. Tang would be happier with Linlin by her side. We still don’t know if Rong’ll pull through but we’ll come to that hurdle when we get to it.”

YuZhi was trying to be smart here, knowing him and ZhengLi couldn’t stay off work for more than a day or two tops, with the collaboration hanging in midair and he didn’t want Tang home alone. He was worried about the mental fallout from all of this and her emotions that could harm the pregnancy. The best thing was to keep them together and locked up in a space that was guarded and safe.

“He doesn’t need to I’m sure his other girlfriend will have a problem with it.” Linlin let out, sometimes hating her own mouth for being too loose when something was weighing this heavily on her heart and ZhengLi faltered, swallowing hard and knowing she was smarter than she seemed. His gut had told him she knew something was up and now he couldn’t exactly keep denying it. TangShi gawped at first Linlin and then the two men and frowned, not knowing what to say.

ZhengLi threw YuZhi a pained look and YuZhi raised a brow in response signaling a ‘come clean’ visual message. TangShi stayed quiet and watched the two men throwing one another loaded looks, her own temper swirling because it was obvious that whatever was going on, YuZhi knew about it and she would strangle him if this hurt Linlin..

“Okay.... You’re right. I haven’t been honest with you but I swear, Linny, you’re my only girl. There’s no one else and I’m not doing anything with anyone to hurt us.” ZhengLi turned to her, pulling her hands into her lap and covering them both with his, nerves kicking in because he knew she could be volatile at the best of times. “My family were making me go on marriage dates, with..... someone I’ve known a long time. It was one hundred percent platonic and I gave her no come ons. It was polite, sterile and only twice. Dinner, I mean, nothing else. I haven’t touched her.” ZhengLi stuttered, losing his cool and realizing how badly he was explaining.

Linlin didn’t reply. Her eyes widening with a heartbroken gulp and her expression dropping as sadness overtook her face. It caused ZhengLi a major stab in the heart so he flinched, lifting his hand automatically and stroking her cheek to try and erase the way she was staring at him. Hating himself for doing this to her and hiding it. His little wildcat was absent in the moment and instead showing her true vulnerability and making him feel worse. He could never deal with this version of her as it ripped the rug from under him and made him feel like a shitty human being.

“Are you?” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words and her eyes misted over. Knowing in families like theirs that arranged marriage was normal and filial sons eventually followed what their parents wanted. That she was never going to be the perfect candidate for the Kim family and they would never approve of someone like her.

“No! I told my mom to forget it. She’s probably writing me out of the will as we speak. Not to mention the backlash from the Huang family might get me blacklisted for all eternity.” ZhengLi, cradled her face, trying to read her thoughts and couldn’t.

“Did you really break it off? Tell your mom to back off?” YuZhi lifted a brow at him, a mild surprised expression too. Even though ZhengLi had always been the rebellious Kim son and did crazy things that grated on their nerves, there was always still a part of him that bowed to them in some way. Even leaving to join Leng group he still kept one hand firmly in the Kim family empire anytime they needed him and they always seemed to be able to drag him back.

“Yeah. I told my mom I was going to marry my girlfriend... that’s if she’s willing after all this. I’m sorry, baby. I swear I never did anything with her. It was carried out like a business meeting.” ZhengLi gave Linlin a hopeful smile and she scowled at him, emotions bubbling up and hurting her heart but she pushed him away.

“Is she prettier than me?” Linlin’s eyes misted over and she swallowed hard, her body trembling.

“No. No one’s prettier than you. You’re the prettiest girl I have ever met. The best girl, the sexiest, the sweetest.... The one I want to marry.” ZhengLi hated how young and withdrawn she suddenly seemed. As though he had betrayed her trust even if it wasn’t that simple. His mouth dry with nerves. Watching her carefully as her heartbreak shone through in tiny facial movements and it was a punch to his gut.

“Who wants to marry you? Going on dates behind my back, lying to me, hiding it, and thinking of marrying some...” She didn’t get to finish her sentence as ZhengLi pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his, kissing her firmly and silencing her. Impulsively needing to make her forgive him and forget all this nonsense. Scared she might actually break up with him over it now that he thought about it the other way around. It would have killed him to know she was out there on marriage dinners and being untruthful. He should never had concealed it from her.

ZhengLi slid his hands around her waist and pulled her up against him so he could kiss her passionately and wipe away that hurt face and wounded heart. Exhaling with relief when she caved and kissed him back, surrendering to his touch. Knowing now how stupid he was to not explain it all from the start and he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Today he could have lost her and that thought changed his entire outlook.

TangShi threw YuZhi a happy smile, shaking her head at their friends and knowing that despite Linlin’s fierce response and sulky ways, she would never turn ZhengLi down. TangShi knew Linlin loved him heart and soul, hopelessly so, and he was the one male on the planet who had any kind of knowledge on how to deal with her. He seemed to take her ups and downs in his stride and never took her rebuffs or moods to heart.

“Go away, jerk.” Linlin was finally released from her passionate clinch and shoved him in the chest so he moved back but didn’t let her go. No real fierce in her biting words and ZhengLi smiled, running his hand through her hair.

“There’s that feisty girl I love. Would a stupidly expensive diamond ring and a promise of a big showy wedding make a difference?” ZhengLi leaned around to catch her face so he could look at her and got a pouted look thrown back.

“No... unless it was a double wedding, somewhere sunny and sandy where unwanted family couldn’t come?” Linlin glared back at him, hinting she didn’t want his anywhere near them if they thought her so unworthy. Not really meaning it and yet ZhengLi grinned at her.

“I actually like that idea.” TangShi broke in, her eyes dreamy as she thought about it and how blissful escaping her family would be on such an important day. Bypassing the media, the stressful planning, the fake niceties, and all the crap that went with high society weddings. It maybe was said in sarcasm, but TangShi bit on her lip as she thought about it. Not having them there to make her life miserable anymore and finally forgetting her ties to the Lei’s.

“Are you serious?” YuZhi turned to her. Not all that shocked as he was the one who said they should do it their way. Liking the idea of making it about them and only having people who were genuinely happy for them at it.

“I’m game if you are.” ZhengLi cut in and drew a shocked look from Linlin who truly thought he was only dropping marriage hints to appease her.

“Are you ALL serious?” She blanched as she was met with three bright smiles and an enthusiastic combined ‘yes.’

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“Take it easy, watch the step.” YuZhi slid his arms around TangShi and guided her down the steps from the back patio into the decorated garden. Carefully holding her weight and concentrating on getting her down safely.

“I’m pregnant, not disabled.” TangShi smiled at him wistfully, more in love with him every single day as he seemed to become more and more attentive to her needs and never failed to anticipate them. Taking his arm and obediently walking slowly down the steps into the sunshine, enjoying the gentle breeze on her skin of a pleasant day.

“Come on you two, I was starting to worry. You were an age!” Linlin appeared, smiling brightly but with a stern stone of an unimpressed mother hen. She was looking ethereal in white today, a flowy sheer gown over a mini dress that was much like TangShi’s, although Tang’s wasn’t a short underlayer but a long flowy skirt. “With you being this close you can’t scare me by going AWOL. I need constant contact and updates. I get separation anxiety when I don’t see you with my own two eyes. Imagine if you went into labor and I wasn’t there!!” Linlin rubbed the expanse of TangShi’s bulging belly with affection and a hint of manic passiveness, and ZhengLi appeared behind her, sliding his arm around Linlin’s shoulder and kissing her on the temple. Grinning at her OTT attention to TangShi that never seemed to waver.

“I was at the bathroom.” TangShi pointed out, giggling at her best friend and used to this attitude. It was only getting worse with each passing week and she sometimes wondered if she was married to YuZhi or Linlin.

“So? I could have taken you. I am capable of tending to your womanly needs much better than the iffy stand in.” Linlin thumbed at YuZhi with an eyeroll as though he could never match up to her expertise in womanly needs.

“If she’s like this now, good luck when you do bring baby Leng into this world. You may have a custody battle on your hands.” ZhengLi laughed at the antics of his little woman, patting her on the head and earning himself a glare. Eternally amused with her and he swooped in to give her a peck on the lip, always incapable of passing her by without touch or kisses. He was as smitten now as the day he married her.

“Hurry up and impregnate her so I don’t have to waste time in court.” YuZhi smirked, poking ZhengLi in the chest. This running joke between them never amused Linlin as she couldn’t see what was so wrong in her caring about her very pregnant best friend.

“Dude, my family are only now coming around to the fact I married her. Give me time. Once I’m sure the hit is off my head then I can possibly wave the topic of grandkids near them. I’m lucky to be alive. You have no idea how ruthless they are. I’m still financially

cut off.” ZhengLi pulled Linlin into an embrace from behind. Snuggling her in and eternally grateful that despite his families threats, he never gave her up. He had thought they were happy together when they dated but cohabiting with his wife had opened up levels of intimacy between them that changed his entire outlook on love and soul mates. Linlin was calmer, content, and her crazy insecure jealousy had abated once they were married. She was his kitten nowadays rather than his fierce wildcat. Well except between the sheets, where he fully encouraged that crazy side.

“I think that maybe had more to do with the fact you four ran off to warmer climates for a week and came back from shotgun weddings. No family invited, and not even close friends got a look in until you guys came back.” A smooth husky feminine voice cut in between them and they moved apart to let Rhea wander into their space. Welcoming her with smiles.

“You’re one to talk about shotgun weddings. What do you call this?” Linlin pointed out with a raised brow, waving her arms around the exquisitely decorated garden and the hundreds of guests milling around after the ceremony. It had been a long day of watching them take their vows before moving here for a garden party in a newly acquired mansion bought by Rhea’s tycoon billionaire husband.

“It’s hardly shotgun. Six months I’ve known him. You four were all wed much sooner than that.” Rhea smiled knowingly. Raising an accusing brow at YuZhi and reminding him of the fact he married TangShi the same day he officially met her. In YuZhi’s mind though, TangShi would always be the girl he fell in love with five years prior and his heart had held on for her.

“We’re just happy that you’re happy and Clint seems like a solid guy. He’s good for you. Plus he’s loaded so you could retire and swan around the world and never have to worry about finances.” Linlin pointed out with a smirk, always looking at the pros to everything.

“Who would have guessed I would fall for an American billionaire while living in London. Although he needs to hurry up and learn Mandarin because translating for him is exhausting. Thankfully most of my family have a good grasp of English so I can have a day off today. He’s really the one.... which I didn’t realize I hadn’t encountered until him.”

Rhea said it honestly, not worried about hurting YuZhi’s feelings because this was a conversation they had some months ago. That they realized they had always been friends and the romantic side was a messy codependence but not real love. That neither had known the true meaning of real love until they met their respective partners.

“Today has been beautiful, you look radiant. I am so happy for you.” TangShi walked forward and gave Rhea a real hug. Embracing her tight and loving her for the person TangShi had come to rely on as much as Linlin. Congratulating her on her day and glad

their duties as her bridesmaids were over and they could all relax. Her feet were aching and her dress was a little constrictive given her fuller figure.

“I am happy. And I’m glad you insisted on still coming even though you are a week away from your due date. I hope you’re not too exhausted? I told you to sit it out and take it easy but it meant a lot to have my girls walk me down the aisle too.” Rhea beamed at them, her eyes misting over that on her happiest day, she was surrounded by her extended family whom she loved to death. All four of them.

“No. YuZhi takes good care of me and Aunt RuiZi has become the overprotective mother-in-law who gives him grief at every opportunity in case he isn’t pampering me well enough.”

“She can be like that.” Rhea smiled. Knowing only too well that once you won Aunt’s affection, you became one of her babies and she would smother you with her own kind of love. TangShi was the daughter in law she adored and was making amends for a rocky start and welcoming her fully into the Leng family, alongside grandfather.

“I think your husband is looking for you.” ZhengLi brought their attention up as he pointed out to the left, to the tall blonde-haired foreigner among the many dark-haired guests who looked lost. His head moving from side to side as he scanned the people in search of his bride.

“I better go save him. Before he attempts to speak Chinese badly. Enjoy the rest of the party. I’ll see you guys later.” Rhea leaned in, kissing TangShi on the cheek, rubbed her belly with a loving stroke and gave Linlin a cheek squeeze before leaving her two best friends to it.

In the last months the women had pulled together and become inseparable companions, especially after the fall out of Rong Cai and everything that happened at that time. His death hadn’t been a shock but it had caused emotional fallout, guilt, strange feelings that had left TangShi in a weird place for some weeks. Yet YuZhi had managed to conceal everything from the media so Master Cai could continue with his life and grieve his son without shame coming back at him. It never became public knowledge and with his death the police didn’t really need to follow up on much. None of them blamed Master Cai for what happened and he certainly didn’t blame TangShi. He had begged for forgiveness and broke his heart over the actions of his only child.

“I’m starving. Too much champagne, not enough food.” Linlin was bored of this glitzy classy affair. It was all classical music, glittery gowns, and finger foods. The kind of events she had avoided growing up as she always felt out of place and TangShi couldn’t agree more. Formal and boring was not their thing.

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Even though her life had a lot of this nowadays, she preferred when the four of them went somewhere normal, to hang out and eat, and enjoy one another's company. Something they did frequently.

"How about we stick it out another half hour, do a walk around and then we go find a hotpot restaurant?" Linlin suggested brightly. Her stomach gurgling because she had avoided food so as not to pop her dress with a food baby.

"You and hotpot, I swear that better not be your craving food when I do get you pregnant. I've eaten so much of it this past few months I can taste it every time I hear the word. It's almost a trauma response." ZhengLi joked, poking her in the top of her head in jest.

"Shut up. It's my comfort food. And if it is my craving, I'll expect you to go at all hours to fetch it for me... without complaint!!!" Linlin berated him, throwing him a sassy and narrowed stare as though to challenge his refusal.

"You know I'll never say no, Linnyboo. Even if I require therapy to get through it. I promise to do the three am hotpot searches for you, even in snow." He winked at her then hooked her arm in his and pulled her with him to go look at the buffet tables for something to satisfy her hunger. "I'm taking the beast to get fed. We'll be back soon." He waved flippantly to YuZhi and TangShi as they departed, continuing his hotpot squabble with his wife as they wandered off.

"Grandfather still didn't come." TangShi glanced around them once more, saddened that he had still not put his prejudice aside for Rhea's family and avoided this happy occasion even though aunt had come. Wishing they could all let the past go and be one happy family.

"I understand him. Besides, Rhea seems happy and she didn't mention him, so I think all is good. They were never close and I guess he's content that I married you." YuZhi guided TangShi to the nearest seat and helped her sit down with ease. Her feet aching from standing too long and fatigue washing in with carrying around this huge bump all day every day. Pregnancy was exhausting and as excited as she was to finally meet their baby, she was also fed up with waiting.

"I'm beat. I don't think I can handle a hotpot pitstop. I want a bubble bath and a flat comfy place to lay down. Some quiet and cuddles." She sighed heavily, hating that she was flaking on this day but she couldn't help it. Her body could only handle so much.

"Come on, baby. Let's get you home. You should be taking it easy right now. We only have a few days before you give birth. I told you we would leave right after the vows."

"I wanted to be here. God knows when I can do something like this again. We'll have little baby Lu Li and sleepless nights to contend with. She is going to be an utter princess thanks to her daddy's need to spoil his women." TangShi sulked, not really

minding sacrificing this kind of life and social activities for a while, but not looking forward to the night feeds and exhaustion she had been warned about. Finding out they were having a girl had healed so many wounds for her, and she couldn't wait to hold her daughter and start her motherhood journey.

"Does it bother you that your father won't be involved? That he won't be here for the birth?" YuZhi still regretted this development in the past months. The business collaboration between Leng and Lei broke down dramatically when it surfaced that Lei Enterprises was running in a red deficit and completely bankrupt. Creditors, contracts and business alliances broke down when it was brought to light and many took legal action to recover losses. Mr Lei took his wife and daughter and fled the country before the debtors came knocking and left Leng group with a huge mess to clear up as the public partners and marriage connected allies. Thankfully Leng Group had deep pockets and great lawyers and got by with minimal disruption or loss and fully separated themselves from the fallout. As newly appointed full CEO, it was YuZhi's first crisis and he handled it like a pro. It had been a couple of months and there was no sign of them ever coming back to China to face what they left behind.

"No. he was never a father. They were never my mother and sister and I feel free knowing they have nothing to do with my life anymore. Like a weight has lifted. After everything, I feel like Karma did what he deserved and it's not my problem. Having grandfather tell me stories and find pictures and videos of my mother has made me feel like I always had her, and she's the only family worth remembering. I don't need them nor do I care where they are."

"You know, you're a lot stronger than you were. You no longer let people push you around or hold you down." YuZhi pointed out to her, sitting beside her and scooping her hand into his. Savoring her touch like he always did and proud to be married to this beautiful woman.

"I'm going to be a mother. I can't have anyone messing with our baby so I have to learn to stand on my own two feet. Linlin has instilled some mama bear into me." She smiled softly. Knowing herself these past months had made her grow up a lot.

TangShi had slowly started to build her reputation again as an artist. Painting had become her therapy once the death of that monster began to fade in her memories and she was hosting her first solo gallery was scheduled in the next year. YuZhi had delayed the date to allow her time to give birth and recover, although she painted daily from the studio in their new home.

He had moved them from his apartment to a stand-alone mini mansion near the Leng manor, where she had a studio and garden to create all day long. It meant they could eat regularly with the Leng family, who now adored and cared for her as though she was always their daughter. Old grievances forgotten and Xiaosu moved into TangShi's new home as her constant carer with her new fiancée, who was TangShi's bodyguard and driver, always at her side.

Life had become calm and simple and it felt like all obstacles and hurt from the past had floated away on the wind. Sometimes she caught herself daydreaming and lost in thought that this was all a fairytale and not true reality at all. Only to pinch herself awake and find that it wasn't. Her life was happy and full and perfect and would only continue to be so as their family grew. She used to believe fate had a grudge against her, but now she was satisfied that Destiny had brought her on a rocky road to appreciate where she would end up.

You had to weather the storms, battle the rolling seas, and come close to near death to savor finding a safe haven of tranquility that could harbor you for the rest of your days. A rainbow always follows the rain.

The End.