

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 31

“Stop fidgeting and act natural.” YuZhi hissed at TangShi, lacking patience as he led her into the dark nightclub by the hand, guiding the way and keeping an eye out for their group. He was dressed in faded jeans and a black tee tonight, paired with a black leather biker jacket that made him seem like a different person to TangShi. For the first time she felt unattractive and inferior beside someone who could pull off this look. He was suave, and the casual style made him seem sexier than usual, especially over boots rather than his normal Italian leather shoes.

Rhea had set them up at a table in the centre of the club, for maximum exposure, with various friends from their social circle and guaranteed attention attractors. A few were known public figures while most were famous for being rich kids, or heirs to conglomerate families. Tonight, the aim was for pictures to be leaked of the two of them with their respective dates and seemingly happy about it while hanging out together. That way the fallout over YuZhi getting engaged soon would be minimal and the scandal of marriage averted, leaving them free to proceed and produce an heir in time. This was the start of dropping hints that TangShi and he were dating, and he couldn't be more unhappy about it. The beginning of having to cuddle up, hold hands, and play lovers whenever they were outside their own home.

“Don't walk so fast, I'm not used to these shoes.” TangShi tugged at his hand, stumbling behind him, aware of how hot and strong it was when clenching onto hers. To outsiders it looked intimate and sweet as though they needed to touch but to her, it was a vice grip borne of reluctance and he was dragging her in at speed. He didn't care if his pace was faster than hers, or his hold was making her fingers ache.

“Why did you change your dress from the white one and make us late? You blend in too much. Just about every woman here is wearing black.” He turned and appraised her up and down with a frown. The point was to be seen and she had switched out a somewhat cutesy white lace number for this cocktail dress that was too sultry and sexy. Something Rhea had chosen on a shopping trip for her and not TangShi's style at all. He preferred the white, as it somehow suited her more than this, brought out her natural beauty but he wasn't about to admit that was the issue.

“My period came.” She dropped her tone, her cheeks heating with the admittance as she leaned in to whisper it loud enough for him to hear. Her heart sinking at the reminder that she had now failed twice to do what was required. “I didn't want to be paranoid about leaking.”

YuZhi turned to glance at her, this time with a furrowed scowl and calculated the dates in his head. Second month of going to that clinic and the second time her period had shown up like clockwork two weeks later. He sighed, not overly disappointed about not having to start that whole mess towards fatherhood, but it just meant he had to keep visiting that place and jacking his load into a cup twice a month. It wasn't pleasant and

he hated going there. If his grandfather wasn't so set on their timeline before he became CEO he would never be trying for a baby.

"Over here! YuZhi!!" Rhea's voice drifted their way, saving TangShi from a response from him, and YuZhi led her on, increasing the pace until she was almost tripping to keep up again. She gritted her teeth and tried to run behind him.

"Hey, all. I am sure Rhea has filled you in on my bringing a girl tonight..... This is the gang we normally hang with, Miss Lei. Gang ... TangShi." YuZhi pulled TangShi level with him as they came to a huge round table that seemed crammed with glamorous people. Nodding to her as he flicked his chin at the assembled group, all giving her little waves and head nods of welcome. TangShi was glad to have a moment to catch her breath and didn't struggle to let go of YuZhi's hand as it was obvious he wasn't about to. Some of the faces she recognised and some she didn't, so she smiled warmly, out of her depth when in a place like this and nodded respectfully.

"Well, well, who is this little buttercup and why are we only meeting her now?" A tall man to TangShi's right stood up, suddenly looming over her, and eyed her from head to foot in an invasive manner before extending a hand towards her. Dressed similarly to YuZhi and around the same age, although he was nowhere near as handsome or exuding the same presence.

"My girlfriend." YuZhi answered blandly and leaned over to take a beer being handed to him by a familiar looking face perched on a stool. One that winked TangShi's way, a mischievous knowing look and half hitched smile, and she instantly clicked it was ZhengLi Kim. TangShi gave a curt little smile in return and turned away from Mr Kim, to deal with this new intrusion.

"Nice to meet you. What family are you from, TangShi?" The man pressed on, ignoring YuZhi's disinterest in a proper introduction, pulling her attention to him fully and moved in as close as he dared. Invading her air so that she instinctively stepped back against YuZhi's arm and her grip in his hand tightened impulsively. She was never really at ease around strange men, especially ones getting in her space like this.

"The Lei family, as in Lei Enterprises." She nodded respectfully in a semi bow, aware this was another rich heir to probably a more worthy family than hers and accepted his outstretched hand to shake. She knew better than to be rude. He was quick to envelope it in a clammy large palm and yanked her forward out of YuZhi's grip, forcing his hand to release her on the other side as she tumbled at least three steps forward.

"Well, hello, TangShi Lei. I don't think he's the best date you could pick up tonight. How about you and I get better aquant..." He slurred into her ear, making her skin crawl and her heart hammer in rapid anxiety with the sudden assault. Retracting her body as best she could without being obvious and turning her face away to avoid his alcohol stench. She inwardly yelped as she was tugged back with a new grip on her

waist, which sent her tumbling into a hard form behind her and meeting a sudden stop as the hand slid around her abdomen and a flat palm held her tight.

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“Out of bounds. Hands off, Kai! She’s already my girlfriend, not just a date you can try and poach.” YuZhi pressed a pointer finger into the man’s forehead in a playful manner and pushed him away with a little force, grinning as though they were friends, and this was all in jest but there was an undercurrent of seriousness. TangShi was relieved at being rescued, but uneasy that YuZhi’s aura seemed to be turning a little hostile as she leaned against his chest, holding her breath at the sudden proximity of his body jammed into her spine, while his hand was keeping her against him.

“Hey, you know I’m only kidding, Yoonie! Just playing with your pretty little thing.” The man laughed and swiped up a beer to hold up and clink against YuZhi’s as a sign of apology. Seemingly unbothered by the change in mood and playing it off.

“TangShi, avoid people like Mr. Yang. You never know where he’s been.” YuZhi leaned down so his nose was level with her ear and said it loudly enough so everyone could hear.

“I second that. Come sit, we are waiting to introduce my bestie to everyone properly. YuZhi you are so useless. Come over here you two.” Rhea’s bright and bubbly voice cut through the noise of the busy bumping nightclub and YuZhi lassoed TangShi around the shoulders with a protective arm, releasing his current hold, guiding her to the seats Rhea vacant at the other side of the table with Rhea. It was almost a natural manoeuvre, but it made TangShi’s heart stop for a second as she was nestled in against him and pulled forward this way. She had never had any man hold her like this and she felt small and vulnerable.

TangShi had been well prepped about how tonight would go. That YuZhi would play the part of smitten date and convince everyone present they were falling in love. That meant he would make a point of touching her, cuddling up and making it clear they were already an item. She had to act adoring, play nice with this mix of friends, and be aware of people taking pictures. With the recent YuZhi and Rhea news, many bystanders would be quick to upload candid shots to social media of these well-known faces. This was why Rhea chose this club, and this group of friends to make their relationships public, without actually doing so.

YuZhi pushed her in first so she would be seated next to Rhea, never letting go of her fully as his hand slid from around her to rest on her shoulder and he followed her to sit down, sliding in, moving close, and placing his arm behind her across the back of the seat to cage her in when they were seated. TangShi squirmed a little. Aware her heart rate was haywire; her skin was abnormally warm and she was ultra-sensitive of every single touch and brushing of YuZhi’s arm against her. She was having trouble remaining calm and normal while her insides were a fluttering mess of nerves.

“What do you want to drink?” He leaned in, his nose brushing her cheek as he asked in her ear directly. His voice low and husky, and less tight a tone than when they arrived. Making it seem like he was looking for any opportunity to touch his date and get intimate.

“I don’t really drink so I don’t know. I’ve never been to a club before.” TangShi whispered back, trying not to get in his face as much as he did her and blushed at how pathetic she seemed admitting that to him.

“Really?” He asked wryly, wrinkling up his forehead in disbelief.

“Really! Why would I lie? I Don’t really go out like this, to clubs, or go drinking.” She leaned back to lock him dead in the eye and tried to ignore the doubt in his expression.

“Sex on the beach, then?” He winked at her, testing to see if she knew this cocktail and then broke into a smile when she gawped at him with utter shock. Her change in manner and an expression she couldn’t fake told him she had no idea what it was.

“What?” Is the only thing she could say. Her face reddening with the heat of embarrassment at thinking he was suggesting something crude.

“Maybe you’re not lying then. Okay, allow me.” YuZhi smirked, lifted his hand and clicked his fingers towards a passing waiter to get him over. Leaning back over the chair he issued a drink order before coming back to slide his arm down from the seat and around her shoulder instead, pulling her close against him so his mouth was almost pressed to her ear and her heart exploded at how intimate this seemed. Aware of Rhea right next to him them who was acting like this didn’t bother her at all and feeling weird and uncomfy at this whole thing.

“Don’t worry, it’s soda. I can’t have you getting wasted on the bare minimal and making an idiot out of me. If you don’t drink, I can assume you have zero tolerance, so I am best keeping you sober.”

“Thank You.” She sighed in relief, for once meaning it, and pulled away from him guiltily to get her breathing space back. Turning to her saviour beside her and instead focused on her and not at how much YuZhi was moving into this touchy-feely role that was doing strange things to her emotions.

“You look really pretty tonight.” She nodded at Rhea’s dark red dress, that clung to her like a second skin in all the right places while not actually revealing too much. She really did have great taste and knew what suited her the best. It was classy and yet seductive, while being modest. Rhea turned and threw her arms around her in an exaggerated fashion, giving her a hug that took TangShi by surprise. Almost like she was glad that TangShi separated herself form YuZhi’s cuddle.

Rhea already smelled strongly of alcohol, and she could tell when held like this, the woman was a little drunk and swaying. They had arrived here an hour before her and YuZhi did, and it was clear they wasted no time in drinking. TangShi hugged her back and then tried to relax when Rhea kept one arm around her, shoving YuZhi's away like an annoyed child and pulled her up tight beside her to stay like that. It felt territorial like she was giving YuZhi a clear message.

TangShi didn't know if this was a jealous reaction and making YuZhi let go, or if this was all for show of painting them as the closest friends and that she fully supported YuZhi's relationship but didn't want him stealing her away. TangShi was not one to play games or act up scenarios like this and she was a little out of her depth when trying to read the meanings.

Soon her drink was brought to her and YuZhi handed it over, amused with the way Rhea was all over her and keeping guard as she stuck to her like glue. He turned away as ZhengLi moved to be beside him and the pair fell into conversation easily. Leaving TangShi to look towards Rhea and listen in as she talked animatedly to the other woman around them. It wasn't exactly a relaxing and fun place to be, but it wasn't unbearable either and for once YuZhi was not being his usual nasty jack ass self.

"So you two, really are over and this is all ...fine?" One particularly pointed faced woman opposite them was motioning towards TangShi and then YuZhi with a doubtful expression and scrutinised Rhea's response.

"Mmm Hmmm. We have been playing the couple game so long for fear of hurting each other and neither wanted to admit we no longer loved one another that way. Scared to lose our best friend. It was a huge relief to finally admit it and find we were both on the same page. We are friends, we love and care as friends but there's no romance anymore. I think we just should have stayed as friends all these years." Rhea was a very good actress and played the role convincingly. Not a single fault in her prepared answer and TangShi felt sad for her that the lie could be so convincing.

"And so, you introduced him to TangShi, or he met her through the collaboration?" The girl beside pointed face, smaller, prettier, but with a resting bitch face was the one throwing questions now and TangShi realised this was an interrogation thy had to pass. If they couldn't convince this group of friends, they would never convince the public. TangShi had been well versed in responses to and wade din hoping to help.

"We met first, at the fashion show venue. Rhea saw me looking lost and came over and introduced herself." TangShi put everything into acting natural.

"That's right. Her father gave her the job of scoping out the day one of rehearsals. We clicked as soon as we met, and I just had to let YuZhi meet her once we grew closer. She's my darling, sweet angel. This girl has brought so much joy to my life, and I didn't want to be greedy and not share her with my favourite person in the world." Rhea slid

an arm around her and gave her a squeeze for added effect, beaming at her like an adoring mother. No hint of malice or jealousy.

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“But dating her??? I mean...” The two women exchanged odd glances as though this was all a little suss to them. “You really didn’t care?”

“Why not? He’s single, there’s no regret between us, and she’s awesome. What better thing than to see my two besties hit it off and have an attraction. And they look so good together.” Rhea was laying it on thick with her Oscar worthy performance and TangShi could only sit and smile and hope she didn’t look as forced and uncomfy as she felt. She wanted the ground to open and swallow her whole as the lies just kept pouring out. The heavy weighing pain in her heart at the deception, and the guilt that Rhea was being hurt by all of this. TangShi didn’t feel good at all.

“And you and Lu Jeng? You two came together and seemed cosy, right up until he went to sit with Trey. Are you dating him? Does YuZhi not care?” More doubts, more prodding from pointed face.

TangShi turned to where they nodded and caught sight of a tall and handsome guy sat down nearby, animated in his conversation with another man. She recognised his side profile as being someone in a drama she watched with Xiaosu so figured it must be him. The friend who would play her adoring date. He was wearing a suit jacket in a blue, over a light tee and had similar jeans on to YuZhi. A casual stylish outfit over a fit body. Gorgeous as well, with nice hair.

“Things are blossoming and I’m not unwilling to see where it goes. YuZhi and he are friends and he gave us his full blessing. I swear, we truly are okay with this. It’s a relief to be free.” She played coy and broke into a smile as the two women also mellowed and began grinning too.

“I mean, he’s not YuZhi, but he’s hot too, and I guess I can see why you would go for him. He’s a bit of a mystery guy and I like that.” Pointed face brushed back her hair and made fluttering lashes his way, eyeing him up with a predatory lick of her lips and then back to Rhea to show her approval.

“It’s early days. Much like for TangShi here. Don’t scare her away while YuZhi is only just starting to win her over. She might run. You know how aloof and cold he can seem, and she’s only been seeing him the shortest time.” Rhea jested, trying to play interference but YuZhi picked up on hearing his name. He leaned their way resting his arm back on the rear of TangShi’s seat, so he caged her in and came painfully close. His knee pushed against hers as he slid his hand on her thigh in a way which screamed ‘mine’. TangShi’s stomach lurched over and the butterflies therein all died of shock.

“Did I hear you say you’re trying to make my new girlfriend run away? Can’t have that, I have zero stamina for chasing tonight. It’s been a hard week.” He smiled naturally, charm on the full offensive as he leaned in smoothly and pecked TangShi on the cheek with a chaste kiss. A soft brushing of his lips against her skin that sent tingles electrifying every pore on her body.

She almost jumped with the unexpected touch and managed to keep herself still while clenching her hands together and pasting a smile on her face that seemed real. The two women visibly melted and swooned at his show of affection and Rhea pulled off a convincing grin and patted TangShi on the other knee.

“When you two get married, I want to be the maid of honour and tell the world how I was the one who pushed you together. Your first daughter better be named after me.” She winked, leaned in and kissed TangShi on the other cheek, pressing hard and with less grace, lingering for a moment, before getting up and motioning towards the dancefloor.

TangShi felt trapped and suffocated. Not just by them one either side, hemming her in like she was some weak prey stuck in a weird game, but by all of this. The mirrored touches and the heavy messages shooting between YuZhi and Rhea that only TangShi was picking up. The pretence, the show they were putting on and how easily they did it. She had never been one who could lie or be deceitful and her only way to deal with this was to smile, blush, and say very little. They were born performers who were used to the public eye and twisting the truth for the benefit of their image. TangShi felt sick, her anxiety peaking because this wasn’t her at all and she was aware her own lack of ability could smash this ruse.

“Come, come, I want to dance with you.” Rhea motioned with a grabby hand, offering a way out and some respite from YuZhi’s invasive presence. He was causing havoc to her hormones and her heart rate. Rhea pulled TangShi up without waiting on a reply and away from YuZhi’s clutches with a tug that almost sent her falling forward onto the table. She wasn’t entirely sure it was an accident.

YuZhi was quick to catch her with one hand, his reflexes had always been good. He caught her by the waist and straightened her to upright before letting her go and watching her walk off with Rhea. Once again, the moon eyes of watching women going all gooey at how he was so tuned into his woman that he couldn’t bear to see her fall.

He leaned back and rested his head against the padded seat as he took a long slow swig of his beer and heard ZhengLi chuckle in his ear. Lowering his voice so only the two of them would hear.

“This is going to be an interesting night. Show’s only just staring and already it’s entertaining. I’m impressed your acting skills.”

“Shut up.” YuZhi nudged his knee against ZhengLi’s but got only a laugh in response. That eternal mischievous nature of his best friend was rarely compressed.

“Rhea is jealous, and your wifey looks terrified about being here. I never expected her to be such a pure lily-white virgin type. I feel bad for her, knowing how your mean ass has been treating her these past two months. She looks like a lamb being led to slaughter.”

YuZhi didn't reply. His eyes fixed on the two of them navigating the crowd, followed closely by the two women they had been chatting to and another girl from the seats beside them. He couldn't help but see how much, even in a cocktail dress, TangShi didn't fit into his crowd or this scene. Despite being a rich Lei daughter, she really had no awareness of how to blend into this type of affair. She was nervous, uncomfortable, and seemed like a fish out of water who had no desire to be here. Her acting skills were almost non-existent and for the first time he regretted throwing her into this shark pit full of biters. He had legitimate doubts about her being the manipulative girl he first pegged her as when faced with the reality that she sucked at lying or pretending and if it was pushed, she would probably cave.

Rhea could handle anything thrown at her, especially when it came to this group of people, but TangShi looked like a kitten that had been abandoned on a motorway. The only thing he could do to keep this ruse intact was to cling to her until tonight was over, smother her with attention and stop anyone else getting close or chatty with her before taking her home before someone got her drunk. They only had to do this once, and then it was plain sailing once the news broke that they were a couple and the netziens outraged panned out.

He just had to hold onto that and then get ready for taking her as his date to every public affair he could in the next month or two. Every passing week was a step closer to this ordeal being over and two years coming to a closer end.

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TangShi had had enough. A night of noise, invasive people around her, dancing on a crowded floor while surrounded by drunk women she barely knew, and Rhea was clinging to her and pulling her around like a puppy dog. Rhea was so drunk she had begun to behave like a needy child and TangShi seemed to be her anchor. It was suffocating and she longed to leave and go back to the peace of home.

Her head was aching, her body hurt, and her stomach was cramping like crazy due to having her time of the month at the worst moment. She was tired, fed up, and emotional about being bombarded all night with questions, interrogative stares, and constant alcohol pushed her way which she tried to dodge. In the end she had drunk maybe three red wine tops all night and was feeling woozy and unsteady on her feet, but she was sober enough to still have her senses. It didn't taste good, and she didn't like the sensation of dizziness or dreaminess.

YuZhi had stayed mostly with the men at the table, throwing back beers and seemingly having a good time. Oblivious to this hell she was being subjected to, or that he really didn't care. He barely looked her way in the last hours and she had the urge to go over

and ask him to take her home. She was so over this play, and she was sure many pictures had been taken all night of her and Rhea cuddled up dancing, whereas none of YuZhi, given his distance. That had been the whole point of this!

TangShi wasn't happy. She didn't care if he got mad at her saying she wanted to go. She had cash on her and a credit card and would leave alone if he was difficult. Worst case scenario, she could call a cab or phone Linlin to come get her. She lived in this region of Shanghai and would drop everything even if it was getting to the early AM's.

TangShi managed to uncurl a very intoxicated Rhea from around her, with a guise of going to the bathroom again. She had been possessive of her all night and seemed like she didn't want TangShi straying back to YuZhi's side, the drunker she got. TangShi knew in her heart it wasn't Rhea's fault. That level of insecurity and growing jealousy was only natural, especially as she was drinking and losing her sense of reality where emotions were bubbling up uncontrolled. TangShi was to monopolize and play at love with her soul mate, and nothing could be done about it. TangShi felt for her and understood and had tried all night to pacify her, but it wasn't easing her heartache. Being obedient and staying over here wasn't helping TangShi any.

YuZhi looked up just as TangShi pulled out of the heaving crowd and made her way towards him on shaking legs, visibly exhausted and he noticed she seemed paler than before. His attention was pulled her way despite himself, distracted by how she looked, and when she slid up and into the booth to get closer to him, he became aware of eyes turning his way from nearby club customers. Stiffening up because he knew he had to continue with the loving boyfriend act.

"Hey, baby." YuZhi laid it on as naturally as he could and reached up to catch her by the wrist and waist to guide her to sit beside him as she closed the gap. She was like a newborn deer on fragile legs, and he managed her weight with zero resistance. TangShi wasn't expecting the sudden affection or help but was too tired to react and flopped down against him. Her weight pulling her so she couldn't stop the way she collapsed against his shoulder like a filled sack of rocks. She didn't care anymore about this fake concern or intimacy, she wanted to sleep, and he was a warm and safe harbor.

"I want to go home. I'm drained and my feet hurt." She barely managed a whisper, but he heard her, and slid an arm around her back and hauled her up against him in a hug. So her head was tipped to his upper arm, and she ended up leaning in cozily looking to all eyes like a couple who were comfy with touching one another. It wasn't entirely untrue. TangShi was used to YuZhi's presence after the last two months of sharing a bed most nights. It meant she trusted he would never do anything inappropriate to her and she was acclimatized to his presence, even if it usually came with a bad attitude.

"Hey, TangShi. Finally, I get a chance to say hello properly. I have a feeling we've met before. Do you remember me?" ZhengLi wasted no time in leaning over YuZhi to get her attention, now she was within range. It had been on his mind all night, how much he got that inkling of familiar, and his gut was still holding onto some connection to Alice of

eight years ago. She had something about her that brought that girl to mind, and he wanted to know if he was right.

“I don’t remember if we have. It’s possible.” TangShi deflected, not willing to rekindle those memories. Sighing and keeping her chin tilted down so he wasn’t seeing her full face.

“I can’t place you but you’re so familiar to me. Maybe a few years back....”

“We’re going.” YuZhi cut in coolly, killing the interaction dead. Knowing exactly what ZhengLi was going to ask her and didn’t want to deal with this. ZhengLi was like a dog with a bone sometimes. He had already told him the subject of Alice was mute, and TangShi was not her. He knew what he was doing and didn’t want it to continue. Some things were better left in the past.

“So early? Or are you taking your girl home for extracurricular activities?” A male from further along the seating leaned forward to wink at them both, a welcome interruption, and YuZhi batted his face away.

“None of your business. ZhengLi take Cheng back to his own club and get him away from unsuspecting patrons. He’s starting to turn feral.”

Cheng gave him a thumbs up with a goofy smile and laughed at YuZhi’s weirdly blank reaction. Normally they could banter and joke about most things, but tonight YuZhi had seemed tense and distracted and barely drunk anything by his normal standards. The laid-back seasoned drinker and regular to his club, had spent the night acting like he didn’t want to be here.

He had noticed YuZhi had kept one eye on the dancefloor all night and at first wondered if it was regret at breaking up with Rhea. Maybe his emotional state wasn’t good, and he had longed to get back together with his girlfriend of three years. That was until he saw his focus had followed TangShi always, without deviating to Rhea once, and he was wondering if his buddy was really falling hard for this new girl. That maybe it was more a matter of being hyperaware and watching over her, feeling nervous someone may charm her away from him in their early dating days. He had never been the possessive or overly watchful type with Rhea and always so confident in their relationship. It was a weird contrast.

“Come on.” YuZhi moved and pulled TangShi with him, knowing they should go without a show. It was almost as though she weighed nothing as he slid his arm around her waist to pull her up and keep her pinned to his side. Her feet didn’t really have any impact on her moving. She covered her mouth with a balled fist as she yawned and nodded but never responded verbally. Going with the flow and relieved he was taking her out of this place. He could feel her lack of resistance and the sluggish way she moved and ducked down to see if she was even conscious.

He could smell the slight scent of wine from her, and as her eyes were heavy and her cheeks rosy from an alcohol reaction, he realized she was close to falling asleep. He cursed her under his breath at the fact she drunk and now she was barely awake so he would have to cradle and baby her out of the club. He wasn't in the mood to be a nanny for a drunk girl, but he had no other option.

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TangShi had given up and the levels of fatigue at being out so late had taken over. That and this hazy weirdness which was getting worse now she had stopped moving around and dancing. She allowed him to haul her with him and move her out of the booth while being stuck in his embrace. He stopped her for a moment while he slid off his leather jacket and hung it around her shoulders before taking her further, aware it was late out now and would be colder than when they arrived. An unusual motion of consideration on his part that wasn't motivated by onlookers but because he used to do this for Rhea any time they went out.

TangShi caught a flash or two from the far left but was slow to see where it came from and assumed it was lights from camera flashing. Even now, late into the night people were still keeping tabs on them and it depressed her. Knowing this would be her life for the near future. To eternally be of interest to strangers.

She stumbled as they headed onward, YuZhi turned momentarily to wave at his friends and motioned a call sign at someone to the right while TangShi looked around to see if Rhea was waving. Rhea came into view, her eyes wide and tearful, clearly upset with the view of YuZhi holding TangShi so tightly, before Lu Jeng pulled her aside and gave her a hug, drawing attention to them from onlookers. Lu Jeng was fully aware of the situation and his part in this story and thankfully acted before Rhea reacted in a way that people noticed. TangShi caught the look of sadness and felt terrible, immediately moving to push YuZhi away in reaction but he caught her in his arms and tugged her back into his chest.

"We're leaving and now more eyes are on us than earlier. Stop resisting." YuZhi leaned down, rasping into her ear before sliding his arm around her waist and moving her in front of him so he was cradling her behind instead. His chin over the top of her hair. He had seen Rhea's face and it felt like a sucker punch to his heart but there was nothing he could do about it, they had to get used to this.

Walking TangShi forward a little awkwardly but holding his jacket around her as if his only concern was keeping her warm as they made it into the breezy entrance hall. Pushing aside all thoughts except getting this drunk pain in his ass home.

As soon as they got out into the foyer, he let her loose with one hand and pulled his cell phone out to book a cab on his app, stopping to look over his shoulder for a moment to see if Rhea was still staring after them through the glass fronted hall exit, but they had

disappeared back into the crowd. He sighed heavily, knowing how awful this must feel for her, but they had gone over this a million times.

This is why he had told her they should spend less time in contact and try to separate their schedules for the duration. Really break up and try to not interfere in each other's lives for their own sanity. She had been clinging on and making demands and putting him in an awkward situation and pushing their relationship onto rocky ground the longer this went on. He worried at this rate they would cause so much damage that they wouldn't be able to back peddle when this was over.

TangShi was worse with the hit of fresh air and her eyes began to swim, blurring everything around her so she clung to his hands. As did all sense of reason and maturity and she giggled at the predicament she found herself in as he halted her on the curb to wait on their ride. She felt lighter, freer as though all those self-imposed rules and needs to behave in a certain way, all went out the window.

"Who knew..... Yoonie, Yoonie, would be cuddling me again and finding me a cab? Deja vu!" She murmured under her breath, caught in memory and finding amusement in how human YuZhi was acting towards her for once.

"Huh?" YuZhi was distracted from his phone by her words and leaned to the side of her head to glance at her face from his taller height. "What did you say?"

"Shhhhhh!" TangShi turned awkwardly, and flat palmed his mouth, swaying and wriggling out of his embrace and then giggling at his frown and poking him between the brows with her other fingers. Finding him irresistible and cute when this close and uncaring about her behavior. He truly never lost his sexy appeal in all these years.

YuZhi pulled back, annoyed, and caught her wrist before pushing it down and shaking his head at her in irritation. His mood was already sensitive, and he wasn't drunk enough for any weird crap from her either. Exhaling heavily because he really didn't have the patience for this tonight of all nights.

"Great, now you're worse. Don't make me carry you. Can you please stand still and behave?" He threatened but TangShi only beamed at him and threw her arms around his neck in a dramatic fashion, pulling him close in a conspirational huddle. Her nose almost touching his and he had to turn sideways a little to avoid a full-on face collision. He hesitated at how close she was coming willingly and had to relinquish his phone to his pocket to use both arms to keep her upright.

"I won't tell anyone that you used to be sweet to me. It's our little secret, Yoonie, boonie. Can't ruin your street cred!" She was talking nonsense, so intoxicated by the wine and air that her brain was scrambled. Finding fun in this and unaware of his widening stare, or the intense changes to his expression. YuZhi heard her properly this time and his furrowed brow deepened as he appraised her face for a moment. Sobering completely as his heart started hammering through his chest.

“Why are you calling me that, and what are you talking about? When was I ever nice to you?” he swallowed nervously, something clawing at the back of his brain and refusing to acknowledge it. They had only met on the day of their marriage, not before, so he was never pleasant to her.

TangShi sighed somewhat sadly, losing her fun burst of energy and playful and rested her cheek against the hollow of his throat as her body began to sag. The effects wearing off fast and that extreme tiredness kicking in. Her heart finding melancholy as those happy memories fizzled away and reminded her that YuZhi wasn't Yoonie anymore.

“Why didn't you come to the bridge like you said you would? I waited until I got soaked through...” Her voice trailed off as her words died on her lips, hints of genuine sadness and TangShi finally passed out. It was sudden, mid word and YuZhi had to catch her.

Her body crumpled and he had to grapple to keep her upright, finding her like a deadweight in an instant before leaning down and lifting her into his arms to stop her meeting the concrete sidewalk. It was easier than attempting to keep a sagging body straight and upright. He stared at her for a long silent moment as he cradled her up close and bounced her into a better position, his head crazy with thoughts and his heart pounding like a war drum. She was peaceful and dead to the world, sleeping like a baby in his arms and all he could do was stare at her.

He couldn't deny what he heard, and he couldn't really keep denying his gut feeling when she laid it out there so clearly. He couldn't mistake what she said.

They met before, she knew he was once called Yoonie, and she said she waited on a bridge for him. In all the experiences of his life, there was only one time that those details matched up and had haunted him ever since.

He didn't want to admit it. He didn't want to see it. Every part of him wanted to dump her ass down and walk off to get some much-needed breathing space to figure this out. There's no way in hell that TangShi could really be Alice.

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YuZhi tossed the bundle of newspapers and magazines across the desk, so they slid in all directions, and one dropped off before ZhengLi scooped down to pick it up and threw it back on the pile. Amused at his friends agitated behavior.

“Looks like our PR campaign so far is going smoothly. Nice pictures by the way, I hate how damn photogenic you are.” He laughed at YuZhi's sour expression, who was leaning back in his chair scowling ZhengLi's way. “Shanghai's Golden couple double date outing! Really catchy. Or this one YuZhi Leng and Rhea Cheng find love again so soon! Bit cheesy but it's better than this one...” ZhengLi held up a known gossip magazine and waved it with a mischievous grin on his face. “Foursome dates for the

Heirs of Shanghai!" He laughed heartily at that one. Shaking his head at the implications, before laying it on top of the others with equally bad headlines.

"Can you stop. I'm not in the mood. They have been hounding me all day."

Once again, the press was swarming the buildings outside, and they had been followed from the crack of dawn right from his own drive. Online news was trending, and his social media accounts had been humming all morning. They expected attention with the news he had a new girlfriend, but this was more than anticipated. All day the call lines were bombarded with reporters, security had to escort many out and Rhea was facing the same over at the fashion show venue. TangShi was told to stay home and not go near windows or outside until this blew over.

Everyone wanted to confirm that the pair were still friends while dating alongside one another. Such was the curse of fame and being a hot topic these past weeks. They also wanted interviews on Rhea's view of YuZhi dating her public best friend while the film world was abuzz that Lu Jeng had been seen with Rhea. Not to mention the interest in TangShi, who she was, what she did for a living and general tidbits for an heir who seemed invisible until now.

"You should frame this one. It gives me serious drama vibes and would make a good cover image to a bossy CEO and his love, plot." He held up one of YuZhi standing behind TangShi, his arms around her protectively as he leaned in and pressed his nose to her cheek. It shielded the fact he had whispered in her ear and looked more like he was nuzzling her seductively. TangShi's eyes were half closed from being drunk and yet it came across as something else in the picture. She looked ready to jump his bones and haul his clothes off. YuZhi waved it away, annoyed that so many images had been released despite only brief moments together at the club. Someone must have been glued to them all night waiting for picture opportunities.

"Don't you have actual work to do? Sure I don't pay you to hang at my desk all day and irritate me." YuZhi didn't sleep last night, unable to get eight years ago out of his head and was yet to tell ZhengLi about TangShi's confession about the past. After dumping her in bed he spent the night in his study, to avoid staring at her and wondering, comparing, touching her. Trying to see if she really did conjure up the image of her past self. He had mulled it over a million times in his head trying to debunk the details and separate her from Alice, but he couldn't. She could only be her and he was not happy about that. His emotions were frazzled and he was feeling raw.

"Why are you so grouchy today. You're either silently sulking and glaring at your paperwork or being techy. Do you have your period?" ZhengLi poked fun at him but YuZhi's face soured further, being reminded TangShi got hers and was another month of no baby, and more trips to that clinic. He was starting to regret this arrangement.

"I'm busy. And now this is public" he gestured at the papers which ZhengLi was stacking up neatly once more. "I have to deal with the Leng and Lieu family dinners after this.

Now they want the public to expect a marriage, of course all of that will be carefully planned so we meet somewhere expensive and popular. “ He sighed and threw his pen down, discarding the contract he had been trying to read and kicked his feet up to the edge of his desk to push himself away in frustration. So many steps to be able to announce his marriage and future baby.

“How about we go take a walkaround the new build? Expend some tension.”

“I can’t. That idiot Lei will be there trying to lord over the construction again, and I may actually punch him in the face this time. He’s driving me insane and not an easy man to do any kind of business negotiations with. I don’t get how someone like him can produce such an undemanding daughter like TangShi.” YuZhi rubbed his temples at the thought of Mr Lei. Every encounter was difficult, and he really didn’t like the man. He wished his grandfather had stayed with the collaboration after signing, so he could continue to interact with him instead. Unfortunately, his grandfather handed him off faster than hot coals the second YuZhi married TangShi and now he knew why. Mr Lei was a slimy and morally devoid human who only saw dollar signs.

“Was that a positive? You complimented her, right? I may need to clean my ears out.” ZhengLi widened his eyes in mock shock and smirked when YuZhi threw his pen at him with a swipe from the desk.

“She has some good points, just not many.” YuZhi faltered, brain flicking to last night and the fact she may be Alice which put a whole new spin on how he saw her. He hesitated again about telling ZhengLi and pushed it back down. It wasn’t that he was hiding it, but he knew his smart ass bestie would make a song and dance about it and hit him with ‘I told you so’. He wasn’t ready to admit it to himself, let alone deal with that.

“She’s pretty and you two look really good together. I mean you and Rhea were always like this Hollywood couple who were too perfect to be real and it was intimidating AF. TangShi with you, it seems natural and real like I can actually visualize you guys married with kids. It’s a whole different vibe.”

“Don’t let Rhea hear you say anything like that. It’s already bad enough between us lately.” YuZhi couldn’t focus on work anymore and got up to walk around his desk and perch beside his assistant. Sliding up beside him so they were almost leaning against one another.

“I did notice things were strained. She seems to like TangShi genuinely, but on the other hand she also hates seeing her near you. I agree about you two separating and staying apart until this is over.”

“She doesn’t understand that I have to deal with this and play at being a doting husband for the sake of my future kid. That if we keep fighting and she keeps trying to tug me to do what she wants, then we’ll end up resenting each other. I already agreed to the clinic and yet it’s suddenly not enough.” YuZhi was frustrated. He understood why Rhea was

jealous and didn't want him near TangShi in any romantic way, it wasn't easy for him to see Lu Jeng play boyfriend either, but she was asking the impossible.

"Such as?"

"She wants me to send TangShi to stay in my apartment alone. To not touch, hold hands, or have any public intimacy after the news dies down and they stop following our dating habits. To basically meet her at the clinic until she's pregnant and then keep away from her until we divorce."

"She does know this is for two years and TangShi being your date and escort to every event, party and dinner is nonnegotiable. That your family agreed to a marriage and not a fake one. That her family agreed to that too, because they want you to present a healthy and happy marriage and not an alliance of businesses that will harm their stocks. They also think you're sleeping with her already." ZhengLi knew Rhea had been constantly nagging him but this wasn't feasible, given the nature of the marriage. Alliances born of manipulating wealth and status were not encouraged, so this had to seem real.

"Rhea doesn't care."

YuZhi was distracted by his phone vibrating in his pocket and pulled it out, frowning his brow at the screen and turned it to ZhengLi with a further frown. His mood nosediving at her name on screen when he was surviving on zero sleep and a mild hangover.

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"Speak of the devil." He sighed heavily as Rhea's picture flashed intrusively. She had been calling him all through the night and then again this morning. No doubt fixated on events of last night and looking for reassurance while interrogating him. She had done this a lot these past months. He had avoided answering, knowing fine it was alcohol fueled at first and now it was probably not wise to pick up after ignoring her until noon.

"Answer it. She'll show up here otherwise and make a scene. You know how she gets." ZhengLi warned, knowing that the sweet and calm side of Rhea was only half a picture and there was a fiery and terrifying temper that hated when she wasn't getting her own way. Rhea was spoiled and used to things her own way. She wasn't a bad person but there had been times when her common sense flew the nest, and she had some pretty questionable behaviors when mad at YuZhi.

"Let's go out to eat. Tell the secretary we're out for business all day if she shows up. I can't deal with this right now while my head's elsewhere." YuZhi kicked the toe of his shoe into the rug, obviously tense and distracted and ZhengLi narrowed his eyes at him in suspicion.

“Where else would your head be? On some other pretty perhaps?” ZhengLi pricked up his interest, seeing YuZhi frown before turning away and dodging answering. He got up and walked back around the desk. “Yo.... Dude? Don’t ignore me.” He pressed him and followed YuZhi around his chair as he retrieved his suit jacket before bumping into the back of him with the sudden stop.

“Just something. Forget it.” YuZhi was way too defensive for this dog to not want that bone.

“Spill bro... you can’t leave me hanging like this.”

ZhengLi was relentless and followed close at his heel as he made his way out from the desk, picking up his car key and wallet from the side drawer and moving out to leave. Trying his best to appear normal and ignore his new shadow.

“Later. Maybe when I have had a chance to digest it a bit more.”

Ughh no, now I have to know, or I am not stepping foot out of here.” ZhengLi leaned back on the desk behind him, perching his butt and crossed his arms. Stubborn on show and refusing to move until he got some answers. He could sniff intel.

YuZhi’s shoulders sank and his hand paused on the handle to the door, knowing his best friend would hold true to his words. He would sit there all day, even if YuZhi walked out and left him. This was pointless and he didn’t want to hang around waiting for Rhea to show up in a foul temper to make his day worse. There’s nothing he could say to her that hadn’t been said hundreds of times already. The awareness they had a time restraint hitched up his anxiety levels and he flashed his friend a pleading look.

“Well? I’m waiting” ZhengLi fixed his focus on YuZhi’s face and cocked one brow.

“God dammit. Okay!” YuZhi relented. Snapping at him and turning before slumping back against the wooden surface of the door and looked tired and fed up suddenly. His skull banging a little forcefully as though he was trying to expel demons. “TangShi last night, she said some things that..... ughhhhhh. I can’t get my head around it, but she said we met before, that it was in Beijing and that I made her wait at a bridge and never showed.” He blurted it out rather than saying ‘She’s Alice’ because he didn’t want to admit it to either of them.

“No way!!! Wait.... NO!” ZhengLi was more excited and shocked rather that deflated like YuZhi seemed to be. His gut instinct had been right, and he wanted to jump for joy because he knew it all along. “She’s Alice?” he grinned and jumped up to march over and pat YuZhi on the head as though he was a good puppy. YuZhi swatted him away with a glare.

“I didn’t say that. She just might be...what with calling me Yoonie and..”

“She called you Yoonie? That’s a name I haven’t used in a long while. Although, I’m sure Yang used it last night. She might have heard it there.” ZhengLi’s brain was in overdrive and his PI skills in full throttle.

YuZhi shook his head, knowing the way she used it and what she said, felt a lot like she had known him as that name. Eight years ago. He didn’t think she just repeated something random she heard.

“It’s really her?” ZhengLi was reading the weird vibes from YuZhi, seeing the confusion and troubled mood moving in and patted him on the shoulder in a much gentler way. Friend mode initiated and moving to try and be the serious shoulder for once. He could be that guy when needed and knew when jokes should be dropped. “Look dude, if it’s really her, maybe you should try being a little nicer and talk about why you didn’t show up back then. I know you think TangShi is some kind of awful manipulative marriage climber who wants status, but I didn’t get that from her back then, or last night. She seems like a sweet girl who has no say in what her father decides. You at least owe her an explanation about Beijing and why we didn’t show.”

YuZhi made a ‘hppphh’ noise under his breath. Memories of her telling him a long time ago all about a father that treated her poorly and a family that didn’t want her and he tried to piece it together with what he knew of the Leis and the TangShi he had been leaving with.

“She told me back then she was unwanted and her father treated her like a leper. Why would Lei push her at me if that was true? This contract relied on a good relationship between our families.” None of it made sense. Mr Lei placing so much on this marriage if TangShi was a rejected daughter or an outcast. Not to mention that if it became clear he threw his family shame at them for this deal, then it would seriously damage the alliance. It was disrespectful as hell.

“Maybe they made up since then. It was eight years ago, and she was still very young.” ZhengLi had his doubts about Mr Lei, but he knew it would take time for YuZhi to process this and think it through. “What now though? I mean she’s the girl you kept in your heart all these years and yet TangShi is someone you treat pretty coldly. Has it changed how you feel about her?” ZhengLi knew it was possible, given in his mind Alice was YuZhi’s first love and he had never really given that part to Rhea all these years. Only ZhengLi knew how much he looked for her after his father’s funeral and how unsettled he was for a long time in feeling like her lost a girl that should have been a huge part of his life. ZhengLi had never understood how one night could cause such a bond between them, but he witnessed his friends regret all these years and the fact he never forgot her.

ZhengLi wasn’t built like that and had never fallen in love. He was a player who liked casual relationships and stress-free fun. For him, he never understood YuZhi’s need to settle down and pin one woman to his side the way he did with Rhea. Their relationship on the surface seemed perfect and glamorous but ZhengLi had always felt like it was a

show love, and empty below the surface. A codependency that grew from tragedy, at a time when YuZhi needed someone to support him, and that he had become this emotionless hard ass who couldn't tell the difference.

"Why would it? She's TangShi now. I don't like her, and I love Rhea. There's no confusion there." YuZhi was quick to answer in a defensive tone, refusing to acknowledge his own confused feelings about her, but even as the words came out there was a nagging feeling in the back of his head and a tight anxious knot in his chest. This was why he hadn't slept and instead had churned over memory and memory of that night in his head. Torturing himself with the details and instead of seeing that masked sweet young girl, he had conjured up TangShi instead. It messed with his head.

"Talk to her. Forget everything up until now, wipe the slate clean and try treating her like a human from here on in. She's still the same girl!"

"I don't want to. If I soften to her and we form any kind of relationship, even friends, it will make Rhea worse. I have to think of the future and salvaging my relationship one day. It's better to stay cold and distant and leave TangShi to fulfil her side of the contract." That's what he had been telling himself all morning, but ZhengLi could see the hesitation in his words.

"Why are you so certain that Rhea is your future? Have you ever told her that you held onto a mystery girl in your heart all these years? And if you did are you going to admit to her it's TangShi?"

YuZhi paced away from ZhengLi, back to his chair and slumped down as though he had lost all will and energy. He knew what ZhengLi was getting at and it was out of the question.

"I told her about Alice a long time ago, when we were just friends.... If she finds out TangShi is her, she will implode. Her insecurity is already intense, I can't imagine what that detail would do. She will never know, and I won't give her reason to suspect it either." YuZhi was sure about that.

ZhengLi exhaled heavily, knowing that this was a mess that would one day unravel, no matter how hard he tried to conceal it, and Rhea was a ticking time bomb. He knew nothing would go as YuZhi planned, because life was never easy that way, and he was curious to find out after the drama explosion if Rhea or TangShi would be the woman he was left standing with. ZhengLi was placing bets on TangShi, his gut had said it from the second he saw her picture months ago and he was secretly rooting for her.

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"You stupid girl! Pick it up, don't you dare leave a single piece on the floor. I am not moving until you pick it all up!" Aunt RuiZi was screeching at TangShi so loudly it was hurting her already delicate head. Suffering from her first time being drunk, and she was

trying to ignore the washing machine stomach or pounding fluffy brain. Auntie her usual mean self and picking out absolutely anything she could to make TangShi's life hard. If it wasn't restricting her food, criticizing her hair, clothes or make up, day in and out, then it was finding random things to scold her for, like this.

She was suffering from last night and was being unusually clumsy today. Having accidentally walked into aunt who was carrying a glass of water and knocked it out of her hand in passing. The shards all over the floor were mixed with the undrunk water and Xiaosu was screamed at for trying to help her tend to it. Aunt was in a bad mood, as usual, and TangShi was always an easy target.

"I'll go get a brush and dustpan and some paper towels." Xiaosu offered as a way of help, but Aunt glared at her with that nasty venom she was good at and Xiaosu quietened right down. She knew better than to intervene when she had been warned off.

TangShi pulled the wastepaper basket from under the nearby table and walked back to the mess glittering the hardwood floor. It was hard to see where all the shards were in the water and began blindly picking at anything sticking up, scratching her fingers as she did so, but Aunt was not sympathetic.

"Don't be so clumsy. Don't you drip blood everywhere. I'm cursed to have you living under my roof and now look at the mess you're making!" Her high-pitched shrill tone was piercing and TangShi jumped. Slicing her index finger on a large piece she was aiming for by accident. Her nerves were already frazzled today, and aunt wasn't helping.

She tried to stem the blood by pressing her other finger against it and continuing to pick up glass with her other hand, turning to Xiaosu with a sober expression.

"Can you get me some tissues for my hand? So It doesn't make things worse." She asked with a gentle quiet tone, hoping aunt would at least allow her something to stop the blood dripping all over the floor.

"Yes, Miss." Xiaosu didn't wait to be told she wasn't allowed and ran off at speed to go find the first aid box, feeling horrible for her Miss Lei. Xiaosu hated seeing her being bullied day after day and hated how indifferent YuZhi seemed about aunts mean temper towards his wife. TangShi was too sweet a girl to throw shade back at the elders, and it infuriated Xiaosu how much she put up with.

TangShi pulled back as a sharp stabbing sensation shot up her pointer finger on her uncut hand and pulled back to stick it in her mouth as fresh blood started seeping from another slice. Aunt looked so furious she might self-implode.

"You're doing it on purpose, aren't you? Stupid, idiot girl. Clumsy and pathetic, I curse the day they brought you home." She had hit a new level of shrill, her temper flaring,

and she waved a glitter tipped finger close to TangShi's face as she crouched down, making her flinch but she kept her calm. TangShi had years of practice being on the receiving end of this kind of treatment and didn't react at all. Doing what she always did, eyes down, face blank and continued to try and finish the task they were yelling at her to do.

The blood wasn't stopping thanks to the water which was making her hands drip. Small slices looking worse as the blood diluted and ran further on both hands now. She kept trying to proceed but the droplets of red were spreading as they hit the puddles on the floor and tinting them too, so it was starting to resemble a mini murder scene.

"What's going on?" YuZhi's hostile tone made TangShi jump with the unexpectedness of it, and Aunt snap her head up to the two approaching male figures that just walked into the hallway. Both men clad in three-piece grey suits and looking like handsome book ends getting off work. YuZhi spotted the mess, the blood around her feet and TangShi's hands from his angle and his face turned thunderous. Isn't switching from tired and relieved to be home, to snarling protector.

"Nothing. She broke a glass and now she's making a mess cleaning it up." Aunt scoffed in a superior tone, sniffing at TangShi with unconcealed dislike.

"What the hell." YuZhi was beside her in a flash, hauling her upright and pulling both wrists towards him for inspection. She turned unsteadily on her feet and stepped backwards to right herself with his ungraceful tug. YuZhi grabbed her tighter and yanked her forward so harshly she inwardly gasped, collided with his torso, and realized she would have stepped on remnants in thin slippers had he let her follow through and had saved her feet from massacre too.

"Where's Xiaosu to clean this up, and why are you naming her pick up glass with her hands? She's not the maid and this was obviously an accident so why are you punishing her?" YuZhi seemed pissed, not his usual smug and tolerant mood whenever he caught aunt terrorizing TangShi. He was radiating angry energy and kept her close, holding her hand sup between them like she was his prisoner.

"I'm here. I have these." Xiaosu appeared like an angel, carrying a first aid box in one hand and a brush and pan in the other and beamed when she saw YuZhi cradling her miss and the handsome that is ZhengLi standing behind him looking amused and gorgeous. She knew aunt had no chance of bullying her further while YuZhi was standing up for her.

"She smashed it; she should clean it up!" Aunt RuiZi was not for backing down and enraged that for once, her nephew was not siding with her.

"Look at her hands!" YuZhi snapped right back. His posture stiff and commanding, accusing her and waving TangShi's wrists her way as though she needed a visual reminder.

“Self-inflicted and looking for sympathy. Don’t be manipulated and drawn in!”

“Are you kidding me right now? Her hands are important to her. She’s an artist, who paints and draws. She wouldn’t do anything like this just to make you feel bad. She isn’t like that!” YuZhi was incensed that his aunt was being this cruel, while turning TangShi back to him to stem the bleeding by holding them upright as Xiaosu opened up the first aid kit.

“Here.... Let me.” Xiaosu made an attempt to guide TangShi towards her with a gentle hand on her arm, but YuZhi tugged her back to him with a determined frown.

“Take it all through to the sunroom. I’ll do it. Come on TangShi.” YuZhi pulled her with him, not letting go, staring his aunt down in passing with a shake of his head, who was spitting nails she was so angry. YuZhi always sided with her no matter what tantrum she was having and had never openly defied her like this before. It made her loathe the stupid girl even more and she would be sure to complain to Rhea and have her scold him.

TangShi didn’t know what to say, dumbfounded by the change in him, and allowed him to guide her at speed, aware of the hateful looks aimed her way as they abandoned Aunt RuiZi in the hall. She knew she would suffer for YuZhi sticking up for her the second he left the house again but for now, TangShi was oddly touched.

She glanced at his side profile meekly as they walked, her stomach warm and fluttery and emotional that he intervened and was acting like he cared for once. Her normal defensive wall that rose whenever he showed face was wavering and she was reminded of the sweet boy he seemed so long ago. This wasn’t because they were in public and on show either, he seemed to really want to help and tend to her wounds.

He put her in the nearest seat as they walked into the spacious glass house, sliding the first aid box from Xiaosu’s hands. He put it on the low table beside TangShi and motioned for the housekeeper to go back and tend to the mess with minimal words and a hand wave. YuZhi was simmering a bad mood after coming back to witness this, visibly riled, while ZhengLi strolled in casually behind them with a smile on his face. Amused at YuZhi’s natural reaction to an injured TangShi when they arrived and mentally added another tick to his ‘will YuZhi fall for TangShi’ scoreboard.

“Auntie has retired to her room with a headache. You’re probably being written out of her will as we speak. Naughty nephew. And here she thought you were her favorite.” He poked fun and wandered off to sit on one of the wicker seats opposite to watch YuZhi play doctor.

“Don’t move.” YuZhi ignored the comments and worked on TangShi’s hand as she sat in silence. Subdued and pale, she watched in numb quiet and seemed like a wounded animal knowing their savior was trying to help. It tugged at YuZhi’s chest painfully.

Drying her skin first, before using sterile rub and cotton to clean them thoroughly, he applied band aids to the worst of them. With so many it took him a few minutes and TangShi patiently held still without making a murmur at all.

“Where is the sassy attitude you give me when facing other people, huh? You can stand up for yourself. I’ve seen you do it.” YuZhi scolded under his breath, although his voice had no real hints of anger. He was frustrated that this whole thing was making him feel weirdly enraged.

“She’s my elder, and your aunt. She runs this house. It’s easier to let it go.” TangShi mumbled, keeping her focus on her hands and not on him leaning in at her so their heads were almost touching. His proximity was doing weird things to her emotions, her stomach was unsettled with butterflies, her skin prickling with every soft touch of his warm hands.

“So? If she’s bullying you, say something. Don’t take it from anyone. Especially not in this house.”

“That’s ironic coming from you.” TangShi whispered, amused by YuZhi’s obvious mood and yet couldn’t believe his hypocrisy. Him of all people in this house, spent weeks trying to goad her and cause trouble. He had sat by and done nothing about his aunt for weeks and now here he was, lecturing her.

YuZhi quietened for a second while he finished dressing the last of her cuts, after inspecting the deepest thoroughly and deciding it wasn’t in need of stitches. He held her fingers for a long moment as though still examining them for others, keeping his eyes averted but aware of her nearness too. His temper finally calming now she was dealt with and none of them were as serious as they looked when he first walked in.

He knew it was time he laid some ground rules with his aunt and stopped this ongoing petty behavior. It was amusing at first when he hated everything about her being here and wanted to see her suffer. As time went on though, and after he made her cry, it didn’t entertain him or give him the same kick as it had and instead, he felt slightly sorry for her. Even TangShi eating that awful diet had lost the fun factor and he hated watching her bland meals every time he ate at home.

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He didn’t want to admit it to himself, but even before he found out she was Alice, he had started to get used to this situation and her presence. Started to see that she wasn’t some manipulative or spoiled god digger who coerced him to get what she wanted. She was almost a girl who tried to be invisible in her own life and avoided conflict with those around her so she could hide away in peace.

YuZhi had even begun to be thankful that TangShi had a quiet personality and was respectful and obedient when it came to his family. She didn’t cause him drama, and

lately with all the arguing and tears from Rhea, coming home to her in the evening always felt peaceful. A relief. Even when they bickered and tried to get a rise out of each other. He knew he had mellowed towards her; he knew he wasn't as hateful as before.

TangShi had a calming aura, a sweetness about her that told you she probably was a caring and loyal person if you gave her the chance. Maybe it was because she wasn't someone who would hurt out of malice or be cruel intentionally that got him so pissed when he saw her bleeding all over the floor and enduring his aunt screaming abuse at her downturned head. In that moment she had looked exactly like that girl eight years ago when he had been drawn to her vulnerability.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He uttered, losing himself in thought while still turning over her delicate little hand in his and smoothed over the biggest band aid with his thumb as softly as he could. TangShi trembled at the alienness of how he touched her and shrugged, tensing all over.

"Tell you what?" She was confused by this. Wondering if he meant tell him that Aunt was horrendous to her at every opportunity. Surely he knew it. He'd seen it before today.

"Who you were..... that you were Alice." He murmured it, looking up as he caught her head snap up, softly gasp, and she widened her eyes at him in shock. Her heart catapulting to her mouth because she had no memory of telling him she was. Her brain racked through the night before when she began to feel really drunk and cursed herself as a slight recollection came back to her. A memory of asking him about the bridge. Her face heated with embarrassment, and she hesitated before pulling her hands out of his and nervously touching her Band-Aids to cover her reaction.

"I didn't think I had to tell you... I I just assumed it wasn't important." She stuttered, her heart pounding like a drum and her brain going haywire that they were actually talking about the one subject that could cut her to the core. She had avoided telling him for multiple reasons, but one was this exact awful confrontation. Her heart didn't know how to cope with it.

ZhengLi perked up over in his quiet bubble, hearing his bestie finally broach the one topic he had been waiting on, and smiled like the Cheshire cat, leaning forward to hear better. Ready for some progress and trying hard to stay inconspicuous.

"Why Alice? It's not your name? Why didn't you ask me why I didn't show up? Why not ask me if I remembered?" YuZhi spewed out the words in a manner that wasn't his usual style as nerves seemed to invade him from nowhere and he found himself wringing his hands together before rubbing them on his thighs. Instant clammy skin and a tightness in his throat. Uptight in a flash and having palpitations for the first time in his life. He didn't understand his own physical reaction to asking her these questions.

TangShi blinked at him, stupefied with the interrogation, and still reeling from the shock of him putting it out there between them.

“Alice is my” She sighed, grasping for the words to explain, fidgeting under his scrupulous focus on her face. “Linlin named me ‘Alice through the looking glass’ when we first became friends, because she felt it suited me. It was a silly nickname which stuck, and I used it for a while when I didn’t want people knowing I was from the Lei family. You know how that can be. Now it’s my artist pseudonym, Alice Lin. A nod to Linlin, the person who pushed and supported me to even start selling my art.” TangShi shrugged again, a habit borne of nerves and feeling hemmed in as her face blushed increasingly and she was sure she must be pink right up to her temples. Avoiding his eyes and biting on her lower lip and wishing he wasn’t this close to her when she was struggling to stay calm.

YuZhi mirrored her mannerisms subconsciously, biting his own lip and looking away for a moment.

“My father died. That night..... A car wreck. It’s why I didn’t show, and I didn’t know how to contact you. I Didn’t forget, I just didn’t recognize you. You’ve changed.” He blew out the breath he had been holding, finally engaged eye contact again and swallowed hard. “I Don’t even know why I’m explaining or bringing this up now, it’s just..... you made it clear who you were and it’s bothering me. We had no closure back then, I guess.” YuZhi, the normally cool, composed, and confident heir of the Leng family, was reduced to that teen boy who felt out of his comfort zone, weirdly angsty and couldn’t keep his focus on her. Maybe it was because the subject brought up old pain and regrets and unearthed long forgotten feelings. It was awkward for them both.

“I’m sorry about your father. I Didn’t know that’s how he passed, or when. I’m sorry. It makes sense that you left in a hurry and had your mind on other things. I was just a girl you didn’t really know.” TangShi didn’t know what else to say, and her words brought YuZhi to a halt, his gaze fixing on her as he stared at her blankly for what felt like an eternity. She couldn’t read him at all, and his emotions were masked completely.

He was looking for more of a reaction in her manner and eyes than what she was saying, a glimmer of residual something. He finally exhaled heavily seeing nothing and looked away, glimpsing over his shoulder to see his friend still listening intently with a wry smile on his annoying face. He shook his head at him, narrowed his eyes and turned back to TangShi.

“It’s the past, right? We were kids and many years have gone by. I’m sorry I stood you up. I regretted it for a long time, but..... Here and now, Rhea is the girl I will go back to. She’s my future. This changes nothing but I didn’t want to ignore it. I hope we can go on from here on in on a better footing and try to get along.”

His words were reasonable and expected yet they cut TangShi’s soul in a way she never expected. A slicing stab in her chest that made tears prick the back of her eyes

and she smiled to hide it as she inhaled slowly and put on a brave face. She always knew Rhea was the end goal, and the thought of trying to be amicable was something to be happy about but it still stung. It was stupid and made no sense to her.

“I know that. And Rhea is my friend whom I want to see happy. I don’t want to keep fighting with you. I Don’t want to make her sad either. I just want to do what’s asked of me and then get on with my life when it’s over.” TangShi looked down at her hands timidly and subconsciously curled them up together, making her appear small and vulnerable with such a childish mannerism. Trying to ignore a huge bridge she would have to cross one day in giving up the baby she would give birth to for him. She didn’t want to face that yet.

“Right. So maybe we can start over. Try to be friends? I mean from here on in, we have to publicly date and be seen together a lot. It’ll be easier if we can get along.” YuZhi nodded, as though this was the perfect solution, and they were agreeing to leave eight years ago behind them. Agreeing to leave their weird war of the past two months on the floor to start anew. Watching her and ignoring his own torn and confused emotions as they grew up inside like a tornado.

“We can try. I just want to get through this without being miserable.” She smiled weakly, for once not reaching her eyes when she blinked back up at him and her tone was tinted with an unmistakable sadness that cut YuZhi to the bone. He couldn’t deny it when it was right there in front of him.

It had never bothered him before if she was unhappy living here or how things were turning out, until now. He had brushed her aside, ignored her, been mean when he could and been the biggest source of teasing her and finding ways to make her upset, and he knew this. Finding out who she was had been like a slap in the face and made him see her in a new light entirely. He could no longer separate her from that vision of eight years ago, no matter how he tried, and he couldn’t be cruel to Alice.

“I’ll try harder.” YuZhi relented, sticking his hand out to solidify the deal.

TangShi stared at his tanned large palm for a few seconds before coyly sliding hers into it. He closed his fingers snugly around hers, being careful not to hurt her wounds. They shook hands as though confirming a business deal, and even though that’s what this was and had started as, YuZhi lingered, holding her there. For some reason, now they had laid things out on the table, and he could no longer deny who she was, or what she had once been to him, he felt even more anxious. Like something was wrong about this whole thing and he didn’t know how to shake it off.

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 40

“Are you sure this is the place?” TangShi wandered around the beautiful scenic courtyard of the traditional building, looking like something out of a historical drama with a curved tiled roof. It framed with billowing cherry blossom, draped over the eaves, lit by

the sun of the day in an almost magical scene and she pulled out her phone to take a picture. It was too pretty not to.

“Mmm hmmm” Linlin was already glued to her own cell, oblivious to this breathtaking view, checking the address and pulling up the details of the teacher she had been corresponding with. “We’re lucky he is going to meet with us. He rejects ninety percent of applications right off, but when I told him your name, he jumped to meet you. Seems you have a fan.” Linlin raised a brow but not her focus.

“He’s a teacher, a well-known one. Why would he want to meet me?” TangShi was dubious. She hadn’t been sure about this when Linlin called her yesterday, but she knew her best friend was only trying to make her life better. This is what Linlin did. She would chase something that she felt would make her friend happy and cut out the steps and inconvenience for her and hand it out on a platter for her to take if she wanted it.

“Why not? Your artwork is amazing and has a special quality to it that makes it stand out. It’s whimsical meets realism but with the soft quality of watercolors. It’s beautiful every time you create something.”

“If I’m so good then why do I need an art school? I think you’re exaggerating.” TangShi laughed and hooked Linlin through the arm, beaming with affection, when she finally put her phone in her bag. Linlin bopped her on the head with a playful smile and the two leaned in together in companionable comfiness. TangShi knew she was blessed and lucky to have her all these years.

“True, to me you’re already accomplished and don’t need a school, but I know you’ve been sad about giving up your scholarship and expanding your studies into painting. I want you to be happy and this is the best alternative I could find. He’s highly noted as a teacher and his students all become famous in their own right. He’s very picky.”

Linlin had listened to TangShi’s woes for the past weeks as she pined for the Californian school and how bored she was amusing herself everyday at the Leng manor. She was losing her motivation to paint the longer she lived there and Linlin could not let that happen.

“Hmmm. I’ll trust you. You never steer me wrong.” TangShi clung to Linlin as they walked the long length of the cobbled path to the inner garden, under an archway of ivy and flowers to very beautiful double doors that were flanked by overflowing plant pots of various sizes and colors. It felt like walking into a mini paradise and whoever tended to all this was a green thumb master of gardening. It was an idyllic setting for creative souls and painters.

Linlin rang the hanging brass bell that dangled on the porch roof, finding it quaint, and jumped when a young man approached from the side of them rather than opening the door.

“Miss Choi and Miss Lei I presume?” His smooth husky voice had them both turn and momentarily rendered mute for a second at the young handsome man standing there. He was not what either woman was expecting and both blinked hard for a minute in case he was a mirage. If he was the ‘teacher’ they couldn’t understand how. He looked barely thirty, was tall, dark haired with good bone structure, muscular, and boyish. He was dressed more like a rich casual weekend visitor on holiday than a stuffy old art major. Linlin had expected traditional clothes, white hair and a long tapered beard, judging by the rumors about him. Not this sexy young hotty who could give YuZhi a run for his money. He had something of the executive about him.

“Teacher Cai?” Linlin queried, confused that someone this youthful could be the legendary art master who churned out talent. Surely his experience was largely based on years, but that wasn’t possible if he was only thirty!

“Sort of. I’m Rong Cai, my father is Teacher Cai, but I am one of his ex-students. I help here. Well... I run things and he gets to paint all day.” He smiled, charming them effortlessly.

Rong Cai appraised the two very attractive women, comparing them in their differences. One was fashion conscious and bold, a daring bob haircut died light chestnut with artistic make up and accessories that hinted she loved being extra. The other was girl next door, long wavy dark hair, natural make up, delicate features and big eyes, and a simple summer dress and sandals that accentuated her feminine frame. They were so different, yet both beauties.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Cai. I’m TangShi Lei. The one who applied.” TangShi leaned forward extending her hand for the polite shake and smiled softly while bowing her head as they greeted one another. Always respectful and poised.

“I’m Linlin Choi the one who has been emailing and texting. You can call me Linlin.” Linlin purred seductively and gracefully flicked out her own hand in a demure manner, full on flirt, and was greeted with a friendly manner.

“Welcome. I’m a fan of your work Miss Lei. My father doesn’t really use technology so it’s me that deals with the applications and interviews. He’s old school and traditional about his life and craft so I became an assistant of sorts. I’m the one who evaluates the talent first and he will look over and agree or not if I like what I see.”

“I see. Linlin said she sent my portfolio, so I am assuming I passed one step to get here?” TangShi liked this man’s warm manner and non-intrusive energy. He was laid back, easy to relax around, and was good looking enough to be a pleasant view.

“Yes, I already knew your name first though and as soon as I saw your ‘fireworks over the pond’ piece, I was very excited to put two and two together. You are one of my favorite up and coming artists in China. I heard you had gone to the US to study but I guess not.”

