

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 51

“Are you sure this is everything? We could check out the new store over there.” Linlin offered but TangShi shook her head without looking to see what the store was and finished putting the shopping bags into the boot of Linlin’s orange car. Glad to have finally finished ticking off her list.

“I already have so many supplies and don’t need much. It’s an art school, not a college for scholars, and I’m sure I can pick up anything later I may have forgotten.” TangShi was excited about her starting date in only a few days and was eagerly counting them down. It seemed like it was coming so fast, and she was more than ready to start. To have something to fill her days with.

“Clothes?” Linlin offered with a small smile. “I’m sure you need some fashionable and arty overalls or something!”

“You mean, TangShi do you want to go shopping so I can spend money on things I don’t need in the name of passing time?” TangShi cocked a brow at her friend and smiled as she closed the car boot.

“I always need clothes; besides I have a hot date with that jackass playboy ZhengLi, and I need to out sexy him. He thinks too highly of himself, and I should put him back in his place and remind him how lucky he is that I am giving him the time of day.”

It had been almost a week since the nightclub incident where Rhea had slapped TangShi, and Linlin had seen ZhengLi three times already. Both adamant that it was a friend with benefits relationship and no serious ties, but TangShi could tell Linlin liked him enough to break her own rule of seeing the same guy only once in a week.

It had been quiet since YuZhi had smoothed things over with Rhea and set the record straight, but she still hadn’t shown up or called TangShi to apologize about hitting her. TangShi still felt uptight and antsy about it and would check her phone every so often in case she missed a call. YuZhi had left that night in the past and told her not to worry about it, but TangShi couldn’t shake the nerves she felt over it. If Rhea really was fine then why hadn’t she reached out, and why had she stopped coming to the house to see TangShi since? She was too reluctant to reach out to her first in case it made things worse and was scared Rhea really did hate her now and suspected her of trying to seduce YuZhi.

Cheng thankfully had very particular standards of clientele for his club, ones who valued their privacy when being there. This meant even though the whole scene had been witnessed by many, not a single report, video, or picture had shown up and TangShi could stop worrying it would. Cheng’s club was a private place with a keypad entry for members. Only those who were accepted could get in and those inside all had reason to stay out of the public eye.

“I don’t have other plans, so lead the way.” TangShi relented, knowing she would rather get sore feet from following her shopaholic friend around for the afternoon than sit at home alone and stress over her current predicament and overthink. Although things were better between YuZhi and her and they had started to find a balanced way of co-existing, it was the only relationship in that house that was easy, excluding XiaoSu. It wasn’t a home for her and when she was there, she tiptoed around, either staying in their room or sitting in the sunroom to paint. She tried to keep out of everyone’s way and always felt uptight.

Grandfather ignored her or avoided her and seemed like he didn’t want to make any lasting bond to a girl who would leave one day. Aunt still treated her like a leper and Rhea’s inferior, and the other uncles and occasional family gave her the cold treatment or bored expressions. They didn’t want pulled into Aunt’s drama and knew she would flip out if they were kind to TangShi, although some felt a modicum of pity for her.

YuZhi’s sister had gone abroad for a few months and never got around to hanging out which had disappointed TangShi, hoping she would have had a friend and ally in her. She figured it was Auntie’s doing that she was suddenly whisked off to a six-month educational trip of importance the minute she showed interest in being friends with TangShi. That meant the house was big and lonely , with only Xiaosu in the day to talk to and YuZhi when he came home at night, sometimes late.

“We could do lunch, shop, then go hang out at my house. I want you to help me find an apartment. I want to move out from my parents seeing as they are never there. It’s too big and I can’t stand their décor choices.”

This had been something they had talked about many times, that Linlin wanted her own place, but never ever committed to doing it. She probably wouldn’t this time either.

“Sounds good to me. Only, can we not go anywhere too high profile, I’m really not in the mood for being followed.”

The press was calming down of late, once again stirred up by the picture on ZhengLi’s WeChat last week but there was lingering paparazzi and the odd citizen who recognized TangShi. She wasn’t used to this and was starting to get why celebrities stayed out of sight or wore masks to move around the city. It was exhausting to always be aware of people around you and monitor your own behavior and company.

“I want western food though and nowhere cheap and cheerful does what I want.” Linlin whined, puppy eyes making TangShi feel guilty for denying her and she sighed heavily.

“Fine. As long as we leave if I start getting unwanted attention. I’m not in the mood.” Some reporters were relentless and would question and yell after her while snapping a hundred pictures, flashes going off in her face. She couldn’t understand why people were even interested.

“Coolio!” Linlin darted up and kissed her taller friend on the cheek with a mischievous grin on her cute face and hooked her arm in hers as TangShi’s phone started to ring. TangShi could never resist Linlin’s requests.

“Hold up a second.” She slid it out of her bag and smiled impulsively when she saw YuZhi’s name on screen. He didn’t often call her, so she rushed to answer it, that familiar feeling of butterflies rearing their heads in her stomach and a ripple of happiness that ignited her childish bubbly side.

“Hello?” Her voice was immediately softer, pulling a raised brow from Linlin who observed with interest. Seeing the physical change in her friend was a sure sign her suspicions of TangShi falling for YuZhi again were confirmed.

“Hey. Are you busy? I need you to do something for me.” YuZhi was lounging at his desk with his feet propped up, halfway down his chair in a mirroring pose to ZhengLi on the other side of his desk. Both recently stuffed themselves on take out after going through today’s schedule and were letting it digest.

“Not really, just shopping with Linlin for my school supplies. What is it?”

“Be my date. I have this thing this afternoon that requires one. I’ll pay for an outfit; I just need you to get here for four pm. Outside my building. If you want to, that is?” YuZhi slid up in his chair, pulling his feet down and motioned for ZhengLi to move his as he pulled documents from under them. “It’s a formal early dinner. So, something modest and understated. It’ll be a table of old men and their rich wives so nothing to cause high blood pressure.” He jested as he found the contracts related to this afternoon and then tossed them to ZhengLi while motioning that he needed three copies. ZhengLi heaved up, sighing that their break was over while still nursing his food baby and scooped up the papers to go back to his own desk and copy machine. Throwing a backwards handwave and thumbs up at his friend.

TangShi’s nerves rose, and her face colored at the thought of something like this and she faltered as she replied. Knowing that public things like this were expected, but it still made her antsy.

“Do I have to do anything?” her voice trembled a little, making it obvious she was nervous about it.

“Just look pretty and be polite. The model fiancée. I’ll do the talking and you can hang on my arm or hide behind me if you like. If I don’t take a date, they’ll try marrying me off to their daughters before they let me leave.” He joked, smiling to himself as he listened intently to her shallowed breathing, knowing she wasn’t a fan of this kind of thing. It still made him feel bad that he had once bullied this girl relentlessly. The more he knew her the more it amped his guilt because she was like a sweet kitten with no real claws, and she got uptight about the weirdest things.

“Okay. Linlin can help me pick something. She can drop me off too.” TangShi nodded at her friend, asking if that would be okay, getting Linlin’s nod and thumbs up as approval.

“She can amuse my assistant while I’m gone if she wants. He’ll be free from four onwards.” YuZhi smirked, teasing because he was aware those two had been hooking up since that night at Cheng’s, even if ZhengLi was denying anything between them beyond kissing that night. It wasn’t like him to play coy and hide the sordid details of his playthings, so he had a suspicion this was different.

“Oh, they already have a date tonight anyway.” TangShi offered innocently and YuZhi burst into a full smile on the other end of the call. He had implied he was busy tonight but not with whom, but it was all fitting together.

“Is there anything else?” TangShi waited with a pensive breath.

“Nope. I’ll see you at four, outside. Don’t forget. I’m sure Linlin knows where Leng Group HQ is though, right? I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Yes, she does.”

“Wait... Tang...” YuZhi had started shortening her name these past few days and it always made her feel a little peculiar. As though it was a sign that his affection for her was growing. It felt personal somehow, almost cute. “Rhea might be there tonight. Her father is one of the investors and it’s not abnormal for him to take her as his partner. I know you two haven’t talked since the club, so maybe it might be a chance to smooth things over. I didn’t want you walking in without a heads up.” He rolled his shoulders, the pit in his stomach tightening as though he was getting stressed on her behalf.

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He had spoken to Rhea a few times since that night and told TangShi it was all sorted, which was a little white lie. The truth was that Rhea was being difficult and her insecurity and jealousy had amped up to another level. She accepted his explanation and admitted she shouldn’t have touched TangShi, but YuZhi’s threat had left them at a cold standoff. He told her that if she ever laid hands on TangShi again or verbally attacked her then they would be over for good, without reprieve. And he meant it. He couldn’t stomach women who used violence to sort their conflicts, especially against other girls who would never retaliate.

He had never made any kind of threats like this in the whole time they dated, it was more Rhea’s style, but this was something he was furious over and Rhea was sulking and pissed about it. He assumed it’s why she hadn’t contacted TangShi and was probably mulling over it like a spoiled child while holding back the apology in pettiness. Rhea could be a stubborn child at times.

“Oh. Okay.” TangShi didn’t know what else to say. Her insides turning over like a washing machine cycle had been switched on and she swallowed hard.

“Don’t worry about it though. Rhea knows you did nothing wrong but she’s stubborn and sometimes takes a bit of time to admit to a mistake.” That was an understatement.

“It’s fine. I can handle it.” TangShi wanted to reassure him even if she didn’t feel great about it.

Linlin eyeballed her weirdly, knowing something was up and frustrated at only hearing half a conversation. She narrowed her eyes and leaned in to listen, but TangShi batted her away with a playful poke in her temple.

“You can! So, four. We can go do something fun after to make it up to you. Maybe a movie? A walk after? You pick.”

TangShi wasn’t expecting the offer to do something like that after, and blushed profusely, aware that her feelings for YuZhi lately were getting complicated and scolded herself for being stupid. She knew that as they grew closer, he was treating her like a friend and trying to make this amicable, but things like invites to a movie confused her emotions and made her hope for things she shouldn’t. She had to remind herself frequently that he loved Rhea, and this was only a platonic arrangement. That she shouldn’t be disloyal to Rhea either, as apart from that one night, she had shown her kindness and friendship while others were being cold.

“I’d like that. I’ll see you at four.”

“Have fun shopping. Don’t let Linlin max your credit card.” He joked with a smile, his mood light because TangShi always made his day seem better, even with the briefest of interactions. She was a sunny personality that had long been missing in his life. She had a pure innocence about her that you never had to question or doubt. What you saw is what you got, and she had no devious plans behind the smile and sweetness. In this society of the super-rich, it was rare.

They hung up without further conversation and TangShi relayed everything to her best friend. Eyeing her up in confusion as Linlin beamed brighter and brighter and her grin overtook her face.

“A fake date followed by a real one. Maybe we should add lingerie shopping to the list.” She jested, poking TangShi in the ribs and then dodging a well-aimed retaliation slap.

“It’s not like that.” TangShi’s face reddened right up to the top of her ears, and she turned away to hide it.

“Sure it isn’t! You know, ZhengLi is with me on this. That you two are not as platonic and straightforward as you both want to pretend. That it’s only a matter of time!”

“Not again.” TangShi covered Linlin’s mouth with her palm, shaking her head at her for once again bringing this up. “I could say something similar about you two. You say it’s a no strings arrangement, yet I have never seen you date one man at a time, and so many hook ups in one week. Hmmm?”

Linlin batted her hand away instantly defensive and turned to shake her ass at her friend. Winking over her shoulder with a sassy grin.

“He’s good in bed and he’s an amazing kisser. Of course, I’m going to get full use of it before I move on to the next one. I’m indulging my needs until he bores me.” Linlin deflected wandering off in search of the nearest place to eat in hopes the rise of her own blush wasn’t noticeable but refused to admit to herself that she had a major crush on ZhengLi Kim. He wasn’t like any other guy she had ever known. He was better at game playing and being aloof than Linlin and for the first time in her life, she was not the master behind the wheel of a new dating partnership. ZhengLi was pulling all the strings.

“Except...I know you haven’t slept with him, so that’s a lie. And another clue this is not all about hook ups.” TangShi followed, knowing that had they had sex she would know all the sordid details, because Linlin was not one to keep them to herself. So far, she had told her about every date and nothing after. That was a big clue that ZhengLi was dropping her off and not staying over. She just didn’t understand the fact Linlin was hiding it. She also was confused about the lack of sex, given both ZhengLi and Linlin were born players and fine with casual one-night stands.

“Pffft. You have no idea.” Linlin blushed, caught out by her friend and ignored the thumpity thump of her own betraying heart. The truth was, ZhengLi hadn’t made any moves to get her into bed yet and Linlin was strangely apprehensive about crossing that line. She had lost all confidence in her sexual prowess when it came to him.

She had never hesitated about sex with a hot man before, yet when things got close to it with ZhengLi, she lost all her vavoom and her nerves almost suffocated her. He didn’t seem all that worried about pushing her into it either. Infuriatingly cool and the last two dates he had kissed her until her toes curled and her breath was crazy heavy, at the door, and left without pushing for more. She couldn’t read him at all. It was like he was enjoying getting her worked up and turned on, just so he could walk off and leave her frustrated. If this was a game plan for him, she wasn’t going to fall for it and be the one to beg or make the moves.

“Come on. Let’s eat fast, you have to help me pick out suitable clothes.” TangShi dropped the subject, caught up to her friend so she could link arms and was led down a side alley to find somewhere they could get some western food. Excitement brimming inside because she was starting to love spending time with YuZhi, and this was going to be a whole afternoon and evening with him.

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“Thank you Mr Kamamoto. It was a pleasure doing business with you.” YuZhi shook the man’s hand, bowing to him and his wife as they made their parting greetings and TangShi stood obediently beside him and waited for the polite goodbyes too. She was stylish in a long navy wool shift dress, and flat pumps. Her hair wavy and sat prettily around her naturally made-up face, free of jewelry apart from one dainty necklace and she exuded an air of elegance. Many of the male diners had been enamored with YuZhi’s date and it had been a pleasant and friendly evening.

They worked through all the dinner companions as they made their way out of the dining area, after a two-hour long dinner, and YuZhi took her hand in his which was now becoming an automatic maneuver whenever he was with her. Finally free and heading for the carpark.

“You did really good. They seemed impressed with my girlfriend.” He smiled, knowing she knew he was joking about the title and fell into a matched pace. Glad this was over and satisfied he got what he needed out of the meeting.

“It wasn’t so bad. I found it interesting listening to you talk about your investment plan and the new company you want to start up. The food was nice. I liked it here.” TangShi had genuinely enjoyed herself and despite working herself up and expecting Rhea, she never showed up at all. Her father brought his assistant instead and they had a relaxing meal talking over a proposal that sounded interesting.

“Yeah, work stuff can be boring, but this was one project I actually have interest in. Something new and exciting.”

They were combining an established fashion line with one of their popular cosmetic brands to create a theme for a known artist. Putting her designs on both prints and accessories, but also packaging to tie them up into limited edition items. And a business venture that was something to do with building a media center in Shanghai. YuZhi had seemed so mature and capable as she watched him as a CEO, and it impressed her how on top of everything he was.

“Have you figured out what we’re going to do now?” YuZhi guided her outside quickly, pulling her into his side as they moved past other diner’s coming in and helped her navigate to their parking space. Looking forward to letting their hair down.

“A movie sounded fun but there was nothing showing that I want to see. How about we go to the Bund? I read there’s a street performance and some craft stalls and attractions tonight. It sounds fun and there’s a planned fireworks display at nine pm.” TangShi had put a lot of thought into what she wanted to do tonight, and this was entirely up her street. She wasn’t a lover of flashy outings, five star surroundings or complicated trips, and loved to see the culture and fun of people enjoying things like this.

“Sure. Do you need a change of clothes, or footwear?” He glanced down, fine with whatever she decided on and seeing she was already in flat shoes. She also had a jacket this time and seemed to have come prepared for a late-night walk.

“Nope. I planned in advance, and I have a bag in your car with my scarf.” She beamed at him, proud of herself for her forward thinking and even picking a warmer dress.

YuZhi nodded, a ghost of a smile crossing his face as he tried not to link this kind of date to them having an adventure in the streets of Beijing so long ago. That was a night of street stalls, a parade, and an impromptu festival which ended in fireworks too. She didn't seem to have made the connection, so he kept quiet and helped her into the car when they got to it. Opening her door and guiding her inside before closing it for her. Tonight, he was airing his boy toy once more and leaving his driver at home. He liked the intimacy of the two of them in his sports car alone.

“To the Bund then.” YuZhi slid into his seat and got them moving. Pulling out into traffic and heading for the historical part of Shanghai where he hoped it wouldn't be too crowded. He was tired after keeping up with the social niceties tonight and wanted some chill out time to unwind. He could do walking around and a crowd as long as no one bothered them.

TangShi was a peaceful companion and even though he got a pang of guilt for taking her out tonight after everything that happened with Rhea last week, he pushed it away. This was nothing sordid and part of the agreement with his grandfather that he would have a believable marriage for two years. Besides, they were hanging out the same way he and ZhengLi would and there was nothing in it.

Rhea had to accept it, even if she didn't like it, as he felt like he was doing it for all of them. He genuinely liked TangShi's company and keeping up appearances like this was good for his family name while fulfilling a promise. They were friends now and she was a major part of his life that he couldn't ignore.

“Are you excited for school starting?” YuZhi added in afterthought, eyes on the road as they drove through the city traffic. Turning on the radio low to play background music.

“Yes. I get so bored and lose my will to paint when I am stuck home all day. I feel like it'll be good for me. Something to do and a way to improve my skills. It's so beautiful and peaceful too and all the staff seem kind and approachable. I think I'll be happy there.” She smiled brightly, casting him a glance before relaxing into her seat and looking out at the passing scenery. She was feeling merry already, even though she hadn't drunk any alcohol through dinner. They had gotten to the stage where small talk was free flowing, and silences were no longer uncomfortable. That being together felt easy and natural, and she could breathe easy and not feel she had to perform or be someone else.

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YuZhi was warmed by that fact. That she was glad to be starting and had found something like this to help her art. He approved completely and was only too happy to pay for whatever she wanted to do or needed. She was talented, but above all he wanted her enjoying life while stuck in this arrangement, so she no longer regretted it or felt upset about how they started out. He was dealing feeling bad about how he used to treat her.

“I wanted to talk to you about that actually. About, home. About the current arrangements.” He flashed a look her way to gauge a reaction and saw only confusion. This was something that he had wanted to broach the past few days but had never found the right time. It had sounded unpalatable in his head and he didn’t know if she would take it the wrong way.

“What do you mean?”

“Where we live right now, it’s not actually where I lived. I moved home as part of the arrangement for this marriage.” YuZhi hesitated at the title, which always felt like a dirty word between them. He glanced her way, uptight for no reason and way too interested in her reaction.

“Where did you live then?” She asked in genuine curiosity blinking at him and giving him her full attention, not really making the connection he was hinting at. Innocently intrigued.

“I have an apartment near Leng Group HQ. I was planning on moving back there once we got..... you know...” He stalled and TangShi bit on her lip, guessing the answer and blushing.

“Pregnant?” Her voice waivered and she looked away, prickling with embarrassment at the topic she never broached. It was the one thing neither of them ever brought up beyond clinic appointments.

“Yeah. Only now, with things like this, I know it’s going to sound weird but I want us to move to my apartment and carry on as planned there. I hate travelling so far to commute every day and you’ll have your own room, your own space, and own bed. We can exist with less eyes on us from my family and I know you’re not happy with how they are towards you. Aunt RuiZi especially. We’ll have more freedom to relax and you might find it less boring to be home without an atmosphere.” He swallowed hard, unsure why this was making him nervous and clammy, and his heart rate had upped. Hanging on her response by holding his breath. He had thought about it a lot this past week and it made sense to move them. Grandfather wouldn’t let him leave her alone at home and this way they didn’t have to explain outings to the clinic or have anyone keeping tabs on them. It would ease so much pressure and they could forge out a proper life for the duration of this.

“You want me to come and live with you in your apartment?” She repeated it slowly as if she wasn’t sure if it was a joke.

“Yeah. I figured now we are close, that it won’t be as weird. We can do our own thing, no diet restrictions, planned meals, standing to attention at the family dinner. We only have to go there for Sunday lunch once a week, like I used to.”

“If you’re sure you want to, then I have no complaints. It sounds like it would be closer to the art school too and easier for me to commute.... That is, if Rhea doesn’t hate it.” TangShi turned it over in her brain and didn’t see that it was much different to sharing his room at the big house, only she wouldn’t share a bed anymore. Her nerves hitched as the last sentence tumbled out and YuZhi automatically frowned, slight irritation that TangShi always considered Rhea’s feelings above her own.

He knew it should make him feel better that was she was this way, and considerate of his ex-girlfriend considering their circumstances, but this decision had nothing to do with Rhea and he didn’t really care if she liked it or not. He ignored her last words and carried on regardless.

“I can drop you and pick you up if we move there. It’s on my way to the company and we can figure out the times. It makes sense and will be easier on everyone.”

TangShi blushed and turned away with a shy smile, overjoyed and feeling gleeful at this unexpected arrangement. Assuming by everyone, he meant Rhea too and took it that she approved. If everyone was fine with it then so was she.

Never had she ever imagined YuZhi would want to move her out of that sterile environment into something that sounded a lot better for them both. More time together, away from prying eyes and judgmental stares. She would be able to relax and eat what she wanted to eat. Sleeping apart would be weird after so long but she always felt it wasn’t appropriate with Rhea in the picture. A sad thought passed over her though and her face crumbled as her feelings died painfully.

“Xiaosu? I won’t see her anymore?” It sobered her happiness and she turned back to him with genuine conflict written all over her face.

“Why not? She’s part of my family’s staff. I can have her come and work for us there. Commute back and forth when you want or need her. I mean, I tend to cook for myself or eat out so never had need for a housekeeper beyond the one who comes twice a week to clean. If you want XiaoSu to come instead, it can be done.” YuZhi just wanted to keep TangShi happy and if that did it, it wasn’t a hard compromise. She really didn’t ever ask for anything from him. She was low maintenance all the time, so he didn’t mind making allowances when she did ask.

“I’d like that. We can figure it out once I get used to my schedule and all of this.” TangShi beamed, a little ray of happiness bubbling inside and leaned back to enjoy the

view once more. YuZhi watched her for a long second and smiled to himself, at that peaceful and content expression her face. She really wasn't hard to make happy and he wished all these years Rhea had been this amicable and easy to please. His life would have been less stressful if she was as mellow as Tang.

They drove on, making small talk for the best part of a half hour before they finally pulled into park within walking distance of the bund. The waterfront mile long walk that passed by every historical and beautiful building in the city, while offering gorgeous views of Huangpu River.

While they moved and made their way to the attraction, they could tell a small music parade was in full swing, noise drifting on the air and heading this way. The scene was bright as there were temporary fairy lights strung from lamp post to lamppost for over a mile of the walkway, making it a magical and surreal view. There were food stalls and makeshift boutiques dotted along the railings, all visually pretty and they moved aside to join the watchers as the bright costume heavy parade moved on by.

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YuZhi kept a hold on TangShi's hand, fingers intertwined, and moved them to a position where she could watch without being shoved around by the crowd. Holding onto her and shielding her from behind when she became excited and childlike and started bouncing up and down to see. She was impulsively waving to the merry makers and grinning with joy at how beautiful it all was. TangShi forgot all her worries and stresses and fully immersed in the celebratory atmosphere and the happiness of the people around her.

Loud but enchanting music surrounded them, an array of bright and wonderful costumes, including a dancing Chinese dragon, swaying about and even a torch wielding dancer who swallowed fire. She watched in wide eyed awe, amazed, and mesmerized by the displays and forgot about everything else. TangShi was enamored with all of it and pulled YuZhi from stall to stall, pointing out performers and light shows and giggling crazily as they found something to look at with every turn. She was beyond happy, infectious with her enthusiasm, and loved the craziness of the people around her, all out enjoying a mild and clear skied evening. It was the perfect weather to be strolling this evening. Not too warm but dry and no hint of rain.

"Here, let's try some of this!" TangShi gushed with excitement and tugged him by the hand to another nearby food vendor who was selling moon cakes. TangShi had all the energy and aura of a hyped-up puppy dog tonight and YuZhi was entertained by how animated and bright she was. Refusing none of her requests and allowing himself to be led about in her frenzy of excitement.

He was used to seeing calm and sweet TangShi and yet tonight she was like an inquisitive kid, running around tugging him to everything for fear she wouldn't get to see it all. Pushing him to stalls to buy them random foods of fancy and bouncing giddily at

everything that gave her pleasure. He found himself picking up on her buzz and feeling it too, joining in and really enjoying himself. Increasing his enthusiasm to make her happy and getting involved in with how much she was enjoying all this. It felt like he was viewing his city through the eyes of a child, suddenly aware of how mesmerizing Shanghai could be when you stopped enjoy it this way.

“Ooooh, candy floss!” She squealed in delight, pulling his jacket to attract his attention while he paid for their moon cakes. He almost missed grabbing the paper bag before she had him stumbling sideways in her eagerness to catch the walking seller who was moving through the crowd with bagged floss of pastel colors.

“Tang, honey.... you need to slow down.” YuZhi laughed at her, following obediently, and had to pull ahead and lead her instead to catch up with him.

“Here... one of those, any color she wants.” He motioned the seller, nodding at his wares, and stopped to dig out his wallet again as TangShi leaned up on tiptoes and pointed at a pastel rainbow concoction in the bundle over the man’s head.

“That one. It looks like unicorn fluff.” She beamed, hauling it down and ripping it open in eagerness without waiting on YuZhi to pay. He handed the money over her head looking a lot like an indulgent boyfriend and thanked the man before sliding an arm around his preoccupied date. Guiding her to a nearby bench to sit because she was in a walkway and most likely about to get trampled while being too engrossed in her treat. He was laden with bags and packages from this food sprint they had been doing and they had only tasted about a third of what he was carrying so far. They wouldn’t need to stock up on snacks for a week or two.

“We could go dump these in the car and head over there to watch the show. There’s a big display of fireworks still to come and we need a nice quiet view.” YuZhi watched her, happy with how content she seemed, sitting picking at her floss delicately and propping it in her mouth while she tapped her feet to the nearby band playing music. He loved seeing her like this. Carefree and young with no inhibition and no care about acting a certain way or pleasing people around her. She seemed free in this moment, and it was infectious, making him feel like being wild and reckless too and enjoying it all the way she seemed to be doing. This was the girl he met eight years ago, that seemed shy at first and made his night one that he had never forgotten. She came alive and left the reserved TangShi behind when she was truly happy.

“Okay. I want to get boba tea to wash this down.” TangShi smiled his way, swaying her head from side to side to the song, looking unintentionally cute and he laughed at her and bopped her on the head with a gentle fist. She was adorable without trying and he wondered how had missed it for the first months they lived together.

“I swear you have reverted to fifteen years old tonight. You should be like this more often. I like it.”

"I'm having fun." TangShi shrugged not really feeling like she was being all that different, it's just she was letting him see the side only Linlin usually got to see. Relaxing because out here no one was expecting anything from her, and she trusted being in his company now. That he wouldn't judge her or bully her anymore. She was opening up to him and being herself more often.

YuZhi leaned in and stroked her hair from her cheek that was caught in her food, and tucked it behind her ear softly, sliding to move closer.

"I'm happy that you're happy. We should do this more often. Make it a regular thing. Date night." He grinned, chuckling at her when her face turned pink, and she shook her head at him, looking shocked.

"We shouldn't call it that, even if you're joking." She lowered her voice so others wouldn't hear in case nosy citizens were hanging around. She still always had Rhea in the forefront of her mind whenever he said things like this, and that tremor of guilt ran over her. A shudder and flashback of her tearful face that night in the club and her unconcealed hatred.

"Come on, lets go to the car so I can have my arms back. I couldn't eat another thing." He motioned for her to follow as he gathered it all in one arm and hooked her hand in his once more to lead the way. Catching sight of someone aiming a cellphone their way and he turned his head towards her and shielded her best he could.

He knew this would be making the rounds tomorrow and no doubt spur another flood of calls from the currently silent Rhea. Another bout of jealousy, and he sighed in deflation. He knew he wasn't being fair to her in all of this and avoiding conflict while her emotions were all over the place. He just didn't know how else to navigate it and the cracks that had always been in their relationship were starting to gape wider and become prominent. He had no energy for any of it right now and he had no words to help Rhea get through this. They needed to cool off and get used to separation for the duration.

"What's wrong? Are you fed up? Tired? Do you want to go home?" TangShi felt his change in mood and wrongly assumed it was because he was bored with this now.

"No. Pictures." He inclined his head to the left as way of explanation and TangShi flushed and looked down at her feet automatically to hide her face, losing all the joy of a moment ago with that reminder of reality. Crashing in on herself and suddenly aware of her behaviors and how she would look in a picture. It made her self conscious.

"I wish they could leave us alone." She sighed, sobering her mood and YuZhi pulled her close and slid his arm around her instead to help her feel secure. Agreeing with her that tonight he really wanted them to be able to be themselves without worrying about being seen or photographed. It felt like an invasion tonight, more so than usual.

"You get used to it but maybe we should drive somewhere and watch the fireworks from afar. Secluded. Get away from this to enjoy the fifty-two varieties of street food we're packing." He jested, motioning all her purchases and broke her sad mood, bringing a smile back to her face. Her happiness picking up again.

"On one condition?" She prodded him in the cheek, feeling playful and the photographer forgotten almost instantly.

"Hmmm?" YuZhi answered absentmindedly as he navigated her through a dense crowd of people as they headed for the carpark. Hyper aware always of people knocking into her small frame or getting between them to separate them while it was so busy. Pulling her into his chest and moving her around as she seemed oblivious to it.

"We lay on the bonnet to watch them. I always wanted to do it that way. Like in the movies!" She giggled as though it was some extravagant request, blinking up at him with a pleading cute girl expression and he broke into a smile. She never ceased to surprise him.

"Sounds good to me. On the condition you don't make me eat anymore or I might throw up. I'll happily sleep on the bonnet, under the stars, if we can stop buying cakes." He joked and led her on to go find his car, knowing exactly where he was going to take her to view the show. Somewhere he had never taken Rhea, but it was a place close to heart and a place he hadn't gone since his father passed away. It was secluded, high up and somewhere not many people ventured.

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YuZhi drove them to a secluded area on the far end of the bund, where many private buildings had their own parking and navigated through a gated entrance using a keypad. The landscaping for this particular park was slightly raised compared to the road in and they got as close to the waterfront as possible before he parked his car, facing towards the display area in the distance. It was a perfect sightseeing spot for the bund from here and they could still hear the music from the bands.

TangShi was regretting eating her candy floss so fast and was sporting a stomachache now, curled up in the passenger seat, being quiet and pale faced but still eager to see the show. They hadn't driven far but this area was darker than the surroundings and had some trees concealing the private parking lot, so it seemed secluded. It felt like they were out in the woods if it wasn't for the high-rise buildings peeking all around them and the glow of the city lights all around. There was a jetty off to the edge that looked like a port for a small private boat, and she pondered how he knew about this place. He had the keypad entry pin, so she wondered if this was something to do with Leng Group.

"Are you sure we are allowed in here?" She queried him, sliding off her seatbelt to follow him as he got out of his own side. She didn't wait for him to open her door and came

around the front of the car to meet him, looking around at the pretty landscaping that edged almost all sides.

“Yeah. I own that building right there and this is its parking allotment. It’s pretty, huh?” He gestured to a smaller building nestled behind them. Only ten floors in height, not particularly outstanding in its plain grey structure and shrouded in utter darkness as if nothing and no one was inside.

“It looks empty. Don’t you use it?” TangShi was intrigued and tilted her head to observe him as he shook his, seeming evasive as she questioned it. He dodged her eye, shrugged and seemed immersed in looking for the start of the show.

“Not really.” He hadn’t been here in years and left it to be maintained by his company although he had never okayed a use for it. It had belonged to his father, with a purpose in mind as their first project as father and son working in Leng Group when he left the military. His father died before that happened though and this building was left to YuZhi with no real purpose.

“My dad and I would come here sometimes and talk about the plans for it. Spend time eating lunch on the top floor and watching the river from there. Or coming here to get air and watch the boats go by. Seems pointless now he’s gone. It’s sat abandoned for so many years that I no longer know what it’s for.” He shrugged it off and then pointed into the far skyline as the first fireworks exploded in the darkness and took her hand in his. Eager to drop this subject because it was still raw after all these years. “Scoot up.” He motioned behind him, and TangShi giggled when she realized he really was going to let her lay on his car. She dropped the conversation about his dad, sensing it still hurt him and beamed back at the sleek bonnet instead, of his black mean machine.

“We might scratch it. It’s okay. I know how much you love this car, and I was only joking anyway.” She laughed, warmed by the gesture, feeling guilty that they might damage his prized possession. YuZhi shook his head at her and then shocked her by scooping down and picking her up like a bride to be before she had a chance to click onto what he was doing. Bouncing her up into a firm hold. TangShi squealed in fright and instinctively grabbed on around his neck so as not to be dropped. YuZhi grinned at her with a hint of mischief in his eye and walked around the car and deposited her on top carefully. Holding her until he was sure she wouldn’t slide off and then grinning harder at her shocked expression and crazy grip on him like she was hanging off a cliff.

“YuZhi!” She half laughed, half choked as she began to slide at his loosening hold and clung onto him, but he pushed her further over with ease and climbed up to follow before turning her onto her back and maneuvering beside her. He figured the best way to anchor her was by using his own body as his clothing was less slippery. Satisfied this was a good idea and the best way to watch fireworks.

They lay side by side as he wriggled into a comfier position and pulled them up higher so he could bend his arm as a cushion for her while putting his hand behind his head

and leaning them on the windshield. In a lounging posture that made it feel like a bed. TangShi was caught in a giggling fit and snuggled closer to him, pulling her jacket closed to combat the night air and found the comfiest way to lay on his shoulder and still stay secure on this slick surface.

“You’re crazy.” She smiled up at him and poked him in the cheek with a pointer finger. Enjoying the parts of YuZhi that came out to play when he relaxed and showed her his less serious side. This was him of eight years ago and still the personality that could make her heart flutter and build a tiny hope deep in her heart. Even though she knew it was futile.

“Me? You were the one who wanted to do this. Most expensive bed I have ever lain on. I could spend a night here though.” He teased, winking at her before staring up into the sky and enjoying the breeze that was a contrast to the hot engine underneath them. Not caring that they might scratch his baby, because her pure joy made it worth it.

“Look, look.” TangShi burst out and sat up so abruptly she gave him a fright and he had to catch her around the waist to make sure she stayed put. Pointing at the now several booms and rainbow bursts in the sky as the display got under way. They turned into dozens of sparking pretty flickers, crackling, and sparking. Magical dancing lights above them.

YuZhi sat up beside her and leaned in close, putting his hand behind her so they were almost cheek to cheek, and he could make sure she wouldn’t fall off. Caging her in while being near enough to share body heat without touching one another. They watched the light show with soft smiles on their faces and a sense of contentment at this conclusion to what had felt like a perfect evening. It somehow felt special watching it from over here in a quieter part of the city. The illusion of the trees around them making it feel intimate and romantic.

“I love this. Thank you for today, tonight. I really enjoyed myself and love the fact it’s ending with fireworks. I love things like this. They’re so pretty.” She rested her head on his shoulder, confident and comfortable with their companionship that had grown over the weeks, and he moved his chin to accommodate her before leaning against the top of her head. Snuggling close, still mesmerized by the sky, a companionable silence as they observed it.

It was thirty minutes of splendor and booms. Littered with sporadic idle chatter about nothing, and the odd joking remark or second of teasing from YuZhi when TangShi seemed too engrossed in what they were viewing. They could hear distant screams, applause, and laughter from others watching the display while they sat on the fast-cooling car and the night grew colder. Neither wanting it to end when it seemed perfect. The music was fading and the hour was getting close to ten. Soon this would be over.

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YuZhi became aware that TangShi was starting to shiver before it ended and nudged her with his nose against her temple. Sliding his hand over hers and finding them cold and curled up to preserve what little warmth she had left.

“Tang, you’re freezing. Let’s go and warm up, stop for coffee on the road home and thaw out. If we stay here, I may have to chip you off the car.” He rested his cheek against her temple and hugged her with one arm to pass his body heat, nudging against her to provoke her to move and do as she was told. Still playful in his manner towards her and starting to feel tired too.

“Hmmm.” TangShi deflected because she didn’t care she was cold as she wasn’t done watching this. She didn’t know if they would ever do this again and she was treasuring every second with a reluctance to it ending. She was so relaxed she was almost asleep in his hold and lifted her chin to look up at him from her lower perspective.

“Five more minutes, it’s almost over. I’m not that cold.” It was her sweet and quiet tone that always melted him to the core. A soft cute expression with half sleepy eyes and a rosiness to her face that made her look ethereal. Her body was almost numb despite not admitting it and her limbs were stiff, but she was enjoying this too much to go home yet. YuZhi couldn’t deny her anything when she looked at him this way, but the telltale signs were all over her pale skin.

“I don’t believe you. Look at these little red cheeks and that nose.” He caught her under her chin with his free hand to angle her face towards him, grinning as he pressed her cheeks with two fingers to make her lips pout and pressed his nose to hers to check if it was icy. Laughing at the sudden sulky facial expression and the frown at him for doing that to her face.

“You’re bullying me.” TangShi mock sulked and smacked his hand from her face with a gentle tap, pouting her lip out by herself and it only made YuZhi laugh harder.

“Why are you this cute? What happened to that sassy pain in the ass that threw me angry glares and haughty frowns? You somehow morphed into a kitten.” He leaned in to catch her chin with his thumb and forefinger again and tugged her towards him playfully. Moving too suddenly when leaning too far forward and inadvertently caused TangShi to slide.

Because her body was so taut with being numb, she couldn’t counteract the movement and flailed her arms out in panic as her butt moved down and catapulted her back against the shiny surface. YuZhi with his quick reactions made to catch her, somehow managing to get his arms around her as she caught him too. Losing his own grip on the polished surface with her added bodyweight. His attempt to pad her head with his hand to avoid collision and leaning over with one arm around her waist to anchor her only pulled him along with her.

They both slid with speed, slumped over, unable to stop gravity when the surface was cold and slick. It was so fast it happened in a heartbeat and YuZhi crumpled on top of her with a gentle thud as they skidded right down the front of his car. His nose bumping hers as they jerked to a halt at the very edge where YuZhi's foot finally met the flat road below. Both balanced and holding on to one another in a tight embrace and held by only one of his legs overhanging the bumper.

Breathing hard, TangShi clung onto him, aware they were precariously held in place, only a whisper apart as they locked eyes and the atmosphere changed dramatically. From a squeal and giggle of their impending doom, YuZhi swallowed hard, his breath hitching at the nearness of her face. The closeness of her beauty, the invasion of her perfume and scent that he always liked, and the intimacy of that delicate body wrapped up in his. YuZhi's head fogged out and his senses overtook as his pupils dilated and he couldn't tear his eyes from hers. Somehow this pose threw all thoughts of platonic out of his head.

TangShi's breath hastened with the way they were curled up and pressed to one another. Aware of every one of his hard taut muscles against her soft feminine curves. His gorgeous green eyes boring into her own dark brown ones and holding her captive with a look she hadn't seen on him before. She forgot how to think, breathe, or move, when caught in his overpowering charms this way.

It wasn't the first time they had ended up nose to nose or on top of one another, but this felt different from any other time and YuZhi couldn't ignore the fact his heart began to race while his insides fluttered. There was a deep stirring inside his soul and an urge drowning out all sense. He moved only enough to graze his nose against hers, his breath mingling with TangShi's, and her skin seemed to ignite a crazy desire in him that he was powerless to resist. Growing closer these weeks had made this kind of up close and personal interaction mean something else entirely.

TangShi blinked up at him innocently, captivated by his warmth and touch, afraid to move for fear she would break the spell and stayed exactly as she was. It only served to make him want her more, always a sucker for the angelic purity of this girl. Heaviness between them as something grew and the air turned static. Heartbeats pounding in unison and shallow breathing becoming obvious. Both minds went blank and were aware of only the here and now while nothing else seemed to matter between them.

YuZhi dipped his head the last millimeters, all thought lost to him as instinct took over and pressed his lips to hers in a moment of weakness. Unable to fight the way she felt under his body and how much he was attracted to her. Knowing it had been growing little by little lately. His heart exploding with warmth and electric sparks as he tasted her soft smooth lips. It was only a second, but it made TangShi tremble and stop breathing. Poised and stiff in case she made him stop. His mouth on hers elevated her body heat and heart rate and she impulsively kissed him back, sliding her hands up onto his shoulders to grip him tight and encourage what he was doing.

Mouths met and opened as YuZhi got lost in reaction and parted his lips to mold to hers properly. Needing to feel her out and taste the sweetness that he had never forgotten all these years. Kissing her with longing and pulling her face to him with the hand behind her neck as they got lost in each other and surrendered to the passion that had built to crazy levels. He French kissed her, probing her mouth with his tongue, exploring the sweetness that was uniquely her and almost lost himself as he spiraled into crazy lust. TangShi was drawn into memories of their first kiss and overtaken by the need and desire to allow him to do whatever he wanted to her. Surrendering as he made love to her mouth and curled her toes.

It was YuZhi who came to his senses first, as chaos racked through his head and guilt kicked him in the stomach by pushing Rhea to the forefront of his mind. It was like she slapped some reality into him, and he recoiled at speed aware of what he was doing. He yanked back, confused, and bewildered that he could do something like this, losing all sense of reason and loyalty. Inhaling hard to calm himself down while internally berating himself for forgetting he loved someone else. He let her go and got up to right himself before hauling her to her feet to make sure she didn't fall and stepped away quickly as if she caused an electric shock.

"I'm sorry.... I didn't mean that. I Shouldn't have done that." He apologized, his words coming out in a strangled rush, and he ran his fingers through his hair, mentally shaking himself for what he just did. His head was close to imploding. He was visually rattled, pacing away from her and swallowed hard as he tried to organize his rambling thoughts.

"It was my fault. I kissed you." TangShi was shellshocked and her legs were trembling and felt like jelly. Her body weak and her heart racing because of what they just did, and she was hot all over and unable to clear her head. She was ready to take responsibility for her part in it and was blushing from her roots to her toes, ashamed that with one kiss she was willing to let him do whatever he wanted to her. Her body tingling all over with an internal war drum beating loudly and stupidly aware that she had no control over her feelings for him anymore. That kiss was proof that she would easily forget Rhea and follow her heart and it made her feel ashamed and sick to her stomach.

His kiss had given her a long dormant longing and desire she had only ever experienced once in her life. Eight years ago, when he kissed her dizzy and made her melt just like he did tonight. She was struggling to calm herself down but also hyperaware of how awkward and conflicted he seemed, and it made her feel sorry. She felt like all she ever did was cause him problems.

"Tang. This was on me. Maybe we should go. Too much romance, sugar....we just got carried away. Caught up in a moment with this atmosphere. It was a mistake. It doesn't mean anything." He was making excuses all while his body was making it clear to him that he was wound up with that brief touch and crazing the kind of touch he hadn't had since he broke up with Rhea. He put it down to a lack of sex and hormones and tried to ignore the fact that he couldn't tear his eyes from her pouted lips or get that peaches

and cream taste of her lip tint out of his mouth. His body was on fire, and he seriously needed a cold shower.

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He couldn't look her in the eye while he felt like this as he no longer trusted himself and inwardly curse that he couldn't even blame this on alcohol. TangShi avoided looking at him too, conflicted with her own shame as she pressed her hands to her cheeks in a bid to cool the flushed rise of heat.

"Okay." Her voice was low, strained, and muffled and YuZhi hesitated at her tone, thinking he had upset her and that she might cry. He knew it might have wounded her and was aware for the first time that maybe she saw him more than a friend and it sucker punched him in the gut. He never considered things between them would get complicated like this and had been so assured that their closeness was platonic. Confident in their friendship and putting his affection for her down to liking her as a kid sister. He was wrong.

"Tang, wait." He caught her impulsively, with a need to comfort her, by the elbow and tugged her back to him so he could see her face. Throwing thoughts aside with genuine concern he hurt her feelings and hated himself for doing it. Spinning her with a little strength because he was panicking and twirled her right into his embrace without meaning to.

She ended up with her palms splayed flat against his chest muscles, feeling out his thundering heartbeat, her nose level with his collar bone as she bumped into him with a tiny 'ouch' and fully embraced in his arms where both of their heart rates shot back up again.

A coming together of two bodies that hadn't recovered, and it was easy to ignite the same sparks. His touch all these weeks which had seemed comforting and familiar was now electrifying and caused goosebumps.

"Sorry... I." YuZhi lost all his confidence when back this close and pushed her away by the shoulders abruptly to make her step back again. Forcing distance between them so he could breathe once more. Aware of the fact he couldn't handle her proximity right now. He was awkward and nervous in crazy levels he had never experienced before and couldn't get his emotions under control in the heat of the moment. "Yeah, let's leave. It's for the best if we ...ummmm..... leave." He had forgotten what else it was he meant to say and acted like her touch burned him. Mentally scolding himself and thinking tonight he might stay over at ZhengLi's to give them both space. He needed his friend to give him a beating for this. He turned and headed for the driver door, motioning weirdly over his head for her to get in the car.

TangShi turned in a hurry, her own skin flaming and her mind melting with conflicted thoughts and feelings. She got into the passenger side while trying to avoid looking his

way, her heart hammering through her chest and aware of how out of control her emotions were. Her bottom lip trembling because she now felt like crying and she had no idea why. She knew these past weeks she was starting to fall in love with him all over again, but this didn't make her feel good at all. It felt wrong and like she just betrayed her friend.

YuZhi sat for a moment in stunned silence, staring straight ahead out of the windscreen without starting the engine, his own head swimming with reasons, excuses, and tried to separate his emotions from his thoughts. Glancing her way and seeing her pink cheeks spreading to her hairline, he had the urge to lean over and hug her to tell her this was all okay.

Only he knew it wasn't. He shouldn't. Rhea would never forgive him.

He gripped the steering wheel as a surge of regret hit him hard and he pictured her crying face that night at the club when she thought he kissed her back then. Twisting his insides and physically causing him pain at knowing he had just broken Rhea's heart for real and would never be able to lie about it. Now he was an actual asshole who really did follow through and was still reeling from the taste of another woman's lips on his. Rhea planted herself firmly in his head, giving him the urge to go see her and somehow try to fix this while he started the engine with a grim look of determination on his face.

TangShi could read his expression a little and sense his change in mood and felt utterly desolate. He was cutting her off and closing her out to resemble the cold and aloof man she met months ago, putting her back on the other side of the wall. Her own heart panging with pain because all this proved he didn't want her that way and he regretted it. And then there was her own guilt and regret because she thought she was a better person than this who valued friendships. Rhea had always been good to her and trusted her not to cross this line. She never thought herself capable of being this girl.

"Let's just forget it. It's fine." TangShi broke the silence with her sweet and feeble tone, an edge of something in there he couldn't quite decipher, and he flinched. Feeling like a complete jerk for making her this way and fucking up everything of the last weeks with one stupid moment. He knew he crossed a line and initiated the kiss, but TangShi was doing what she always did when trouble arose. Blamed herself and took the full brunt of responsibility. Ingrained into her lack of self-esteem and worthlessness to always be the one people blamed. He hated that about her.

It enraged YuZhi, irritation coming up from somewhere in the pit of his stomach at hearing her words. Without thinking he spun towards her, dived forward and caught her chin in his hand to tug her to him so they were a foot apart and she blinked in wide eyed shock at his sudden hostile behavior. Silenced and intimidated by the coldness in his face.

"I kissed you. I'm the asshole here and you did nothing wrong. I don't want to hear you say that again. This is my problem, not yours." He scolded her, sat back, letting her go

and deliberately banged his head against his headrest as he screwed up his face, closed his eyes and sighed heavily. Questioning his life. Looking pissed even though it made no sense to react like that and TangShi recoiled back to quietly watch him from her corner. Not sure what to do or say and carefully clipped on her seatbelt to focus on something to do. Nervous around him and this unpredictable behavior.

He opened his eyes and hit the start button a little hard, thrust his car into gear before clutching the back of her headrest to lever himself around to peer out of the rear window and reversed at speed. Making her nervous with this change in him, the lurch of speed and his crazy driving, and she shifted to face forward. Straight and stiff, focusing on the windshield and remained silent.

“I’ll take you home and stay with ZhengLi tonight. Maybe we should cool things between us for a while. Stick to the plan and make some new clinic appointments. Not hang out for a bit.” He was reverting to his bolt hole, hiding behind hostile and cold in a bid to put some reasonable distance back between them until he figured out what to do about this. He knew he couldn’t keep it from Rhea. Hating that he felt like shit for being this way to TangShi and knowing she didn’t deserve it over a kiss.

He was always someone who reversed away from complicated emotional mess faster than hell, like he had been doing with Rhea lately. Aware that made him an asshole but it was an ingrained instinct ever since his parents died. He had no idea how to navigate or handle it and was running scared. Confused at his own feelings.

“Okay.” TangShi mumbled, almost incoherently but he heard her, and it caused a sharp pain in his chest to hear her deflated and hurt. TangShi couldn’t understanding why he was being like this, but she couldn’t say anything about it. Looking down into her lap before sighing and focusing on the scenery to force herself to push tears away as they got out into traffic. She could feel the wall growing between them and wished this hadn’t happened at all.

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“Where you at, buddy? I need to come see you.” YuZhi called ZhengLi once he dropped TangShi off at the house on his hands free as he drove back towards the center of Shanghai, making way to his friend’s apartment. Squinting at the windscreen as tiny drops of rain started to fall and added to the melancholy of his mood.

“I’m at Dream in Changing district with Linlin, What’s up?” ZhengLi was standing at the bar of a popular nightclub while getting his table a fresh round of drinks. It was quiet given it was a Wednesday night, so the volume was low. He was a seasoned party animal who often hit clubs on a weekday and still managed to work the next day. He turned to watch Linlin sashaying across the dancefloor with two girls in tow, giggling merrily and unaware of his watching them. Amused by his date for the night, her wildcat antics and dirty dancing she had been doing minutes ago that had held him standing there longer than required.

“I’ll head to your place then. I’m staying there tonight, and I’ll see you when you get home. Don’t rush on my account.” YuZhi lifted his hand to hang up, not wanting to impose when ZhengLi was with Linlin, but ZhengLi cut in smoothly. Recognizing the strain in his tone and the curt and cool manner.

“Wait for me. I’m not in the mood for this tonight, so I’ll head back. Have to keep the little woman on her toes and make her miss me. I’m getting too accessible and she’s undervaluing my worth.” He grinned, lounging casually with his hip against the bar, propping an elbow behind him and motioned her a little ‘come here’ gesture as he caught her eye.

Linlin stopped in her tracks, leaving her two friends to wander back to their table without her where a group of them were convening and made her way to ZhengLi with a sassy catwalk. Her face lighting up at being summoned and aware of pushing her bust and butt out to appear as sexy as she could be. They weren’t drunk at all yet and had only been here a short time, meeting up with a mix of his friends and hers in a so-called casual meet. Neither would admit it was a real date and were still playing the hot and cold game with one another in some strange power struggle that was exciting them both.

“If you’re busy...” YuZhi felt guilty about ruining his plans, but ZhengLi was having none of it. His friend sounded stressed and rarely made calls for help so he knew something was up. ZhengLi was maybe a heartbreaker when it came to women but was loyal and true when it came to his friends.

“Dude, I’ll be ten at the most. Buy some beers, you owe me a drunken stupor.” ZhengLi hung up before YuZhi could refuse, knowing he would, and turned to smile towards his tiny vixen, strutting her stuff up to him in stilettos and a zebra print, strapless mini dress that went well with her new fuchsia pink hair. She was a knockout in a small package and crazily addictive for him since the first time he laid eyes on her. Linlin was a bold girl when it came to style, and he liked that she was fearless in expressing herself through her hair, make up and fashion, and her bad temper.

“What? I was going to sit down and await my cocktail. You better not have gotten me over here to carry the tray?” she accused, tilting her chin towards the drink order the bartender was sliding behind him and narrowed her eyes while pouting like a child.

“Baby, you’re too weak to carry that big old tray. I have to disappoint you I’m afraid and apologize in advance. I have another hot date and can’t stand them up. So, I have to go.” He grinned wickedly, reaching out to bop her on the side of the chin in a playful gesture. Enjoying the way her face switched from cute sulking with a hint of sexy, to enraged murderous thunder as a scowl pinched her pretty pink lips.

“You what?” She snapped at him, blinking in shock that he would come out with this crap to her face, prodding him in the firm abdomen in angry reaction with a lethal finger. “What hot date? What the hell, ZhengLi Kim? Why ask me out if you’re going to ditch

me and run off with another bitch? What kind of shameless bastard are you?" Linlin was beyond mad. Furious and seething with green eyed fury, unable to really compute that he would be this much of an asshole and not able to control her outburst. She knew they weren't exactly exclusive, but this was a whole other level of jerk

"Baby, are you mad? Is this jealousy?" He smirked, leaning in close to bridge the gap between them in a smooth manner. His voice lowering to that seductive husky that he knew drove her wild while tapping her on the tip of the nose and almost losing his head in the process as she aimed a slap to swipe his hand from her. Scowling and gritting her teeth while trying to control her outward reaction and failing, Linlin stomped her foot and narrowly missed his toes. He dodged back, chuckling as she stomped again to aim this time and then kicked him in the shin in rage because she never was one who could hold in all that internal lava when it started spewing.

"Ouch!" ZhengLi barked and hopped back clutching his leg and making an 'eeesssssh' noise through clenched teeth.

"Jerk. Go choke on your hot date. I don't like you all that much anyway. No loss to me." Linlin spun away, throwing her hair in his face, turning to march off as he hobbled to right himself, frowning at his banshee woman. Amused.

"Don't hate the bromance. A man must do what he must do when the brotherhood calls for back up!" He called after her, grinning at his own humor when she stopped dead in her tracks about three feet away and snapped her head back around to him.

"Bro?... You utter asshole. You're ditching me to go run after YuZhi Leng? Oh my god. Why would you imply...? Ughhhh! Well, have fun, I spotted a handsome man over there who looks lovely and lonely. I'll not miss you. Go, toddle off and play with your boyfriend." Linlin stuck her tongue out at him and went back to stamping her feet in the direction away from him.

"Baby... Linnyboo? Princess Choi?" he limped after her at a surprising speed and caught her by the back of the dress, catching a handful that jerked her to a halt. Spinning her his way he caught her in his arms so he could tilt her back while he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. Silencing all that building fire with a smooth move and a cheeky smile. He loved nothing more than riling this wench and she was so easy to make bite.

Linlin lifted her hand and pushed his head away with a flat palm to his forehead, glaring at him and wriggling to get loose. Held at a ninety-degree angle so she had to hold on with one hand on his shoulder to stop her feet sliding out. Maddier than hell that he kept saying and doing stupid things like this to press her green-eyed button and then laughing at her in amusement as though it was all very entertaining. He was infuriating and immature and kept her on her toes by acting like she wasn't all that important to him. She had no idea why she kept on agreeing to seeing him when he made her want to stab him in the throat with her shoes.

"I hate you." She snapped, still trying to fight her way free and feeling useless as her body cooled down at his irresistible touch. Her mind simmering because his kiss was like a drug, and she could never get enough of them. He could disarm her so easily after making her furious.

"That's fine, it makes for better sex when I finally invite you back to my bed and end all this crazy tension we have building." He winked, standing her up and pushing her to rights before letting go and patting her on the head like a puppy. Appraising her dress because it was pulled up higher, exposing more thigh on the sexiest legs he had ever seen. Not having sex with her was getting harder with every date, even a saint would raise his willpower, but he wanted Linlin to chase him as much as he did her and he could wait it out until he broke her.

"Pffttt. I would rather sleep with a homeless person than you. Who says I will ever grace your bed?" She bit, turning on her heel in the worst of moods because he was leaving her and taunting her all at the same time. Disappointed because despite being an annoyance, she had the most fun when he was around.

"Ughhhh, wounded. I even had a pillow embroidered with your name, just for you. It sits right beside mine." He mocked and clutched his heart dramatically, before following her with the tray of drinks back to the table and sliding them on the surface while casting her another smile and wink. He nodded to his friends at the far end, some guys from his gym, and gestured for his jacket as a hint he was leaving. They barely registered, too engrossed in chatting up Linlin's pretty girlfriends to care and tossed it his way. He waved at them before turning back to his tiny crazy sulker.

"Behave. I don't want to have to come back and save poor defenseless boys from you." He leaned in and kissed her on the forehead, lingering a moment to enjoy the feel of her skin and the seductive scent of her perfume before he walked off without a second glance to head home. Getting only a few feet before a tall leggy blonde stopped in front of him, blocking his way on purpose, and he recognized her as a past plaything. He sighed, knowing this isn't what he needed when eager to go.

"ZhengLi? I thought that was you. It's been a while. Why don't you come sit with me and have a drink, we could catch up and rekindle old flames?" She purred seductively, sliding a hand up his abdomen over his white button shirt to his muscular chest and he dropped his chin to look at its progress before raising a brow at her. Amused that she was being this brazen and assuming she was drunk. The girl was not this bold in the past and had bored him by being all too nice and vanilla.

"I'm busy. I don't have time nor inclination. Can you move." He smiled at her, full on charm offensive despite his harsh command and yet didn't get her reply because a tornado swung in between them and shoved the girl back with an aggressive thrust. A pint-sized head of pink hair and an ass thrust into his groin to shove him back away from her.

“He’s not interested. He has a date. It’s me, and I don’t share with drunk hoes. Toddle off before you end up with a sore face.” Linlin squared up to her from her smaller height, full on hostile and rammed her hands on her hips with attitude that was bigger than she was. ZhengLi chuckled at her little warrior self and slid his hands onto her naked shoulders to tug her back against him and save her from a cat fight she didn’t need to get into. He had zero intention of switching her out anytime soon.

“You should listen to her, she bites, and she isn’t inoculated. It would be messy and probably lethal.” ZhengLi chuckled, patted Linlin on the top of her head and shooed away the other woman with a gesture. Smiling as she took the hint, tutting and storming off to show her anger while he kept Linlin restrained against him.

He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek from behind to cool her jets and say farewell and then patted her ass before walking around her, with a backwards handwave over his head as he left to go. If he was going to hook up with any girl tonight, it wouldn’t be anyone else but his three-foot demon and he shook his head at how much her bad temper floated his boat. She was never dull and definitely not too nice a girl.

“I’ll call you, Linnabelle. Later.” He didn’t look back and strutted off smiling to himself, merry at seeing her hackles rise and that show of possessiveness when faced with competition. ZhengLi liked Linlin, but the girl was hard to handle, had zero interest in being a one-man woman and was a little too bossy and stroppy for the likes of him. He had his own ego to contend with.

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He was pulled to a halt by his trouser waistline being tugged from the back, and his small terror strutted around him, forcing a flat palm on his chest to keep him in place with a warning look of ‘Don’t take another step’. Glaring at him with fury and he couldn’t help but relax back into a casual posture and smile at her.

“I didn’t say goodbye.” She pouted, letting go of him to reach up and catch the open collar of his shirt with both hands and yanking his face down to her so she could reach. He was surprised by the show of force, the impressive tug that hauled him to her level but closed his eyes as her mouth met his and allowed her to kiss him passionately. Sinking into her as he progressed it to a proper make out with tongues and heavy panting, catching her head in his hands to angle her for a better fit before she released him. A look of victory in her eye and a hint of color high on her cheeks because she had raised both of their temperatures and sparked crazy sexual urges. “Later.” She smirked, letting him go to stumble to right himself and swallow hard. A little breathless at her assault. She toddled off without another glance his way in the direction she came from with a sway of her sexy ass while ZhengLi stood for a moment to admire it and cool his own jets. Crazy turned on, feeling the heat between them sizzling all over and seriously reconsidered leaving her here.

He knew if he wanted her as a long-term playmate, he would have to bend her to his will a little and find the compromise if this friends with benefits thing was to pan out. He had met headstrong in the past, but he always had the upper hand. Linlin was different and she played as many mind games as he did, always looking to be the boss and the one to call the shots. It was thrilling, and fun and he was enjoying the fact he put her nose out of joint by abandoning her tonight. He knew he would have to grovel for the next date because she would surely make him suffer and he looked forward to the challenge. He was starting to think he was some sort of masochist when it came to her.

YuZhi let himself into ZhengLi's apartment and dumped the crate of beers on the kitchen counter. Sighing and throwing his jacket off onto the grey leather corner couch as he paced to the windows that covered the whole wall of the sitting room and stared out over the Shanghai skyline. It was late, almost midnight, and yet YuZhi was wired and strung out and had a head full of chaos that signaled no sleep tonight.

He kissed TangShi and it made him feel like shit. So many conflicting thoughts and feelings and somehow like a psychic connection, right about when he pulled into the drive to drop TangShi at home, Rhea started calling him. It drove it home more that he was an epic jerk, and he couldn't fathom how to fix this situation. She pushed his guilt to a new level and when he answered her on the way back, he couldn't bring himself to say much. Rhea made small talk, clear her mood was over now and she was looking to play nice again. No mention of the night she hit TangShi.

"Yo, bro, you here?" ZhengLi kicked his front door open while balancing a couple of crates of beer in his arms he decided to pick up on the way and noticed all his lights had been turned on. Catching sight of YuZhi standing at the window and grinned at him. "Something is definitely up. What's with the dramatic brooding silhouette as you stare pensively at the city?" he joked, mocking his friend and dumped the boxes beside the one YuZhi brought in, wasting no time in ripping them open to fill the refrigerator and then popping the caps off two for them to drink. He walked over to YuZhi and handed him a bottle, before matching his pose. Mirroring him against the window and gazed out at the sea of night lights and flickering signs at the view below them. This was a penthouse apartment and had one of the highest vantage points in the surrounding buildings. A bachelor pad with minimal décor and modern comforts.

"I fucked up." YuZhi lifted his beer and swigged it, taking a long slow drink and exhaling heavily before pulling it back down and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. ZhengLi copied, his eyes on YuZhi while he drank and knew he wasn't done talking. "I kissed TangShi." YuZhi admitted and somehow saying it out loud made it feel worse as he shook his head, heaved his shoulders, and exhaled another long breath. A weight over the top of him that was like sitting under a suffocating heavy black cloud.

"And?" ZhengLi shrugged, tapping his bottle against YuZhi's and grinning at him with a kind of proud look.

“And? I shouldn’t have. It’s messing with my head and now I can’t even look her in the eye.” YuZhi knocked his bottle away and shoved his friend’s shoulder with his two fingers in playful pushiness. Aggravated that ZhengLi of course would not see the problem in this.

“Did you like it?” ZhengLi cocked a brow at the despair in his tone and went straight into the interrogation. Wanting details rather than guilt confessions. YuZhi had always been an overthinker and on the pessimist side of life, while ZhengLi was more of a ‘you only live once, have fun and go out in a blaze of glory’ type.

“The point is, that Rhea is going to freak out and tonight I told TangShi about moving to the apartment... before I kissed her. I don’t know what to do now.” He felt hopeless and couldn’t think straight. The apartment idea seemed stupid now.

“Don’t tell Rhea, for a start. Not yet. Give it another nineteen months or so when you get to the stage of rebuilding your relationship. In the meantime, it will only make her worse and cause drama. She doesn’t need to know until you’re ready to wipe the slate clean and date again.” ZhengLi hoped that day would never come and was counting on nineteen months of his best friend’s life being the changing point in his future. He had nothing against Rhea as a person, but he didn’t think Rhea was YuZhi’s person.

“I know you’re right. She’s already jealous and insecure and suspects TangShi is trying to seduce me behind her back, but I shouldn’t lie.”

“It’s not a lie, it’s merely non-disclosure of all the facts. It’s better for Rhea that way and healthier for you. Less chance of losing genitals or your life.” ZhengLi smirked, seeing the funny side in the dilemma. It was not a big deal the way YuZhi was imagining it was.

“I feel like I cheated, and I can’t shake it out of my head. And then there’s Tang. I can’t face her after what I did, and what do I do about moving to my apartment? Do I leave her at the house?” YuZhi really was in over his head with this and had no way to navigate it. The kiss hadn’t felt bad, or wrong and that in itself had been clawing at his brain as much as his guilt was. Messing up all his carefully laid plans.

“Are you a ten year old? You kissed a girl so now you can’t look at her and fear being in her company in case you have the restraint of a starved pig when tossed scraps? Come on, buddy? Be a man. It’s not like she’s your first kiss.” ZhengLi poked fun at him and pushed his beer bottle into YuZhi’s shoulder, laughing at his fragile emotional state and not seeing the problem. It was just a kiss. TangShi was probably more embarrassed about it than he was, given YuZhi used to kiss girls a lot as a teen. His smooch count was easily in double figures from his wild Romeo days. This was no big deal, but YuZhi was obviously missing the point as to why it was a big deal to him.

“It’s not what I mean. TangShi and me... we’re close now. It feels like I made this into something else and I felt like I upset her. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea about us. Give her hope and then hurt her.” YuZhi really was in turmoil. Denying the fact she

had made his heart race and his body respond and still put it down to lack of intimacy since ending things with Rhea months ago. He didn't want to admit, that kiss had made him regret losing her in the past all over again.

"You have given her boundaries enough times that I'm sure she knows that you don't want this marriage to be real. As for moving.... You already share a bed and a room. The apartment will separate you to your own at least, it still makes sense. More so if you really want to avoid a repeat of..." ZhengLi made kissy kissy noises and moved at YuZhi in a mock pout to get his cheek.

"Get off, you weirdo." YuZhi batted his face away and shoved him back to separate him, dodging his affectionate assault. "I guess you're right, but I need to sleep on it and try and find the nerve to face her. Put us back to platonic." He downed another long swig of his ale and went back to staring off into the manmade stars of Shanghai.

"Being in a relationship for the last three years has turned you into a wuss. I'm so disappointed in you." ZhengLi smiled at his friend before leaning forward and rubbing him on top of his hair, messing it up, but it was done with genuine affection this time. A normal mannerism between them when they were being serious. "I know you're going to give her the cold shoulder and put distance back between you. It's what you do when people get too close or stray over the lines you set. Just remember, TangShi is a sweet girl, and you should go easy on her. She'll be around for a long while yet and you have to live with the consequences." ZhengLi felt like he needed to remind his friend because he could already predict YuZhi's knee jerk reaction in the coming days. Until he got his head around this nothing kiss, he would try and freeze TangShi out to drive it home it would never happen again. He knew his friend could be cold and cruel even if it wasn't his intention. He was emotionally stunted for such a smart guy.

ZhengLi knew though that it wasn't because TangShi turned him off, it was because deep down he knew YuZhi wouldn't trust himself not to do it again now he had done it once. The history of eight years ago was still lingering between them even if YuZhi denied it was a factor anymore. ZhengLi saw how he was with TangShi these past weeks, and he knew it was completely different to the boyfriend he had been for Rhea these past years. He was attentive, considerate of her, and fiercely protective.

TangShi brought out a softness in him, a boyish fun side that only ZhengLi got to see normally. He let his guard down and he seemed to relax around her as though being by her side was as natural as breathing. They had something between them and ZhengLi had seen it beginning to grow. The last time ZhengLi had seen him that way was a long time ago, before the loss of his family had closed his heart and ripped the light from his eyes. He had waited years to find something to help heal his brother's pain and now all his money was riding on the sunshine girl who was thrust into his dark life.