

Destined To Be His wife by L.T. Marshall Chapter 91

Rhea sat motionless and stared blankly at nothing, her heart stopping for a second as it filtered through, but it felt like she already knew. There was no shock at his confession, no instant anger or hate, only a quiet painful nod because she had felt it long ago. Tears began to fall but yet also somehow it felt like relief. A weight lifted from on top of her and all those suspicions and questions and gnawing thoughts were set free with the admission that she had been right. She couldn't do anything about it anymore, except accept it and yet it didn't hurt as much as she expected it too. Maybe because she had been preparing herself for months to face this reality. Maybe even years.

"Say something." YuZhi softened his tone and begged her. Waiting for a reaction, expecting a massive one and yet there was only quiet and a soft sniff.

"Tell TangShi I'm sorry. For everything. I used her to stay close to you and keep tabs on your relationship because I knew I didn't have you. I hoped by being her friend I could police her and stop you two getting close, because deep down I always knew you didn't love me." She broke into quiet cries but held herself composed. Finally being honest with herself after a lifetime of ignoring the signs.

"Rhea..." YuZhi broke in, torn up by her pain, aching in deep regret, but she cut him off.

"Don't. I always knew and I was in denial. I pushed you and held onto you and have never really felt secure or happy. Always aware I needed to control you to keep a hold of you and it's made me tired from fighting so hard. You were right when you said I always manipulated you and threatened because I did. It's not how love should be. I've done a lot of thinking while being here and having so much down time. All this time, I was gripping onto something with all my effort and yet it never brought me the happiness I thought it would. I see that now. Time away, being able to look from a distance..... I know we should never have dated. We should always have been nothing more than friends. It was circumstances and tragedy that brought us together and I abused your dependency on me as a friend to guilt you into being my boyfriend, I can admit that. Thank you for the years that you did make me feel some kind of joy from being yours and for trying to love me. I did love you, YuZhi. I'm sorry too." She sniffed again, through a waterfall of quiet tears yet her heart was expanding as though she had unchained a long held weight that was tugging it down. A ray of light filtering into her darkness.

"Rhea, I don't know what to say." YuZhi stared down at his feet, his own eyes misting over because this hurt and yet gave him a sense of freedom that she wasn't reacting how he thought she would.

"Say that one day we can be friends again. That we can put everything behind us and maybe I can start over with TangShi and make amends. I hated the fact she's a genuinely nice girl, and likeable, but I hope one day I might be a real friend to her." Rhea swallowed hard exhaling heavily and letting out all the nerves and fear she had

been holding onto while making this call. Trembling all over from adrenalin at psyching herself up. "I don't want to be like this anymore. Always obsessing and anxious over you. That's not love and it's not the relationship I wanted. I'm not mad, I'm sad, but I feel like I need to let you go to find what will make me happy. I want you to be happy too."

"I never wanted to hurt you. I'm sorry how things went and how I handled all of it. I know I did a lot of things wrong, and I treated you in a way you didn't deserve. That was down to my inadequacy in how to navigate all of this. I hope that in time we can meet again and start over as friends once more." YuZhi knew he had major responsibility in all of this and should carry the emotional burden of hurting her. He owed her so much and yet felt like he now was casting her aside.

TangShi kept her eyes on her paper, hearing only half a conversation but her heart thumped erratically, and she tensed, trying to gauge what was being said. Summarizing from what she could hear that Rhea was not going crazy over this and yet it didn't ease her own sense of shame. Rhea maybe hadn't been a real friend, but TangShi had viewed her as one and still done this to her.

"I'd like that. I might make it back for the engagement after all. I swear I won't cause a scene. I won't be drinking. I've booked myself into a program to help me deal with my life without alcohol, and it's a step. I know I don't have a drinking problem, so don't worry it's not rehab or anything. I just feel like I have unhealthy coping mechanisms and used it more than I should."

"I'll support you if you need me." YuZhi sighed, deflated at her admission to needing to get help. He didn't think she drunk excessively before but after the breakup it had concerned him how often she drunk and got drunk given her self-control before he married TangShi. She had undergone a personality transplant and her behavior had become erratic, straying into her public life. He sensed a real honesty now in this conversation and wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Maybe before the party I can see TangShi Briefly. I really want to prove I'm sorry. I know what I did. I may not be overly happy that you two but this isn't on her. I don't want bad feeling and hatred between us." Rhea choked up, unable to get her head and heart around them together yet and try as she might she couldn't hold back the tears. Moving the phone away from her mouth so she could wipe her face on her sleeve and try and calm herself with deep breaths. This hurt a lot, but it also felt empowering.

"We'll see. Take some time and we'll talk again before you come back. I don't want a public scene. I promise I won't dodge your calls if you need me."

"Okay. I should go. I'm a mess and Tell her I'm really sorry. I don't hate her, and I regret telling her I wished she would die. It's not who I am."

They both knew that was true. It had shocked him to the core that night.

"I will. Have a safe trip. Bye, Rhea." YuZhi hung up first, feeling there was nothing more to say and aware TangShi was probably uptight with wondering what was said. Eager to reassure her. He could sense the genuine remorse, but he needed to safeguard TangShi above all. Rhea had twice assaulted her, and he wouldn't let there be a third.

"Hey, come here." He motioned to her, and she didn't hesitate in dropping her book and running over to him by the window into his open arms. She had been sitting tense and poised on tenterhooks waiting for him to end his call. He caught her and cuddled her in tight, sliding his hand onto the back of her hair, the other across her back and cradling her against him as her arms slid around his waist. Swaying them from side to side slightly as though comforting a child. Squeezing her in a tight embrace.

"Rhea wants to sort things out with you two. Start over. It's up to you whether you can forgive or trust her again and I believe her when she says she won't cause any more issues." YuZhi knew it would be better for all of them if they could lay it all aside and get on. Even if Rhea was never the close friend again she once was, he wouldn't turn his back on her if she ever needed his help. "I won't force you. I know there's history here and you might never be okay with her around us again."

"I'll see her." TangShi butted in, without stopping to think it through She had never been one to hold a grudge and she had too forgiving a personality. She knew the only way forward was to accept her and try to rebuild something. Rhea had been his friend his whole life and she didn't want to be the reason he stopped that.

"Let's talk about it later. I'll order food and we can sleep on it today. Focus on us, forget everything else for one day." YuZhi leaned back, sliding his hand around her face to tilt up her chin and kissed her softly. Lingering to stay close and rubbing his nose against hers. "Whatever you decide, I'm with you and I'll do what you need me to. You're my priority." He kissed her again, smiling at how even after kissing her a dozen times she still give him butterflies and goosebumps.

"Okay." TangShi beamed, smiling without restraint and kissing him herself this time, only more passionately than he did. Bold enough to now do it without waiting. She wanted today to stay special seeing as it was officially day one and bringing Rhea into it would only cause a blemish.

"After food, let's go out take a walk along the Bund if the rain stops and have a date. A real one. Re-inact a kiss on my car." He winked and leaned down to nuzzle her neck, sliding her up to him in a vice like grip so he could devour her and then regretted it right away as his body reacted and the urge to do more overtook him. TangShi giggled at his antics, her own hormones notching up with his touchy-feely behavior and she shyly took the initiative. Longing for more of what he had shown her this morning.

Sliding her hands into his as he put her down, she pulled him with her as she walked backwards and smiled coyly. Reddening and unable to look him in the eye but obvious with her intent.

“I’m hungry for something other than food first.” She blushed, but he understood right away and grinned at her. Loving how sweetly she could make an invitation to get naked and dirty sound.

“What have I created?” he laughed, lurching forward to scoop her up princess fashion and carried her to their bedroom with a skip in his step. Unable to deny her when his own needs were going crazy to have her again.

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TangShi was feeling sick with nerves, clinging to Linlin’s hand as they stood backstage and awaited the official walk out onto the runway for the engagement announcement. Uptight and strung out like a tightly wound coil. She had never understood this tradition of treating engagement like a show, strutting out on a stage and being presented to rich men and women who didn’t care at all who was being married off. Even her own family sat out there had little to no emotion on this announcement, given they already got what they wanted, and she was secretly married to their business promoter. It was all about money and status after all.

“Breathe. Relax. It’s no big deal. Think of it as a pageant and you only have to walk out, smile, get your ring, and then go enjoy yourself with YuZhi after a small speech. You don’t even have to say anything. Just look pretty.” Linlin was trying to soothe her panic, fluffing out her bridal style dress and making sure her friend was picture perfect for the swarm of media out there. TangShi looked ethereal and almost fairylike all in white with pinned up hair and natural make up.

YuZhi Leng getting engaged was a big deal, given all his years in the limelight and the fact while dating Rhea Cheng, he never once made that move. It confirmed to the public that TangShi was the true love of his life, given their dating had been only a couple of months at most and it was causing stirs with the official announcement. More than they ever expected. His fans were elated, and his social media was going crazy today.

“After this speech you’ll be called out Miss. Lei.” A young organizer for the event and part of the Leng Group PR team, gave her a gentle rub on the shoulder, bowed and left them at peace to go check on other details. TangShi peeked out from behind the huge satin curtain at the sea of diners at white linen tables, the array of extravagant flowers dotted around the room, soft lighting and low music, and that terrifying center walkway. Swallowing hard and then pulling back slightly to fan her face as heat spread all over.

YuZhi appeared in the middle of it, holding a microphone while facing the crowds, two men by either side. Seemingly comfortable with public speaking and being in the limelight and she admired him from her hidden spot. His tall muscular frame that seemed built for a tuxedo and his charisma and aura that demanded attention. She had to pinch herself to really believe he was hers, and this wasn’t all a dream.

“Thank you all for coming to our event tonight and celebrating with the Leng And Lei family. Leng Group has been one of Shanghai’s leading companies most of my life and it gives me great pleasure to represent it as we move into a brighter future.....” YuZhi began his speech, knowing he had a lot to get through in terms of thanking attendees. The obligatory list of things he must say so as not to offend anyone, especially business associates from notable families. Even though this was about his impending marriage, these kinds of things were always about business first.

TangShi snuck away, zoning out as the wave of fear turned her cold and her stomach twisted in knots. Fanning her face and motioning to Linlin she needed to go to the bathroom or out for air for fear of passing out where she stood. This was nerve-wracking.

“Calm down, calm down.” Linlin crooned following her and catching hold of her hand to give her a squeeze. “you got this. Just hold onto YuZhi and smile. That’s it. It’s one walk to meet him and then it’s pretty much over.” Linlin had been to her fair share of glitzy engagement announcements and was an old hat at how this should go.

“Where you going?” ZhengLi appeared, coming to make sure everything ran smoothly and to personally escort TangShi onstage at YuZhi’s insistence. He knew she would be scared and nervous as being center of the show was not her thing. Her lack of self-confidence eating away at her.

“Trying to cool herself down. My baby girl is looking rosy and ready to jump ship.” Linlin teased and spun her, pulled out a powder to blot TangShi’s face in an attempt to tone down the high color at her cheeks. Somehow though, it suited her and made her seem youthful and shy.

“Hold onto me. You are out of time, Mrs. Leng. Come on, as best man it’s my job to escort you to your husband and keep you from running away.” ZhengLi cocked a cheeky smile at her, and held his hand out, gesturing her to come to him as he could hear YuZhi’s speech coming to a close. He was present for all rehearsals and knew when it ended. Linlin got behind her and pushed her in his direction, frog marching her right to him while patting her back in a loving way.

“Smile, stand tall, chin up and own it, baby. You’re about to be thrown into the limelight as the future Leng daughter. Get used to red carpet events and being famous. You can’t escape it once you’re part of that family.”

ZhengLi Caught her wrist and tucked her arm in his firmly, pulling her in tight and gave her a pat on top of her head in a fatherly gesture. Knowing he might need to be heavy handed in getting her out there. He could feel her fear emanating.

“Come on. We’re practically siblings already. Trust me to hand you over.” He smiled softly, winking at Linlin and getting one in return. A kiss blown their way as she turned and headed off to go find her seat out there with the guests. “It’s not that bad when you

get out there. The lights make it near impossible to make out all the faces. You might only see the first row or so. You look pretty and you have nothing to worry about, YuZhi will take good care of you, he's used to this."

"I'm ready." Her voice wavered, her hand trembled and yet she took a deep breath to calm herself and stood up straight. Shoulders back, chin up, and pasted a bright smile on her face. Mimicking everything Linlin showed her. Moving with him confidently as though she wasn't scared witless inside.

They made their way out onto the stage from behind silver curtains and as ZhengLi said, the light obscured the hundreds of guests in the hall, and only really gave her clear view of the closest diners at the tables down each side of the runway. All of which were Leng and Lei family. She kept her eyes up and over the top of them and was guided straight to her fiancée's side. Internally shaking but to onlookers she seemed poised and bright with happiness.

YuZhi turned as he introduced her by name, smiling and holding out a hand as she was transferred from ZhengLi to him quickly. Sliding her delicate small palm in against his larger warmer one and that feeling of safety swept over her as their fingers entangled. Gripping onto him with a vice-like hold, squeezing his hand to feel secure. YuZhi pulled her in close, turned and smiled at her with utter adoration.

"We couldn't be happier to share this special night with all of you and confirm our plans to marry in the near future with publicly giving one another our engagement rings. TangShi, it's my honor to bring you into the Leng family." YuZhi leaned in and kissed her on the cheek before he motioned to the side. ZhengLi appeared carrying a custom white satin box that held two rings and handed them over.

YuZhi let go of TangShi briefly, opened the box and held it between them in one hand while he handed his mic to ZhengLi. Sliding out the ring for TangShi and carefully put it on her outstretched hand. She was visibly trembling as she watched the princess cut diamond get put in its rightful place, swelling with joy and forgetting about the watchers. He kept hold of her hand in his and leaned down to peck her on the forehead as a way of calming her.

"Start of a new life for us, honey." He uttered softly, admiring his bride with a full heart.

TangShi followed suit and nervously, with fumbling fingers took his ring out before putting it on his finger too. His was a simpler silver band with a diamond embedded beside some intricate carving. TangShi couldn't help the tears welling up in her eyes, or her heart and chest heaving because this wasn't fake anymore and actually meant something to her. Getting emotional with the reality that only a few days ago this ceremony was only for show and now it meant something else entirely.

"To never taking these off again. Don't cry, Tang." YuZhi leaned in and said it only to her, giving her a small hug and brushing his thumb over her cheek to catch a stray

single tears that managed to escape. Giving her a moment to compose herself by lifting her hand with his and placing a kiss right under her engagement ring and grinning at her with glee.

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He stepped back to turn them both and display their hands to awaiting photographers by holding them up while clasped together firmly. They were cheered on by everyone present, an eruption of applause and whoops, and then he dipped in and delivered a kiss on her lips. A chaste respectable show of affection for the event. Cupping her chin with his hand and pressing their mouths together but she could feel his sincerity and love. His warmth and care for her as he protected her in the moment.

“When will the wedding be set?”

“Can you turn this way, Mr Leng, over here?”

“Do you feel you have dated long enough to warrant marriage? Isn't it all a bit rushed?”

“Why is Miss Cheng absent, is she unhappy with this development?”

The questions came fast and thick, some rude reporters, and crossing agreements made on what they should ask as the allowed media got in near the front of the podium first. Security had already been prepped for this and started moving them back, hushing their questions and filing them out once they had enough pictures of the happy couple. They had an understanding that reporters had to leave once the announcement was made so party guests could enjoy the rest of the evening, but it was also to safeguard speculation over Rhea not making it back, and rumors about the relationship being rushed. Not that YuZhi cared anymore because they could follow him all night and would only find genuine love between them.

ZhengLi said a few words of thanks to the media, made all the right sounds and noises in dismissing them from the hall. He thanked guests and informed them of the dishes being brought out for dinner and bade them all a good night. Bringing an end to the speeches and the formal part of the evening.

All three of them on stage bowed amid another cheer and applaud, and then YuZhi led TangShi down the runway to walk off the end and head for the main dining table. There were flashes, music started playing as they ventured down, and she was aware of so many eyes on them as a spotlight tracked their progress. The moment she had been dreading the most was this and concentrated on her steps, her arm in his, her smile pasted on and made sure to keep her chin up. They walked down and off to the main table for the bridal party where their head of families sat and the merciless bright glow slid away from them finally.

“You’re doing great. You look beautiful.” YuZhi guided her to their seats, pulled hers out and sat her down before leaning over her and kissing her on the cheek from behind, his hand trailing her face before he sat next to her. All eyes at the table aimed their way and she could feel the hatred from her sister and Aunt, zoning in like lasers from two directions.

“You look very handsome.” TangShi turned to him, adjusted his dark red bowtie for him and smoothed his lapels down. Savoring the way his closeness could anchor all her nerves and make her feel sheltered.

“Ignore the haters.” He smirked, slyly nodding his head at her family and she burst into giggles.

“I think Aunt is the leader.” She joked, covering her mouth and leaning in so they didn’t hear.

“Give it time. Once she sees how in love we are, she’ll lay off. She adores me in her own way and just wants me to be happy.”

TangShi glanced around the table and caught Grandfather Leng’s eye, as he raised a glass to them. They both responded by raising their own and midair saluting with red wine. Smiles passed between them as the night’s entertainment took the stage and got underway, making conversation impossible, much to her relief. Grandfather seemed happy tonight, a faraway look on his face and he was smiling more than she had ever seen him.

“Why does grandfather seem drunk already?” She whispered leaning up to reach the side of YuZhi’s face. YuZhi flicked a look his way before sliding his arm across the back of TangShi’s chair to angle in close as possible and tilted his head to talk directly into her ear.

“He’s happy. He knows about the new developments between us and wasn’t shy about the fact he supports us outlasting the contract. He wanted this marriage to be a permanent thing from the start, so now he’s the happiest guy on the planet, beside me of course.” YuZhi tilted her chin to him and kissed her deliberately. A gentle almost nothing meeting of lips while he held her still and then smiled while still against her mouth. “He can actually build a relationship with you now, given he didn’t want to before because you wouldn’t stay.”

“I thought he didn’t like me?” She faltered, pulling back a hairsbreadth and gawped at him with wide eyes. Sure grandfathers coolness all of this time was because she wasn’t worthy. Feeling ostracized by his entire family and assuming it was due to being a forced bride for money purposes.

“He’s the one who picked you. He was adamant you would be my forever wife. He just didn’t want to form bonds with a granddaughter if I was going to send her off in two

years. He's a very sentimental man and family means a lot to him. He doesn't do separation of loved ones very well."

TangShi was surprised by this. Always believing he remained cold and aloof with her because he was disappointed in the girl they had chosen. Sure they thought Juefeng had been the right daughter. Yet, if he chose her then he knew who she was even on that first day.

"I only found out earlier today that Grandad knew your mother's family a long time ago, and your mother as a child. He told me you look just like her. That it was the reason he singled you out among all other families."

"What?" TangShi blanched in shock, stunned into silence as her heart lurched and she blinked at YuZhi.

"Yeah, was news to me too. We can ask him on Sunday when we go for dinner. He seemed to have fond memories of her. Weird that our families knew one another before we even met in Beijing. Must be fate."

YuZhi sat back in his seat as the starter was laid down in front of them and TangShi pressed a palm to her racing heart. Overcome with a mix of conflicted and painful emotions and had to swallow hard and take a deep breath to not react. Not sure how to process this revelation and confused over it.

Her mother was an enigma in her life. The cause of so much misery and loss and yet she never knew her at all. Knew nothing of her past, her family, or anyone she had known. TangShi's birth took her mother's life, and her father forbade any mention of her in her entire existence. Her mother's family had never been a factor in the Lei empire either. She didn't know them, only that they were no longer in Shanghai, and they had no contact with her.

No pictures, no memories, nothing of hers handed down to let her know anything about her at all. She didn't even know if her ability to paint came from her or what she looked like. Her father blamed TangShi for the reason he lost her and pushed TangShi aside like a black spot in his perfect life, so he never shared anything to feed her need to know.

She wanted to cry, that grandfather was willing to give her something she had ached for all these years. Some incite into who she was, what she was like, and whether TangShi was anything like her. It was something she had always wanted, more than anything and she dabbed her eyes as her heart filled to bursting that she might get it now.

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TangShi focused on her food and tried to avoid Aunt's glare, mid-way through Sunday roast and yet she was uptight and wishing it was over. It had been a tense half hour

already and despite YuZhi shielding her, she was aware of the darts being visually aimed her way from across the table.

“Grandad, we’re staying for coffee afterwards in the study. TangShi wants to know more about her mom. Give you time to spend some quality time with your granddaughter in law and build some bonds.” YuZhi reminded him, smiling with content, reaching out to pick up some meat and put it on TangShi’s plate. Ignoring his aunt’s scathing mood today and relaxed with the casual late lunch even if his Aunt had been a frosty and silent member who kept tutting because he rejected a specialized diet for Tang. He had sent it back to the kitchen and asked for her to eat the same as everyone else.

“Yes, yes. That’ll be nice. We can have some cake.” Grandad perked up smiling to himself. Since the engagement, in fact since YuZhi confessed TangShi and he were in love, he had been a completely different character. Smiling and bright with hopes for his family’s future.

“No cake. Your blood sugar is more important than treats.” Aunt scolded and the old man waved her away with an unconcerned smile.

“YuZhi only comes home every so often. One piece won’t hurt.” He snorted, being a cantankerous member of the household and always ignoring her advice.

It was a small lunch today with only the four of them. The other uncles rarely came home to eat anymore and YuZhi’s sister was still abroad. Other Leng family no longer lived close to Shanghai, after the tragedy that broke all their hearts, so their numbers had dwindled over the years.

Xiaosu was back and forth bringing dishes to the table, cleaning away the empty and topping up the glasses while smiling TangShi’s way with utter joy. It was obvious to her that they had progressed to a real relationship in the time they had been gone from the main house. She had always secretly rooted for them and was over the moon that YuZhi was now treating TangShi with the care and love she knew he was capable of.

“Don’t run off too soon, I invited a guest for coffee, so you can all stay out here for their arrival.” Aunt cut in, a tone that dared them to argue and everyone fell silent. Even though Aunt was not the lady of the house or YuZhi’s mother, she had been running it as if she were for almost ten years and they all respected her authority. Grandfather loved his daughter but knew she was a force to be reckoned with if tackled head on.

“Who?” Grandad and YuZhi asked in polite unison, interest piqued.

“My adopted daughter of course. She just flew home last night, and I have missed her terribly. I told her to come over and sort out this mess that seems to be going on with you all. I cannot stand bickering and nonsense fall outs.” Aunt raised a brow at TangShi as though she was responsible and the clatter of YuZhi chopsticks hitting his bowl as he dropped them interrupted them all as it broke the silent tension.

“Why? Why would you do that? Why would you interfere?” YuZhi snapped, his temper flaring because he had been enjoying today as something happy and casual which was supposed to end with his fiancée and grandad bonding over memories. Not a heart to heart with Rhea when they still hadn't spent enough time putting everything to bed. Despite knowing it was a bridge they had to cross, it was early days and he had only officially gotten engaged to the love of his life two days before.

“Because, I said so.” She grit her teeth, giving YuZhi a warning frown.

“RuiZi, you should let the children deal with their own problems.” Grandfather interjected, not on board with this at all. His own feelings on it were clean cut and uncomplicated. He had what he wanted now and to him, Rhea was nothing of interest.

“Rhea and I are done. When are you going to accept that I love TangShi, and I want to stay with her? That we're together properly, and this isn't a sham marriage anymore. It's real. Rhea and I we need time apart if we're ever to be friends again and Tang has every reason to not want her here. You don't know the half of it.” YuZhi had lost his appetite and his desire to stay. His bad mood evident in his tone and posture. Scraping back his chair and throwing his napkin on top of his half-eaten food. “Come on, we're leaving. I'm not doing this today.” He caught TangShi's wrist and began to slide her chair out to take her with him, so that she hurriedly put down her own chopsticks. Pushing her rice bowl aside and warily casting an eye at Grandfather and Aunt.

“Sit down, right now. How dare you up and leave in the middle of eating.” Aunt slammed her hand on the table, making TangShi jump, and shrieked at them. Killing the last dregs of happy ambience and making TangShi bristle with uptightness.

Xiaosu took off out of the room at speed, knowing where not to be when things kicked off. Having been a member of this household since a young teen and seeing her fair share of Aunt and young master going head-to-head. YuZhi froze, his temper rising in his belly like bubbling lava as he hovered over TangShi who was still sitting. Trying hard to bite it down and not make this a dramatic outburst.

“RuiZi, YuZhi, please. There's no need to go.” Grandad motioned with a down gesture, meaning for him to sit and her to calm down. Eyeing them both up and sighing heavily. “Rhea is not a part of this family, nor will she ever be. I thought I was clear on that from the day my son died. She is not welcome here anymore. RuiZi, respect your nephews right to choose for himself. He's not a child anymore.” He lectured, ironically, given YuZhi married the girl he chose for him. Grandfather had managed to go all these years without Rhea once sitting at a dinner table with him even if she had come and gone with YuZhi from this house and he wasn't about to change that now.

“I still love the girl as if she were my own. How dare you ban her from my home. Do I get no say?” Aunt was livid. Her face turning puce and waving her hands about in an exaggerated manner as her fury built.

“No, you don’t. Not when it comes to my relationships and my issues. TangShi and I will see you after, Grandad.” YuZhi continued the process of pulling TangShi’s chair back and sliding her up to him. Taking her hand firmly in his and guiding her around to walk out with a swagger to his movements that hinted he was ready to battle if she stopped them.

“Ummmm, Mr. Leng.” Xiaosu reappeared at the door of the dining table, her face aflame and acting coy and fearful. Eyes darting around in a guilty fashion. “Miss Cheng is already here, in the hallway. She could hear everything.” She whispered as though afraid to be heard too and nodded her head to the side. The housekeeper had already let them in before she hightailed it out there and she was red all the way to her roots with embarrassment.

“Sit down. Don’t be disrespectful of a guest. Let her in, for goodness sakes.” Aunt RuiZi was not for giving up, but YuZhi had a worse temper than her and a stubborn streak twice as big. They eyeballed one another with anger, neither flinching, or backing down when Rhea took the prerogative and walked in herself. Sick of standing out there and enduring them bickering over her presence when she was capable of talking for herself.

“I’m sorry for intruding. I didn’t come to cause problems and I can hear I already have. Let me just say my piece and I’ll go. I promise. YuZhi, please.” She turned his way, solemn, sincere, and tried for a soft pleading smile. Avoiding staring at TangShi by his side as her heart still fluttered with agony at the sight of them together.

TangShi glanced from her to YuZhi, then to Aunt and grandad to try and gauge the mood around them all. Sensing the tension as grandfather slid his chair out and got up to leave. The dinner disintegrating and the once calm mood dying a horrid death.

“Xiaosu take my food to my room, I’m tired and no longer in the mood for company.” Grandfather picked up his walking aid and moved deliberately out of the way before turning and walking towards the door. “YuZhi, bring TangShi to see me after work one evening, not too late, and we can have a chat. I have old pictures somewhere in this house I need to find.” He nodded their way, avoided Rhea completely as if she wasn’t here at all and walked out without a backwards glance. Not shy about snubbing the girl as he had been doing for a decade. Rhea didn’t react because she was used to this from him, but it was the first time TangShi witnessed it and her heart actually ached for the girl. Seeing it for herself that Rhea was never the accepted and loved daughter of Leng the press made her out to be all these years.

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“YuZhi.” TangShi tugged at his hand softly, knowing this couldn’t hurt while he had told Rhea they could try and put the past behind them. They could only do that if they stopped avoiding her all together. Giving him doe eyes and a soft smile as way of pleading to stay and talk this out and YuZhi caved. TangShi was the most persuasive force in his life, with just one word in that soft tone it weakened his entire resolve.

Unable to deny her anything she ever asked for. He knew he couldn't avoid Rhea and he did owe her something he just hadn't expected it today or so soon while still walking around in honeymoon mode.

"Okay, we'll sit. Say whatever it is. I guess we all need to move forwards." YuZhi tried to be pleasant, tried for a blank expression, and guided TangShi back into her seat, sitting promptly beside her but not taking his hand from hers at all. He wanted to make it clear to both Rhea and his Aunt that they had zero influence over his feelings for her anymore.

Rhea's eyes moved to their interlocked fingers and then she glanced away quickly, her cheeks reddening as she moved to a chair on the other side of the table. Her heartrate upping and a stabbing in her chest that made her swallow hard to try and push it away.

XiaoSu filled a tray with grandfathers dishes and quickly left, leaving the four of them sat looking at one another. Aunt RuiZi crossing her hands on her lap and refusing to give them space, while stubbornly glaring at her nephew. She wanted to see them reunited, to sort their issues out and felt it needed nothing more than a chat with mediation. She furrowed her brow at TangShi, believing this was all this manipulative little girl's fault.

"TangShi, I'm sorry. I know I acted like a complete crazy and horrible person the last time I saw you. I know I pretended to be your friend and did and said things about you behind your back that I'm not proud of. I can't take back that I hit you and threw things at you, or what I said, I can only beg for forgiveness and a chance with my actions to show I'm truly sorry. It's why I came at Aunt's invitation, to put the past behind us. YuZhi, you know all of this because I already told you and I really do want to make amends. We've been friends our whole life and I miss you being a part of my life, even if it's on a small scale. I want us all to find a way to exist without bad feeling and hatred."

"You hit her?" Aunt piped in, shocked that her delicate angel girl would lift her hands to someone, even with reason. Rhea had never been a violent or vicious girl and always painted a picture of serene composure and golden heart. This shocked her that she was capable of doing such things. Blinking at her as she let this confession sink in. Trying to mentally justify what she was saying and putting it down to a broken heart. Shaking her head and refusing to believe this was how it sounded. Even with Rhea nodding her way, obvious shame etched all over her.

"I've already forgotten it. I wasn't hurt badly. I don't want it to hang over us anymore or for it to be like this either. You may not have really been my friend, Rhea, but I did like you and I'm sorry for how things turned out. This was never my intention." TangShi broke in, not letting Aunt railroad this conversation and squeezed YuZhi's hand to tell him she was fine. He was staring at the side of her face, tense and poised as though afraid that this would upset her. YuZhi treated her like a fragile crystal and underestimated that TangShi wasn't all that soft.

“I accept that this is really over. I knew it in my heart a long time ago and as hard as it may be to see you together right now, I know in time I’ll get over it. And I want to. I want to start my life over.” Rhea, dabbed her cheek as a single tear rolled involuntarily down, sniffing to curb the aching in her chest but feeling lighter for finally seeing them. This had been plaguing her the entire trip home and gnawing at her since she had spoken to him on the phone days ago.

“I never wanted to hurt you. I understand why things escalated. I’m sorry too.” YuZhi answered, low and calm. Realizing that despite not wanting to do this that maybe it’s what was needed for closure between the three of them. It was a situation where Rhea wasn’t really a villain but a victim, much like TangShi was and he blamed himself for all of it. He had known her since birth and despite her spoiled princess ways at times, she had a good heart underneath and he believed this was genuine. Rhea was trying to find her way back to who she used to be.

“I know. ZhengLi spent a few hours on the phone to me a couple of days ago. Talking it out, being my friend. He made a lot of sense as someone who could see it from all sides and had witnessed us for the entirety of our relationship. He helped me figure some things out. Told me what I needed to do to start fixing all of this.” Rhea smiled through watery eyes, glad that they had always had him within their friend circle. Coming away from that call with a new mindset and a list of tasks to start walking into a new future.

YuZhi nodded, knowing he had spoken to her but not the details because that’s how ZhengLi was. He could be the flashy, mischievous, and childish playboy, and throw drama into life, or he could be the wise, and sensible friend, who had wide shoulders and a nonjudgmental ear. He wouldn’t pass on your woes to others, but he would do anything to help. For someone who spent his life acting like a prepubescent teen, ZhengLi had a wise head on his shoulders and an ability to figure out life problems better than most. It’s why YuZhi had clung to him their entire life.

“TangShi, I really want us to be friends again one day. Real ones. I want to be there to watch YuZhi have children and see them grow. He’s been a part of my family since forever and I don’t want to miss out on it. I want to watch my friends grow old and have families.”

“We both did wrong. I’m to blame for the breakup and destroying us. I know this but if you ever do anything to hurt Tang again....” YuZhi warned, the seriousness in his tone was clear and even Aunt had recoiled to silence as she listened. Suddenly aware that she had never been given the bigger picture and full story and had fallen for Rhea’s tears and cries of victim. Months of her whispering and confiding to her about how awful TangShi was and yet witnessing this gave a new spin to things. She was confused and suddenly felt unsure about what to believe anymore.

“I’ll never do it again. I’m sorry. I know I could have caused her serious injury and I said things I should never have said to anyone. I’m not proud of who I became.” Rhea pulled a tissue from her bag and dabbed her face.

"I'm sorry too. For being the reason your life, your future with YuZhi, and your happiness were destroyed. I didn't know when I married him that it would lead us here or that he was Yoonie, or that I would love him. I'm sorry, Rhea. I didn't want to hurt anyone, and I didn't go after him or try to take him from you, it just happened." TangShi's voice was strained with her own guilty emotion. Her heart bursting with so much regret over being the center of someone's pain and misery.

There was a heavy silence in the air, as none of them really had more they could say to this situation. There was pain, and betrayal, and broken trust, and heartbreak, all coiled up into confused emotions between them. It would take time and baby steps to resolve and put it all to bed once things were processed and hearts had begun to heal. Rhea had the biggest mountain to climb in being able to let YuZhi go. Aunt no longer had anything to input at seeing all this raw and honest outpouring, just fear and sudden loss of someone she cared for.

"Rhea, I don't want to let you go. You've been my daughter since you were knee high to a grasshopper. I love you." Aunt finally broke in, that cold frost of her normal speaking voice dissipating, and genuine upset shone through with a hoarse voice and misty eyes. TangShi felt for her, as YuZhi had told her that her husband died in the first year of their marriage and she had never wanted to marry again. Meaning no children would ever be born to her. She had longed to be a mother for a long time and Rhea and YuZhi had filled that void. She could understand Aunt's need to cling onto Rhea and why she had despised TangShi for ruining it..

"You don't have to. Her relationship with you is not affected by what she is to me. You don't need her married to her family to love her, Aunt RuiZi. Rhea isn't going anywhere, and you work in the same field." YuZhi understood their bond, had watched it and wanted nothing more for his Aunt to accept TangShi into his life with the same warmth she had shown Rhea all these years. He had no reason to deny them their own relationship.

Aunt closed down, knowing what he was hinting at and turned back to cool and aloof. Always one to wear her heart hidden inside a steel chest and rarely show it on the surface. Her mind ablaze with so much she needed to think about but glad to see Rhea here again. It had been so many months of her not being allowed to grace their home.

"I only have space for one daughter." She snorted, glaring TangShi's way, a rise of stubborn and refusal to be disloyal, and Rhea caught it.

"Aunt?" Rhea got up and moved to the seat next to her, sliding her hand into hers and pulling her to look directly at her. Coaxing with a soft smile, pulling out all her sweet and honesty. "Give TangShi a chance. I spent so much time with her and she's a good girl. I know everything I said to you to make you dislike her. I painted a picture of a manipulating fame chaser who was seducing him, but I lied. I wasn't honest with you, and I made up so many stories. I was afraid that you would love her too and push me

aside. That I would lose all of you. I' sorry, Aunt RuiZi." Rhea broke into small tears of shame and genuine hurt in her own heart. Admitting to deceiving someone she loved and being the reason for her hatred.

YuZhi shook his head, hearing enough and motioned TangShi with him. He had suspected Rhea was the main source of Aunt's dislike and this angered him on another level. It was one thing suspecting, but another knowing it for certain when he wasn't really ready to fully forgive Rhea yet. He knew if he stayed and listened to this then his desire to make peace with Rhea would die a death. Lying so easily was something he had never suspected her of and it was not sitting well with him, seeing this new side to her.

"You two need some time alone. Seems undoing damage and putting things straight are what you intend, and we don't need to listen to it. We have to go. Tell Grandad I'll bring her back on Thursday. Rhea. We'll see you at some point. Maybe once you take back all the bullshit about Tang." YuZhi nodded, holding in some curt words that would only exasperate the situation, despite his haughtiness, and pulled TangShi with him.

Rhea faltered but knew she deserved is anger after hearing what she said. She couldn't watch them walk out together but instead turned back to Aunt and smiled through watery tears. Knowing she was about to tell her everything and expose her own lies and manipulation, but it felt like a step to freedom.

They hadn't eaten much but he would rather take TangShi out to lunch somewhere alone than listen to Rhea try and undo months of slander to make his aunt hate her. If she meant what she said about making amends he knew this was a start and he had no idea how deep or far Rhea's tarring of TangShi's character had gone within their circle of family and friends. This wasn't on him to fix, and he wasn't exposing TangShi to it either.

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"Baby? Have you seen the file I had last night?" YuZhi was wandering around the Livingroom, pulling up couch cushions and kneeling down to check under furniture, trying hard to remember what he did with it. Frustrated with himself for losing something so important in one night and clock watching because he was already running late. He was tired, head already buzzing with so many details about today and agitated with this delay.

"Try the bedroom. You came in with it, I think, when I was falling asleep." TangShi was in the bathroom tying her hair up into a high ponytail for a day at school, checking the time while YuZhi seemed unusually scatterbrained. His normal CEO composure out the window today. He had been like this since he jumped out of bed with his alarm and seemed to be out of whack. Losing things, his schedule upside down and he had even showered without eating breakfast today.

“God dammit. It’s the proposal for this morning’s meeting and I altered it last minute. I need it or else this is screwed. I’ll have to change the meeting time without it or I won’t be able to get ZhengLi to draft the new version in time.” He huffed, yanking up the edge of the rug in the off chance it had somehow slid under and zoning out on her advice to check their room. Seemingly still so in his own head her words didn’t register, and she knew it was a sign he was exhausted. Taking pity on him because it had been a hellish week of not seeing him much unless he had papers glued to his face. She lost count of how many times this week he fell asleep mid task. Even through lovemaking two nights ago.

TangShi put down her brush, walked into the bedroom and it was the first thing she saw on his side of the bed. Discarded with notes and post its sticking out the side as he had fallen asleep with it propped on his face before she reached over to lay it down. Probably why he had no recollection of putting it anywhere.

“Here.” She waved it in the air as she carried it back through and laughed at his posture, on hands and knees as he peered under the low TV unit. Somehow being in a designer blue three piece suit and grey tie didn’t look right while crawling around the floor like a child playing horse. Seeing the black folder from his crouched level he stood up fast and came to her for it, sighing with relief as she spotted his crooked loose tie and disheveled appearance.

“What’s wrong with you today? Normally you’re Mr. In control and unrattled. Not so sharp this morning, Mr. Leng.” She giggled at him and reached up to fix his tie, pulling it straight and tightening it as she neatened his collar. His hair was styled in it’s usual flicked back way, but a single strand had worked it’s way out across his forehead and she tugged him down to fix it too. Smoothing it back and running her fingers through it to bring it all back to obedient neatness. Still enamored every time she gazed at him at just how handsome YuZhi was.

“A million projects all coming to a head at once. Not enough sleep or hours of the day, and last-minute details that are frying my brain. You look pretty though, as always, Miss. Lei.” He stopped mid ramble to lean down and peck her on the lips, standing obediently still for her to fix him up before he ran a hand over her hair and tugged her in for a forehead kiss, lingering to inhale her as a way of self-calming. Never able to control his urge to touch or snuggle up with her when she got close. It made TangShi melt inside as she lifted her thumb to smooth the hint of a serious frown at the point between his eyebrows with a smile. Stroking away the stress with the softest of touches.

“I’ll be late home so don’t cook for me, and don’t wait up. I have a dinner with clients and then a cocktail bar with another. We might be past midnight given this particular associates drinking habits. Promise I won’t be too drunk, and I’ll try not to wake you.” He lifted his hand and made a scouts honor gesture, admiring her for a moment before snapping himself back into work mode. Knowing that despite needing a day off to curl up at home with her, neither had that luxury today.

“Make sure you eat lunch. Rest when you can. And if you wake me up you might get a proper welcome home.” TangShi winked naughtily and got a grin in response, worried about his hectic work routine and needing him to know she appreciated him. Long hours, rarely a day off, or home at a normal time lately, and he carried so much stress from having so many balls up in the air. Her life compared to his seemed like a long vacation and she wanted for nothing. The least she could do was wake up to his drunken antics and let him have his way with her. She liked drunk YuZhi anyway, as he was usually a little rougher and wilder in bed.

“Likewise. What days are the late nights for this show? I could pick you up if it matches up with my schedule.” YuZhi turned to pick up his briefcase and slid his documents into it, glancing around for any other papers he may have brought home yesterday. One part of his head on getting ready and the other trying to make plans to see her while he knew another week ahead was busy as hell. She was always his priority, always thinking of her and yet always feeling like he was neglecting her too.

“The end of next week. Probably the Thursday and Friday night. The show closes Sunday noon so we can pack up early that day.” TangShi wandered to the table and sat down to check through her backpack, pulling out her lip balm to touch it up. All ready to go and satisfied that she wasn’t the one slowing him down.

“Shoot, babe. I have to fly out Saturday morning and won’t be home until Monday early. I can catch your show before I leave though, early Saturday. I can pick you up late the other two days and we can come home together.” He stopped, heavy guilt hitting him in the stomach over the clash in schedules, but TangShi smiled his way with a shake of her head. Truly not upset over this, as despite forgetting, he already had prepared her for this.

“You already told me you had to leave. I’m fine. It’s not like I’m switching out the paintings over the three days. Saturday before you go is more than I hoped for.”

YuZhi leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, squatting behind her for a second so his knees were at either side of her body, and she was cocooned in his body heat, even though he knew they had to leave. All his late mornings this past couple of weeks had been because of his inability to separate from her without a lot of pawing and hugging first. Somehow needing her more everyday even though he could maul her to his heart’s content.

“I’ll miss you, our first time apart since you told me you loved me.” He nudged her with his thigh against hers, sliding his arms around her waist and nestled her against him. Resting his chin on her shoulder and watching her zip her bag up. Exhaling heavily in a mix of fatigue and contentment because touching her and being this way was the feeling of home for him.

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"I'll miss you too. Although, I might get a good night's sleep seeing as you're against it." She jested, stretching her hand back and patting his cheek with adoration. They were still in the first throes of passion and the honeymoon phase and YuZhi had yet to go one day without the need to get her naked. She wasn't complaining as it made her feel cherished and desirable and she had gotten used to how good sex could be when you had a gentle and attentive lover. She woke every feeling content and aglow with his attentions. Her heart always bursting to overflowing with the happy emotions always cradling her. Her past life seemed like a distant bad memory that wasn't real at all.

"You better rest well, because when I get home ..." He warned, nibbling her neck and pulling a squeal out of her as he wrestled her in and almost knocked them both onto their asses, before being cut off by his phone ringing. Saving her from being mauled all over and the possibility of an even later start to their day.

YuZhi glanced at the screen, frowned at ZhengLi's name knowing he would only call if it was important at this time of the day and got up to take it. Wandering off into the bathroom for last minute checks of his hair and suit. Wrinkled, and ruffled and he started fixing it all once again, mentally scolding himself for messing with Tang when dressed for work.

TangShi got up and went to the door, pulling on her trainers under her denim dungarees she had bought to wear to school. She went casually dressed nowadays since she settled in and was enjoying not having to glam up and look fashion show worthy in the mornings. Without make up and expensive clothes most people on the street didn't recognize her as YuZhi Leng's fiancée. So she still had a modicum of anonymity while walking around Shanghai. Unlike YuZhi who was recognized wherever he went and going on dates with him recently had shown her so. She didn't envy his fame, although she understood it was a necessary part of his life.

"Babe?" YuZhi came back from the bathroom sliding his phone into his inside pocket, deflated in mood and tone, and spotted her getting ready by the main door. Coming to slide his own shoes on and eyeing her with a remorseful frown. Cute boy face firing on all cylinders and she immediately knew something was wrong.

"I need to drop you off fast and get to the office. ZhengLi has problems. I may have to cancel tonight's meetings and fly early to Hong Kong instead of this weekend. I might be gone all week."

TangShi's heart dropped, and her eyes widened in disappointment, already not looking forward to him going away as it was but now he might be gone for days. Sometimes things like this happened but this was a first where it was more than a day or two.

"I know, don't look at me like that. If you didn't have school and this show I'd be taking you with me." YuZhi was upset about it too. Feeling like they had only been together five minutes and work was pulling him away from her at every opportunity. Fitting in dates and quality time had become a juggling act. "If I have to go, I won't get to see your

show, I'm sorry. Don't be mad." He pulled her into his arms and gave her a bear hug, squeezing her tight to somehow make up for it. Hating himself for letting her down and distraught at her saddened expression.

TangShi was upset, her chest aching, but she knew it wasn't his fault. His work was important and as the future CEO he had to prove himself worthy for the board of shareholders and his grandfather. Leng Group was a massive corporation and a leader in so many fields. Going away on trips was inevitable.

"I can't miss school or the show or I would come. I don't want you to be gone so long." She pouted and then shook herself mentally to paste on a brighter expression as she didn't want him feeling bad over this.

"It's just over three hours for the flight. If I have a long stay over I can try coming back one night for a couple of hours to break up the week. Maybe more than once to see you if I can fit it in." YuZhi couldn't bear the thought of it either. Hating she would be here alone and going to see that asshole Rong Cai without anyone to keep him in line. Missing her was going to drive him crazy.

"Don't do that. You're already tired and overworked as it is. Don't make me feel guilty by adding flight time in. I'm a big girl I can stay alone for a few days and Linlin will come over some nights." TangShi reassured him and then caught sight of the clock on the wall and squealed. "I'm going to be late." She jabbed him in the abdomen, pushing him off like tossing off the bed covers, in panic and began tugging his arm to hurry him as he looked for the car key on the wall rack. He slid his feet into his shoes and checked he had his briefcase and phone.

"Let's go. I can call you at lunch when I know for certain what's happening. If I drive fast you'll make it." He turned her and pinched her ass for good measure, opening the door and sliding them out into the hallway before yanking it shut. Patting his pocket again to be sure he had everything.

"Don't get a ticket." She warned.

"If I get you there early can we make out until you have to go in? Then I don't mind getting a ticket." He joked pulling her with him by the hand as he headed for the elevator at speed. TangShi laughed at his childishness, her bossy man always behaving like a hormonal teen, and no one would ever believe he was the icy Mr. Leng famous in the Leng group for his composed and cool outer persona. If they could see him like this they would never trust him to run things.

"If you get us stopped for a ticket then we won't get there early. How about drive normally and if I'm a little late it's fine."

"So..... being five minutes later from a make out session shouldn't matter either?" he winked back at her and got an eyeroll in response.

“What happened to you? You used to be so aloof and controlled.” She giggled, meandering behind him as he led the way down to the underground carparking garage. It was a fast elevator ride and a short walk to his usual spot.

“My Cinderella from eight years ago finally showed up. I’m still aloof with everyone else in the world except you. That’s the perk of being my fiancée.” He winked at her and opened the car door to let her in, always the gentleman as he put his open palm up against the frame to pad it so she wouldn’t bump her head as she slid into the seat.

“I like it. I didn’t like when you were mean and cold and borderline abusive.”

“Me? Never! I’m so above immature behavior and cruelty.” He jested knowing fine well his behavior of their early days were something he regretted every time he looked at his sweet angel’s face. She had riled him to extra levels he never understood back then.

YuZhi got in the car, turned on the engine but as he turned to click his seatbelt he caught sight of her arranging hers. The sweet delicate side profile of her like this. Hair up off her face, free from make up and yet blushed from early morning cooler weather. Her naturally small and delicate features that made her silhouette breathtaking and the almost juvenile hairstyle. It enhanced an already pretty face, bringing out his protective instinct to always shield her from the world. She was wearing an outfit that made her seem younger and somehow vulnerable and his heart expanded to painful levels as he stared at her. Frozen mid task while he couldn’t deny how incredibly in love with her he was. She was his idea of perfection in every way, and it overflowed his heart and soul and pushed his impulsive need to kiss her to extreme levels.

Catching her off guard, he let go of his belt, so it zipped back into the holder, leaned in and caught her under the chin with one hand, pulling her face to him and sunk a kiss that rendered her speechless. Not a gentle peck or a goodbye grazing of lips but an intense need to satisfy a craving that had sprung up from the deepest part of him, almost like a ravenous hunger. Aware that she was the only girl on the planet that had ever made him feel or act this way, even so many years ago when he hadn’t been able to stop kissing her. He knew every second with TangShi highlighted how lacking in love and passion his years with Rhea had been.

YuZhi kissed her firmly, pushing their lips apart as he deepened it to searing hot levels and devoured her mouth as though they were alone in their bedroom and not the complex parking. His hand sliding into her hair so he could tilt her face to better accommodate him and kissed her breathless, holding nothing back. Tongues exploring one another’s taste and feel as she surrendered to him. Heat rising between them, and breath labored as bodies reacted and pulses soared. TangShi’s hands slid around his neck involuntarily and she teased and toyed with her own responding kiss, savoring him. Losing sense of time and forgetting that both were running late to instead succumb to a basic primal urge to be joined intimately.

They kissed for minutes before YuZhi pulled back breathless, keeping their noses touching lightly and brushed her hair from her face that had escaped her up-style. Gazing into her eyes to calm his crazy responses and finally feeling complete again and less listless and scatterbrained. She gave him sanity.

“I Love you so much it makes me crazy. How did I get this lucky?” He whispered his breath tickling her lips because they were still that close. His tone low and husky and wishing he had kept her upstairs in bed and a forced day off. Screw work and school when he needed her this much. TangShi blushed and smiled stroking his cheek with her thumb and then tracing his lips with equal enamor.

“I love you too. You make me happier than I’ve ever been. I feel like I’m the one who was blessed and could never imagine my life would go this way.” TangShi responded in an equally affected tone. Her heart racing and body on fire with longing for him to do more than kiss.

“I’ll do anything for you, you know that, right? Whatever you need, whenever you want something. Just ask. I’ll move mountains for you, Tang. I’ll never hurt you again, I’ll never leave you. I need you.” He pulled her into his body the best he could at their awkward positioning and slid her face in against his throat as he hugged her tight and stroked his fingers through her hair as it hung behind her. Needing her more than anything in this moment when he knew he was going to have to leave. Almost squeezing the life out of her with the intensity of his grip.

“I know. I’ll do anything in my power to make you happy too. I feel like I was always meant to find you again. That you’re my fate.” Tang slid back, releasing herself from his hold and cradled his face in her two palms, sighing with sheer contentment at a face she idolized and adored. YuZhi maybe hadn’t started off as the man of her dreams when they married but now she couldn’t imagine ever wanting anyone else this way. He was the gentle and loving boy she met in Beijing and had left his mark on her heart for all time. Gorgeous inside and out.

Gazing at one another until sense finally filtered in and YuZhi’s beep of his phone brought them back to reality. They lingered, smiling in genuine happiness before he exhaled and groaned at reality invading once again.

“We should go, huh?” he grinned, pushing her back into her seat and adjusting her belt for her before moving back to his own. Regretting the fact he would have to leave but energized by the feel of her on his lips.

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“We’re heading over now. Grab your things.” Rong Cai appeared at TangShi’s desk, startling her out of her daydream and she scurried to grab her bag and phone and put her paints aside. It had been a hectic week of prepping new artwork and today was the last day of overseeing the hanging in the gallery for the opening in the morning. In terms

of work the days were swift, but in terms of missing YuZhi it felt endless. She was glad it was getting close to being over.

“Coming.” She called after him, swiping up the last framed piece, a small one from YuZhi’s study that she really wanted to be included and knew exactly where to hang it. He had bought it long ago before they were even friends and yet it was the only artwork that graced his office. It made her happy anytime she walked in there and saw how much he appreciated her skill, even when he didn’t like her. So she wanted that small piece of sentimentality displayed in among the pieces she was most proud of.

She was missing him like crazy, to the point where she wasn’t sleeping properly without him in the bed, even though it had only been a few days apart. Although he called her every night before bed to check in. No matter how chaotic his day or far from his own bedtime it was, he made sure to give her a goodnight and at least thirty minutes of his time to listen to her day. It was the highlight to her day.

Work in Hong Kong sounded exhausting and was taking up most of his day and evenings. Meetings, visiting the build site to the entertainment center they were building, and then evening dinners to discuss details. He wasn’t sleeping enough and barely getting breaks to catch up. She couldn’t wait for him to be home so she could make sure he rested properly and wrap up in his arms for a good night’s sleep.

The gallery was around twenty minutes from the school and four of them piled into Rong Cai’s car and headed to go and do the final touches. Squeezing into his four by four which was unusually spacious and expensive for a guy who seemed to hate wasteful spending. A hint that told TangShi they had a pretty decent income from the school even if Master Cai looked like an aging hippy in the same clothes every day.

Boxes in arms were slowing them down, a couple of art pieces still to be installed in tow and a pile of flyers and business cards to be left at reception for visitors were with them. The students were excitable and raring to get done so the journey was filled with chatter and noise as they got hyped up with the approaching event opening. It gave TangShi time to stare out of the window and get lost in her own world of peace and quiet as she zoned them out and thought of YuZhi instead.

The show was always a good promotional event for the school every year and attracted art buyers and possible students equally. It was a highlight for them all as the reputation and talent was of the highest quality. She had overheard Rong and Master Cai discussing it days before and it seemed it also brought in sponsors and helped pay for the running of the school and grounds. She guessed being an elite school that handpicked less than a dozen students a year could afford to keep numbers low that way.

TangShi headed to her section of the show hall with her frame when they finally pulled up, admiring the set up as she drew close to the corner and appraised how it now looked with the spotlights redirected at the pictures. The lighting crew had come in early

to sort out positioning and her one paper taped square reserving this frames spot also had a low light glow shining and waiting for its arrival. Everything was standing out and stunning, softening the colors and bringing out the inner beauty she always saw in them when she painted. The atmosphere calm and tranquil with the right amount of soft white light and subtle shadow to bring her pieces alive. Tomorrow they would play low level soothing music to add to the ambience and she was excited to see it all come together.

“Do you need me to help with that?” Rong appeared behind her, actively seeking her out now the majority of this place was ready, as he hoped to spend a little one on one time. Originally he thought this event would be a good excuse to spend a lot of time alone with TangShi, but he had been wrong. With so many great students this year, his father had picked several and they had all insisted on being hands on in the process of setting up. Leaving him running around tending to everyone and it infuriated him that she was the only one who never called for his assistance.

TangShi was weirdly independent and liked to do things herself, despite his constant hovering over her and offering at any opportunity. She was hands on, self-reliant and rarely looked for guidance or help from any of them. She never mentioned that night at the bar to him ever again either, even though he had hoped it would cause major rows with Leng and she would have reason to come complaining to him about it. Instead TangShi had seemed politely distant ever since and didn't seem upset when Leng showed up that afternoon to collect her. A sickening display of lovey-ness that had sent Rong storming to his office in rage.

“Nope. I got it.” TangShi pulled the step ladder over as she had asked for a picture mount here already, it was just a case of hanging it up. Admiring the koi scene and thinking of YuZhi as she stroked the edge of the frame, which softened her expression and she smiled without realizing it. Lost in sweet memories.

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“Is this your favorite piece?” Rong was staring at her from his lower angle, mesmerized by her and assumed her smile was for her art.

“Not really, but at the same time, I guess so. It's not my favorite work but it belongs to someone who cherishes it, so I guess it's my favorite item here.” She got down; eyes glued to it as she did so before she turned back his way. His presence didn't make her as uncomfortable as it used to, and he had backed off a lot since a fellow student had shown the class the photos of her engagement event. Rong had seemed a little cold and distant for a couple of days afterwards and had since returned to gentleman. SO now she didn't mind his presence as much as before.

“Let me guess.... Your fiancée.” He smiled, but it was completely fake, concealing his utter disdain for YuZhi Leng and the way his stomach tightened in disgust at thinking of him. He still thought TangShi deserved better, and nothing would change his mind. He

knew it was only a matter of time before she realized he was a rich playboy and not worthy.

“It’s that obvious?” TangShi giggled, a little embarrassed at her obviousness, unaware of the black dip in his mood.

“Hmmm. He hasn’t been around to pick you up for a few days. Is he too busy now he’s got a ring on your finger?” Rong nodded towards her hand, acting like it was in jest with a fixed smile while despising the sparkling diamond since the first time he laid eyes on it. It was something showy and wasteful and in his opinion didn’t suit who TangShi was. It seemed like a flashy attempt at telling people Leng owned her. Little did he know she picked it herself, after browsing dozens, that it was her closest ideal to her dream ring since she had been a little girl. She didn’t like much jewelry, but she adored this and would often stare at it with happiness.

“Oh, no. He’s in Hong Kong until early Monday morning. He had business to take care of.”

“So, he’s not coming to our show? He’s not going to come support you and see what all your hard work, sweat and tears has produced?” There was a tone to his voice as he gritted his teeth while trying to stay expressionless. TangShi heard it and faltered not sure why he was being weird.

“He said he would try and get a flight back tomorrow for a few hours, so he didn’t miss it, but he won’t be able to stay. I know he didn’t mean to not be here, but it was unavoidable.” She excused him, knowing every word was true.

“I see. Lucky you. Not many men would spend thousands to jet back and forth for a few hours in a day. To be rich, right?” Rong turned his head away so she wouldn’t see the furious glint in his eye at thinking of that asshole. Feeling he was neglecting something important to her and didn’t believe for one minute he had any intention of coming here for only a few hours. He knew the type and it’s why he had steered clear of working in his uncle’s firm so long ago and becoming just like the YuZhi Leng’s of this world.

TangShi’s phone began to ring in her dungaree front pocket, saving her from responding to Rong’s oddness, and she excused herself by waving her phone his way and walking off. Feeling a little strange about his weird mood and grinning when she saw YuZhi’s name on screen. Dismissing Rong entirely as a secondary thought.

“Hello.” She answered with sudden enthusiasm.

“Hey, baby, how’s the set up going? Are you almost done? Did you eat yet?” YuZhi stretched out in his office chair of the temporary room he was working from, straining his neck side to side and ignoring the mountain of files sat in front of him. He needed a break, and he missed his girl.

“All done. Just a few tweaks and we’re all set for tomorrow. How’s things on your end today?” She walked to a quiet corner and leaned against a wall, closing her eyes to picture her gorgeous fiancée and sink into the sound of his husky, sexy voice. Missing him so badly it made her suddenly tearful, and she hoped he really would come back tomorrow.

“Up to my eyeballs in paperwork. I have a flight to you at four pm, so I’ll get to you a little after seven. I need to get on one back to Hong Kong at two am, but I can’t miss your first show.” He knew the gallery doors closed at eight so he was planning things to a tee and hoping no flight delays as he couldn’t get in any earlier. This was as important to him as the project he was working on, and he wouldn’t miss it.

“Really? You’re really coming back tomorrow?” TangShi burst out in glee, clutching a hand to her heart as excitement bubble over. Hopping up and down like a child in a candy store and had to curb her instinct to squeal in happiness. YuZhi laughed softly at her reaction, knowing it was worth to hear her this happy, even if the flights would exhaust him. One minute with her after days apart could make up for all of it.

Rong Cai glared her way from where he was observing her, furious rage bubbling through him like molten lava and for a second he resented how naïve she was. Knowing her happiness must mean that showoff Leng was coming here after all and snarling at the thought of it. Flashing his cash to make up for being a sad excuse of a boyfriend.

“I promised you, didn’t I? We can go for dinner after, then home for a little while before I need to go back to the airport. I’ll be home Monday around six am as planned after that so it’s not much longer. Next time, I’m kidnapping you as I hate this.” YuZhi rubbed his face and eyes, stretching out but totally serious.

Rong couldn’t stand it any longer. Even thousands of miles away, during school hours, he was still monopolizing TangShi’s attention. If they were in class then calls would be forbidden right now and it irked him on another level. Clenching his fists as he watched her animated gestures and bright expression and wanted to snub Leng out.

“Hey, TangShi, after we’re done with this we’re going for dinner. Put your pretty face on and get over here.” He shouted loudly making sure YuZhi would hear him on the other end of the phone. Smirking to himself.

YuZhi paused recognizing the voice, tapping his thumb on the desk and gritting his teeth as his stomach twisted and his happy energy nosedived. Even though Tang never gave him reason to doubt her he just couldn’t stand this guy and it was almost irrational how much he could piss him off with the briefest of words. He knew he was jealous and being dumb, but that guy was like a black cloud in his happy life, and he’d be glad when TangShi graduated from there.

“Oh, okay.” TangShi waved Rong’s way before returning to her call. “I think that he’s hinting at me to get off the phone. I’m not supposed to use it in school hours.” TangShi apologized, reddening at thinking she was being told off.

“Is it just the two of you? For dinner, I mean?” YuZhi asked, then scolded himself internally for sounding like a possessive lover and showing an insecurity that made no sense. As much as he didn’t ever want her alone with him, he knew he had to trust her, and this guy was part of something she wanted to do. It involved her future career. He had no right to say anything about it.

“No. There’s three other students here too, so five of us together. I won’t go if you don’t want me to.” TangShi offered, hating the change in YuZhi’s upbeat tone to a deflated one. YuZhi exhaled slowly with relief at knowing she was with other people too, yet it only dug up a sense of shame for being this way.

“Don’t be silly. Go, relax, you earned it after working so hard. Enjoy your time with your classmates. I’m fine about it, honest. I’ll be home tomorrow afternoon and we can do something together then. Don’t drink much when I’m not there to look after you, okay?” YuZhi made an effort to sound upbeat and brushed off the insecurity as him being an idiot.

“I won’t I promise. I don’t like drinking much anyway.”

“Baby, I gotta go. I have so many things to sign and ZhengLi will be back about now to take me to the next meeting. I miss you, behave, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” YuZhi didn’t want to hang up, but the lurking figure of a secretary at his open door reminded him he still had a full schedule to get through. Sighing at having to hang up when he wanted to listen to her for longer.

“I miss you too. I love you.” TangShi smiled to herself, lingering on the phone to hold onto him for seconds longer.

“Love you, baby.”

TangShi stared at her phone for a minute after he hung up, a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that gave her anxiety and then pushed it aside as her being overly sensitive. After years of being her families verbal punching bag she sometimes didn’t know how to relax with someone who only ever treated her well. His slightest mood or change in tone made her expect something to erupt even though it never did. Always doubting herself and assuming every minor change in him was somehow her fault and she knew it was an ingrained flaw and something she had to work on.

“You ready to go?” Rong walked over, glad to see she had ended her call and still riled up with jealousy.

“Umm, yeah, let me get my bag and check it’s all done.” TangShi dodged by him, her mind still occupied on YuZhi and didn’t see the way he stared after her. Eating up every inch of her with a determined look in his eye.

From the first day he met her he felt like they had clicked and in his head TangShi was the girl for him. Besotted and a little bit obsessed with who she was to him, and he couldn’t move on to anyone else. To him she was his ideal woman, in looks and personality, and it didn’t faze him at all that she currently had a boyfriend. He just needed that asshole Leng to exit and clear the path for the two of them to be happy together. Something he was sure would happen.

The way TangShi lit up whenever he spoke to her irritated him and he knew he would have to do something to push them apart if it didn’t happen on its own soon. Rong was a man of action and he had wasted weeks in hopes she would come to her senses while being nice to her, and it was using up the very last ounces of his patience. He had never been known to wait for anyone.

TangShi wandered back, oblivious to his inner thoughts and smiling his way, a look of joy in her eyes and her steps lighter. Happy about how her work was displayed and looking forward to time to relax with her classmates to unwind before going home.

“Lead the way, I’m starving.” She walked on merrily, her head on the happy thoughts and that her fiancée was coming home to see her tomorrow which was the best gift she could ever ask for.

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TangShi was tired but pensively watching the door and checking her phone and watch obsessively. It was almost seven thirty and YuZhi hadn’t been in touch since he left for the airport before four pm earlier in the day. She had no idea if he was delayed or stuck somewhere.

“Girl, I love everything you create but that one is coming home with me.” Linlin gave her a nudge, pointing at a large painting in the center of the wall, hushing her voice so nearby lurkers wouldn’t know TangShi was the artist. Another pond scene, only this one had multicolor fantail goldfish that looked ethereal and magical like underwater sirens. A palette of pastel colors that gave a warmth like a summer day.

“This one is my favorite in the whole gallery. I’m sure you may have to fight me for it.” Rong Cai cut in, walking up behind them and Linlin gave him a side eyed squint. He had been hovering near TangShi all day and eavesdropping on any conversations she had, looking for a way in.

“I’m a black belt in Taekwondo, I don’t think you really want to try me.” Linlin remarked haughtily, not liking this guy anymore since that night in the bar and no longer trusting

him as far as TangShi was concerned. She got creep vibes the longer she knew him, and she had witnessed his eternal following around the gallery all day.

“Money speaks louder than punches, kiddo.” Rong jested, patting Linlin on the head and getting a glare of fury in return that could melt steel. Her temper rising because she hated people treating her like a child, based on her four-foot eight height. Not amused with this chump as it was and he earned himself another black mark.

“I’ll maim you if you do that again.” She stropped, spitting a snarky retort and TangShi had to pull her back and smile as though she was joking.

“Linlin is feral, excuse her. She bites.” She giggled nervously.

“Damn right she does, but that’s her sexiest quality.” A voice from further back drew both women to turn to see who it was and Linlin broke into a huge grin as ZhengLi swaggered towards them. Looking hot in washed out jeans, trainers, and a leather bomber jacket with a pair of shades sat on top of his head and that walk of a confident ‘dude’ who was used to being center of attention. Linlin couldn’t control herself and ran for him at speed, jumping into his awaiting arms and encircling him with legs, lassoing him around the neck for a welcome home kiss.

Sinking one on him that wasn’t appropriate for a public venue, but ZhengLi encouraged it by kissing her back and sliding his hands under her ass to keep her up while he devoured her. She too had been having serious withdrawals this past week without her man and yet had no clue he would come here today as he didn’t tell her. He was all about surprises.

TangShi squinted past them in excitement, not caring about their behavior as she was used to it now. Looking for YuZhi but as yet there was no sign of him, and she brushed past Rong and made her way to ZhengLi. All but ignoring the man who was craving her undivided attention and oblivious to his darkening mood.

“Where is he?” TangShi strained her neck looking towards the door and seeing no one new coming in. Her heart deflating with disappointment that maybe he sent ZhengLi instead. Confused as to why he would be here and YuZhi wasn’t.

“Behind you.” A voice right at her ear made her jump, her heart skipping a beat as she spun on the whisperer and squealed to see her own perfect lover in an outfit not all that different to ZhengLi’s. Obvious they both dressed causally to skip home for a night, and he looked swoon worthy and somehow Hollywood hot like this.

TangShi jumped into his arms, catching him around the neck and tugged him down to her face so she could kiss him with force. Overwhelmed with her happiness and smothering him with love, losing awareness of time and place and acting impulsively. YuZhi wrapped her up tight in an embrace and gave her a squeeze, kissing her with less passion than Zheng and Linlin’s due to him having more respect for art shows.

Submitting to her sweet kisses and not really minding about the art lovers wandering around and throwing them snooty looks for their disruptive behavior. He indulged her, content with finally having her back in his arms.

Rong Cai scowled at them from his previous position, eyes narrowed in hatred and turned and stormed off in the direction of the adjoining hall. Knowing fine well sticking around would end in a scene because he was growing worse with the need to pull them apart. Temper riled once more and another reason to do something to get rid of YuZhi Leng from TangShi's life.

"Come on, let me show you around. It's closing soon and I want you to see all of it, not just mine." TangShi slid her arm in YuZhi's, leaning her head against him possessively, and gazed at him with adoration from her shorter height. Full of the joys of love and excitement and inwardly bursting with sunshine. Glad to be back with him while feeling like this was a dream and he wasn't really here. He smelled of outside, and aftershave, and airport air, but he still felt too good to be true.

"Lead the way, baby. I'm all yours." He slid his hand into hers without untangling her from him and wandered with her to the far corner where her work was displayed. Despite seeing a lot of her work firsthand at home or when she uploaded new pieces to her print shop, he still wanted to see them in this setting. Eyeing up a familiar framed picture as they got close, and he smiled brightly.

"Hey, you stole my favorite one."

"Borrowed. And besides, yours was a print when I moved into the apartment, and you never noticed I replaced it with the real thing. So technically this is still mine." She grinned at him.

"Sneaky!! You're really talented, Tang. There's something about your work that stands out and you can always identify it among others. From the first time I saw something you painted; I loved your style." He pulled her with him as he walked the length of the wall, admiring them all in the specialized lighting. Paying attention and taking real interest while mentally choosing which ones they were going to hang at home when this was over. He loved them all.

"You're biased, like Linlin." She pointed out, snuggling close and reluctant to be parted even for a second.

"I may be biased now but I liked them before I liked you." He winked at her cheekily. "I'm serious. I would take all of them home if we had enough wall space." He shook his arm out of her grip so he could slide it around her instead and tugged her in so he could kiss her on the forehead. Cuddling her into his body and continued walking her around.

"Dude, I'll see you at the airport for the flight back. Don't be late. Me and my wildcat have other things to do." ZhengLi prodded him from behind, tugging Linlin with him and

giving YuZhi a conspirational wink that hinted on what they were leaving for. Even TangShi caught on and blushed.

“Don’t YOU be late. Or I will leave without you and not cover for you.” YuZhi prodded him back in the shoulder and then nodded him away with some visual message passing between them that TangShi couldn’t translate.

“Sure, boss” ZhengLi saluted him with a mock bow then took off with Linlin waving wildly and blowing kisses TangShi’s way. She knew she was excess to needs now Tang had her boyfriend here and had much more fun things to be doing with ZhengLi while she had him home. Almost a week of being separated by a thousand kilometers was reason enough to drag him home and punish him for neglecting her and she had many fun and naked ways of doing that.

YuZhi admired every artist section in the gallery, aware they were on a time limit and turning down the offer of champagne from an attending waitress. He had plans of his own to wine and dine his girl after this and had to stay sober to drive so he could save them time.

TangShi didn’t notice the dark shadow who followed them around the hall at a distance. The way Rong’s eyes were glued to them in a spiteful manner as he observed their every move and interaction. Following them from room to room while thinking through all the ways he could ruin what they seemed to have together.

“It looks like they’re closing. Come on, you can buy me Xiaolongbao. I’m starving.” TangShi nudged YuZhi as she noted the main doors being latched to stop newcomers and leavers were being bid farewell as they were let out.

“Come on. I know of the perfect place that still serves until late.” YuZhi let go of TangShi and took her hand, walking them out in search of steamed dumplings without a backwards look at Rong Cai.