

Stealing Your Heart Chapter 321

After Lin Xinyan came out of the menswear store, they continued on their shopping spree and she bought Cheng Yuxiu a nice fur coat. When they passed by another boutique, Lin Xinyan spotted a black cashmere coat that would suit Aunt Yu perfectly. She then asked the shop attendant to get the coat for Aunt Yu to try on.

Aunt Yu waved her hands in shock. "I don't need this! I have enough clothes to wear myself. Don't take it for me."

"Your daughter just wants to be filial to you, so you should try it. Nice clothes would make you look younger." Judging from Aunt Yu's age, the shop attendant assumed that Aunt Yu was Lin Xinyan's mother and not her mother-in-law, as it was rather rare for women to shop for clothes with their in-laws.

From the shop attendant's experience, it had always been a mother-daughter duo, which was why she had said as such, to persuade Aunt Yu to try on the coat.

Aunt Yu's face paled at her words as she scolded the shop attendant. "What nonsense are you speaking of? This is my young mistress, and I'm her servant. How can you say such words to embarrass me?"

Lin Xinyan patted Aunt Yu's shoulder soothingly. "Don't be mad, it's fine! You're about my mom's age, anyway."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." The shop attendant was stunned momentarily before she soon apologized to them. This was the first time she had actually seen someone buying clothes for their maid; a coat of good quality, in fact.

How is it possible that there's still such a kind-hearted, rich woman in this world?
The shop attendant thought internally.

This is a real eye-opener for me.

“Then you should take her offer and try on the coat! There are not many people who are lucky enough to be employed by such a kind-hearted young mistress.” The shop attendant was desperate for her commission, hence she really wanted Aunt Yu to try on the coat and buy it.

“Go and try it on.” Lin Xinyan smiled.

“But...”

“Come with me then! I'll bring you to the changing room.” Without further ado, the shop attendant dragged Aunt Yu to the changing room.

Aunt Yu was a petite lady, which was why the short coat that she had tried on looked really good on her.

“See how good you look in this coat!” The shop attendant praised.

“Then I'll take this one.”

“I really have enough clothes to wear. I don't need such a nice coat.” Aunt Yu grabbed the attendant to stop her from wrapping the coat.

“Oh, I'm not buying this as a gift for you. I expect you to take good care of Xichen and Ruixi in the future,” Lin Xinyan uttered purposefully.

“Taking care of them is my responsibility,” Aunt Yu answered. “Besides, I'm paid to do so.”

Zong Jinghao had always been kind to her. Throughout the years, all the credit cards that he had given her had no spending limitations.

That only served to show how reliable and trustworthy she was, in the eyes of Zong Jinghao.

“You are so lucky! I’ve never come across such a kind-hearted boss myself. I’m so envious, you know.” The shop attendant joked, “Shall I work in your stead then?”

Aunt Yu waved her hands frantically. “Oh, no way.”

She was worried that others could not take care of the family well. It was not because she was reluctant to let go of such a high-paying job, leaving her kind employer.

The shop attendant quickly wrapped the coat whilst Aunt Yu was distracted.

By the time Aunt Yu realized the coat was wrapped up, she knew that she couldn’t reject the gift anymore and left the store with it after Lin Xinyan had paid for it.

After three hours of shopping, their hands were now full of shopping bags.

When they descended downstairs, Lin Xinyan passed by a winter clothing store by the name of AQ. Back when she was still living in Country A as a kid, she was terribly afraid of winter months, as Zhuang Zijin was poor and couldn’t afford to buy warm winter clothes for her.

When she was twelve, Zhuang Zijin had used all of her earnings for the month to buy a down jacket for her, and she could still remember that it was bought from AQ.

That was the warmest piece of clothing that she had ever worn.

Lin Xinyan turned around to face Aunt Yu. "Wait for me in the car."

Aunt Yu nodded and left with their bags.

Lin Xinyan entered AQ once Aunt Yu had left.

"These are our latest designs. Feel free to have a look here." The shop attendant welcomed her.

However, Lin Xinyan did not follow her recommendations. Instead, she turned to another area.

For many years, Lin Xinyan could never find the same design that her mother had once bought her. *I bet that it's out of fashion now.*

After all, it has been so long.

The shop attendant followed her and recommended, "These are winter wear for people in their middle ages. Are you going to buy it for yourself or as a gift?"

Lin Xinyan spotted a knee-length grey down jacket with a mink coat hood. She remembered that Zhuang Zijin had rheumatism, due to the extreme winter coldness in Country A, which was why she was fond of long down jackets that could cover her knees.

Zhuang Zijin was about 165cm tall, so she would look good in long down jackets.

Lin Xinyan stroked the fine fabric of the down jacket as she recalled her past with Zhuang Zijin. "Is there an M size for this one?"

The attendant shook her head. "We only have L, XL, and XXL. If you really want an M size, I can get it from the headquarters and courier it to you, if you have no time to collect it yourself."

Lin Xinyan pondered over the suggestion. "Then please get it from your headquarters."

"Alright. Would you like to collect it yourself or have us send it to you?"

"I'll give you an address and please send it right there." Lin Xinyan was afraid that she would quarrel with Zhuang Zijin again if she had met her directly, hence she requested for the store to send it over on her behalf.

"Alright. Please write it down here." The shop attendant handed her a paper and a pen. "Please leave your contact details too, so that we can contact you once the jacket has arrived at its destination."

Lin Xinyan hummed in reply while writing down the Lin residence's address and her contact, before paying for the jacket.

Meanwhile, in the Lin Residence.

The household was sealed by the police cordon, while the maids and Zhuang Zijin were brought back by the cops for further investigation. It turned out that Lin Guoan had died in his bed, and the forensic doctor was doing an autopsy to assess his cause of death.

"There's no sign of fighting or physical struggle in the bedroom. According to the maid, Zhuang Zijin's relationship with Lin Guoan had been close, and she would cook for Lin Guoan every day. They were inseparable, so she doesn't think that this is a case of murder."

Initially, Shen Peichuan had also suspected Zhuang Zijin of murdering Lin Guoan, as Lin Guoan had been terrible to her before that.

Surprisingly, when he arrived at the crime scene, he didn't find any evidence of a murder at all.

Zong Jinghao raised his eyes and glanced at Shen Peichuan. "If you were in Zhuang Zijin's shoes, would you have forgiven a man who has betrayed you, abandoned you for years, and who was indirectly caused the death of your child?"

Shen Peichuan gave it a thought and shook his head. "Of course not! I'm not crazy enough to..."

Shen Peichuan halted midway, suddenly realizing the meaning of Zong Jinghao's words. "You mean, you're suspecting..."

"I'm not suspecting." Zong Jinghao was certain that this was a murder. He didn't think that Lin Guoan's death shortly after his remarriage to Zhuang Zijin was a coincidence, especially when Zhuang Zijin had been so insistent on remarrying him.

At that moment, the forensic team came down from upstairs.

Shen Peichuan approached them immediately. "Any clue?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes."

Shen Peichuan frowned. "What have you found?"

"I can't confirm the cause of death yet. I can only tell you after the lab test," the doctor replied.

"Then when will the results be out?" Shen Peichuan asked.

"Latest by the day after tomorrow," the doctor answered.

"Alright. Time to clear out. Bring the body back." Shen Peichuan ordered his subordinates.

He then returned to Zong Jinghao's side. "What if it really is Zhuang Zijin..."

Shen Peichuan trailed off. If it was really Zhuang Zijin who had murdered Lin Guoan, then she would be charged with murder. *How is Lin Xinyan going to take this?*

"Don't let this news get out." Now was not the worst yet, as there was no evidence to prove that Zhuang Zijin was the one who had murdered Lin Guoan.

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All they could do now was to hide this murder from Lin Xinyan first until everything was confirmed.

“Do inform me of any progress.” Zong Jinghao checked the time. “I’ve got to leave now.”

“Alright.”

When they reached the door, Zong Jinghao paused in his stride.

“Since you’re all alone, come and join us for the reunion dinner.”

Shen Peichuan was not a local and his family was not in B City with him. Even in the past, he had hardly spent New Year’s Eve with his own family and would often gather with Zong Jinghao and Su Zhan instead. But this year, Su Zhan was married, and Zong Jinghao had to spend the new year with his kids. With the two of them being unable to gather outside, the still single Shen Peichuan was now lonelier than ever.

“Sure.”

Shen Peichuan smiled. “I thought that the both of you had forgotten about me after getting married.”

Zong Jinghao reminded him. “Don’t spill the tea.”

“I know that.”

With that, Zong Jinghao turned around and walked out of the villa. It was snowing heavily now, and his grey coat danced, in the icy cold wind as a small flake of snow hung on his hair. Taking out his car key, Zong Jinghao unlocked his car and climbed inside immediately.

He then rolled down his car window and gazed at the villa. When the villa was almost covered in snow, only then did he retract his gaze, as he soon drove away.

When he arrived home, Zong Jinghao could see the two red lanterns hanging on the eaves, which shone brightly through the falling snow.

He was then greeted by the sight of his children hanging up the Chinese New Year decorations. It was their first time spending the New Year with a complete family, hence they were very excited and had fun decorating the household.

Staying close to them were Zong Qifeng and Cheng Yuxiu, who were afraid that the children would fall down and hurt themselves.

Aunt Yu came over to take his coat.

“Where’s Xinyan?” Zong Jinghao asked.

“In the room,” Aunt Yu answered.

“She slept for the whole afternoon?” Zong Jinghao asked again.

Aunt Yu shook her head. “We went shopping just now,” she bragged.

“She had even bought me a new coat. I have never met such a kind-hearted girl, throughout my entire life.” Aunt Yu choked out as she spoke.

She was never married, hence she had no children of her own. Zong Jinghao was nice to her and had even given her a lot of money for her expenses, but no one else had ever thought of buying something for her.

Zong Jinghao patted her shoulders. "I'll go up and check on her."

"Go then," Aunt Yu uttered with a grin.

Upstairs, Lin Xinyan sat by the window with her pillow, as she stared at the falling snow outside.

She was so engrossed in the view that she didn't hear the room door opening behind her.

"What are you thinking about?" Zong Jinghao came over and placed his hands on her shoulders.

Lin Xinyan turned around at his words. Zong Jinghao could see that her eyes were red, and he stroked her face endearingly. "Why?"

"I miss my mother." Lin Xinyan wrapped her arms around his waist. She had actually wanted to visit her mother at the Lin Residence, but she was scared she would quarrel with her mother again.

They had always spent the New Year together. This year was the first time that she did not spend it with Zhuang Zijin, and Lin Xinyan felt really upset about that.

"Shall we invite her over?" Zong Jinghao asked cautiously.

Nonetheless, Lin Xinyan shook her head. "No need for that; I'm just scared that we'll quarrel again. I just don't understand why she would remarry a selfish man like Lin Guoan. She's the one who should know better."

“Don’t waste your energy thinking about sad things then. You should change now; we’re going out for the reunion dinner soon.” Zong Jinghao tried to distract her.

“Oh, yes! I’ve bought you a new suit. Come and try it on.” Lin Xinyan let go of Zong Jinghao and went to her shopping bags in her slippers. She then opened the sealed bag and took out the suit. “I think that it will look good on you, so I bought it.”

Zong Jinghao’s clothes were all custom-made overseas. He didn’t have to shop for clothes, as the boutique had records of his size and would send him his clothes for different seasons all year round.

Lin Xinyan returned in excitement. “Can you try it now?”

Zong Jinghao hummed in delight.

Lin Xinyan removed his clothes and helped him to put on his suit; it fitted him perfectly. She didn’t know his size, truthfully. However, since she was a fashion designer, Lin Xinyan had an acute sense of a person’s physical size. She only needed to know the person’s height and his approximate weight to predict which clothing size would fit him the best.

Lin Xinyan fixed the collar and flattened the wrinkles on his suit with a pouty face. “I haven’t even bought myself such an expensive piece of clothing before.”

In the old days, all she ever had in mind was to save as much money as possible to spend on her kids. This was the first time that she had actually spent so much in one go, and it was not on her kids, but rather, on her husband instead.

Zong Jinghao chuckled. “Oh. Does that mean that you love me more than you love yourself?”

So, she had willingly spent her money on me, even when she has always been reluctant to spend for herself?

Lin Xinyan pouted further. "I've regretted it now. I shall return this tomorrow."

Zong Jinghao felt speechless at her words.

"No, you can't."

Zong Jinghao liked the suit; not because it was expensive, but because it was chosen by Lin Xinyan. He would wear anything that she had bought for him, even if it were a cheap piece of clothing that she had bought from a roadside stall.

Lin Xinyan took off his suit and placed it back in its shopping bag. "Well, since you won't let me, there's no use returning it then even if I want to."

A cunning glint flashed in his eyes as he raised his brows. "Oh? You mean you still regret buying it?"

"Yeah... Wait... No no no!" Lin Xinyan changed her words the moment she saw his cunning smile.

"Too late!" Before she could finish her words, Zong Jinghao had already pulled her into his arms. "Stop being naughty!" Lin Xinyan pushed him in rejection.

"Since when have I been naughty? Hmm?" Zong Jinghao rubbed his lips on her cheeks.

Lin Xinyan changed her attitude quickly. "Fine, I don't regret it. I'll buy anything for you as long as you like it, okay?"

Unfortunately, I will go bankrupt to suit his expensive taste, though.

"Good wifey." Zong Jinghao kissed her cheeks. "Let's go down then."

Knock! Knock!

Aunt Yu knocked on their door. “Young Master, Young Mistress. It’s time to go.”

“Alright,” Zong Jinghao answered. He soon released his hold on Lin Xinyan and smoothed her ruffled hair while enjoying the sensation of her smooth strands passing through his fingers. Her waist-length hair was never permed before, hence it shone healthily as it flowed past her shoulders.

“Don’t keep them waiting,” Lin Xinyan uttered.

By the time they reached downstairs, Shen Peichuan had already arrived at their house. He had played around with the twins before, so he was rather familiar with them. Lin Ruixi was the most excited to see him, as she dragged him around. “We have lots of fireworks! Do you want to play with us?”

Shen Peichuan stroked his chin in contemplation. “Fireworks... Is that fun?”

Lin Ruixi answered innocently, “Yes, of course!” She gestured with her hands. “It’s something that shoots up in the sky and explodes loudly into a huge colorful flower! It’s very beautiful to watch!”

Beside her, Lin Xichen could not help but cover his eyes in embarrassment. “Do you think that Uncle Shen really doesn’t know about fireworks? He’s merely making a fool out of you,” Lin Xichen informed his sister.

However, Lin Ruixi blinked her eyes innocently. “Making a fool out of me? How is he doing that?”

Lin Xichen smacked his forehead at his sister’s silliness.

Suddenly, Lin Ruixi dashed towards her mother and pleaded cutely, “Mommy! I’m so hungry!”

“Alright, then let’s go now. The restaurant has called and said that they are ready.” Cheng Yuxiu handed Zong Qifeng his coat. “Wear this.”

Zong Jinghao extended his arms to carry his daughter, who was hanging onto Lin Xinyan's leg.

Nevertheless, for some reason, Lin Ruixi insisted on wanting her mother to carry her. "I want mommy to carry me."

"No, you can't," Zong Jinghao refused to oblige to her demand.

"Why?" Lin Ruixi retorted unhappily.

Zong Jinghao eyed Lin Xinyan worriedly. "See, your mother is so skinny now. She doesn't have the strength to carry you."

"She can! She could carry both me and Xichen at the same time, previously!" Lin Ruixi retorted.

You don't know mommy as well as I do. The little girl thought internally.

"Your mommy is injured now, so she cannot carry you," Aunt Yu uttered, upon recalling the bruise on Lin Xinyan's waist. "There are no anti-slip mats in your bathroom, am I right?"

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Although Aunt Yu was never married herself, she knew about love marks on the bodies of a loving couple. The only thing that she wasn't aware of, was that some love-making sessions could be aggressive enough to leave bruises on the body.

Everyone shifted their gazes to Lin Xinyan, including Zong Jinghao. "You're injured? Where did you injure yourself?"

Before Lin Xinyan could speak, Aunt Yu replied on her behalf, "She had slipped in the shower, and there's a huge bruise on her waist. I saw it when her sweater rolled up during lunchtime. If I didn't notice that, I'm sure that she wouldn't have mentioned it."

"Should we send you to the hospital then?" Cheng Yuxiu asked in concern.

"No, There's no need for that. I'm fine." Lin Xinyan struggled to maintain a casual tone as she spoke.

She was so embarrassed now that she had just wanted to dig a hole and hide in it.

On the other hand, Zong Jinghao sank in deep thought. *She had slipped last night?*

Why didn't I notice that?

"Let's go! We're going to be late!" Lin Xinyan tried to divert their attention as she helped Lin Xichen into his coat.

Zong Jinghao landed his gaze on her waist and his lashes flickered in understanding.

Cheng Yuxiu was still worried as she whispered beside Lin Xinyan. “Are you sure that you’re alright?”

“Yes, I’m really fine,” Lin Xinyan answered, without lifting her head while tying her son’s shoelace.

Cheng Yuxiu could see that Lin Xinyan did not want to continue the topic.

However, Aunt Yu didn’t catch Lin Xinyan’s obvious avoidance and asked once again, “There are no anti-slip mats for the bathroom upstairs, right? If we don’t install them, it’s easy to slip and fall.”

“We did, actually,” Cheng Yuxiu replied. In fact, they had not only had anti-slip mats. The tiles in the bathroom floor were also made of anti-slip materials of high quality, so it shouldn’t have been possible to slip in the first place. Lin Xinyan’s fall might have merely been an accident.

Cheng Yuxiu did not think of other possibilities when she responded as such.

Currently, Aunt Yu was confused. *Hmm? If there are anti-slip mats, then how did our young mistress slip in the bathroom?*

“Alright, let’s go,” Zong Qifeng called out.

Everyone put on their coats and headed out of the house. The wind was blowing strongly, as sounds of their crunchy footsteps in the snow joined in, with the whooshing sounds of the wind.

Lin Ruixi finally did not insist on making Lin Xinyan carry her and stayed obediently in Zong Jinghao’s arms.

Perhaps it was due to the reflection of the pristine white snow, their surroundings still appeared pretty bright, despite the night’s darkness.

The cars left the villa one by one.

The snow-covered road was now printed with crisscrossing tire tracks.

The restaurant they were heading to was booked by Zong Qifeng, as it had a private room that could host twenty people. Back to the times when Zong Jinghao did not return to celebrate the New Year, all the maids and drivers would often join the Zong family household for the reunion dinner, as though they were from the same family.

That would make the dinner more cheerful, with so many people to celebrate together.

Compared to the past few years, Zong Qifeng was the happiest that he had ever been this year. He could hardly remember how long had it been since he had last spent the New Year's Eve with Zong Jinghao.

When everyone took their seats, the waiter came over and asked to serve the dishes.

Before Zong Qifeng could answer him, Lin Ruixi replied impatiently, "Please serve the dishes. I'm hungry!"

The waiter smiled but still turned to Zong Qifeng for confirmation.

"Listen to my granddaughter then," Zong Qifeng confirmed with a wave of his hand.

"Alright," the waiter answered and retreated from the room. A while later, a row of waiters started to serve the delicious dishes.

Lin Ruixi salivated at the delicious food before her. "Wow! It smells so good! I want to eat it now!"

She couldn't wait to taste the food now.

"Before we start eating, I have a few words to say," Zong Qifeng suddenly spoke and gestured for Cheng Yuxiu to take something out, that he had prepared beforehand.

"For the past six years, I didn't know that I was already blessed with a pair of grandchildren, and I feel extremely guilty for not giving them the greatest care that they had deserved. I would like to express my gratitude to Lin Xinyan, who has given birth to them and has raised them well for the past few years."

Zong Qifeng gestured for the waiter to fill their glasses. The waiter immediately caught his meaning and filled Lin Xinyan's glass with wine.

"For the first toast, I would like to direct it to Xinyan." Zong Qifeng raised his glass.

Surprised by the gesture, Lin Xinyan immediately stood up with both hands on her glass. "Oh, please don't say such things. I'm the one who has willingly given birth to my children, raising them myself, and I'm not complaining about that. I'm the junior here; it is only polite for me to toast you and not the other way round."

Lin Xinyan toasted him and downed her champagne in one go, which burnt her throat as the hard liquor went down her esophagus.

"I'm not good at drinking," Lin Xinyan uttered while covering her mouth.

"Eat something to clear off the burn." Zong Jinghao filled her bowl with food.

Zong Qifeng gestured for her to sit down to which Lin Xinyan complied.

She then popped the food that Zong Jinghao had given her into her mouth and munched on it silently.

Zong Qifeng's mood lifted significantly at the sight. He was very happy with this daughter-in-law of his, as she was the one who had brought Zong Jinghao home and had given birth to his adorable grandchildren.

He then took the two folders that his wife had taken out for him. "These two folders contain my shares in my company. I've divided them into half; one is for Xichen, and the other half is for Ruixi."

Although he had retired and Zong Jinghao was now the one in charge of his company, Zong Qifeng still held a significant amount of shares, which he had now intended to pass on to the twins.

Lin Xinyan stood up once again. "They are still so young! They can't accept such a grand gift from you."

Nevertheless, Zong Qifeng was firm in his decision. "I've signed the documents already. I know that they are still too young to manage it, so I'm entrusting you to manage it for them."

Zong Qifeng handed the folders to Lin Xinyan, but she dared not take them from him. "This..."

"Why? Is this too little?" Zong Qifeng pretended to be upset. This was half of Wanyue's shares, and yet, she was not in the least bit moved by it.

Zong Qifeng nodded internally. He knew that Zong Jinghao's wife had to be a trustworthy woman who could withstand all sorts of temptations for him to not worry about his son.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, the kids are still young and they don't need any of this. I understand your intention and love behind this gift, but this is too important a gift for me to accept on their behalf." Lin Xinyan still dared not accept the folders. *That was half of Wanyue in it!*

If she accepted on the twin's behalf, then half of Wanyue would be theirs now. Although the shares were under their name, the twins probably had no idea what it had actually meant to them, as they were only six. As their parent and guardian, Lin Xinyan had the duty of managing the shares for them. That meant that she would be indirectly holding half of Wanyue's shares in her hands.

That was precisely the reason why she couldn't accept the shares.

However, if the shares were given to the twins when they were adults, of course, she would not stop them. After all, they were descendants of the Zong family.

Seeing how she dared not accept the shares, Zong Jinghao took the folders on her behalf instead. He knew very well that there were not many lines of descendants in the family. For Zong Qifeng's generation, he only had an older brother who had died in his teenage years. Zong Qifeng's father also only had a younger brother, namely Zong Qifeng's uncle. He did badly in the business realm, as two of the company's branches had gone bankrupt in his hands.

Knowing that he was not a business person, Zong Qifeng's uncle had since then decided to stop his business endeavors as he resorted to becoming a mere shareholder of Wanyue, with no administrative power.

Later on, he had a son, which was Zong Qifeng's cousin. By right, he was entitled to half of Wanyue's shares as well, but he had happened to be sterile. He was born with necrostermia, a condition in which he had a low percentage of living sperms and a high percentage of immotile dead sperms.

The aforementioned cousin had spent a lot of money to treat his illness but it was to no avail. He was still alive; only a few years younger than Zong Qifeng, yet he was a withdrawn man who didn't like to socialize because of his sterility and he was never in contact with Zong Qifeng at all.

This cousin of Zong Qifeng's still held twenty percent of the shares, while Zong Qifeng himself held fifty.

As the only male descendant of the family, Zong Jinghao himself held the remaining thirty percent of the shares.

The twenty percent with Zong Qifeng's cousin was insignificant to the family. It only served to provide his cousin the yearly earnings of the company, in which twenty percent of the earnings would be banked into his account.

Although he had no children of his own, he was still lucky enough to live a rich and luxurious life, especially during his young days. He might not be young anymore, but he still could afford to enjoy the fun that this world had to offer, as he was never short of money for that.

Zong Jinghao filled Lin Xinyan's plate with food again. "Just take it."

"Aren't you scared that I will kick you away from your position?" Lin Xinyan muttered.

Her voice was soft, but Zong Jinghao had heard it, anyway. He leaned in, closer to her and whispered in her ears, "I don't mind that. I can give it to you if you'd like."

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Lin Xinyan's face flushed crimson.

Surely, she could deprive Zong Jinghao of his position if she wanted to. After all, she had fifty percent of the shares in her hands.

On the other hand, Cheng Yuxiu had also prepared gifts for the children. Unlike Zong Qifeng, it wasn't money but a token from the heart.

She had gone to South China Temple in person to ask for an amulet with the hope that the children would grow up safely and healthily.

The amulets were in a small yellow silk bag, embroidered with Buddhism-related motifs. Cheng Yuxiu brought them forward and hung them on their necks.

It wasn't that she was a superstitious person, but it would be better to believe in something than nothing at all.

"Today is New Year's Eve, and I can't just come empty-handed." Shen Peichuan had also prepared a gift for the children – a Nephrite jade pendant. "I don't know much about jade, but I was told that it'd be good to wear this when I bought them. Men should wear it in the shape of the Guanyin statue, while it should be the Buddha for women, although I don't really understand what it means."

He gave the pendant with the Guanyin statue to Lin Xichen and the one with the Maitreya Buddha to Lin Ruixi. The little girl opened the red velvet box to see the beautifully carved Maitreya Buddha inside grinning pleasantly while holding the Buddhist prayer beads.

"Thank you, Uncle Shen. I love it," the little girl beamed while stroking the pendant.

Shen Peichuan sighed in relief. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

He had been feeling very uneasy since the day he purchased the pair of jade pendants. Gifting was a matter of catering to someone else's liking, but getting them a plush toy didn't seem right for this occasion.

"Thank you, Uncle Shen. I love it too," Lin Xichen chimed in politely. Growing up abroad, he didn't understand the Buddhist culture back home so he asked, "Men should wear it in the shape of the Guanyin statue, while it should be the Buddha for women. Is it because the Guanyin is a female and the Buddha is a male?"

There was a moment of silence at the table.

No one had expected Lin Xichen to ask such a question.

"That's not how you interpret it, and you can't just say that." Lin Xinyan patted her son's head. "It's not very respectful."

"It's all right. He's just a kid." Zong Qifeng waved his hand. "Let's eat."

Zong Jinghao had a couple of drinks with Shen Peichuan to celebrate the occasion.

He thought it didn't matter if he drank himself unconscious since the drivers were around.

Outside, fireworks were on display.

Lin Ruixi inhaled her food and finished the bowl of soup in one gulp, earning a frown from Lin Xinyan. "Slow down. Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I wanna play with fireworks," the little girl said hurriedly, her voice muffled as she shoved another mouthful of food into her mouth.

Lin Xinyan stroked her hair lovingly. “Still, there’s no need to rush. There are so many of us who haven’t finished our food yet. It’s not like you can go out on your own, right?”

Upon consideration that it wouldn’t be fun to play alone outside, the little girl jumped off from her chair and urged, “Then hurry up! I wanna play outside. Don’t keep me waiting.”

Amused, Shen Peichuan said, “There are so many dishes. It’ll take at least twenty minutes for me to finish them.”

The little girl blinked. “Then just finish this plate of fish in front of you.”

“Oh, no, I need to fill myself up,” Shen Peichuan said, grabbing a crab roe bun. “Besides, I don’t like to eat fish.”

“You’ll get fat if you eat too much,” Lin Ruixi piped. “And a fatty can never find a girlfriend. Look at Uncle Su doing so well with Aunt Qin Ya. Nobody will want to go out with a fatty.”

Everyone at the table roared with laughter.

“I’m done,” Shen Peichuan said, putting down his chopsticks.

She’s right. I’ll never find a girlfriend at this rate.

“Eat up, Uncle Shen,” Lin Xichen piped up as he refilled Shen Peichuan’s plate.

“You’re the best, Xi,” Shen Peichuan said, patting Lin Xichen’s head.

“Even if you’re not fat, you can never find a girlfriend,” Lin Xichen said, putting a piece of braised pork in his mouth. “You might as well eat, Uncle Shen.”

Shen Peichuan was rendered speechless at the sudden verbal attack.

The reunion dinner ended with joyful laughter. After leaving the restaurant, they arrived at a vast space where Lin Ruixi could set off fireworks.

At that moment, all sorts of fireworks were readied in the trunk, and the little girl couldn't get any more excited.

Shen Peichuan first ignited her two sticks of fireworks, known as Little Stars. The name was such because it resembled a star when it ignited.

She gave Lin Xinyan a stick and said, "Mommy, mommy, this is for you."

Lin Xinyan bent over to accept it, and the little girl dashed off in her snow boots.

Zong Jinghao stood next to her. In the distance, Shen Peichuan was setting off fireworks with the kids.

"This is their first time celebrating at home. We weren't allowed to set off fireworks when we were abroad." Lin Xinyan's lips quirked up into a faint smile, watching as the kids hopping around happily.

"Are you happy?" Zong Jinghao asked, draping an arm around her shoulder.

"I am, but it's not perfect," Lin Xinyan answered. It was her first Chinese New Year without Zhuang Zijin. She felt a little disappointed because it wasn't a perfect reunion, especially since she had just reunited with the children's father this year.

Sensing her dampened mood, Zong Jinghao buried his head inside her coat. "When did you fall down? How come I don't know? Here, let me take a look," he said, reaching inside her coat to lift her sweater.

Lin Xinyan pushed him away in shock. Not knowing if she was too strong or if Zong Jinghao did it on purpose or if it was because his feet slipped, his body leaned back the moment she pushed him. In just a split second, he fell over while taking hold of her hand and pulling her down together.

“Ah!” Lin Xinyan shrieked reflexively, but she shut her mouth immediately in fear of alarming Shen Peichuan and the kids.

Zong Jinghao landed on his back first, and with his coat opened, Lin Xinyan fell on his chest.

Lin Xinyan tried to stand up, but the man yanked her arm, causing her to topple over again. Pressing her head with one hand while fondling the back of her waist through her sweater with the other, he lifted his head slightly and captured her lips with his.

Her long hair cascaded down, covering both of their faces. His kiss was deep, and his body was burning up despite the cold weather.

Lin Xinyan struggled to break free from his arms.

“Don’t move,” the man said, loosening his grip. “I’ll be gentle.”

Just then, with a deafening roar, fireworks burst through the dreary and hazy night, making the sky a kaleidoscope of colors.

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Lin Xinyan ran off in the rainbow of starlight. The past year had been a remarkable year with many happenings, and each of them was beyond her expectations. It might have been a lucky year or a lousy year, but one thing for sure, it had been a year full of surprises.

She stood in the whirling snow, holding the hands of her two children, looking up at the blaze of colors bursting in the sky.

Zong Jinghao, on the other hand, stood watching them from not far away.

This year had no doubt been a surprise to him as well.

Chinese New Year's Eve was all about staying up late. After having a fun time outside, they were greeted by a whiff of warm air as they pushed the door open. Zong Qifeng and Cheng Yuxiu were sitting on the couch in the living room, watching the Spring Festival Gala on TV while Aunt Yu and another maid had prepared a table of fruits.

The two children had probably stayed too long outside and digested their dinner because they started munching again while watching TV as soon as they entered inside.

At twelve o'clock, the Chinese New Year bell tolled.

The kids were so excited that they refused to sleep, and they ended up spending the first day of Chinese New Year in bed.

On the second day, it was Lin Xinyan's birthday.

Lin Xichen had bought her a huge cake.

After giving birth to two children, Lin Xinyan never celebrated her birthday. She understood that it was the day to celebrate her mother instead who had undergone excruciating pain in giving birth to her.

Therefore, every year on her birthday in the past, she wouldn't buy a cake nor remind anyone, but she would buy a gift for her mother.

The huge cake Lin Xichen bought had eight layers, and sitting on top of the cake was a doll in a wedding dress.

It didn't look like a birthday cake but a wedding cake.

"Do you like it?" Lin Xichen asked.

Lin Xinyan nodded. "Yeah, but it's a little weird."

"You mean her?" Lin Xichen pointed at the doll.

Before Lin Xinyan could say yes, he went on explaining, "You're a fashion designer. You've designed many wedding dresses for others, but you've never worn one yourself. I want you to wear it once too, and I think you'll look best in it."

Lin Xichen had heard it from Zhuang Zijin that Lin Xinyan had never worn a wedding dress.

There was once when Lin Xinyan had designed a beautiful wedding dress for a customer, but Lin Xichen had said, "Mommy would definitely look better in it."

Zhuang Zijin, at the side, had a gloomy expression on her face.

After making a few discreet inquiries, it dawned on Lin Xichen that Lin Xinyan had never worn a wedding dress despite being married, and he had despised Zong Jinghao for that.

At this moment, Zong Jinghao was on the phone with Shen Peichuan. The results reported that Lin Guoan didn't die a sudden death but was poisoned, having consumed nitrites.

"According to the maid's confession, Zhuang Zijin had been preparing three meals a day for Lin Guoan. She had the opportunity and the motive to poison him. Zhuang Zijin has been officially detained and is currently waiting to be investigated."

Zong Jinghao shifted his gaze toward the living room.

"I can't condone such things as a criminal police officer. But of course, I know who she is, so I can try to make it a case of manslaughter. I won't let her suffer too. Lin Guoan was surely at fault, but what she did has violated the law. As for Xinyan..."

There was a big difference between intentional homicide and manslaughter.

"Just keep it from her for now." He didn't know how to approach Lin Xinyan with this news. More so, he didn't want to disturb nor destroy their happy moments, seeing as they were having a good time.

"Got it," Shen Peichuan said.

Zong Jinghao hung up the phone and cast his gaze on the doll on the cake as he walked over.

"Daddy."

"Hmm?"

Lin Ruixi beckoned him over. "Bend down. I want to tell you a secret."

Zong Jinghao did as he was told, leaning his ear toward her.

“The secret is...”

She stretched out her hand from behind her back and smacked Zong Jinghao’s face with cake.

“The secret is that I want to smear your face with cake. Hehe...”

Zong Jinghao froze for a moment before picking her up. “Why, you little...”

The little girl giggled.

“Aren’t you getting mommy something?” Lin Xichen asked deliberately, thinking that Zong Jinghao didn’t know about Lin Xinyan’s birthday.

Lin Xinyan was somewhat looking forward to it upon hearing her son’s words.

Zong Jinghao pondered for a while before answering, “I didn’t prepare anything.”

Lin Xichen’s face instantly fell. “Hmph! Don’t think that my mommy belongs to you now.”

Lin Xinyan was a little disappointed as well. But considering that a man like him would probably never prepare a gift for someone, she thought it would be surprising if he did.

Zong Jinghao looked at Lin Xinyan and chuckled, “Who would dare to take her away from me?”

I’m gonna skin that person alive if he does.

“All right, all right,” Lin Xinyan piped up and brought the kids who were covered in cream to wash up.

“But I still want to eat,” Lin Ruixi whined.

“I’ll clean her up later,” Aunt Yu said.

Seeing that there was no other choice, Lin Xinyan went up to change her own clothes instead. There was no one in the room. She found some clean clothes from the cupboard, then took off the cream-stained clothes she was wearing, not at all realizing that Zong Jinghao was on her heels.

Right then, Zong Jinghao pushed open the door. He saw her topless and that the bruise around her waist hadn’t completely faded. And because her skin was so fair, the patch was especially noticeable. Very quickly, she put on a sweater, blocking his view.

Lin Xinyan adjusted the collar and turned around to see Zong Jinghao standing at the door. “When did you come up?”

“I came up when you did,” he replied nonchalantly.

Lin Xinyan frowned.

Does that mean he saw me when I was changing? I mean, yes, he has seen me naked, but still...

Zong Jinghao walked in and closed the door. Looking at her slightly flushed face, he ran his fingers through her hair and said, “Are you blushing?”

“No.” Lin Xinyan looked away.

“Oh, don’t be shy. I’ve seen every part of you.”

Why, you!

Lin Xinyan shot daggers at him. “Can you be any more shameless?”

“Shh, I won’t let you suffer.” With a stretch of his long arms, he pulled the woman into his embrace and whispered in her ears, “I’ll prove it to you tonight.” No sooner than Lin Xinyan threw a fit, he shoved a blue velvet box into her hands.

“What is this?” She looked down at the simple yet elegant-looking diamond-shaped box.

“Why don’t you open it and have a look?”

Lin Xinyan blinked in confusion. “Is this for me?”

“Mm-hmm...” he uttered seriously.

Lin Xinyan opened the box under Zong Jinghao’s blazing gaze. What laid inside was a huge diamond ring, oval in shape and pink in color.

“The Pink Star?”

“You know this?” Zong Jinghao asked in shock.

“I’ve seen this at the jewelry auction of the century. It was named ‘The Pink Star’ for its shape, color, and its flawless craftsmanship. It was bought by a famous jewelry mogul in 2017 for a whopping seventy-one point two million. How did it end up in your hands?”

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Zong Jinghao stared at Lin Xinyan dumbfoundedly.

“You wanna know how I know so much about it?” Lin Xinyan continued, chuckling. “Actually I was there at the auction back then.”

She didn’t go to buy anything that day but to have a glimpse of the auction’s grand finale.

As a fashion designer, she needed a lot of inspiration.

Zong Jinghao was lost in thoughts. He had seen a figure similar to her at the jewelry auction three years ago. But by the time he had squeezed through the crowd to look for her, she was already nowhere to be seen. He had Guan Jing check the footage from the surveillance camera, but it just so happened that the surveillance system had malfunctioned on that day.

In other words, he wasn’t mistaken that day. It was her.

Lin Xinyan did a double-take. “You were the one who bought that ring?”

How could I forget that Zong Jinghao is a businessman?

Ever since 1947 when De Beers advertised diamonds with their famous slogan – “A Diamond is Forever”, diamonds had become the symbol of love.

To get married, there should be a diamond ring to show that you love a person because “A Diamond is Forever” simply meant that a couple’s marriage would last forever.

Buying a diamond ring for the person you love proved that your love was much more solid than a diamond ring. A stone after giving the value of “love” would become priceless, and at the same time, brought in great wealth to those who hyped it.

Lin Xinyan touched the ring in the box and said, “How evil.”

She wasn’t familiar with Wanyue’s business, and she didn’t know how many businesses Zong Jinghao had developed.

“Are you talking about me?” He hugged her waist from behind. “Why don’t you put it on?”

Lin Xinyan rejected, “I’m afraid I’ll get mugged.”

Not only was it too conspicuous on the hand, but a diamond of that size didn’t really suit her slender fingers.

“Hmm?” His voice echoed from his chest. With his arms tightening around her waist and her back sticking close to his chest, she could clearly hear the sound of his strong and powerful heartbeat.

Zong Jinghao removed the ring from the box and slipped it on her index finger after finding it unfit for her ring finger and middle finger. “Why are your fingers so thin?”

“It’s not that my fingers are too thin,” Lin Xinyan laughed. “The ring just doesn’t suit me.”

After a moment’s silence, Zong Jinghao suggested, “How about I find a craftsman and turn it into a necklace?”

“I don’t want,” she replied, knowing that it would still stand out regardless.

She would usually buy jewelry for herself, but they were mostly on the small and delicate side. As a fashion designer, she knew what suited her best.

He nibbled on her neck and asked, "What don't you want?"

Lin Xinyan's heart fluttered. She bit her lip and said, "I don't want anything."

Zong Jinghao paused, then bit her neck again in a punitive manner, causing Lin Xinyan to grunt in pain.

He had abstained himself from touching her last night because of her excuse of having a backache. Surely, he had overdone it that day, but she had promised to do it with him once a day.

"We have to do it twice today to make up for yesterday," he smirked.

"Zong Jing... Argh!"

The man held her by the waist and flipped her over, taking her by surprise as he pinned her on the bed before she could finish her sentence.

Zong Jinghao grabbed the lower hem of her shirt and pulled it up in an attempt to take it off. "Don't wear such clothes again."

It was a hassle to remove them, and he would prefer those with buttons.

Lin Xinyan's breathing hitched as she gripped the bedsheet beneath her nervously.

Looking at her flushed face, Zong Jinghao pinched her chin and sized her up, teasing, "What's with that face? You looked so ugly."

Lin Xinyan glared at him. "How am I ugly? If I'm ugly, then why are you...." The words "screwing me" got stuck in her throat.

“Well, there’s no turning back now. I’ll have to make do with your ugly face,” he laughed with imperceptible gentleness.

Buzz... Buzz...

Just then, Lin Xinyan’s phone on the table vibrated. She turned around and reached for her phone, but Zong Jinghao was a step ahead.

“I just wanna see who it is,” Lin Xinyan quickly said in case he hung up.

It was an unknown number.

Zong Jinghao didn’t want her to answer her phone at this time. Thus, he simply brushed it off and hung up, only for it to ring again shortly after.

This time, Lin Xinyan was quick to react. Though it was an unsaved number, it wasn’t necessarily a harassment call. She picked up her phone, and a female voice sounded from the other end of the line. “May I speak to Ms. Lin, please?”

“Speaking,” Lin Xinyan said.

“I’m afraid I can’t deliver the clothes you told me to. Do you have the time to drop by the store to pick them up?”

“Why is that?” Lin Xinyan asked.

Did I give her the wrong address?

“That villa has been sealed off. I heard someone died in there, and the police have intervened...”

Colors left Lin Xinyan’s face, and she could no longer hear the sales assistant’s voice.

Someone died? Who could it be?

It couldn't be mum?

“What’s wrong?” Zong Jinghao cupped her bloodless face worriedly.

“M-My mom could be in trouble,” she said, her voice quavering with emotions and tears brimming in her eyes.

Zong Jinghao’s heart sank. He grabbed the phone from her hand at once, eager to know who the caller was.

But at this moment, Lin Xinyan got up like a raving madwoman and rushed out, wanting to look for Zhuang Zijin.

Zong Jinghao hurriedly grabbed a coat from the clothes rack and chased after her.

He took hold of her hand and said, “I’ll take you there. Put on some clothes first.”

“No, it can’t wait. I told her that there’s no way Lin Guoan will turn over a new leaf. Why didn’t she listen to me? If something happens to her, I swear Lin Guoan won’t get away with it!”

Well, I guess I can't hide it anymore.

“Get in the car. I’ll take you there.” Zong Jinghao zipped up her down jacket.

Lin Xinyan nodded and quickly got in the car.

Immediately, Zong Jinghao took out his phone and sent a text message to Shen Peichuan, telling him to make the necessary arrangements as he would be taking Lin Xinyan over.

Upon getting into the car and revving up the engine, Zong Jinghao asked, “Who was it on the phone just now?”

“The clothing store. I bought my mom a down jacket at the mall that day. I was afraid we would get into an argument if she saw me, so I had the store deliver it. Until that call... saying that they can’t send it over because...” Lin Xinyan trailed off in a choked voice. “What should I do? What should I do...”

Zhuang Zijin was a weakling in her eyes, so instinct told her that Zhuang Zijin could be the victim.

Hearing that, Zong Jinghao held her hands. “It’s not Zhuang Zijin who’s in trouble.”

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Lin Xinyan was stunned. “H-How did you know?”

But soon after that, she figured it out. Narrowing her eyes, she asked, “Did you know it a long time ago? It’s just that you didn’t tell me, right?”

Zong Jinghao tightened his grip on her hand. “Now don’t start to imagine things-”

“I am not. If you didn’t know it already, you wouldn’t have told me just now.” After the initial nervousness, clarity began to set in.

There must be a reason that Zong Jinghao hid it from me.

A thought popped into her head. Could it be that it was Lin Guoan who has died and not Zhuang Zijin? But it must have something to do with Zhuang Zijin... I mean, that’s why Zong Jinghao was hiding it from me, right?

It suddenly dawned on her that Zhuang Zijin had had a hidden agenda for insisting on remarrying Lin Guoan.

Thinking of this, she began to regret not stopping Zhuang Zijin at the time.

“When did it happen?” She had her eyes cast down while asking.

After a long silence, Zong Jinghao replied, “It was before Lunar New Year.”

In other words, it was just a few days ago.

“Is there any evidence?” asked Lin Xinyan.

“COD for Lin Guoan was because of nitrite overdose. And according to the maids, your mother has been cooking for him every day.”

She parted her lips but could not say anything. With a lump in her throat, she was annoyed that she didn't notice what Zhuang Zijin was up to earlier.

In the cold wind, Zong Jinghao parked the car in the compound of the Criminal Investigative Division of B City.

Shen Peichuan, who was waiting at the entrance, took a few steps forward when he saw their car.

Soon after that, Lin Xinyan got out of the car, but hesitation stopped her in her tracks when she reached the entrance.

Zong Jinghao then came up to her to wrap his arms around her and comforted, “With Peichuan here, she won't suffer. Don't worry.”

Lin Xinyan nodded her head.

“Let's go,” urged Shen Peichuan.

After entering the hall, Shen Peichuan led them to his office as he arranged for Zhuang Zijin to be brought over here.

“I'd like to talk to her in private,” Lin Xinyan said.

Shen Peichuan looked up at Zong Jinghao to get his consent before replying, “Come on in. I'll bring her over later. No one will come here today.”

He was implying that she could say anything to Zhuang Zijin as no one would eavesdrop on their conversation.

Lin Xinyan nodded her head and walked into the office. The place was all cleaned up, so it was very tidy.

Sitting on the sofa, Lin Xinyan was not in the mood to think about other things. She just wanted to see Zhuang Zijin quickly and to ask her if things were like what she had thought.

Soon, the office door was pushed open. She immediately tensed up and straightened her back, but she did not dare to turn around.

Zhuang Zijin was also a little hesitant when she walked inside. Meanwhile, Shen Peichuan poured two glasses of water on the table and said in a low voice, "Take your time."

They could stay however long they wanted.

Lin Xinyan responded in acknowledgment while Shen Peichuan exited the room and closed the door behind him.

After a while, Zhuang Zijin, who was standing behind her, broke the silence and called her, "Yan."

Lin Xinyan clenched her fists, but said nothing.

Sighing, Zhuang Zijin walked over.

Lin Xinyan looked up and saw that Zhuang Zijin had become a lot thinner. It was probably all thanks to Shen Peichuan that she was not handcuffed and looked the same, like how she always was.

She studied Zhuang Zijin for a long time.

When she was on the way here, she had a lot of things to say, to question, and to complain, but the moment she saw her, she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

It was probably because she did not know where to start.

Zhuang Zijin sat down across from her and apologized, "I'm sorry."

It was all because of her. She only thought of herself and did not have Lin Xinyan's interests at heart.

All the emotions that Lin Xinyan had been holding in came flooding out at this moment as she sneered. "What's the use of apologizing? Is it worth it to get yourself in trouble in such a way—"

"Of course, it is," Zhuang Zijin interrupted her. "He's responsible for my son's death. What I did was just sending him to meet my son. Am I wrong?"

Lin Xinyan looked at her in astonishment.

"In fact, since we came back and met him by accident, I've started to get in touch with him. I know that he was interested in the relationship between you and Zong Jinghao, and wanted to seek a connection with you. So I took this opportunity to get close to him. He thought I was still the same old me who would get cheated easily. But, who knew, he was the fool!" Zhuang Zijin got a little agitated when she said this.

She could still remember how much pain Lin Guoan had suffered before the poison ended his life. Standing by the bed, she watched him put up his deathbed struggle, but no one could save him.

"It's you?" Lin Guoan bellowed with his bloodshot eyes.

“It’s me.” She looked at him condescendingly, her voice and expression void of warmth, appearing even colder than the snow outside. “Where did you get the confidence to believe that I can still forgive you abandoned and hurt me?”

“So you’ve come to seek revenge.” Lin Guoan’s heart raced. His breathing became shallow as if he would breathe his last in the next second.

Zhuang Zijin laughed. “A person like you doesn’t deserve to live. If it weren’t for you, Yan wouldn’t have to follow me and suffer so much. I feel sorry for my brother as I didn’t take good care of her. I feel sorry for my son, who had been living on borrowed time since birth, but his life was eventually taken away. It’s all your fault, Lin Guoan! If you hadn’t sent me away, Yan wouldn’t have to suffer with me, and my son wouldn’t have died. You brought it all upon yourself!”

Lin Guoan widened his eyes in shock. *Son? What son?*

He crawled to the edge of the bed and tugged at the hem of Zhuang Zijin’s top. “Your son?”

“I was pregnant when you sent me away.” Zhuang Zijin paused and looked at Lin Guoan. “But because I had a rough pregnancy, he was born autistic...”

Recalling her son’s death, Zhuang Zijin still felt her heart aching even to this day.

More precisely, she had never forgotten the pain of losing her son.

If it were not for Lin Xinyan, she would not have made it this far.

Lin Guoan opened his mouth, but nothing came out. *I once had a son, but he died?*

When he was sending Zhuang Zijin away, Shen Xiuqing said that she was pregnant with his son, which was why he made up his mind to send Zhuang Zijin away.

However, he did not know that Zhuang Zijin was also pregnant with a son.

At this moment, Lin Guoan regretted his decision back then.

As a man, he wanted a son.

Yet now, Zhuang Zijin told him that he had had a son, who had come to this world and seen a part of this world – unlike the one in Shen Xiuqing’s belly, that was gone even before he was born. But he had no knowledge of it at all.

At this instant, even a cruel man like him was also filled with regret.

Seeing Lin Guoan’s agony, Zhuang Zijin smiled. “Considering that you won’t be alive for long, I will tell you another secret – Yan is not your daughter.”

Lin Guoan widened his eyes. *W-What did she say? Lin Xinyan isn’t my daughter?*

“Y-You betrayed me...”

Zhuang Zijin did not want to explain, just so she could watch him suffer.

“Y-You b-b*tch.” Lin Guoan’s hand suddenly dropped to the side of the bed, as he breathed his last. His eyes were still wide opened as he was unwilling to die in peace.

Zhuang Zijin looked at him with indifference. If her brother hadn’t had a terminal illness and died at a young age, she would not have married Lin Guoan and brought along her family business.

She thought that Lin Guoan would be the right one for her, but to her chagrin, he was not even human.

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“I don’t regret it.” Even now, Zhuang Zijin didn’t think that she was wrong. The fact that Lin Guoan was dead actually brought her some relief.

Lin Xinyan looked at Zhuang Zijin for a long time before finding her voice again. “Have you ever thought that this is against the law? Have you ever thought about me?”

“Yes, I have.” At the time, Zhuang Zijin thought that she would continue to help Lin Xinyan take care of her children if she did not get caught. But if she were caught, she would be punished by law and could no longer help to do so. “You’ll be doing fine even without me. I think Zong Jinghao is pretty good. After all, you gave birth to his kids. So for their sake, he will treat you well.”

Lin Xinyan balled up her fists. “So, you’ve had it all planned out for me, haven’t you?”

“I’m sorry.” Apart from this, Zhuang Zijin did not know what else she could say.

Lin Xinyan had mixed feelings, but she tried her best to hold them in so that she didn’t shed tears in front of Zhuang Zijin. “Two days ago, Xichen and Ruixi said that they missed you. What do you want me to tell them in the future? Do I tell them that their grandmother is a murderer?”

The mention of the word “murderer” caused a change in Zhuang Zijin’s expression.

Only then did Lin Xinyan realize that she had said something wrong, but it was too late to take back what she had said, leaving her vexed with herself.

“Have a great life.” Standing up, Zhuang Zijin walked to the door and put her hand on the doorknob, but she didn’t turn it and just stood there in silence. After a while, she added, “At this point, there’s no more turning back. I promised to take care of you, but I didn’t. I hope you don’t blame me. I’m truly sorry, Yan.”

Lin Xinyan didn’t notice the meaning behind her words at all as she kept beating herself up.

If I had cared more about Zhuang Zijin, I would’ve realized what she was up to, and she wouldn’t have made such a big mistake.

Initially, I had a chance to dissuade her, but now...

Lin Xinyan covered her face and cried. *She will definitely go to jail no matter what sentence she receives.*

She could’ve enjoyed her remaining years, but she ruined her life ahead just because she wanted to avenge Lin Guoan.

Is it worth it, though?

Listening to Lin Xinyan’s hushed cries, Zhuang Zijin felt her heart ache. “Don’t be sad. Since I’ve chosen to do it, I’ve thought about the consequences. What I’ve overlooked are the feelings of you and the kids. Tell them...” Zhuang Zijin choked up, and continued with reddened eyes and a hoarse voice, “Tell them that I’ve gone far away. Don’t bring them here or tell them what I did. After all, I’m not exactly a role model.”

Zhuang Zijin then turned the doorknob and opened the door. “You don’t need to come and see me anymore.”

After that, she walked out quickly, for fear that she would hear Lin Xinyan crying again, and that she would regret her decision if she stayed any longer.

Standing in the corridor, Shen Peichuan and Zong Jinghao looked over at the same time upon hearing the sound of the door opening.

“Could I have a second with you?” Zhuang Zijin looked at Zong Jinghao.

Zong Jinghao pursed his lips and said nothing, but Shen Peichuan understood what he meant, so he said, “I’ll leave you two to it.”

Then, he walked away.

Clasping her hands, Zhuang Zijin walked over and hesitated for a while before she asked, “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Yes, what is it?” Zong Jinghao’s tone of voice was so calm that it was void of emotion.

“Yan has suffered a lot with me. I’ve failed to take good care of her, and now, I’ve even upset her. I feel very sorry and distressed for her. In the future, I’m afraid I can no longer take care of her and the two kids, so I’m counting on you to look after them.”

“They’re my wife and children, so I definitely won’t let anyone hurt them.” It was not a promise, but at this moment, his words were solemn and carried a weight behind them.

“I believe in you.” Zhuang Zijin took out a necklace from her pocket and handed it to Zong Jinghao. “Please give this to her, and tell her that her mother left it for her.”

Yet, Zong Jinghao did not take it.

Seeing that, Zhuang Zijin hurriedly explained, “She’s a little emotional now, so—so...”

Getting what she meant, Zong Jinghao took the necklace from her.

It was a thin platinum necklace without a pendant. With his eyes on the necklace, he carefully pondered what Zhuang Zijin had just said. Feeling that something was wrong, he asked tentatively, "You're leaving this for her?"

Zhuang Zijin was silent for a while before replying, "Yes." She paused and added, "She's still in the room and is not in a very good mood. You should go comfort her."

After that, Zhuang Zijin walked to the entrance to call Shen Peichuan.

However, Shen Peichuan did not take her away immediately, but instead, he turned to look at Zong Jinghao for his opinion.

Zong Jinghao waved his hand.

Taking the hint, Shen Peichuan took the hint and left with Zhuang Zijin.

Standing at the same spot, Zong Jinghao looked down to study the necklace in his hand, still feeling as though there was another meaning to Zhuang Zijin's words.

But he quickly negated his suspicion. *If Zhuang Zijin isn't her mother, who else can it be?*

He felt that he might have overthought this and that Zhuang Zijin merely happened to use the wrong term.

With that, he put the necklace away and walked towards Shen Peichuan's office.

The door was ajar, and a broken, sobbing sound was heard coming from the inside.

It sounded repressed and was filled with unspeakable pain.

The look in his eyes darkened as he opened the door gently and walked in.

Hearing the noise, Lin Xinyan stopped weeping. It was not that she had stopped feeling bad, but she simply didn't want to cry in front of others.

Zong Jinghao walked up to her.

Without looking up, she wiped the tears off her face and said, "Let's go."

Zong Jinghao took her by the arm and pulled her into his arms without saying a word. Stroking her long hair, he said, "Just cry if you want to. You don't need to put on a brave face in front of me."

As soon as he said that, Lin Xinyan buried her head in his chest. "I am angry and sad, not because she is hiding it from me, but because it's not worth it. Ruining her own life for a scumbag isn't worth it at all."

"Perhaps she thinks it is?" Zong Jinghao tried to talk some sense into her, "Let me ask you if something keeps weighing on a person's mind and he keeps brooding over it, will he be relaxed, joyful, and hopeful?"

Lin Xinyan was bereft of speech. She had to admit that Zong Jinghao had a point, but she still could not accept it.

She tugged at Zong Jinghao's collar tightly and asked in a low voice, "If the evidence is conclusive, how long will she get?"

He stroked her back gently to soothe her as he replied, "She won't get a long sentence."

Lin Xinyan was still feeling uneasy, but she had calmed down a lot. With Shen Peichuan's help, she believed that Zhuang Zijin's sentence could be reduced.

“Let’s go back.” Zong Jinghao wrapped his arms around her.

Lin Xinyan leaned into his arms and nodded her head. Then he draped his coat against her shoulders and walked out of the office, where Shen Peichuan was waiting for them.

Shen Peichuan comforted Lin Xinyan by saying, “Don’t worry, Xinyan. I’ll make sure that your mom won’t suffer. Besides, this is an accident, and her sentence will be reduced later, so it won’t be too long.”

As he emphasized the word “accident,” Lin Xinyan instantly understood what he meant.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely.

“Don’t thank me, or I’ll feel I’m being treated as a stranger,” Shen Peichuan replied with a smile.

Chinese New Year had passed, and it was still cold outside. However, the snow had melted, and the sound of water dripping could be heard everywhere.

They drove back to the Zong family’s residence.

Lin Xinyan wiped her face dry and patted her cheek so that she wouldn’t look so pale as she did not want her kids to know that she had cried.

Before she even had time to change into her slippers, Lin Ruixi ran over and wrapped her arms around her leg. Waving the diamond ring in her hand, she asked, “Mommy, mommy, is this for me?”

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Lin Xinyan lowered her head and saw the diamond ring in her daughter's hand.

She was in a hurry earlier, so her things were left on the bed. Lin Ruixi went up to find her, but she saw something gleaming on the bed instead.

She liked this shiny diamond very much, but she didn't know its value, as she simply thought it was something fun to play with.

At that moment, Lin Xinyan didn't know what to do, so she glanced back at Zong Jinghao for his opinion. This was not a normal toy, and she could not make the call.

Besides, how can this be a toy?

However, Zong Jinghao didn't think it was a big deal. Lin Xinyan didn't like it anyway, so he was happy that his daughter liked it.

He stroked his daughter's hair affectionately. "You like it?"

The little girl nodded her head earnestly. "Yes, I like it. It's so shiny. I have never seen such a shiny stone. Daddy, Mommy, where did you find it?"

She wanted to go and find one too herself.

It was so pretty.

After all, girls liked all things pink and shiny.

Lin Xinyan was speechless.

Stone?

She squatted down to be at eye-level with her daughter and patiently taught her, “Ruixi, this is not an ordinary stone that you can find anywhere. It’s very rare, and you can’t just bring it outside. I’ll help you keep it. When you grow up, I will give it to you, okay?”

If this thing were brought outside and was spotted by some greedy people, she might be at risk, and it would not be worth it.

The little girl didn’t quite understand, but she realized that this stone seemed to be quite valuable.

She looked down at the diamond ring, which was really shiny.

She liked it very much.

Seeing that her daughter was reluctant to let her keep it, Lin Xinyan sighed softly and said, “It’s not that I won’t give it to you, but this thing is very valuable. If a bad guy sees it when you bring it outside, he will snatch it away from you, won’t he?”

The little girl seemed to be able to imagine that someone was going to snatch it away from her as she held the ring tightly in her arms.

Her exaggerated reaction amused Lin Xinyan.

Why didn’t I notice that she likes shiny things so much?

“Can you not take it outside, then?” Lin Xinyan knew she could not talk her daughter into giving it to her anymore. Therefore, she was planning to help her keep it when she started to lose interest.

The little girl hesitated, as the possibility that it would be snatched away scared her. If it were snatched away, she would no longer have it.

Still feeling very reluctant, she handed it to Lin Xinyan. “Mommy, you should keep it and give it back to me when I grow up.”

Lin Xinyan pinched her cheek. “What a good girl.”

The little girl grinned, revealing a set of dazzling white teeth.

“Young Master, Young Mistress.” Aunt Yu walked over. “Master wants you to see him at the study.”

When Lin Xinyan heard that, she then asked her daughter to play on her own and turned to look at Zong Jinghao.

As their eyes met, Zong Jinghao replied calmly, “Alright.”

Lin Xinyan was a little nervous. Zong Qifeng must have wanted to meet them because something was going on, but she didn’t know whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Zong Jinghao patted her on the shoulders and said, “I’m with you.”

Only then did she feel more at ease.

When they walked to the door of the study, Zong Jinghao looked up and knocked on the door. After the man inside gave them permission to go in, he opened the door and walked in with Lin Xinyan.

Only Zong Qifeng was in the study, and he was practicing calligraphy. When he saw them coming in, he put down the brush and asked them to sit down.

“The two kids are almost old enough to go to school. What’s your plan?” In fact, Zong Qifeng had been wanting to ask why they were not sent to a kindergarten to familiarize themselves with the learning environment. But when he thought that

there must be a lot of inconveniences in taking care of two children by herself all these years, he did not raise the question.

They were already six years old now and could go to elementary school in the second half of this year. So he thought that they could go to kindergarten to familiarize themselves with the environment.

“I’ve made the arrangements.” Zong Jinghao had thought of it a long time ago and had made the arrangement before the New Year.

Lin Xinyan looked at him. *Why have I never heard about it?*

There was no chance for him to tell her in the past few days. Initially, he wanted to tell her today, but he didn’t have a chance to say it because of what happened to Zhuang Zijin.

“Shengdun?” Zong Qifeng asked.

This kindergarten had the best education and environment. Most importantly, it was invested by Wanyue, and their teachers were relatively trustworthy, so he would feel more comfortable sending two of his grandchildren there.

It was often said that parents treated their grandchildren better than they treated their children, and it seemed to be the case for Zong Qifeng. He was more concerned with his two grandchildren than he was with Zong Jinghao back then.

“Yes,” answered Zong Jinghao.

“From now on, you can let us take care of the kids, while you go about your business,” said Zong Qifeng.

He was aware that Zong Jinghao was busy, while Lin Xinyan had her own career too, so he and Cheng Yuxiu would take over the task of looking after the kids.

Due to the wall Zong Jinghao had put up between him and Cheng Yuxiu, the latter did not show up at the study, for fear that he would turn them down.

In fact, during his stay here, he no longer gave Cheng Yuxiu cold stares like he used to, apart from not talking to her.

He had been reluctant to let go merely because of Wen Xian.

Lin Xinyan was willing to follow their arrangements, as she was not very familiar with the situation in the country. Besides, she had no worries about Zong Jinghao's arrangements.

As everyone was on the same page, the conversation was quite pleasant. After all, they had the same purpose, which was wanting the best for the kids.

After the conversation, Zong Jinghao and Lin Xinyan left the study. When they were about to go upstairs, the doorbell rang.

Aunt Yu went to open the door and saw that Su Zhan was standing wobbly at the door. He did not wear a coat and had just a thin suit on while reeking of alcohol.

She knew him and knew his relationship with Zong Jinghao, so she turned and said, "Young Master, it's Mr. Su. He seems to be drunk."

Zong Jinghao frowned. *Why does he come here after he's drunk?*

"Xinyan, Xinyan..." Su Zhan leaned against the door frame and shouted.

Lin Xinyan walked over and saw him in his drunken stupor.

Meanwhile, Zong Jinghao shot him a look of despise. "Come in."

Aunt Yu helped him sit on the sofa in the living room.

Soon after that, Lin Xinyan went to the kitchen to make a glass of honey water and handed it to him. "Drink some honey water to sober up."

Su Zhan grinned. "Thank you, Xinyan." Taking the glass, he downed the content in one go.

He handed Lin Xinyan the glass. "Can you give me another glass?"

Lin Xinyan took it and went to make him another one. Only this time, he did not finish it.

"So tell me what's the matter?" Lin Xinyan sat down beside Zong Jinghao.

Su Zhan looked at Lin Xinyan grievingly. "You have to help me, Xinyan. Qin Ya doesn't want me anymore."

On New Year's Eve, Qin Ya had even appeared at the ward and counted down with him and the old lady, who was also in a good mood.

But in the past two days, he could not reach Qin Ya, as she refused to see him and even avoided him.

Lin Xinyan frowned. "Are you having a fight?"

She was not worried about Su Zhan, but Qin Ya.

Women in a relationship were more sensitive and vulnerable than usual.

At this point, he had to tell the truth, "You see, I have an ex-girlfriend. She came back, and we met several times..." Then he hurriedly explained, "We only met up and talked. Nothing else. But Qin Ya doesn't believe me and insists on breaking up with me."

Regardless of whether it was right or wrong, she stood her ground and supported Qin Ya.

Su Zhan and Qin Ya are already in a relationship, so why does he still want to see his ex-girlfriend?

“Do you still have feelings for your ex-girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Why did you want to see her, then?”

Facing Lin Xinyan’s tough question, Su Zhan was at a loss for words. After a long silence, he found a suitable explanation. “Well, we are still friends-”

“I can’t help you.” Lin Xinyan interrupted him decisively. After knowing Qin Ya for so many years, she knew what kind of person she was. “She isn’t an unreasonable person, so you must have crossed the line, otherwise, she won’t be so determined to break up with you. Considering that she had promised to marry you, she must have certain expectations. The fact that she could break up with you decisively shows that you must have broken her heart.”

“Yes, it’s my fault.” Su Zhan admitted that he was wrong and shouldn’t meet Liu Feifei without telling Qin Ya. However, he believed that he should be given another chance instead.

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“I know I messed up, Xinyan. Please just help me out.” Su Zhan begged flirtatiously while clinging onto Lin Xinyan’s sleeves. “Have mercy on me and help me talk to Qin Ya. Please?”

Zong Jinghao frowned as he went ahead and pulled Su Zhan away from Lin Xinyan. “Just talk. There’s no need for all this touching!” he exclaimed.

Su Zhan paused.

“Xinyan. If you don’t help me out, I really just might die.” Su Zhan gave Zong Jinghao a glare and dived right onto the couch. “I’m not leaving until I see Qin Ya,” he continued.

Su Zhan was being persistent.

This place was great anyway. It was huge and had spare guest rooms. Not to mention him not needing to worry about food.

“Go ahead,” Zong Jinghao replied and dragged Lin Xinyan upstairs.

She looked at Zong Jinghao with uncertainty. “Are we going to just let him be?” Lin Xinyan asked.

Zong Jinghao kept quiet as he pulled her up the stairs. The issue was not whether she should help him. When it came to relationships, things would get really complicated. Su Zhan should be the one to clear things up with Qin Ya, so he did not want Lin Xinyan caught up in their relationship. If they managed to patch things up, great. But what if something went wrong? Would Lin Xinyan be blamed?

On the other hand, Lin Xinyan could actually tell that Su Zhan was going through a rough time.

But in any case, he should suffer a little in order to understand and cherish this relationship.

“I’m giving Qin Ya a call.” She looked at Zong Jinghao who closed the room door. “I won’t involve myself. I’m just concerned about Qin Ya.”

It was obvious that the separation was not doing Qin Ya any good either. She would not have accepted the marriage proposal if she did not have feelings for Su Zhan.

Lin Xinyan pulled out her phone and dialed Qin Ya’s number.

Qin Ya had moved out of her place with Ellen and no one knew where the new place was. It was not big but the living space was just right for her.

Qin Ya sat at the bay window with a book in hand as rain poured down outside. The book was called ‘What is Happiness’. There was a line in the book that she repeated numerous times. It read, ‘What is happiness? Happiness is but the warmth of sunlight in the cold winter. It is but the refreshing iced tea served under the summer sun. When you are content, the smallest of things grants happiness.’

It made so much sense to her. The more one wanted, the more discontented one became. Happiness was lost in the process.

It was like her current situation. The only things on her mind were complaints and regrets. Why did Su Zhan break his promise? Why did she say yes to his proposal that ended up leaving her in this sorry state?

But come to think of it, it’s actually not that big of a deal. I just have to let go.

Su Zhan was just a passerby in her life. He was just someone who made good memories with her but would not stop her from moving on.

As long as she wanted to, happiness would be an arm's reach away and she would be under the warmth of the winter sun.

Buzz...

The phone beside her suddenly rang. She looked at who the caller was but did not immediately pick up. The shop's grand opening was scheduled on the 8th; it was still early. Incoming calls for her before that would most likely be related to Su Zhan.

"Ms. Lin," she answered the phone after a momentary contemplation.

Lin Xinyan walked to the window. The snow outside had already melted away as water dripped from treetops and eaves. She silently braced herself before she said, "Are you free right now?" Lin Xinyan did not want to jump straight into talking about what happened between Qin Ya and Su Zhan.

Qin Ya pursed her lips and asked, "Did Su Zhan ask you to call me?"

"He's drunk," Lin Xinyan replied honestly. "He came knocking on my door and said he wouldn't leave if I don't help him. Don't worry though, I'm not calling to talk about that. There are more than enough rooms here for him to stay. I just wanted to ask how are you?"

"I'm doing alright." Qin Ya lowered her head.

I'm doing much better when I've figured things out.

Qin Ya understood that she should not be avoiding her issues. Instead, in order to let go, she had to confront them.

"If he's being unreasonable, just ask him to call me." She had blacklisted Su Zhan's contact prior to Lin Xinyan's call but decided to undo that. Although she had not forgiven him, it was time to move on. She was ready to confront him with her composure now.

“He really looks like he’s suffering,” Lin Xinyan smiled as she replied, “I’m not trying to persuade you here. I’m just telling you what I see.”

Qin Ya also smiled. “He really doesn’t let anyone feel secure, does he?”

Maybe he has feelings for me.

“I’ll tell him that,” Lin Xinyan replied.

After that, they proceeded to talk about work. The conversation went on pleasantly. As they hung up, Lin Xinyan went downstairs to let Su Zhan know that Qin Ya would be picking up his calls now. But it turned out that he was already fast asleep.

Aunt Yu covered him with a blanket. Sighing, Lin Xinyan left him alone. *We’ll talk in the morning.*

She returned to her room and saw that Zong Jinghao was lying flat on his back with his arms and legs stretched outwards. It was truly unsightly. Lin Xinyan gave him a look and suggested, “Su Zhan fell asleep. You wanna get him into a room?”

Zong Jinghao turned to his side with one hand supporting his head and signaled her with his index finger. “Come here.”

As for Su Zhan, the house was heated so he was at no risk of catching a cold anyway.

Lin Xinyan instinctively backed away and exclaimed, “What are you doing?”

Raising an eyebrow, Zong Jinghao grinned. “What are you afraid of? I don’t bite,” he teased.

“You’re weird.” Her lips curled.

Zong Jinghao paused.

How am I weird?

“Come here. I have something for you.”

Lin Xinyan skeptically took another step back.

A sudden sense of defeat welled up from within Zong Jinghao seeing how nervous she was.

He let out a sigh and took out the necklace that Zhuang Zijin had given him from his pocket. “Your mom wanted you to have this.”

“It’s my mom’s?” Lin Xinyan replied hesitantly as she gazed at the trinket in his hand. She went up to him but refrained from reaching out. In fact, Lin Xinyan was still considering the truth of his words.

After all, she had never seen this necklace on Zhuang Zijin, nor was this something Zong Jinghao would buy.

A brief moment later, Lin Xinyan extended her hand toward the necklace. The moment she touched it, Zong Jinghao grabbed her arm and tugged at her, causing her to fall into his arms.

“Are you gonna hide?” He smiled.

“Nope,” Lin Xinyan replied while shaking her head.

She quietly stayed in his embrace and asked, “Did my mom really ask you to give me this?”

“Yes,” Zong Jinghao assured her.

Lin Xinyan inspected the necklace carefully but did not find anything unusual about it. It was just a plain and simple platinum necklace. "Put it away if it makes you feel uncomfortable," Zong Jinghao said as he cuddled her from behind.

She shook her head. "Help me put this on."

As a matter of fact, Lin Xinyan already had her closure. She was just saddened by the future trials and tribulations that Zhuang Zijin had yet to face.

Since the necklace was hers, she decided to wear it as it felt as though her mother was still beside her.

Zong Jinghao placed the necklace around her neck and clasped it in place. Although he noticed some tiny wordings on the clasp, he assumed those were the marks of the necklace brand and did not inspect any further.

The chain was very thin but bright at the same time. It stood out brilliantly from Lin Xinyan's black sweater.

Life after the new year was a peaceful one. The two kids went back to school after the fifteenth. Lin Xinyan's plans to feature Tea Silk in a fashion show was put aside. On the other hand, Zong Jinghao had gotten quite busy recently. She rarely saw him because he left home early and came home late.

As for Qin Ya and Su Zhan, Lin Xinyan did not concern herself with their issue any further. Su Zhan left on the day she told him about Qin Ya being able to see him. She never saw him since then.

Time flew by and almost a month had passed since the new year. February was near when Lin Xinyan received a call from Zong Jinghao asking her to head to his company.

After she hung up, she got off work. She was getting ready to meet up with Zong Jinghao when she passed by the washroom to see that Qin Ya was throwing up inside.