

BURBERRY BLUE LABEL³

WHEN YUET-YAN INTRODUCED LAM FUEN-TUNG TO YIP BUEN-HA, SHE LAUGHED AS IF IT HAD JUST OCCURRED TO HER: “YOUR NAME MEANS WINTER AND YOUR NAME MEANS SUMMER, A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN!”⁴ BUT INSTEAD, YIP BUEN-HA ASKED KNOWINGLY, “WOULD MISS LAM’S FATHER ALSO BE A TRADITIONAL CHINESE HEALER?”⁵ LAM FUEN-TUNG JUST SMILED WEAKLY, COVERED HER MOUTH WITH A FIST, AND COUGHED. THE CAMEL-COLORED BURBERRY RAINCOAT THAT SHE HAD DRAPED OVER HER ARM SLOPED DOWN, NEARLY TOUCHING THE GROUND.

YIP BUEN-HA WAS ORIGINALLY INTERESTED IN YUET-YAN, BUT SHE ALREADY HAD A BOYFRIEND. SHE THOUGHT YIP BUEN-HA WAS DEPENDABLE AND HONEST, AND SO SHE FOUND HIM SOMEONE SINGLE, TWENTY-NINE, PRETTY, AND WITH A SWEET CHARACTER – IF A LITTLE TOO QUIET. SHE WAS DEFINITELY WORTH MEETING, AND YIP BUEN-HA AGREED TO BE SET UP. INITIALLY HE HAD NO EXPECTATIONS, BUT ONCE HE SAW HER HE LIKED HER, THOUGH HE DIDN’T KNOW IF IT WAS JUST BECAUSE OF THE NAME THING. HE ASKED HER OUT RIGHT AWAY. LAM FUEN-TUNG DIDN’T REFUSE, BUT HER RESPONSE WAS SOMEWHAT LUKEWARM.

THAT YEAR’S WINTER WAS VERY MILD, BUT WHENEVER YIP BUEN-HA SAW LAM FUEN-TUNG SHE ALWAYS HAD THE BURBERRY OVER HER ARM, THOUGH SHE NEVER HAD IT ON. THE TWO OF THEM DIDN’T GET FAR BEYOND DINNER AND MOVIES, PRETTY ROUTINE. ONCE YIP BUEN-HA WANTED TO LIVEN THINGS UP, SO THEY TOOK THE FERRY TO CHEUNG CHAU.⁶ LAM FUEN-TUNG, HOLDING THE BURBERRY AS USUAL, LEANED ON THE DECK RAILING. THE EARLY MORNING OCEAN BREEZE BLEW A STRAND OF HAIR ACROSS HER LIPS. YIP BUEN-HA STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND TO BRUSH IT BACK. WHEN THEY REACHED THE SHORE, HE MOTIONED FOR THE COAT, AND TOOK HER FREED HAND IN HIS. HER HANDS WERE COLD, LIKELY NUMB, SO HE RUBBED THEM TOGETHER BETWEEN HIS. LAM FUEN-TUNG LOOKED UP AT HIM, HER USUALLY PALE FACE REDDENED CONSUMPTIVELY, BUT BEAUTIFULLY.

YIP BUEN-HA FELT THAT EVERYTHING WAS GOING WELL, EXCEPT THAT THE BURBERRY MADE HIM UNEASY. HE TRIED TO ASK LAM FUEN-TUNG NONCHALANTLY WHY SHE ALWAYS HAD THAT BIG COAT WITH HER. SHE SMILED, SAYING, “NO REAL REASON.” WEARING AN IVORY-COLORED LIGHT WOOL SWEATER, SHE WAS WALKING ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET. HER LUNGS HAD IMPROVED A GREAT DEAL

RECENTLY, AND YIP BUEN-HA THOUGHT THAT MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, SHE MIGHT NOT NEED THAT BIG COAT ANYMORE.

BUT LAM FUEN-TUNG'S COMPLEXION REMAINED THE VERY OPPOSITE OF THE SUNNY DAYS. SOMETIMES SHE WOULD COUGH INCESSANTLY – A DRY COUGH, AS IF EVERY LAST THING INSIDE HER LUNGS HAD BEEN FORCED OUT. YIP BUEN-HA WOULD TURN PALE AND LOOK ON HELPLESSLY. THE ONLY THING HE COULD DO WAS ASK IF SHE'D SEEN A DOCTOR, BUT SHE WOULD INSIST, "IT'S NOTHING, IT'S NOTHING." ONCE, WHILE LAM FUEN-TUNG WAS IN THE LADIES' ROOM, YIP BUEN-HA SEARCHED THE BURBERRY INSIDE AND OUT, BUT FOUND NOTHING. ALL HE LEARNED WAS THAT IT HAD COME FROM THE FACTORY STORE IN BRITAIN. LATER HE ASKED YUET-YAN ABOUT LAM FUEN-TUNG'S PAST, BUT ALL YUET-YAN SAID WAS, "FAN-DONG'S ALL RIGHT, REALLY, HER LIFE'S BEEN SIMPLE. SHE'S NEARLY THIRTY AND SHE'S STILL NEVER HAD A REAL RELATIONSHIP BEFORE, SO NATURALLY SHE'S NOT SO AT EASE. IT'S ALL UP TO YOU, OKAY?"

YIP BUEN-HA DECIDED THAT LAM FUEN-TUNG MUST HAVE SOME SPECIAL AFFECTION FOR BURBERRY, SO HE BOUGHT HER THE NEW BLUE LABEL WRIST CLUTCH. IT WAS BLACK NYLON WITH A DIAGONALLY CHECKERED LINING AND A ZIPPER CLOSURE. THEY HAD PLANS TO GO TO A PERFORMANCE AT THE ARTS FESTIVAL THAT NIGHT. IN THE MORNING, IT WAS STILL WARM AND SUNNY, BUT THE WEATHER REPORT ANNOUNCED THE ARRIVAL OF A COLD FRONT. YIP BUEN-HA ONLY HALF-BELIEVED IT, SO IN THE END HE WORE AN EVERYDAY SUIT JACKET. WHEN THEY SAW EACH OTHER, LAM FUEN-TUNG ACCEPTED THE GIFT, THANKED HIM, AND THEN CAREFULLY WRAPPED IT BACK UP AGAIN.

AS THEY WERE COMING OUT OF THE HONG KONG CULTURAL CENTER, A GUST OF FRIGID WIND SUDDENLY SWEEPED BY, SENDING EVERYONE BACK INSIDE WITH GASPS AND CRIES. THEN IT STARTED TO DRIZZLE AND THE WHOLE SKY DARKENED WITH MIST AND FOG. UNEXPECTEDLY, LAM FUEN-TUNG'S CHEEKS TURNED ROSY PINK, AND HER EYES FLASHED WITH A RARE LIGHT. OPENING UP THE BURBERRY RAINCOAT AND PUTTING IT ON, SHE RAN OUTSIDE INTO THE RAIN, THREW HER ARMS WIDE OPEN, TURNED HER FACE UPWARD, AND SPUN AROUND IN CIRCLES. THE BREATH FROM HER LIPS MADE THE STREETLIGHTS LOOK LIKE AN ORANGE MIST. YIP BUEN-HA REALIZED THAT THE BURBERRY WAS SO LONG IT REACHED HER ANKLES, AND THE SLEEVES EXTENDED BEYOND HER FINGERTIPS. IT WAS AS IF A GIANT SILHOUETTE WERE WRAPPED AROUND HER. HE STOOD BY HIMSELF IN THE DOORWAY AND HUGGED THE BLUE LABEL BAG.