

Fat Wife 131

Chapter 131: Asking for Ration Money

Old Madam Zhang gritted her teeth in anger when there was no further activity after the two children entered the house.

“Then you don’t have to go back to the city! Just spend the rest of your lives in the countryside with your mother! Be a villager for the rest of your life!” Old Madam Zhang shouted towards the house.

The two children hesitated at the door. To city dwellers, the countryside meant an uncouth place with no prospects, a place where people could not afford food or clothes. It was a symbol of backwardness.

“Hear what you’re saying. Haven’t you always said that the two children are villagers, when did they become city dwellers?” Qiao Mei said as she looked at Old Madam Zhang.

How did Qiao Mei know about this?

Old Madam Zhang had suffered many losses today. She thought that it was Li Gui who told her daughter, otherwise Qiao Mei could not have known about something like this. Old Madam Zhang glared at Li Gui, certain that Li Gui had gossiped a lot since she returned to the village.

Of course, it was not Li Gui who mentioned these things. For her, whatever Old Madam Zhang said would go in one ear and out the other. If she remembered all these things, would she still be able to survive in the city given that she would be so angry every day.

“Your household register is in the village so you must have been bullied by the children in the city. Now that you’re returning to the village to study, the kids will be so envious of you. Your results here might even be better than your results in the city. Tell me what’s so bad about being in the countryside,” Qiao Mei said as she looked at the two children.

In the city, their classmates all bullied him and his younger brother, saying that they were from the countryside and were inferior. Now that they were in the countryside, not only would their results improve, but they might even become the best or second best in class. They could even have meat for every meal and more rations than they could finish, and they also would not get beaten and scolded. Given the choice, anyone would choose the second option. There was nothing good about being in the

city when the most important thing was to have enough food to eat. Otherwise, why would their grandmother and father come all the way to the countryside to ask for food and money. Right! Stay in the countryside then!

“We’re not going back!” Zhang Wei held on to his younger brother, Zhang Chao, and said to Old Madam Zhang.

“Alright! Alright! I finally see your true colors! You two little ingrates! You forget your surname after others feed you a few mouthfuls! If you don’t want to come back, then get lost!” Old Madam Zhang stomped her feet in anger and clenched her fists to stop herself from reaching out and hitting the two children.

Old Madam Zhang said that the two children were ingrates, yet she did not even think about how she had treated them all these years. Not only did she beat and scold them, but she also did not give them food from time to time. As Li Gui was from the countryside and all her children followed their mother’s household register, they did not get any rations in the city, what more having rice to eat. The only time the children might have a bite of meat would be during the major holidays or when Old Madam Zhang was in a good mood and offered them a bite. However, the good stuff would never be given to Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao given that they were girls. Old Madam Zhang felt that girls were useless and just needed to be married off.

Old Madam Zhang assessed the situation in front of her. She had returned Li Gui’s children but she did not get the money. She was not going to give up today and said to Li Gui, “You have to give me the ration money for the food that your children have eaten for the past few years! Not a single cent less!”

“You must be joking. It’s not as if these children have taken Li Gui’s surname. Don’t they have the surname Zhang, yet they need to pay when they eat food from their family,” Auntie Zhou said laughingly.

“You old melon skin, shut up! Who do you think you are to interrupt when I’m talking to my daughter-in-law! Pfft!” Old Madam Zhang scolded angrily, feeling agitated when she saw that her son had already gone off into the distance.

“Hey! You!” Auntie Zhou wanted to go forward and argue with Old Madam Zhang but Qiao Mei stopped her.

“They all have their household register in the countryside and don’t get any food stamps in the city at all! They don’t get any rations! What they eat is the food meant for me, my husband, my son and my eldest grandson! What’s wrong with paying me! Hurry up and give me money!” Old Madam Zhang said.

This time, no one had anything to say. What Old Madam Zhang said was indeed the truth. After all, food was in short supply now and every bit was precious. On this issue, Old Madam Zhang was right and no one felt able to speak up for Li Gui.

“Tell me how much you want.” Qiao Mei looked at Old Madam Zhang.

Old Madam Zhang looked at Qiao Mei’s wealthy appearance and said, “600 dollars!”

Everyone gasped. 600 dollars! That was not a small sum, and this Old Madam Zhang had the audacity to ask for it.

Chapter 132: Freedom

Old Madam Zhang felt that it was not possible to grow good quality fruits and vegetables in what she deemed as Li Gui’s lousy courtyard, particularly since she had previously eaten crops grown by Li Gui, and evident by the fact that Li Gui had only managed to earn five dollars even after a few days. It was good timing to return these few children to Li Gui so that their family could save on feeding them. Besides, even if they did not take care of these children anymore, the children would still have to support her when she was old. No matter what, she would always be the children’s biological grandmother, it was a fact that she could bring up in any situation!

The sum she quoted was based on 100 dollars each child for four children, and 200 dollars for the adult. In the past ten years, no matter what they had eaten, they would have incurred more than this amount. Qiao Mei thought that the sum was fair and there was no loss to them based on the calculations.

“You’d better be sure. Don’t go back on your word later on and say that you didn’t receive the money!” Qiao Mei said.

Old Madam Zhang looked at Qiao Mei’s stance and wondered if Qiao Mei was going to pay her? She hurriedly said to Qiao Mei, “I’m sure! There are so many witnesses here! I can’t fake it!”

Qiao Mei got up and went home to get the money. Everyone wanted to stop her, but they did not know how to say it. In such a situation, the parents should borrow from elsewhere even if they did not have money. It should not be left to her, being just the older sister of the family, to fork out the money, especially since it was such a large sum of money. However, looking around, Qiao Mei's family was probably the only one who could afford to fork out a lump sum amount of 600 dollars.

Qiao Mei had 600 dollars in her hand when she returned and showed it to everyone. She then said to Li Gui, "Take this money as a loan from me. You can pay me back later."

Li Gui quickly agreed. "Alright! I'll pay you back when I have money in the future!"

Qiao Mei was not a fool and did not intend to fork out this money for nothing. Of course, she would ask Li Gui to return the money. At most, she would give Li Gui more vegetables and fruits to sell to earn money to return to her. Otherwise, Li Gui would feel uneasy.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief to know that this Qiao Mei was not an indiscriminately nice person who went around poking her nose in everything. This Zhang family was like a bottomless pit which would not be satisfied no matter how much money was thrown into it. If Qiao Mei really used her own money, the Zhang family would go to Qiao Mei's house to cause trouble in the future and that would mean terrible days ahead.

"Take the money and leave quickly. Check if it's 600 dollars. Don't turn around later and say that I didn't give you enough, and then come back to ask me for more money," Qiao Mei said to Old Madam Zhang.

Old Madam Zhang felt embarrassed by the fact that Qiao Mei said what she had been thinking. She had wanted to just put the money in her pocket and leave, so that even if she came back later, no one would know exactly how much Qiao Mei had given her. This little girl was young but she was quite scheming. Old Madam Zhang counted the money note by note so that everyone could see.

"It is 600 dollars. Who said I'm going to extort you, I'll leave now," Old Madam Zhang said.

"You have to confirm that this money covers all the expenses that my mother and the four children have spent on food over the years. Don't leave out anything and come asking for more money later," Qiao Mei said.

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Old Madam Zhang just wanted to quickly put the money into her pocket so that it would be a done deal. At the moment, she would agree to whatever Qiao Mei said, given that she had never seen so much money at once.

“Alright, I confirm this covers all the expenses spent on food for these children and your mother,” Old Madam Zhang said.

Qiao Mei pointed at the children and said, “From now on, the children won’t owe you anything, am I right.”

At this moment, Old Madam Zhang realized that something was wrong and that Qiao Mei was setting a trap for her. Just as she was about to retort, she saw Qiao Mei reaching out to take the money in her hand and she hurriedly agreed. “Yes, yes, yes! They don’t owe me anymore!”

You could not lose 600 dollars like that. In such a situation, you had to agree even if you did not want to. It was too big a sum of money to walk away. At most, you could find other reasons to ask for money in the future.

“That’s good. Once you accept the money, these children and my mother won’t owe the Zhang family anything anymore,” Qiao Mei said as she watched Old Madam Zhang put the money into her pocket.

When the children stood at the door of the house and heard that they no longer owed the Zhang family anything, they were ecstatic and felt like spreading the news all throughout the mountain area. In the past, Old Madam Zhang always said that they owed the Zhang family and would owe them for the rest of their lives. Now, they no longer owed anything to the Zhang family! They were free!

After having an elder sister, everything became better. Elder sister must be their savior. This elder sister of theirs was too good! Elder sister was a hero! The children looked at Qiao Mei and smiled. When Qiao Mei saw that, she gave them a wide smile in return.

Chapter 133: Having Barbecue

Old Madam Zhang left with Zhang Cong once she achieved her goal and hurriedly chased after Zhang Qian who had already left.

Qiao Mei and everyone else heaved a sigh of relief and the children also came out of the house timidly. Zhang Miao, being young and lively, ran to Qiao Mei's side and said timidly, "Thank you, elder sister..."

Qiao Mei was overjoyed and a few older women also smiled when they saw how sensible the children were. Today was finally over. In the future, this old woman would not come and find trouble with them and the children could also live a quiet life.

"Qiao Mei, if you don't have a receipt or something, what if this old woman really says that she never received any money." After Auntie Dong said that, the other women also looked at Qiao Mei, worried that Qiao Mei would get cheated.

"It's fine. This money is not something that they can bring up in public. It's not as if they dare to report us, they will definitely just take the money and leave. As for whether they confirm receipt or not, that's a small matter. I, Qiao Mei, am not afraid of anything!" Qiao Mei said as she raised her arm and pointed at her biceps.

The way that Qiao Mei looked made everyone laugh out loud. Indeed, with Qiao Mei's strength, it was not as if she would be at a disadvantage. If those people were to come again, they would get the brigade's militiamen to come by as well. They would like to see whether the fists of the Zhang family or the bullets of the brigade's militiamen were more powerful.

In the evening, everyone went home, still chatting and laughing. Qiao Mei also brought the children and Li Gui to her house to have a good meal. Today was Zhang Wei and Zhang Chao's first time in the countryside, so they had to eat something different!

"Children, let's have a barbecue today!" Qiao Mei said.

Barbecue??The children had never tried it before. They imagined it to be eating food that was placed into the fire to be burnt. How could such food be considered delicious??The children looked at Qiao Mei in confusion.

“Elder sister! Are you making a bonfire for cooking!” Zhang Miao asked Qiao Mei curiously.

“No, you’ll know in a while!” Qiao Mei said mysteriously.

In her other life, she loved having barbecue the most. Now that she was here, she had to find a way to have a taste of it. Otherwise, her craving would not be satiated.

Some time ago, she had asked Qiao Qiang to check if anyone he knew had an iron bucket. Then they also found a thick iron sheet, cleaned it up and mounted them together into a simple barbecue pit. Not long ago, she also asked someone to help her buy some charcoal from the city. Everything came in handy today.

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There was also eight pounds of beef that Uncle Wang had sent over early in the morning. Uncle Wang happened to be in the city today, so he brought some back with him. She had originally planned to use it to make some side dishes for Xia Zhe, but the barbecue was more important now and Xia Zhe’s beef sauce would have to wait until she got someone to buy more meat for her.

Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao had already started preparing the bowls and chopsticks and went off to get a big basin of water to wash the plates and cutlery. As for Zhang Wei and Zhang Chao, they did not move and just stood there, not knowing what to do.

“Zhang Wei, Zhang Chao, aren’t you the men of the house.” Qiao Mei looked at the two children and asked.

In their family, other than their mother and elder sister, there were only two younger sisters and an old grandfather. The two children thought about it and realized that they were indeed the only men of the house.

Zhang Wei and Zhang Chao nodded.

“A man has to be responsible and can’t just sit there doing nothing while waiting for a pie to fall from the sky. Do you understand?” Qiao Mei said.

The two children nodded again.

Seeing that the children were obedient, Qiao Mei continued, “In the countryside, people have to work in the fields to earn work points. However, our family doesn’t need you to go and do that, so you have to do the work in the house, do you get what I mean.”

The two children immediately knew what they needed to do. Qiao Mei gave them the names of a whole bunch of vegetables to pick in the courtyard and told them to return to ask her if they got confused.

She did not expect Zhang Chao to have such a good memory and remembered everything after she said it once. However, being kids from the city, there were many vegetables that they had never seen before. So they picked those that they knew and then wanted to go back to look for Qiao Mei.

Qiao Mei quietly hid herself and watched the two children busy themselves in the field. She did not want the two children to find her and wanted to see how they worked.

The two children could not find Qiao Mei and did not know how to pick vegetables that they could not recognize, so they could only go and look for Li Gui. The two children walked up to Li Gui slowly, looked at her, and then rubbed their hands. Zhang Wei said to Li Gui, “Mom... Mom, we don’t recognize many of the vegetables that elder sister mentioned. Can you... can you help us?”

Chapter 134: Procuring the Three Turns and One Sound

Qiao Mei only felt relieved when she saw them going to talk to Li Gui. She then stayed in the house to do needlework and take a rest.

Li Gui’s eyes were red as she quickly agreed. “Alright, mom will bring you there!”

This was the first time the two children had spoken to her so nicely. In the past, due to Old Madam Zhang’s instigation, the two children hated Li Gui. They felt that she did not treat them well and that unlike the other kids’ mothers who were so nice, their mother did not care about them. They even hit Li

Gui like how Zhang Cong did. However, now that they knew Li Gui did not have it easy, there was naturally a marked improvement in their attitudes..

The two children were very happy. Their elder sister was the best person in the world, she gave them food and drinks and many other things that they had never seen before. Their elder sister's grandfather was also very nice, he was always smiling and not fierce at all.

That was because they did not know how scary Qiao Qiang could be when he got angry. The children in the courtyard were laughing and joking and it made Qiao Qiang happy to see them. Although they were not his grandchildren, the bustling atmosphere made the whole place feel very festive.

It did not take long for all of them to clean up and get ready to eat. Qiao Mei put her homemade sauce and some salt on the meat and the fragrance immediately filled the entire courtyard. The few children wolfed down the food. They had never eaten such delicious food, and also never had so much meat.

It seemed that elder sister really did not lie to them!

After dinner, the four children rushed to clear the table, wash the dishes, and clean up the charcoal fire in the courtyard. Judging by the way they wanted to tidy up the place to its original state, it seemed that they had decided to stay here.

"Thank you, Mei Mei. I don't even know how to thank you." Li Gui broke down and cried in the house, not knowing how to face her daughter who had helped her so much.

"It's fine. They're all good children," Qiao Mei said.

The children were still young and did not have bad intentions, so it was not too late to help them. As for the relationship between the children and Li Gui, they would still need to think of a way to deepen their feelings for one another.

On the way back, Old Madam Zhang did some planning on buying the 'three turns' for Zhang Cong. It was not easy to buy a watch, so she decided to buy the bicycle and sewing machine first. As for the radio, she did not intend to buy it at all since there was no use for it. The other family had agreed earlier

that just getting the 'three turns' would be enough. She would give them only what they had agreed on and not a single item more.

Zhang Qian said to Old Madam Zhang, "Give me the rest of the money."

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When Zhang Cong heard this, he could not take it anymore. This money was not even enough for his betrothal gifts. He thought Feng Qin said she did not need any money to get married.

"This amount of money is probably not even enough for me, so you don't even think about it. You're already marrying your third wife and I still don't even have one yet! I haven't even bought a bed yet, so there's not enough money!" Zhang Cong hurriedly snatched the money from Old Madam Zhang, afraid that Zhang Qian would take it away again.

"You can ask Li Gui for money after some time, you can get married then! Let me marry first!" Zhang Cong said.

The way that Li Gui looked, Zhang Qian did not even want to see her for even one more day and felt that it would be a relief to get a divorce quickly. She was not as beautiful and capable as Feng Qin.

The Zhang family members saw someone coming from afar while on their way, so they stopped arguing.

Qiao Yu looked at these people who were dressed quite well and did not seem to be from the village. She asked curiously, "Are you here to visit someone?"

At that time, people did not have many ways to contact one another since not everyone had a telephone. Only the brigade had one and they would charge people for using it. Therefore, people would usually greet one another when passing by.

Also during that time, casual visitors were not allowed to roam around in the village and they would be asked about their intentions for visiting. If visitors intended to stay the night, they would have to

produce a letter of recommendation as a form of proof. Otherwise, they could not spend the night in the village.

Old Madam Zhang said, "We're here to look for Li Gui."

"Li Gui? Isn't that Qiao Mei's mother?" Qiao Yu thought to herself. "These people must be leaving the village at dinner time because Qiao Mei did not ask them to stay for dinner."

"Aren't you guys staying for a meal given that Qiao Mei's family is not lacking in rice, noodles or meat. Didn't she ask you to stay for a meal?" At the mention of meat, Qiao Yu almost drooled.

Chapter 135: Letter From the Capital

At this point, the Zhang family could no longer maintain their dignity. They did not even get a drink of water, let alone a meal. How embarrassing.

"Eh? Is Qiao Mei's family very rich?" Old Madam Zhang asked.

Li Gui's mother, Old Madam Li, used to go to the city often to complain about being poor and to ask for money. She said that Qiao Mei ate too much and Qiao Qiang's salary was not even enough to feed Qiao Mei, and that she even needed to subsidize them.

It seemed that these people did not know anything about Qiao Mei's family. Qiao Yu smiled and said, "You mean you guys don't know! When Qiao Mei got married some time back, the man gave her a betrothal gift of 2,000 dollars and 'three turns and one sound'! And they were all brand new!"

She thought that these people did not seem to be nice people. Even if she had no way to make Qiao Mei suffer a loss, she wanted to do something to create trouble for Qiao Mei. After saying that, she left the surprised Zhang family members behind.

Zhang Qian instantly wanted to go back and snatch Qiao Mei's 'three turns and one sound'. This way, Zhang Cong would still have a lot of money left and he would be able to get married!

Before he could go back, Zhang Cong stopped him.

“Father! Are you crazy! What are you going to say if you go back now! What reason do you have to ask her for things.” Zhang Cong then continued muttering, “What an old pervert, only thinking about getting a wife.”

Hearing this, Zhang Qian stepped forward and wanted to kick him. “Screw you! How dare you say that about your old man!”

Concerned about Zhang Cong’s injured leg, Old Madam Zhang hurriedly stopped Zhang Qian. “Haven’t you embarrassed yourself enough! Hurry up and go back! We’ll find another chance to ask them for money in the future! Let’s go!”

The three of them returned to the city in a sorry state. In the end, they went and bought Zhang Cong’s betrothal gifts first.

There was no reason for any family to harass Qiao Mei’s family anymore and they managed to have a few peaceful days. Every day, Qiao Mei brought the children up the mountain to pick mushrooms and she told Zhang Wei and Zhang Chao the same things she previously said to Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao. She told them that they would get a share of the money from selling the mushrooms.

This was so that In the future, the children would be able to use their own money for pocket money and tuition fees and Qiao Mei need not fork out any more money. No one had any objections to that and they were all very happy. Other children could not even get any money, but they would all have their own money, which truly belonged to them, and they did not have to give it to others. This was a status that everyone else did not have, not even the children in the city.

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Qiao Mei was more than willing to take care of these children. Although they had lived with Old Madam Zhang for a few years, the children were still capable, sensible, grateful and not lazy. They were all good children and she was fond of them.

After they had been here for a while, Qiao Mei felt that it was time to teach them how to read. However, it was not good to expose too much of her capability, so what she did was to ask her grandfather to teach her something at night and she would then teach the children the next day.

They had to go through all the subjects together. Zhang Wei and Zhang Chao had thought that they knew a lot, but they slowly realized that this elder sister, who had only studied with them for a few months, was much better than them in every way. Therefore, they settled down obediently to learn from Qiao Mei.

After she counted the days, she felt that even if they went to the elementary school in the neighboring village this semester, they would not be able to keep up. They should just wait until the next semester to start school and she would teach the children at home during the next few months so that they would not fall behind.

“I think you should not go to school this semester but to start next semester. Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao, you two have to go too,” Qiao Mei said.

“Are we able to study too! Can we go to school too!” Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao said to Qiao Mei in surprise.

In the past, families could not really afford to provide for their children’s education, and would therefore only let boys go to school. Girls stayed at home to do housework and were not allowed to go to school. Zhang Qin and Zhang Miao had thought that they would never be able to go to school.

“Of course you can. There’s no difference between boys and girls when it comes to studying,” Qiao Mei said.

There were many girls studying in school now, which was a good thing. The girls would be well-educated enough for the coming future.

The sound of bicycle bells could suddenly be heard from outside. Qiao Mei craned her neck to look outside the door. She counted the days and realized that today should be the day that the postman came by the village!

As expected, a figure wearing dark green clothes appeared at Qiao Mei’s door.

Qiao Mei hurriedly walked over. Before she reached the postman, she could already hear him talking.

“Is Qiao Qiang at home? It’s a letter for Qiao Qiang!”

A letter for her grandfather? Who would send a letter to her grandfather??Qiao Mei felt puzzled.

“I’m Qiao Mei and Qiao Qiang is my grandfather. He’s now sleeping in the house. Give it to me and I’ll pass it to him later when he wakes up,” Qiao Mei said to the postman.

Qiao Mei held the letter and looked at it in disappointment. It was indeed addressed to Qiao Qiang. She could not help but feel a little down as she had thought that it would be a letter from Xia Zhe.

Seeing the sad look on such a beautiful face, the postman could not help but say, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back again in a few days. Perhaps I’ll even be here tomorrow. By then, I’ll have your letter!”

Qiao Mei knew that the postman was trying to cheer her up, but after thinking about it, she felt that it made sense and agreed with him.

“I’m leaving! See you next time! Don’t be unhappy!” the postman shouted as he rode off on his bicycle.

When Qiao Mei saw that the letter was sent from the capital, she knew that it was from her grandfather’s children. Previously, Uncle Chen Hu told her that her grandfather’s children wanted her grandfather to return to the capital. Perhaps they had now written a letter to discuss it with him.

Qiao Qiang was woken up by the postman’s voice. When he saw the letter in Qiao Mei’s hand, he thought that Xia Zhe had sent another letter. He grinned at Qiao Mei and said, “Why? Did that Xia brat write to you again? What did he say? Has he chosen a name for the child?”

Qiao Mei had previously written to Xia Zhe to ask him to think about the child’s name. Xia Zhe had replied to say that he had not thought about it yet, and that he needed to be more cautious about such an important matter.

“No, it’s not. Stop teasing me, grandfather. This is a letter for you, it’s from the capital,” Qiao Mei said.

Qiao Qiang's smile instantly disappeared and he frowned as if he thought of something.

"Throw it out and burn it. What an eyesore." Qiao Qiang turned around and walked into the house.

Qiao Mei looked at her grandfather's back and knew that he did not want to talk about these things, but she did not know any details at all. Qiao Mei followed him and said, "Grandfather, can I take a look on your behalf?"

Her big bright eyes made it impossible for anyone to refuse her request. Qiao Qiang looked at Qiao Mei's expression and found it hard to reject her. He nodded and agreed.

Time had passed so quickly. Previously, when Xia Zhe came, Mei Mei was still dark and fat like a black bear spirit. Now, she looked as pitiful as a little kitten. He had seen the hardship she had to go through during this period of time.

Chapter 136: Changing Surname

During that period of time, Qiao Mei did not eat much. Every day, she went up the mountain to pick fruits and occasionally had to chop firewood for the family. She also had to grow bean sprouts for the supply and marketing cooperative. He was old and Qiao Mei was the one who helped him with many things. Every day, she would come home dirty and smelly, and it would be strange if she did not lose weight after going through so much. However, it was also a good thing that she lost weight. She seemed much healthier after she slimmed down.

"You can read it, just don't tell me what it says," Qiao Qiang waved his hand and said.

Qiao Mei smiled and nodded. She went to the courtyard to read the letter, not knowing who wrote it. When Qiao Mei carefully opened the envelope and unfolded the letter, she thought that the handwriting was really beautiful and smooth. She looked at her own handwriting and found it incomparable. Then she frowned when she read the first sentence in the letter and had to force herself to patiently finish reading it.

“Father, it’s been 10 years since we parted. I miss you very much. Father, please don’t blame me for being insensible. What happened back then was something done out of helplessness. In order to protect everyone, it’s something we couldn’t help but do. I hope Father can forgive us. This time, we are...”

If this person missed her grandfather so much, why would he not come to see him for 10 years? What a joke. He probably did not even know the way to enter the village. Qiao Mei had mixed feelings after reading the letter. Although she did not know what exactly happened during those years, she had heard from Uncle Chen Hu that her grandfather’s children who lived in the capital now wanted to bring her grandfather back to recuperate in the capital.

Qiao Mei looked at the signature carefully. It was written as “Qiao Guo”. Qiao Guo was probably her grandfather’s son. She did not know what exactly happened 10 years ago to cause her grandfather to return to this village, but from the letter, she could tell that her grandfather’s son must have done something that left her grandfather heartbroken. The man then did not keep in touch for 10 years and did not come to visit her grandfather. What an insincere man.

However, Qiao Mei thought about something else. Based on the current medical technology, the standard of medical care in the capital would definitely be better than in the hospitals in this county city. Her grandfather had already been very seriously ill for a long time. During this period of time, he had been eating vegetables which grew from energy exchange with the pendant. His complexion looked much better, but she did not know how effective it was. She still needed to find out the actual extent of his illness before she could feel at ease.

In the past, all the money in the family was used to buy meat and grains for the original owner of the body. Her grandfather did not have any money to treat his illness at all. His gastric problem was actually caused by the fact that he gave all his food to the original owner of the body, and then he had never gone to see a doctor properly.

Should she talk to her grandfather about going back to treat his illness? Whether he wanted to see that family or not was another matter. She had enough money now for her grandfather to treat his illness.

Qiao Mei folded the letter and thought for a moment. She could feel that these people were still up to no good. She did not know what exactly happened back then and yet, she did not dare to ask her grandfather about it. She was afraid that it would bring up sad memories for him. However, she also wanted her grandfather to go to the capital for treatment so that he could recover faster.

Just as Qiao Mei was in a dilemma about whether she should tell Qiao Qiang about her doubts and thoughts, Qiao Qiang looked at his granddaughter through the window of the house behind her. Her brows were knitted and she looked like she had many questions.

Qiao Qiang walked over and asked, "What did they say to make you so worried?"

Qiao Mei was so focused on thinking about getting medical treatment for her grandfather that she did not notice Qiao Qiang standing in front of her. She looked up at Qiao Qiang and said, "Grandfather, do you want to go to the capital?"

Qiao Qiang had also guessed the contents of the letter. Previously, he had not been willing to get involved in the matters related to the capital. Later on, Chen Hu had also asked him indirectly many times. In the end, he found out that there was trouble in the capital and there were people who wanted to ask for his help.

Qiao Qiang looked at the curious Qiao Mei and sighed. "Aye, let's talk inside. There are a lot of mosquitoes outside."

Qiao Qiang brought Qiao Mei into the house and sat down near the fireplace. Qiao Mei said, "Grandpa, who's Qiao Guo?"

"Qiao Guo? What Qiao Guo?" Qiao Qiang was unable to react immediately and wondered who this Qiao Guo was. Qiao Mei unfolded the letter and pointed at the signature.

"Look, Qiao Guo," Qiao Mei said.

Qiao Qiang snorted and looked at the letter with disdain. "Hmph, what a joke. Isn't his name Liang Guo, he even changed his surname when he wrote this letter."

Qiao Mei was too stunned to speak. So it turned out that the matter back then had already escalated to such a point. No wonder that her grandfather was unwilling to mention them even now.

Chapter 137: Recalling the Past

"I actually had no intention to ever mention again what happened back then. They really can find me no matter where I go." Qiao Qiang looked out of the window as he thought about the past.

Qiao Mei had heard some things from Chen Hu about her uncle and aunt in the capital, but he only said positive things like they were a wealthy family in the capital who specially wanted to find Qiao Qiang so that he could return to the capital to enjoy life. Chen Hu probably did not know anything else.

"Grandfather, can I know what happened back then?" Qiao Mei asked carefully.

Qiao Qiang looked at Qiao Mei and could not help but sigh. She was already 18 years old this year. When he first returned to the village, she was still so thin and petite, as skinny as a bamboo pole, and she almost died. Now, she was already a beautiful young woman and it was time to let her know about what happened back then.

Qiao Qiang sighed and said, "Time really flies."

For a moment, he did not know where to start. After thinking for a moment, he started with the past events.

"In those early years, your grandmother and I lived in the village. Back then, we had a nice life even though our family was poor and we did not have much food at all. Your grandmother was a virtuous woman, she was beautiful and also capable. However, there was a famine back then, everyone had no food and we could only eat elm bark. Those were some difficult times..."

Qiao Qiang paused for a moment before continuing, "Later on, your grandmother was killed by enemies who came to the village. At that time, I was working outside the village and managed to escape the same fate. When I came back, there was only your father left, so I heartlessly abandoned him and joined the army. When I entered the army, I wanted to make a name for myself and I managed to achieve some good results by the time I was 32 years old. Our leader thought highly of me and felt that I had a future, so he asked his daughter to marry me. Later on, we had two children, Qiao Guo and Qiao Lan. Oh! No, their names should be Liang Guo and Liang Lan now."

He did not say much about what happened after that. The gist was that the old leader probably thought that getting a nobody son-in-law with no background meant he would get a lot of help with his family,

but things did not go according to his plan. Qiao Qiang did not listen to their orders at all and did not want to help their family do anything. This made the Liang family very troubled.

Initially, the Liang family's daughter was very happy with Qiao Qiang. However, Qiao Qiang's stubbornness caused the Liang family's daughter to always get reprimanded by her father, who said that she did not know how to persuade Qiao Qiang to help her family. The couple was very loving in the first few years of their marriage, but later on, her attitude towards Qiao Qiang changed for the worse.

Much later on, there was a fundamental conflict between Qiao Qiang and the Liang family. The Liang family then tried to kill Qiao Qiang to protect their own family. When this ploy was discovered by Qiao Qiang's comrades, he barely managed to escape from the army and survive the attack. Later on, he returned to the village, which was far enough for him to get away from everything, and no one could do anything to him.

Back then, the Liang family was ruthless and insisted that the Liang family's daughter get a divorce. They even ensured that Qiao Qiang left the marriage with nothing. The children also took on the Liang family's surname so that they would not become useless people who could not enter the army.

If it were not for them, things would not have come to this point today, where a war hero like Qiao Qiang languished unnoticed in this faraway unknown village.

Qiao Mei did not expect to hear that there was such a grudge back then. After a moment of silence, she got up and went to the kitchen to burn the letter. Out of sight, out of mind. Halfway through burning the letter, she remembered that the stamp had been left intact when she opened the envelope. If she had kept it, it would be a treasure in the future.

Forget it, I don't really need this stamp. I'll be angry just looking at it. It's better to burn it and throw it into the stove pit and go back to the house to accompany my grandfather.

"Grandfather, do you want to go to the capital to have a medical examination? We won't go and see them, but let's go and get you checked out." Qiao Mei was still worried about Qiao Qiang's health.

"Sigh! No, no! I'm in good health. I can even chop wood. Why should I see a doctor! No!" Qiao Qiang said as he waved his hand.

When Qiao Mei heard this, she decided not to go for the time being. However, she would definitely try to persuade her grandfather to go to the capital to see a doctor at some point in the future as it was not something that could be left to him to decide. When Xia Zhe returned, they would bring her grandfather to the capital and she would do anything to get it done. At this juncture, she would not mention it and she would wait for an opportunity in the future.

Chapter 138: Deciding to Find Someone

“Alright, then we won’t go to the capital. Let’s eat, grandfather. I made your favorite potato and kidney bean stew today. It’s very delicious.” Qiao Mei put down the tableware to have a meal with her grandfather.

“Our Mei Mei’s culinary skills are getting better and better! That kid Xia Zhe really has it good,” Qiao Qiang said with a smile.

“Hahaha, I wonder how he’s been recently,” Qiao Mei said.

“Why, do you miss him, but it’s about time his letter gets here. Don’t worry, it’ll be here tomorrow or the day after,” Qiao Qiang said.

“Yes, yes, I’m not in a hurry!” The truth was that Qiao Mei actually counted the days in her heart every day, looking forward to the day his letter arrived.

It was really like what Qiao Qiang said. The letter arrived on the third day and it was the young postman who delivered it. Qiao Mei’s face had looked tense for the past two days but she was finally all smiles now. She had wondered if something had happened to Xia Zhe, preventing him from replying.

The letter was similar to his usual letters. He wrote about the many interesting things that happened during training and that he had won first place in a competition against his comrades in the army. In her last letter, Qiao Mei asked Xia Zhe to think of a name for their child. This time, Xia Zhe addressed her request in his letter, but she felt that the names he suggested were a mess.

Xia Zhe wrote that if the child was a boy, he would name him Xia Guo, Xia Zhuang or Xia Qiang. If it was a girl, he would name her Xia Lan, Xia Fang or Xia Juan.

Qiao Mei did not even want to hear these names and thought that she might as well name the children herself. There were countless names in the village using these same few words. No, no, definitely not. She could not let her children have such names. In the future, when they went to school and the teachers called out the names, there would definitely be a few other people who would reply to the same name. That would be too awkward and the children would have no recognizability at all. She had to think of other ways to name the children without dampening Xia Zhe's enthusiasm. It appeared that this matter would have to wait until the children were born.

She still had not informed Xia Zhe that she was pregnant with twins, a boy and a girl, and she wondered about his expression on the day when she told him. Qiao Mei unfolded the letter to read it again and realized that Xia Zhe had also mentioned in the letter that he would not be able to come back for next month's holiday as he had promised. He wrote that he was going to Gushan and that she should send letters and packages there in the future. However, he would only contact Qiao Mei when he got there as his trip was supposed to be a secret.

Qiao Mei hurriedly got up and looked at the calendar. It was the year 1971 and only one month and eight days away from the day of the great earthquake. The letter would have been posted a few days ago. In that case, Xia Zhe would definitely be at the earthquake zone when it happened!

She remembered it was recorded that hundreds of thousands of people died in that earthquake. Could Xia Zhe be one of them? No, there could not be such a coincidence!

The original owner of the body did not have many memories of Xia Zhe spending time with her, but Xia Zhe was a very responsible person. Every month, he would send his salary to the original owner of the body so that she would be able to support herself and the children. However, later on, the person who transferred the money eventually changed from Xia Zhe to his uncle, Qin Dong. Why did the change happen?

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The original owner of the body was illiterate and she was satisfied as long as she received the money. So long as she had food to eat, she would not think about anything else. Could it be that he did not like the original owner of the body so he asked someone else to transfer the money on his behalf? Then why was it Xia Zhe's uncle instead of the communications officer from the army?

No, something must have gone wrong somewhere. Could it be that Xia Zhe was there during that earthquake! That he did not abandon the original owner of the body! No, Xia Zhe could not die. Qiao

Mei clenched her fists and stared at the date on the calendar. She carefully and repeatedly counted the dates, afraid that she would miscount and miss out on a day. She did not know whether Xia Zhe had already set off, as he did not mention when he would be going and only told her a rough plan.

The letter in Qiao Mei's hand was extremely wrinkled. By the time Qiao Mei realized it, it had already been crumpled into a ball. Qiao Mei hurriedly took the letter to the brick bed and spread it out. She carefully pressed a book on it to flatten the creases, hoping that it could still revert to its original state. Qiao Mei sat on the brick bed and sighed. She took out the pendant that she wore on her chest as it glittered with a dark green light. Qiao Mei made up her mind and held the pendant tightly with both hands. She had decided to go and look for Xia Zhe!

Qiao Mei walked to the courtyard to look for Qiao Qiang and said firmly to him, "Grandfather, I'm going to Gu.. no, I'm going to the capital!"

Qiao Mei almost told Qiao Qiang of her real destination. She thought that it was better not to let her grandfather know about it so that he would not worry.

Chapter 139: Preparing to Go to the Capital

Qiao Qiang was stunned when he heard this. What was going on, didn't she say two days ago that she would ignore those people from the capital, yet she wanted to look for them? The look of righteous indignation on Qiao Mei's face made it seem as if she was going to seek revenge. So she looked so worried yesterday not because she was waiting for the Xia kid's letter but because she was thinking about the matter concerning him.

"This... Meimei, didn't we agree there is no need to go to the capital to look for them? Besides, so many years have passed and I also don't want to look for them anymore. And you're pregnant..."

Before Qiao Qiang could finish speaking, Qiao Mei was also stunned. So grandfather thought that I am going to the capital to ask those people for an explanation.

"Grandfather, what are you thinking, here's what happened. In his letter, Xia Zhe mentioned that he can go home at the end of this month. I want to go to the capital to look for him and meet his family. What do you think?" Qiao Mei asked carefully, afraid that Qiao Qiang would not agree to let her go. If he rejected her, she did not have any other good reason.

“Ah right, then you should go. You haven’t even met them yet. Tell me when you intend to go,” Qiao Qiang said.

Qiao Mei heaved a sigh of relief. Fortunately, Qiao Qiang did not suspect anything. Otherwise, her intentions would have been exposed. When they got married, Xia Zhe had sent her the ‘three turns and one sound’. The radio was able to receive the news broadcasts. If Qiao Qiang knew of her going to Gushan and then he heard the earthquake being reported over the radio after a few days, she would not know what would happen if Qiao Qiang got worried and went to look for her. It was better not to let her grandfather worry.

“Perhaps in a week’s time. I still have to pack my things,” Qiao Mei said.

“Go to the county city with Sister Dong tomorrow and buy a few pieces of nice fabric to make some new clothes. It doesn’t matter how much it costs. I still remember how your mother-in-law was about such things in the past. She’s not a typical person so you have to be serious about it.” Qiao Qiang had saved Xia Jun before and had a good relationship with him, and also knew his son and daughter-in-law.

“There’s no need for that, grandfather. The fabric that Xia Zhe gave me should be good enough. There’s no need to trouble Auntie Dong to make a trip with me.” Qiao Mei felt that her grandfather was making a mountain out of a molehill.

“Sigh! Don’t disobey me. I know what their family is like. Your father-in-law is not too bad, he usually just likes to spend time with his birds and he has a good temper. Your mother-in-law is one-of-a-kind. When she was young, she was in the military art troupe and was a key personnel there! She’s very capable and she’s also good-looking, and she’s especially particular about her clothes. Later on, when she was older, she transferred to the logistics department. Anyway, you just need to wear whatever looks nice and fashionable!” Qiao Qiang said as he recalled the past.

Based on what Qiao Qiang had described, it seemed that she really had to come up with some countermeasures. This mother-in-law seemed really one-of-a-kind. Qiao Mei planned to make a few more dresses. In the past few years, such clothes were not allowed. People would say that a person wearing that was indecent, and the person would get reported and had to go to attend a meeting about the issue. There was not much said about such clothes now, but people were still not very liberal. Since her mother-in-law had an eye for fashion, then she need not have any misgivings about it.

Qiao Qiang felt that it was not enough for her to just wear nice clothes but that she still had to give them something presentable. Qiao Qiang went back into the house and rummaged through the

cabinets. He took out a bottle of wine that he had kept for many years but then thought that there were plenty of that in the capital and they probably would not care for it at all. After a while, he finished searching the entire house but still did not manage to find anything suitable.

Qiao Qiang then took out a small box containing the wild lingzhi and a small piece of wild ginseng that Qiao Mei had brought back and gifted to him. For such herbs, the artificially cultivated ones were not as nutritious as the ones picked from the mountains, and could only be chanced upon by luck. Qiao Mei originally wanted him to keep it for himself, but he could not be bothered with that now.

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Qiao Qiang took the box to Qiao Mei and said, "Take this with you. They should value this kind of thing."

Seeing that her grandfather was afraid that she would be subject to criticism and had taken out his most valuable assets for her, she could not help but tear up. Qiao Qiang's actions made her feel the warmth of having a family.

To Qiao Mei, it was a simple matter to produce these. Any simple energy exchange could get her high-quality wild ginseng and wild lingzhi. She did not have to worry about finding these herbs.

Right now, Qiao Mei's superpower allowed her to search for rare and valuable plants within a three-kilometer radius and her energy exchange could produce high quality plants. However, these herbs were supposed to be rare. If she caused them to appear all over the mountains and plains, people would surely notice something was amiss. Therefore, Qiao Mei only did a simple energy exchange and brought back two to three catties for Qiao Qiang to try out and see if it helped with his health. He would usually soak them in his drinking water. The quality of this batch of herbs was still not good enough to be brought to the capital.

Chapter 140: Cheers and Laughter

Lingzhi was a type of fungus that typically took more than a year to be fully grown and would only grow only under very specific conditions. However, it was still not as difficult to find as ginseng. It was very rare to find good quality old ginseng. Even if one managed to find it, one needed to find someone who knew how to dig it out, otherwise there would still be damage done to the ginseng. An intact ginseng was a very rare find.

As Qiao Qiang looked at these items, he still felt that they were still not up to standard and not presentable. Back then, Xia Zhe was tricked into entering the house to be with Qiao Mei, but not only did he not despise Qiao Mei's figure and appearance, he even gave her generous betrothal gifts. Even for weddings in the city, there were very few people who were able to come up with the 'three turns and one sound'. It was not because people did not have the money to buy it, but because one might not be able to get hold of the items even if one had money.

Qiao Qiang decided to go back to his cabinet and see if there were any other valuable items that Qiao Mei could bring to the capital with her.

Qiao Mei hurriedly pulled Qiao Qiang back. She could have as many of these herbs as she wanted. She wanted her grandfather to keep his share for himself and she could go into the mountains to get some more. Her heart ached to see how nicely her grandfather treated her, but it was just not possible for her to tell him about her abilities.

"Grandfather, keep these for yourself to put in your drinking water. I'll go to the mountains to look for more. There should be plenty of these!" Qiao Mei said to her grandfather.

"Plenty of these? Hahahaha, do you really think it's like cabbages that can be found everywhere? Silly child," Qiao Qiang said laughingly.

Qiao Mei handed the box to Qiao Qiang and said, "What makes you think I can't find it, I'll go look for it again. If I really can't find any, then I'll take yours."

Qiao Qiang thought for a moment and decided he did not want to argue with his granddaughter, so he let Qiao Mei be. He put the box back into its spot in the corner. Although everyone was poor now, he was still afraid that someone would covet it and come to steal it.

Qiao Mei went up to the mountains alone. Recently, she would take the four children out for a walk whenever she had time and teach them to recognize all the useful things on the mountain. As the old saying goes, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime". Instead of picking and harvesting stuff for the children to sell, it was better to teach the children how to pick them and to distinguish what was useful and what was not edible.

Ever since the villagers saw Qiao Mei bringing the four children up the mountains to pick wild crops every day and coming back with their hands full every night, many people tagged along to take a look at where they went to find so many nice things. Usually, Qiao Mei would also produce more fruits when she did energy exchanges, afraid that the villagers would become suspicious. She had already informed Auntie Dong and Auntie Wang roughly which areas they should head to. After all, they were on her side and it was better than letting outsiders pick the fruits.

She also did not want the children to follow her all the time. They still had to have their own circle of friends. Qiao Mei roasted the remaining melon seeds at home, distributed them to the children and asked them to play near the tree at the entrance of the brigade office. That area was big and all the village children liked to play there. She told them to share the melon seeds with the other children if the children did not invite them to play together. Using this method, they got along well with all the children in less than three days. There were even a few children who took the initiative to go to Li Gui's house to play with them.

Ever since the children came to the village, they laughed more and there were smiles on their faces every day. Zhang Wei, who was relatively older than the rest, slowly brought his younger siblings out to play with the children in the village. He soon became the leader of the group of local children and everyone liked to play with him.

Li Gui even borrowed a few pieces of rags from Qiao Mei and sewed a triangular sandbag and a square sandbag for the children. Many children found it novel and played at Li Gui's house for a long time before pestering Li Gui to make one for them.

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"Auntie, make one for me too!"

"Auntie, I want one too!"

"Okay, okay, okay..."

The harmonious atmosphere made Qiao Mei feel relieved.

She had already explained to the four children how difficult it had been for Li Gui all these years, as well as told them about the evil deeds of Old Madam Zhang and Old Madam Li.

The children were all quite sensible and understood that what happened in the past was not entirely Li Gui's fault. Most of the time, it was someone else's fault. Their attitude towards Li Gui improved a lot and they knew to help her in whatever way they could. Li Gui used the money that she earned from selling things to buy them items that they liked. They were no longer afraid that the Zhang and Li families would sow discord between them and ask them for money.