

Collapse 40

Chapter 40: New Year's Almost Here_1

The white-haired landlord's eyes flickered.

Even though the old woman's eyes were no longer bright, Gu Mian could see the emotion in them.

The landlord hesitated before speaking, "I know, Xiao Gu, you probably think my building isn't 'clean,' but I can tell you, no one has ever died in this building. Not a single person. However, your mention of knocking does remind me of something...

"It's true, a tenant died two years ago, but not in one of my apartments here. He was a man in his early thirties named Zhao Wen. It was an accidental death; he died outside.

"At the time, he was still renting from me. He was found dead in a motel, apparently from starvation. When they discovered him, the body had already started to decompose.

"That brings us to why he was renting my apartment but moved out.

"That Zhao Wen was a young, energetic fellow, only in his early thirties. When he first moved in, he was quite active, always popping in and out, visiting neighbors.

"But less than a month later, he wasn't himself anymore. I don't know why, but I watched him grow gaunt and lose a lot of weight. He didn't have the energy to move around anymore.

"Then one time, he secretly asked me if anyone had ever died in the apartment he was renting. Of course not. If someone had, I wouldn't have hidden it from him.

"Then he told me he kept hearing strange knocking at his door late at night, but when he looked, there was never anyone there.

"Not long after, he had a few friends come stay with him, but no one heard the knocking except him. He couldn't sleep at night because of it. Eventually, I think he got too scared. He moved back to his family's home—it wasn't far from here—without even formally terminating his lease.

"After that, I didn't hear any news about him for a while.

"Then, less than two months later, I heard his neighbors discussing it. The young man had died. Sigh.

"Even though I thought he was imagining the knocking, I didn't rent out that apartment again. This building is never fully rented out anyway, so it didn't matter if one unit stayed empty.

"It wasn't until you came to me today that I started to find it strange. Could it be that what that boy Zhao Wen said was true...?"

Qing Huan stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

As the landlord finished speaking, Qing Huan had a strange expression. He stiffly craned his neck to look at Gu Mian. So, the one knocking on Dr. Gu's door last night was really a ghost? And Dr. Gu actually cursed out a ghost?

Gu Mian wasn't too concerned with that. Instead, he continued his questioning, "Do you think there's a connection between Zhao Wen's death and the knocking he mentioned?"

The landlord shook her head. "That, I don't know. He seemed to have gone home to live for a while. You can ask his family for the specifics. I should still have their phone number... they left it when they registered for the rental."

As she said this, she stood up, walked to a nearby table, and took out a key to open a drawer.

At this moment, Gu Mian suddenly asked, "By the way, was Zhao Wen staying in the same room I am now?"

The landlord shook her head. "No. After he died, I never rented that apartment to anyone else again."

Saying this, the landlord fumbled in a drawer and took out a thick notebook.

It was a yellow-covered notebook with pages so thin they were barely thicker than tissue paper. A few pages in the middle had detached and been taped back in.

She put on her reading glasses and carefully leafed through the notebook. After a while, she stopped. "Found it. Here's his family's home phone number..."

In 2002, many people didn't own personal mobile phones yet, but most households had a landline.

Gu Mian copied down Zhao Wen's home phone number, said goodbye to the landlord, and left with Qing Huan.

Qing Huan followed closely behind Gu Mian. "Dr. Gu, was Zhao Wen killed by that knocking ghost?"

"Most likely."

"So, does that mean all of us targeted by these ghosts... will end up dead like Zhao Wen?"

A chill ran down Qing Huan's spine at the thought. So these ghosts have been killing people all along. Who knows how many groups of people they've cursed before us?

Gu Mian patted his shoulder comfortingly. "Don't worry, I'm here..."

Qing Huan looked up at him, somewhat moved.

Gu Mian continued, "Anyway, as long as I don't die, we won't all be wiped out."

"..."

Zhao Wen's home phone was still in service. When Gu Mian called, a woman who didn't sound young answered.

"Hello?" a voice came from the other end.

"Hello," Gu Mian began, "Is this the Zhao residence?"

There was an evident pause on the other end. After a few seconds, a somewhat suspicious voice asked, "And you are...?"

"We're from the Supernatural Event Investigation Bureau," Gu Mian said. "We've noted that a few years ago, a deceased individual named Zhao Wen may have died due to a supernatural event. We're hoping you can assist our investigation." He paused, then added, "There's compensation."

Things went smoothly, and Gu Mian and Qing Huan found Zhao Wen's home address without any trouble.

Zhao Wen's home wasn't far from Gu Mian's Hongsheng Apartment, about an hour's walk. It was an older residential building, the type often provided for employees' families.

Though the apartment was small, it was very clean. Currently, only a woman nearing forty was home.

She poured two glasses of water and handed them to the pair on the sofa.

"I'm Zhao Wen's older sister, Zhao Meixiang," the woman said, looking uncertainly at Gu Mian. "You're... a doctor?"

"Yes," Gu Mian nodded. "Members of our Supernatural Event Investigation Bureau all have day jobs. Don't mind it."

Zhao Meixiang finally looked away from him. "You're here to investigate my brother, aren't you? You don't actually have to pay. As his sister, I've always wanted to understand why my brother died."

When she spoke of Zhao Wen, her expression darkened, her face etched with sorrow.

"He was my only younger brother. We were very close since childhood. I never imagined he'd pass so suddenly. After he left, my parents, already elderly, were heartbroken. They followed him within two years..."

Zhao Meixiang wiped away tears as she spoke. "Ask whatever you want. I'll tell you everything I know."

Since she put it that way, Gu Mian asked directly, "I heard from Zhao Wen's landlord at the time that for a period, he kept hearing knocking sounds. When Zhao Wen came back home, did he ever mention this to you?"

Zhao Meixiang nodded. "At the time, he was working at a factory not far from our home. Initially, I wanted him to live here, but he refused.

"I was already married by then, and it wasn't really appropriate for my younger brother to continue living with us, so he went out and rented a place.

"But less than a month later, he rushed back home, without even his luggage. I asked him what had happened, but he wouldn't say. He just frantically moved into our spare room...

"I was very worried about him. The next day, when he still hadn't emerged after a long time, I went to his room to check on him.

"When I went in, he was still in bed, curled up into a tiny ball. I sensed something was wrong, so I pulled back the covers. I saw his face, deathly pale, and his eyes were wide open, staring.

"I was startled and quickly asked him what was wrong. With that same pale face, he looked up at me and asked...

"Did you knock on my door last night?"