

Folly 181

Chapter 181: The Dumbfounded Crowd

In the paddy field, Mrs. Lin rolled up her sleeves and rushed up, stepping into the muddy water.

Mrs. Jin was not to be outdone and retaliated head-on.

These days, her own man's affairs were like a hanging sword over her head, continuously reminding her that those people from the Old Mu Family were worthless, and now it was time to vent.

The two women fought fiercely, with Mrs. Lin being the more aggressive one. She relied on her years of hard work and physical strength, clamping Mrs. Jin's head under her armpit and continuously hitting her head.

"Bitch, still want to fight me? I'll make you feel my power today." Mrs. Lin viciously said to the person tightly clamped in her armpit.

Mrs. Jin felt terribly uncomfortable in Mrs. Lin's armpit.

Mrs. Lin wasn't particularly clean, and these days had been hard at work, she just laid down in bed after eating, no time for a bath, so naturally, she smelled bad.

"Ugh..." Mrs. Jin dry heaved a few times from the smell.

Mrs. Lin struck Mrs. Jin's head a few times, then started pulling her hair.

The one-sided abuse turned around when Mrs. Jin found leverage and kicked Mrs. Lin's leg.

With a "plunk," both of them fell into the field, yet their hands continued to fight...

No one stopped them at this point, because Mr. Mu had gone home for a bowel movement and wouldn't be back soon.

Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian were on the other side of the rice field throwing seedlings into baskets, Yu Si Niang originally didn't get along with Mrs. Jin, and she remembered Mrs. Jin for hurting her husband and trying to sell her daughter, so she definitely wouldn't step up to advise.

On the field ridge, everyone watched another drama of the Old Mu Family, covering their mouths, even stopped working on the field.

"This Old Mu Family is interesting, in the morning two sons hug each other, in the afternoon two wives fight."

"Indeed, this family is a disgrace, watching it makes one feel ashamed."

"Hey, you might not have heard, Mu Dashan's separation was justified, heard they wanted to marry off Shuang, Da Shan got so angry he spit blood and wasn't treated, that's why the third branch separated."

"I told you, Da Shan hasn't been out for days, wondering if he's ill or something, turns out to be true."

Everyone chattered away, getting more and more outrageous, some even bored enough to bet whether Mu Dade from Old Mu Family could pass the exam.

They say long sickness in front of the bed breeds unfilial children, even the real son can't always respect the father.

Much less Mu Dade, who hasn't passed the scholar exam for ten years, even if admired, respected, over such long time, that bit of feeling has been eroded away.

Now, the Old Mu Family became the dining-table gossip, taken out from time to time for entertainment.

Mr. Mu finished his business and saw on the field ridge, his two daughter-in-laws brawling, covered in mud, spewing vicious curses at each other.

Without a word, Mr. Mu raised a shoulder pole and struck them each one blow, making them howl.

"Shameful, shameful, you two get back home, change clothes, don't come back later!"

Nearing dusk, Mr. Mu didn't expect the two daughter-in-laws to return, even called the remaining workers to go home.

The Old Mu Family, it was time for another family meeting.

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Mu Shuangshuang returned home, the Old Mu Family meeting had started, Little Zhi and Xiao Han sat on the doorstep, each holding a straw fan, fanning themselves while waiting for Mu Shuangshuang to come home.

On seeing Mu Shuangshuang, Little Zhi put the straw fan into Xiao Han's hand and immediately came over, Xiao Han remained quiet, but also came closer.

"Sister, this afternoon Aunt and Second Aunt were fighting, all covered in mud."

Little Zhi just meant to inform Mu Shuangshuang about this matter, unexpectedly her sister reacted so intensely.

Mu Shuangshuang clutched her stomach, squatting and laughing till she was out of breath.

Beside her, Xiao Han helplessly turned his head, already accustomed to his sister's behavior.

"Where are they now?"

Mu Shuangshuang was extremely curious, Mrs. Jin was the face of the Old Mu Family, Mrs. Lin was the shrew of the Old Mu Family, if these two fought, Mr. Mu wouldn't go crazy.

"Grandpa called the family to discuss matters."

"Is Mom there too?" Mu Shuangshuang frowned, the third branch had separated, why let her mom attend some rubbish meeting.

"Yes, Grandpa specifically called Mom."

"No way, I must get Mom, the Old Mu Family's matters are unrelated to our third branch."

During the separation, nothing was given to the third branch, and now Old Mu Family has trouble, wanting the third branch to take the fall, there's no way.

The main house of the Old Mu Family—

Mrs. Jin and Mrs. Lin stood in a row, Mrs. Jin lowered her head, continually looking at the floor.

Mrs. Lin held her head high, she's sure Lin Xiaozao won't lose in a fight.

"Mrs. Lin, who are you putting on this act for? Look at your good deeds, the Old Mu Family's face lost because of you."

Mr. Mu still had in his heart that Mrs. Jin was his eldest son's wife, so harsh words first aimed at Mrs. Lin.

"Dad, this isn't my fault, sister-in-law herself tried to marry off our Qingqing, Qingqing is so small, why marry her to that Wang San?"

Marrying Mu Qingqing was Mrs. Jin's thought, yet she hadn't even got the chance to say it.

"Mrs. Lin, I've treated you well, why falsely accuse me? Why curse me as a chicken that doesn't lay eggs?"

A chicken that doesn't lay eggs, Mrs. Lin's favorite jab at Mrs. Jin, because Mrs. Lin herself had two sons, while Mrs. Jin had two daughters, yet this is Mrs. Jin's bottom line, untouchable.

Seeing the two about to fight again, Mu Shuangshuang just happened to step into the hall.

Her arrival naturally caught the attention of everyone in the Old Mu Family.

"What are you here for, get out, you the third branch is separated, can't enter Old Mu Family." Mrs. Jin unkindly said to Mu Shuangshuang.

Clearly, Mrs. Jin was venting on Mu Shuangshuang, Mu Shuangshuang herself knew.

"Sister-in-law, Shuangshuang is just a child, why vent on her?" Yu Si Niang, who hadn't spoken, opened her mouth.

"Mom, Dad seems unwell, you should quickly check on him." Mu Shuangshuang went and pulled Yu Si Niang's hand, trying to get her to leave.

"Okay, mom will go now."

Yu Si Niang hurriedly left, worried about her husband, not noticing that Mu Shuangshuang hadn't followed.

After Yu Si Niang left, Mu Shuangshuang spoke. "Grandpa, Aunt is right, since we the third branch are separated, there's no need to attend such family meetings.

Also, Aunt, you don't need to target me every time, you don't even want to marry off your own daughter, why marry me?

Human hearts are made of flesh, don't always try to take advantage, for your own gain, beware that actions in life are seen by the heavens, inviting retribution in time!"

"You... dare speak to me like that?"

Mrs. Jin's face was already twisted, the gentle she now looked no different from a lunatic.

Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to waste time with her, walked out of the Old Mu Family's hall with her head held high, leaving behind a roomful of stunned people.

Was the brat rebelling? Or did they just imagine her doing so?

Chapter 182: Rare Curiosity

Since Mu Shuangshuang declared her independence at the Old Mu Family, she's completely let herself go. Not only does she skip work in the fields, but she also eats a lot on purpose during meals.

Old Mrs. Mu was so angry that she wanted to hit someone several times, but Mr. Mu seemed under a strange spell. Despite Shuangshuang's "arrogance," he never said a word and always came out to scold Old Mrs. Mu instead.

With Mr. Mu's help, it became natural for Shuangshuang not to work and to eat on time every mealtime.

Instead of working, Shuangshuang used her time to make straw fans and earn money in town.

One early morning, Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng went to town together to do business.

Pushing a small wheelbarrow full of goods, the two of them arrived in town just as the sun was rising, during the hottest time of the day.

The town market was much quieter than usual, probably because the farmers were busy with planting and harvesting, and there were fewer porters carrying mountain goods on the streets.

However, there were still quite a lot of town folks out shopping.

Shuangshuang took the cold noodles to Jiu Si Xuan as agreed and had her usual chat with the Fat Chef about the noodle market.

The Fat Chef's expression was even prouder than last time.

Of course, as he had personally chosen the dish, and only his restaurant served it, how could he not be excited?

"Girl, why don't you and this young fellow stay for lunch? Consider it my thanks for bringing such good business to Jiu Si Xuan."

"No need, Uncle. Lu Yuanfeng and I still have things to sell. If you really want to thank me, improve the taste of the cold noodles so I can continue to supply them to you."

"You girl, you really know how to talk." The Fat Chef looked exasperated. This girl, truly with a Seven-Aperture Exquisite Heart, handled things with grace and principle.

Shuangshuang, eager to see how well the straw fans would sell, exchanged a few pleasantries with the Fat Chef and then left Jiu Si Xuan with Lu Yuanfeng.

Once outside the restaurant, Lu Yuanfeng asked Shuangshuang, "Shuangshuang, should we sell the rabbits first, or the straw fans?"

Yuanfeng, who careful prioritizes everything, naturally wanted to know Shuangshuang's internal order of priorities.

"Of course, we should sell the rabbits first since they're live animals. The longer we keep them, the more risk there is."

The hot weather meant that without food or water, the rabbits might die, and losing them would waste dozens of coins.

A rabbit could sell for about sixty coins, and together they caught seven rabbits, which could bring in nearly four hundred coins—a substantial sum.

Shuangshuang had been in business for a while, earning small amounts, but she was quite content. Money is gathered little by little.

Finding ways to earn money in this unfamiliar ancient world was already a blessing. She didn't aim to get rich quick.

Much like herself, the original owner of this body was too skinny. After exercising and eating more for a long time, she was finally seeing some results.

At least her face was rosier than before, and even her cheeks had gained some flesh.

After some time, they sold all the rabbits.

As she expected, the rabbits sold for almost four hundred eight coins, but she gave the rabbit skins to the restaurant for free.

Lu Yuanfeng didn't mind, and when Shuangshuang suggested giving away the rabbit skins, he showed no hesitation.

"Don't you feel it's a loss? Those rabbit skins could be tanned and used to make a small vest."

Indeed, the skins from seven rabbits could make a vest.

But Yuanfeng didn't forget that when Shuangshuang proposed giving away the rabbit fur, she secured an advantage.

In winter, all the game they delivered, regardless of size, must be purchased by the restaurant without reducing the price.

This deal definitely outweighed the value of a few rabbit skins since, in winter, when hunters mostly entered the mountains, game was plentiful but easily preserved, leading restaurants to lower prices aggressively.

Realizing how far Shuangshuang thought ahead, Yuanfeng could only admire her; how could he think of it as a loss?

"No, I understand Shuangshuang's intention."

Not to mention, Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng never lacked tacit understanding. Almost every action Shuangshuang took, Yuanfeng could grasp the underlying meaning.

This kid is smart!

At the market, Shuangshuang spread out the straw fans she and her family had spent two days making, one by one.

Holding a fan, she gently fanned herself; even in the heat, the fan's breeze quickly dispelled much of the stifling atmosphere.

In the hot weather, a girl holding something like a fan, which no one had seen before, naturally drew a crowd of the heat-averse.

Soon, Shuangshuang's stall was surrounded.

Lu Yuanfeng stood by, watching the crowd. With more people, it became chaotic and prone to petty theft. His job was to protect all the fans and their money bags.

"Hey little girl, what's that thing you're holding? Is it a fan?"

A plainly dressed woman stopped by Shuangshuang's stall, curiously asking.

Close enough already, Shuangshuang didn't say much. She just picked up her fan and fanned toward the woman, and the cool breeze immediately took away much of the heat.

"If it blows wind, it must be a fan. My fan is cheaper than ordinary paper fans, and the quality is better. It can last three to five years, at least."

For a straw fan, lasting three to five years was quite normal, and Shuangshuang wasn't exaggerating.

"Is your stuff really that good?" A curious woman next to them came over after hearing Shuangshuang's introduction.

"You'll know if it works just by trying it."

Handing the straw fan to the woman, she fanned herself a few times and was particularly satisfied with it, so she took one.

"Madam, won't you take another one? There are many mosquitoes in the summer. Having one in the outhouse means you won't be bitten even if you go there at midnight."

This was Shuangshuang's experience from her time in the security team, having felt the power of mosquitoes. Forgetting to light mosquito repellent meant being their feast.

Experienced seniors advised her to bring a straw fan to the restroom to fan away the mosquitoes.

The woman hesitated but, thinking of the mosquito-infested outhouse at home, decided to take another one.

"Little girl, you still haven't told us how much one of these fans costs."

"Five coins!" exclaimed Shuangshuang, raising the straw fan to the crowd. "Everyone, come take a look! High-quality, practical straw fans for only five coins each!"

Hearing that they were only five coins, the woman didn't hesitate and handed ten coins to Shuangshuang, smiling and saying,

"You girl, you're really good at business. But this thing is truly useful, and I'll bring a few friends to you next time."

Hearing this, Shuangshuang quickly handed the woman another fan.

"Thank you, Madam! You're my first customer; Shuangshuang's decision is to give you an extra one!"

With a look of surprise and delight, the woman accepted the fan from Shuangshuang and ran out of the market, seemingly to really call others over.

Chapter 183: So Domineering

Mu Shuangshuang has never been the type to casually give things away or offer discounts when doing business.

The things she does usually have her own considerations and can generally bring business to herself.

The best strategy for doing business is word of mouth. She cultivates some quality customers to help spread the word for her.

Before long, the woman who had received the straw fan from Mu Shuangshuang really came back, followed by several women, their expressions a mix of curiosity and anticipation.

It's clear they sincerely came to do business.

One of the women picked up a fan and said to Mu Shuangshuang, "Little girl, we were all recommended by acquaintances, we'll each take two fans."

Mu Shuangshuang was not pretentious; since others had brought people to her, she naturally responded swiftly and acknowledged the favor. As for giving things away, she really didn't.

A fan costs five coins. If she gave one to everyone, she wouldn't be able to do business at all.

Fortunately, no one minded.

After paying, they took their fans and left.

This time, Mu Shuangshuang brought fifty-two straw fans from home. This woman and her friends bought twelve fans in one go. With this start to business, Mu Shuangshuang's straw fans sold remarkably well, with hardly anyone complaining about the price.

After selling the last fan, Mu Shuangshuang breathed a sigh of relief.

It seems that even though Mu Dashan has been bedridden with internal injuries for half a year, he now has a way to make money. He should be able to stay put now.

With everything sold, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng had some free time, so they wandered the streets together.

Thinking about how she had only ever seen ancient streets on TV before, now being able to roam in a real ancient market filled Mu Shuangshuang's heart with excitement.

All the way, she strolled and stopped, taking in everything around her, finally stopping at a vendor's stall selling women's items.

Women's jewelry, handkerchiefs, or sachets like silk flowers have always been popular items.

While standing by, Mu Shuangshuang observed several young women ask for prices and promptly pay, walking away happily with their purchases.

"Young lady, what are you looking for? Hairpins? Silk flowers, or handkerchiefs?"

The vendor, seeing Mu Shuangshuang standing for a while, took the initiative to ask her.

"How much is this sachet?" Mu Shuangshuang curiously pointed at a sachet embroidered with a lotus flower.

"The one you're pointing at is eight coins each, and there's another type for twelve coins. The main difference lies in the embroidery and material of the sachet," the vendor explained honestly.

But to Mu Shuangshuang, the so-called differences seemed negligible.

The sachets weren't finely crafted, and the material wasn't particularly soft, falling far short compared to Yu Si Niang's craftsmanship.

"Can this sachet repel mosquitoes?" Mu Shuangshuang wasn't really fond of fragrant things.

It was just that there were too many mosquitoes at home. When she went out to the outhouse or bathed at night, she didn't know how much blood had been drawn by the mosquitoes. If the sachet had special effects, it would be worthwhile.

"Young girl, are you joking with me? Sachets are for emitting fragrance from your body, not for driving away mosquitoes. If that were the case, these sachets would be too cheap," the vendor replied with some annoyance, perhaps due to years of dealing with women's goods and not considering Mu Shuangshuang, in her attire, someone with money, and so not as approachable as with other customers.

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't angry. Buying things is just like that. If she meets a vendor with a good attitude, she'll buy some things happily. If not, she'll just ignore them.

Lu Yuanfeng glanced at the vendor and suddenly said, "Shuangshuang, it's not impossible for sachets to repel mosquitoes. This person says they can't, but that's just because he doesn't have the skill. When we get back, I'll make one for you."

"Hey, what do you mean by that? I don't have the skill?" The vendor rolled up his sleeves and jumped out.

"I see you two shameless paupers have no money to buy. If you don't have money, just get lost!"

The vendor's insult angered Mu Shuangshuang, and she said, "Since you opened a business, when a customer asks, you should answer. Besides the mockery, to attack someone, how can people still come to buy from someone like you?"

In my opinion, the cost of your sachets is no more than two coins each. The so-called good embroidery and material, any clear-eyed person knows, are just of average quality."

"You... you... you're spouting nonsense! If you keep slandering me, I'll kill you!"

The vendor's face turned slightly red, his secret so easily revealed, he couldn't let it go.

As he spoke, he pulled out a wrist-thick wooden stick from behind the stall and swung it in Mu Shuangshuang's direction.

Lu Yuanfeng stepped forward, kicked the wooden stick out of the vendor's hand, and with a strong grip, seized the vendor's right hand holding the stick.

Immediately, the vendor let out a scream, and Lu Yuanfeng's face remained cold as he applied more force.

"What are you doing? Ouch... let go of me," the vendor exclaimed in pain, his expression pale and his features contorted from the pain.

"Apologize to Shuangshuang!" Lu Yuanfeng's icy gaze locked on the vendor like a demon from hell, fearing no one.

The vendor instantly cowered, pleading with Mu Shuangshuang, "Miss, I'm sorry, please let me go. I'm the pauper, I'm the shameless one... I..."

The person in front of her cried with snot and tears, but Mu Shuangshuang was unmoved.

People around were either watching the commotion or gloating.

This vendor, considered one of the more profitable ones on this street, always treated surrounding vendors with contempt.

Over time, people had grievances against him, but since they all peddled in the same area, no one confronted him.

Now with Lu Yuanfeng standing up to teach him a lesson, people were happy to be bystanders and watch the spectacle.

When the vendor's face turned ashen and he was on the verge of fainting from the pain, Mu Shuangshuang finally spoke.

"I won't hold this against you, but in the future, when doing business, you better not dehumanize people.

If you don't want to sell to others, then don't. But if you dare humiliate anyone again, I won't forgive you!"

After admonishing him, Lu Yuanfeng released his grip.

Freed, the vendor didn't even bother with his injured hand and quickly packed his things, fleeing while cursing.

"You two little bastards, just wait, I'll definitely get my revenge," he shouted as he ran.

Lu Yuanfeng clenched his fist and was about to chase after him but was pulled back by Mu Shuangshuang.

"Let it go, don't chase desperate dogs. He's just boasting to save face," Mu Shuangshuang said, finally calming Lu Yuanfeng's expression as he agreed with her.

"Let's go and continue shopping," Mu Shuangshuang suggested.

Chapter 184: The Kitchen is Built

On the road, Mu Shuangshuang didn't let that stall owner affect her mood for shopping.

Just like before, her eyes scanned the wide array of goods in the marketplace, hoping to find something she needed.

Lu Yuanfeng walked beside her, occasionally glancing at her.

In his mind, he was still thinking about the words Shuangshuang said earlier, the sachet to ward off mosquitoes.

When Lu Yuanfeng was in the Northwest Camp, the people there would incense some herbal-like things into their clothing.

After doing so, even when outdoors, mosquitoes wouldn't bite them.

"Shuangshuang, actually..."

"Lu Yuanfeng, actually..."

They both started speaking almost at the same time, their words surprisingly in sync.

"Haha, you go first," Mu Shuangshuang laughed.

"Better if Shuangshuang goes first!" Lu Yuanfeng shook his head, responding to Mu Shuangshuang.

"Alright, I was thinking, if we put some mosquito-repelling herbs in the sachet, it should work. If you want a scent, you can mix in some petals."

Lu Yuanfeng looked at Mu Shuangshuang excitedly, he said, "Shuangshuang, we thought of the same thing.

This method, we used it in the camp, but we didn't mix petals, and mainly smoked the scent into the clothing. Of course, the smell wasn't pleasant."

After all, it was something the men used, compared to being pleasant and good-looking, they cared more about effectiveness.

"That's good, let's try it out when we get back."

The two of them wandered around the market a few times, and Mu Shuangshuang bought a set of small rice bowls and five big dishes bowls.

She also bought a set of an iron pot and a spatula, but she didn't spend money on chopsticks, because after going back, she could find someone to split bamboo into them.

Farm households prefer to save money; they usually won't buy things they can make themselves in town, saving money for the future.

As Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were almost done shopping, and had seemingly bought everything they needed,

just when they were hesitating about returning, Mu Shuangshuang saw a shop selling seeds and suddenly remembered that piece of wasteland they opened needs some seeds.

Lunar June, the weather is scorching, suitable vegetables for planting are limited, cabbage, eggplant, and peppers are just perfect for this time.

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng entered the seed store and bought a little bit of seeds.

Next, once the soil was turned, and manure was applied, they could plant the vegetables.

Since today's earnings were quite good, they made a lot of money selling rabbits and cold noodles, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng indulged a little, each buying two pounds of beef and some snacks to take home.

Moreover, the green beans and flour were running low, so Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng bought twenty pounds of green beans and ten pounds of flour together.

As they were now working together on business, they jointly invested in materials for making cold noodles.

However, Mu Shuangshuang had previously agreed with Lu Yuanfeng about the straw fan business; most of the fans were made by Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan, so the earnings belonged to them.

When they were returning, Mu Shuangshuang was exhausted, but Lu Yuanfeng was still full of energy.

She recalled that along the way, only Lu Yuanfeng was pushing the wheelbarrow while she was resting beside him, which made Mu Shuangshuang feel even more that her strength compared to Lu Yuanfeng was vastly inferior.

She needed to put on weight!

Perhaps she should make some delicious food and quickly gain some weight to have the strength and stamina for work.

In these ancient times, unlike modern times, slightly plumper boys and girls were more popular than those who were skinny and frail.

Everyone looking for a wife or husband wasn't seeking a decoration, they needed someone to work in the fields and manage household chores, without good physical strength, these tasks are simply impossible.

Just as they entered the courtyard, Zhao Daniu and Zhao Dahu came up to them.

Both of them were covered in sweat, and before Mu Shuangshuang could ask about the satisfied smiles on their faces, Zhao Dahu took the initiative to speak.

"Sister Shuang, we've finally finished your kitchen and pigsty."

Upon hearing this, Mu Shuangshuang hurried to inspect the empty space next to her house, where two wooden huts had already been built.

The wooden huts were built alongside the old earthen house of the third branch, making the huts appear especially new.

However, since they were for the kitchen and pigsty, their size naturally couldn't compare to the main house of the third branch.

"Thank you, Big Niu, Big Hu, Shuangshuang has just bought some things, come and eat together, so I can also settle today's wages for you."

As Lu Yuanfeng helped Mu Shuangshuang carry the items they bought into the house, an uninvited guest appeared.

Mu Danian had just come out of the latrine, as it was close to the third branch, and with the recent commotion of building the kitchen, the Old Mu family's members were all red-eyed with irritation.

In the countryside, the most expensive house is without a doubt the green brick red tile house, followed by earthen houses, then thatched cottages and wooden houses.

Wooden houses are the least valuable because timber can be chopped from the mountains, and they are easy to build; if a few people work together, they can erect a wooden house in a few days.

But even so, it exceeded the expectations of the others.

"Oh, so this kitchen has been built quite quickly, is little Shuang ready to have some good food? I'm your fifth uncle, don't you forget me."

Mu Danian laughed lewdly, having spotted from afar the items Fengzi was carrying earlier; now that he was closer, he could see them clearly.

Lu Yuanfeng had a cloth bag on his back, stuffed with what seemed to be rice and flour, which Mu Danian wasn't particularly interested in.

After all, who doesn't have rice at home?

The highlight was the grass-tied beef in Lu Yuanfeng's hand, which made Mu Danian drool.

Beef is a treat; sometimes, even in an entire village, years might pass without seeing it.

Farmers' lifeblood is the farming oxen, and they would never easily slaughter them for meat.

Firstly, the government doesn't allow it; Da Ning Dynasty values agriculture, and everything related is protected. Secondly, people can't bear to.

So generally, beef is replaced by ox meat; the taste is great, but it's expensive, about twenty-eight coins per pound.

"Shuang girl, you're impressive, even managed to get beef. Come, let Fengzi give it to me. I'll take it to the kitchen for your grandma to make a stir-fried beef dish tonight."

Mu Danian reached out to grab the beef but was blocked by Lu Yuanfeng.

"Fifth uncle, you might have the wrong place. This is our third branch, your house is over there," Mu Shuangshuang kindly reminded Mu Danian.

Mu Danian, sensing that Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to give him the beef, exclaimed,

"Well now, you little brat, stole the meat and planned on eating it all by yourself? I'm going to tell the village head that you're a thief."

Mu Danian's words left everyone stunned, that such a shameless person could exist in this world.

Little Zhi stepped forward and pushed Mu Danian. "Go away, my sister is not a thief, you're bad!"

Chapter 185: What Is Uncle Up To?

"Hey, you little brat, just as rotten as your sister, get out of my way."

Mu Danian made a gesture as if to hit Little Zhi, but Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng both reached out to stop him.

Before Mu Danian could touch them, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng simultaneously pushed him away.

A burning pain flared up in his arm, and Mu Danian's expression immediately changed.

"Alright then, you filthy pair, how dare you hit me. I'll teach you a lesson on behalf of our third brother today."

Unlike Mrs. Jin and Mrs. Lin, Mu Danian had some strength, so Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng exchanged a glance and decided to give this foul-mouthed person a good lesson.

A deep voice suddenly emerged from behind, stopping the unruly Mu Danian in his tracks.

"Fifth, what are you doing? Are you even planning to hit Little Zhi?"

It was Mu Dade, dressed in a blue-gray robe, his hair impeccably combed. The fabric of the robe appeared very soft and undoubtedly of high quality.

Despite being over thirty years old, he didn't look his age at all. Having never done any hard labor, Mu Dade appeared five to six years younger than farmers of the same age. His presence was like a striking spectacle.

Mu Shuangshuang knitted her brows.

When did so many people suddenly come into her shabby house?

Wasn't Mu Dade always one to never come out, forever reading in the east wing?

As Mu Shuangshuang was pondering, Mu Dade had already approached. He squatted down in front of Little Zhi and asked gently, "Little Zhi, your fifth uncle didn't mean what he said. Don't be afraid. I apologize on his behalf."

Mu Dade's voice was inherently rich and magnetic, and now, with his voice deliberately softened, it was exceedingly gentle.

Little Zhi stared blankly at Mu Dade. In her memory, her eldest uncle was always so lofty, treated like a god by the entire family, untouchable by anyone.

Even the second auntie, who bullied the third family the most, never dared to speak ill of him.

Mu Danian was dumbfounded as he watched Mu Dade suddenly appear and deliberately comfort the little girl of the third family.

What's up with his big brother? Could he have gone mad?

Why was he deliberately getting close to the third family all of a sudden?

After a long pause, Mu Danian angrily voiced to Mu Dade, "Big brother, have you gone mad? That crappy girl's family has already separated from us, you..."

"Fifth brother, you really need to reflect on your actions. Everyone here is a child, and as a man, bullying them would make you a laughingstock if word got out. Also, isn't your field work still unfinished? You better go tend to it quickly!"

Mu Dade's words carried an assertive tone that allowed no refusal.

"Eldest uncle is right, fifth uncle, you should be busy in the fields, not here bullying children."

Mu Shuangshuang smirked. She was watching to see what game this eldest uncle was playing. When she was about to be sold, he did absolutely nothing.

It was precisely because he did nothing that made it more detestable. Had he not told the Old Mu Family she was short on money, they wouldn't have targeted her.

"Big brother, what are you talking about? We are family." Mu Danian persistently resisted.

"Fifth brother, the third brother and his family are also part of our family. Regardless of whether we've split or not, I hope you remember that!"

As soon as Mu Dade finished speaking, his stern face suddenly softened into a smile.

"Shuangshuang, I heard your father is ill, so I came to have a look."

One wouldn't hit a smiling face, so Mu Shuangshuang refrained from turning away gloomily and simply said, "My father is in his own room. If there's nothing else, I'll go back to my room first."

All the valuable items in the house were kept in Mu Shuangshuang's room, partly to guard against thieves and partly to guard against people from the Old Mu Family.

Just before entering Mu Dashan's room, Mu Dade cast a glance at the items Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were holding, his gaze briefly showing a flash of shadow.

Mu Dade went straight to Mu Dashan's room. Mu Dashan's room wasn't large, and with half the room stacked with smoked palm leaves, it looked even more cramped.

Mu Dade seemed somewhat disdainful but didn't show it. His coming here was neither hugely significant nor entirely trivial.

Earlier that morning, an old schoolmate had dropped by to see him and told him that a certain food called cold noodles was presently very scarce in the town. It was sold at a high price at Jiu Si Xuan and was so rare that only the truly wealthy had a chance to taste it.

Moreover, his old schoolmate had intentionally inquired about it and found out that it was provided by a little girl who held the secret recipe, and that little girl was Shuangshuang.

This schoolmate had a certain relation to Mu Dade, visiting his family once a year, so it wasn't surprising he knew Shuangshuang.

Mu Dade had just meticulously observed everything. Given what his schoolmate said was likely not false, Shuangshuang was indeed able to purchase such precious beef, and the items in that Fengzi boy's satchel were probably grains like rice and flour, all things that required silver, not suddenly appearing from thin air.

Already worried over financial matters, discovering now that Shuangshuang had such a recipe surely made him think it was a blessing from the heavens sent to help him.

"Big brother, why are you here?" Mu Dashan hurriedly tried to rise from the bed, but Mu Dade stopped him.

"Third brother, I heard you were ill, so I came to see how you're doing. Are you feeling any better?"

"I'm fine. If it weren't for having to drink medicine daily and feeling weak, I wouldn't even think I'm sick."

Mu Dashan was telling the truth, as internal weakness compared to other ailments was almost negligible, but when doing heavy labor, his body would react. The last time Mu Dashan coughed up blood was because he had reached his physical limit.

If he continued to force himself to work, his physical issues would only worsen.

Mu Dashan felt uneasy in front of Mu Dade, a feeling that had formed very early on.

Currently, Mu Dade was a scholar, not even having to bow in front of the County Magistrate, incomparable to them, the peasants.

"Big brother, did you... have something to discuss?" Mu Dashan wasn't truly clueless. His big brother wouldn't come without reason, certainly not just to check on him.

Besides, Mu Dashan had a lingering shadow from the past. Last time, sister-in-law came to find him, almost costing him his daughter. This time, with big brother here, it couldn't be...

Mu Dashan's emotions were clearly visible to Mu Dade, and how could he not understand Mu Dashan's wariness towards him?

"Oh, it's nothing much, just reminiscing. Back when I hadn't become a scholar, neither had third brother married, and you were doing almost all the work at home.

Back then, second and fifth brothers were as they are now, finding ways to slack off, and father couldn't hold them accountable, so he had to have you do more work to make up for their slack. Thinking back now, indeed, father was biased then."

A simple acknowledgment of favoritism left Mu Dashan with reddened eyes, having worked tirelessly most of his life, always yearning for recognition, acknowledgment from the Old Mu Family that he, Mu Dashan, had never slacked off and consistently contributed to the family.

Chapter 186: Soft and Tender

Mu Dade and Mu Dashan chatted for a long time, from Mu Dashan's health to many things from the past.

This approachable Mu Dade was someone Mu Dashan had never seen before. Of course, there was still a knot deep in Mu Dashan's heart, one that would not easily be untied.

Fortunately, from start to finish, Mu Dade didn't make any excessive requests.

Mu Dashan felt relieved.

"Third brother, take a good rest. Tomorrow, I'll have your sister-in-law bring some herbs from home. Maybe they'll cure your illness."

Mrs. Jin's family was scholarly, but she had a distant relative who worked as an attendant at the town's pharmacy, making it much more convenient to get medicine than for most people. Back when Mu Yingying's face was pinched by a lobster, it was the medicine she got from them that helped her recuperate.

"Thank you, big brother, but it's not necessary. Shuangshuang boils medicine for me every day. I'll get better soon."

When it came to Mu Shuangshuang, Mu Dade's eyes flickered before he spoke. "Third brother, Shuangshuang is a good child. These things, are they made by her?"

Mu Dade naturally didn't know what a straw fan was, but being able to display it at home surely had some use.

Due to the earlier goodwill, Mu Dashan slightly lowered his vigilance.

After all, he's his brother, sprouted from the same root, ultimately better than strangers.

"Yes, Shuangshuang is different from before. She came up with all these, saying they can be sold for money in town."

Mu Dashan spoke with pride, wanting others to know the prowess of his daughter.

He always believed that his daughter was not the worthless girl they said she was.

Such boastful words — how could Mu Dade not understand? He composed himself, not knowing why, but he suddenly felt a bit jealous of this brother.

If Shuangshuang was his daughter, if the cold noodles recipe was his...

Hold on, wait a bit more, this time definitely making the third branch voluntarily hand over the formula—

"I'll go back and study now. Third brother, take a good rest."

Mu Dade exited the room, and Mu Shuangshuang followed in.

Her first question was about Mu Dade's purpose for coming.

"Dad, what did uncle say?"

"Nothing much, just spoke about some past matters. Your uncle himself is under a lot of pressure. He says he cares a lot about this opportunity."

After Mu Dashan finished speaking, he looked at his daughter, seeing no extra expressions on her face, or signs of anger, he let out a breath of relief.

"Shuangshuang, your uncle isn't a bad person, just that the pressure from family over the years was too much for him. Of course, dad will still remember what your aunt did, and won't be easily fooled again."

These words were spoken after Mu Dashan had thought deeply about them.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded. "I know, don't tire yourself too much. Leave the household matters to mom and me. Once the stove is built, we'll cook on our own."

"Alright!"

Mu Shuangshuang returned outside to settle the wages for Zhao Dahu and Zhao Daniu, and Lu Yuanfeng had already started working.

Building the stove required mud bricks, which were made from clay. From the start, Lu Yuanfeng had prepared to help Mu Shuangshuang build the stove, so the mud bricks were already gathered. What remains is the matching clay, which needs to be adjusted by oneself, but these are not difficult tasks for Lu Yuanfeng.

In the mottled little wooden house, near the wall corner, Lu Yuanfeng arranged the mud bricks one by one. His movements were careful, with every step aligning the mud bricks neatly.

Mu Shuangshuang walked in, noticing that he was already drenched in sweat, beads trickling from his eyebrows past his eyelashes. This was the first time Mu Shuangshuang observed Lu Yuanfeng so closely.

From her angle, Lu Yuanfeng was bending over, his sturdy back tilted toward Mu Shuangshuang, carrying a large mud brick in his hands, focused intently on the stove before him, not even noticing Mu Shuangshuang's presence.

Each time he placed a brick, he used a mud scraper to apply the clay he had mixed in the right proportions, resulting in a simple stove tiled evenly by Lu Yuanfeng.

It was clear that he was very meticulous.

"Fengzi, wipe your sweat, it's about to get into your eyes."

Mu Shuangshuang's way of addressing him changed at this moment. Previously, she had kept calling him Lu Yuanfeng, both because she herself was mentally older than Lu Yuanfeng and because calling him brother was awkward for her.

So, she casually followed everyone else and called him Fengzi, which wasn't too distant, nor did it make her feel uncomfortable.

Lu Yuanfeng lifted his head, dumbfoundedly looking at Mu Shuangshuang, and only after quite a while he realized Shuangshuang had called his name.

"Haha, it's fine. Once I finish here, I'll wipe my sweat."

Lu Yuanfeng wanted to finish building the stove quickly, so Shuangshuang could cook herself soon. She was already so thin; if she continued not eating well, what would become of her?

"I'll help you then." Mu Shuangshuang took out her cotton handkerchief from her sleeve, carefully wiping the sweat off Lu Yuanfeng's face.

Even through a layer of handkerchief, Lu Yuanfeng could still feel the touch brought by the girl's hand gently brushing against his cheek—soft and cool, completely different from his own warm hand.

His heart thumped incessantly, as if it was going to leap out of his chest.

He instinctively pursed his lips, and his bright eyes squinted into a straight line.

"Okay, if sweat gets into your eyes again, call me, I'll get some food ready for you all."

While in town, Mu Shuangshuang had bought a watermelon. Upon returning, she soaked it in a bucket of water, just waiting for Lu Yuanfeng to finish his work and Yu Si Niang to come back from the fields to cut it.

Little Zhi was staring at the watermelon, drooling. She had never eaten watermelon in her life, only knowing that the outer skin was green, while the flesh inside was bright red, and delicious.

"Good girl, Little Zhi, let's hold on a bit longer. Once mom returns, we'll eat the watermelon."

Xiao Han was comforting his little sister beside her, and just like Little Zhi, he hadn't eaten it either. But he knew that everything was bought with his sister's earnings, and to eat, the whole family had to eat together.

"Okay! Little Zhi knows. Little Zhi will go play with Little Black for a while. Brother Xiao Han, stay here and guard it, don't let anyone take it."

The reason why Little Zhi was so afraid of thieves was due to past experiences. One year, Yu Si Niang caught a chill from the winter wind and was ill for a long time. Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu couldn't bear to hire a doctor, nor make anything good to eat.

Mu Dashan walked a long distance to Yu Si Niang's mother's house to finally get a few eggs, but before he could make them into custard for Yu Si Niang, the next morning, even the basket holding the eggs had been stolen.

Yu Si Niang eventually pulled through, but from then on, Xiao Han and Little Zhi became more cautious. Whenever there were good things at home, they would keep an eye out to avoid being stolen.

Chapter 187: Like a Family

By the time Lu Yuanfeng finished building the stove, it was already nearing dusk.

He had worked through the afternoon, but fortunately, the stove he built for Shuangshuang's house was quite impressive. The clay bricks were stacked perfectly with no protrusions on the exterior, and the surface of the stove was as smooth as if it had been sliced with a knife.

However, since the stove had just been built and the clay hadn't dried yet, it couldn't be used immediately. It would take a couple of days for the clay to dry and the stove to become solid.

Even when it was heated with a big flame, there would be no issues.

By this time, Mu Shuangshuang had already prepared dinner, and Yu Si Niang had just returned home—everything was timely, neither more nor less.

Just like Lu Yuanfeng's mood, neither excessive nor lacking.

In this warm and simple environment, with the aroma of food filling the air, Lu Yuanfeng found himself not wanting to leave for a moment.

He loved this kind of life, earning a living, while "she" stayed home, handling the three meals, while he took care of all the other tasks.

Lu Yuanfeng even pictured such a scene in his mind, but for him, it was too luxurious to even know if that day would ever come.

"What are you thinking about? Not even drinking your water?" Mu Shuangshuang stretched out a hand, fingers spread, and waved it in front of Lu Yuanfeng.

Just as before, whenever she came in, Lu Yuanfeng never noticed until she made a loud sound.

Lu Yuanfeng snapped out of it, only to see Shuangshuang holding a ladle of clean water with a pure smile on her face.

Her smile was sweet, her eyes bright, even the stars in the night sky couldn't compare to the sparkle in her eyes.

Lu Yuanfeng felt enchanted, his mind filled with thoughts of Shuangshuang, just like a moth drawn to the flame, knowing it could be lethal but unable to resist approaching the light.

Lu Yuanfeng took the ladle of water from Mu Shuangshuang's hand and gulped it down in a single breath.

This water, so sweet!

After drinking the water, Mu Shuangshuang asked, "Guess what I made for dinner tonight, and where I made it."

As Mu Shuangshuang spoke, her eyes were full of mischief. Lu Yuanfeng knew she must have done something thrilling again, yet he merely shook his head.

"I don't know!"

"Haha, I made it at your house, then brought it over with Yuanbao and Little Zhi using washbasins and buckets." Of course, it wasn't all tossed together; they were separated by bowls.

"Tonight we're having spicy beef, along with pan-fried winter melon. Yuanbao picked the winter melon for me; he said it's the only vegetable in your house, along with two wild vegetables I gathered from the mountain, and also some chilled wood ear mushrooms."

Having picked wood ear mushrooms for so long, finally getting to eat them was a treat.

A stream of words flowed from Mu Shuangshuang's mouth, and Lu Yuanfeng found himself listening intently.

"Alright, go wash your hands; let's start dinner right away."

It was still early, no need to eat inside; Mu Shuangshuang had set up food in the yard, which was just right for the Old Mu Family to have dinner without anyone causing trouble.

Plates of food were set on the table, and the anticipated exclamations came from Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan.

"Shuangshuang, where did these things come from?"

The mere thought of beef was beyond Yu Si Niang's imagination.

Much less to mention all these dishes.

"The beef and pork are from the town, the winter melon is from Fengzi's house, and the wild vegetables and wood ear mushrooms are from the mountains.

Mom and Dad, let's talk less and eat more.

Oh, Dad, beef can be stimulating food; you're still ill, better eat less."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't forget to remind Mu Dashan that beef can be stimulating. Of course, it was impossible for Mu Dashan not to eat. At times when there's nothing else, filling the stomach is paramount, disregarding anything else.

"Okay, Fengzi, Yuanbao, you two are guests, you must eat more." Mu Dashan accepted Mu Shuangshuang's words and turned to encourage the two guests to eat more.

The spicy beef dish had a tantalizing aroma that made everyone present nearly drool.

Upon closer inspection, there were bamboo skewers sticking into the beef.

"These..." Yu Si Niang stared at the bamboo skewers.

"I placed these bamboo skewers intentionally as a feature of the spicy beef, or you can call it beef skewers."

"Aunt Si, these skewers were threaded by me, Little Zhi, and Xiao Han."

The naturally sociable Little Yuanbao didn't forget to mention what he had accomplished, looking for praise.

"Haha, Yuanbao is so capable, little smarty." Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but poke fun at Yuanbao.

Truth be told, Yuanbao's nature was the most outgoing of the three children.

He could easily bond with everyone in a short time, unlike Xiao Han and Little Zhi.

Xiao Han had a reserved nature, barely expressing anything.

Little Zhi was pure, with many questions, but she mainly expressed them to Mu Shuangshuang; faced with more people, she was shy and often preferred hiding away from those unfamiliar.

Mu Shuangshuang unconsciously guided Little Zhi and Xiao Han each time because she believed that open and cheerful personality would always be better.

"Shuangshuang, you've worked hard, eat more." Yu Si Niang didn't forget to remind her daughter, without Shuangshuang, who knows what fate the family would have.

Just after Yu Si Niang finished speaking, several beef skewers were added to Mu Shuangshuang's bowl, and upon looking up, she found Lu Yuanfeng still helping her with the dishes.

Mu Shuangshuang had arranged the table, placing the meat dishes in front of Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan. To grab them, she'd have to stand up, but Lu Yuanfeng, with his long arms, could easily reach any dish on the table.

"Thank you, make sure you eat too!" Mu Shuangshuang didn't act coy and continued eating generously after giving Lu Yuanfeng a thank you.

Lu Yuanfeng's hand slightly trembled while he was serving the food, but soon he calmed down.

Having finished dinner, it was still early, with strands of red glow still hanging in the sky, from a distance looking like a beautiful landscape painting.

Mu Shuangshuang brought out the washed watermelon from the house, soaked in cold water for the afternoon, it was already chilled.

Beautiful scenery, a pretty lady, accompanied by a slice of watermelon was truly a delightful experience.

Several little ones had waited all afternoon just to eat watermelon, and now that it was finally brought out, their eyes couldn't look away.

The watermelon, sliced open by Mu Shuangshuang's kitchen knife, released fresh juices, exuding its unique fragrance. As a dessert after dinner, it was eaten until only two pieces remained.

The last two pieces, one was reserved for Zhao Yun's house, as they had been kind over the period, and the remaining piece was for the Old Mu Family's fourth household.

Yu Si Niang mentioned how Mu Dajiang had a heatstroke while working in the afternoon and nearly collapsed in the field. If not for her scraping treatment seen by the Old Mu Family before, Mu Dajiang might not have survived.

Alas, she had to visit her fourth uncle, remembering how her father nearly died of heatstroke and Aunt Si gave up the family's only coin.

Chapter 188: The Pitiful Fourth Household

"Shuangshuang, when you take the watermelon to your fourth aunt's house later, remember to avoid your grandpa and grandma."

Yu Si Niang didn't forget to instruct Mu Shuangshuang. At this time, Old Mrs. Mu should be asleep, but being cautious is always good.

The fourth branch isn't like the third branch. The third branch has separated from the family, and many things, the Old Mu Family can't interfere with. But the fourth branch hasn't separated, and everything is still under the control of Old Mrs. Mu.

If she finds out Mu Shuangshuang delivered food to the fourth branch, it won't be Mu Shuangshuang who suffers, but the fourth branch.

"Alright, mom, I got it. You rest early."

Mu Shuangshuang took the watermelon and a handful of fish mint to the fourth branch.

The fourth branch's house was dark inside at this time, not even an oil lamp lit. If Mrs. Liu hadn't come out to pour the foot bath water, Mu Shuangshuang would have thought the people in the fourth branch had fallen asleep.

"Fourth Aunt, is Shuangshuang convenient to come in?"

Mrs. Liu was only wearing a tank top, with patches all over her clothes, clearly a product patched and repaired over many years.

The days for the fourth branch weren't easy either.

Seeing Mu Shuangshuang, Mrs. Liu felt a bit embarrassed. These days, everyone in the fourth branch knew about Shuangshuang not doing housework.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Lin was questioning Yu Si Niang, but was then scolded harshly by Yu Si Niang.

Mrs. Liu looked at Mu Shuangshuang with envy before speaking, "Come in then, your fourth uncle hasn't slept yet."

Not that he wasn't asleep, but he simply couldn't sleep. No matter who it is, after working all day, bones feel broken, it's hard to just lay down and fall asleep.

After Mu Shuangshuang entered the house, Mrs. Liu lit the lamp, and its dim light illuminated most parts of the fourth branch's house.

Unlike the third branch, the fourth branch's house was slightly larger. Of course, Mu Shuangshuang had heard Yu Si Niang talk about the various reasons.

When Mu Dashan married Yu Si Niang, he didn't spend a penny on betrothal gifts.

Likewise, Yu Si Niang's family didn't give any dowry, other than some food and mountain goods, but even so, those few things were all scavenged away by Old Mrs. Mu.

Because fourth aunt's family gave quite a bit, the fourth branch naturally received a house larger than the third branch's; the fourth branch had three rooms while the third branch had only two.

In the house, originally due to pain, Mu Dajiang was moaning, but upon seeing Mu Shuangshuang, he quickly silenced, not wanting to show weakness in front of a child for being a grown man.

"Fourth Uncle, Shuangshuang heard you were sick, brought a piece of watermelon for you and Fourth Aunt, hoping you'll get better soon. Also, fish mint leaves, have Fourth Aunt boil them for water during the day for you to drink; it's great for cooling down."

When Mu Shuangshuang handed the watermelon to Mrs. Liu, she even heard Mrs. Liu swallow.

Mu Dajiang got up from bed, hesitated for a long time before asking, "Did... your grandpa and grandma eat?"

As Mu Dajiang spoke, Mu Shuangshuang seemed to see the previous Mu Dashan, always thinking of Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu at any benefit.

But such a filial son, Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu couldn't see, their eyes were only for the hypocritical Mu Dade and the two aunts.

"Fourth Uncle, you are like this, take care of yourself now. If grandpa and grandma want to eat something they can't make, even if they can't, the aunt can get it."

You can't blame Mu Shuangshuang for speaking frankly. With the fourth branch like this, it's time they considered themselves.

"Xiao Xia's dad, you take it. Shuangshuang is right, if dad and mom want to eat something they can always get it. You are still sick, have to farm early tomorrow, if you don't take care of your health what to do?"

Mrs. Liu stood in the corner, her words less timid than usual, with more firmness, perhaps because Old Mrs. Mu wasn't around.

Mu Dajiang finally swallowed the thought of sending the watermelon to Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu.

This watermelon he really hadn't eaten in many years. The last time was when he was very young, when Mu Dade became a scholar, the family bought a watermelon.

The watermelon was all eaten by his big brother, second brother, and fifth brother. When Mu Dajiang and Mu Dashan finished their work and came back, there was only watermelon rind with a lot of red flesh thrown on the ground left by Mu Danian.

At that time, his mouth craved badly, without thinking, he picked up that piece of watermelon rind from the ground, it was probably the sweetest watermelon he tasted in his life.

Yet the watermelon before him now is probably the most heartwarming, because the person who brought it cares for them at their most critical moment.

"Fourth Aunt, take this, if there's a chance, buy some nice food for Fourth Uncle, don't let my grandma find out."

Mu Shuangshuang handed over the prepared ten copper coins strung with hemp rope to Mrs. Liu. Mrs. Liu, using the light of the lamp, saw the ten copper coins in her hand, knowing it was Yu Si Niang's several days of wages, firmly refused to accept.

"Shuangshuang, bringing things to Fourth Aunt makes Fourth Aunt really happy, can't take your money, your family has it hard too."

Mrs. Liu understood the living situations of the third branch well, no matter what, she wouldn't take the money.

"Fourth Aunt, listen to me, now the most important issue for the fourth branch is Fourth Uncle's health. Xiao Xia and Xiao Chu are still young, even if not for Fourth Uncle, you should consider for them. Save these coins bit by bit, one day they might be useful."

Mu Shuangshuang believes that even if Mu Dade becomes a scholar and an official, he might not bring the honest fourth branch. When that time comes, Old Mrs. Mu would take away everything from home and sell the lands, leaving the fourth branch truly with nothing.

At this stage, Mrs. Liu didn't refuse anymore, just kept Mu Shuangshuang's goodness in her heart.

Once Mu Shuangshuang left, Mrs. Liu sighed.

"Xiao Xia's dad, I feel the third branch might have really made the right move, their days might get better and better."

Watermelons aren't just for anyone to eat, the third branch just split from the Old Mu Family, didn't get anything except for those few acres of land. So the silver for the watermelon must be earned by Shuangshuang herself.

"Everyone has their own life, we have ours. Maybe when big brother becomes a scholar, our days will be easier," Mu Dajiang fantasized.

"Yes, it'll be soon. The hard days are almost over, as long as big brother passes the exam. Xiao Xia's dad, eat the watermelon and rest early, tomorrow's work awaits."

Mu Dajiang took the watermelon from Mrs. Liu's hand, used a bit of force, and split the watermelon into two halves, giving one to Mrs. Liu. "Eat, I can't finish it alone!"

Mrs. Liu looked at that half of the watermelon, her eyes instantly reddened.

"Xiao Xia's dad, let's finish the work earlier, bring the two kids over, I miss them."

Mu Dajiang nodded, he shoved the watermelon into his mouth.

The sweet taste of watermelon instantly awakened his memories of watermelon.

Just like many years ago, when he picked up the watermelon rind from the ground, this piece seems even sweeter!

Chapter 189: Encounter with Thieves

That night, dark clouds obscured the moon, enveloping the entire Er Gui Village in darkness.

In a corner of Old Mu Family's backyard, a shadow slipped into Mu Dashan's room and emerged with something in hand. Moments later, a hen screamed in agony from the chicken coop.

Soon after, calm returned to Old Mu Family.

Awakened by the clucking sound in her sleep, Old Mrs. Mu sat up with a start, and startled Mr. Mu awake as well.

"Wife, what are you doing? Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Sleep for what? I just heard our chicken clucking. Could it be thieves?"

Those few chickens in the house were the lifeblood of Old Mu Family; they depended solely on their daily eggs.

"You're overthinking it. There's no chicken clucking. You must have misheard." Mr. Mu replied confidently; still sleepy, he casually reassured Old Mrs. Mu and fell back asleep.

Feeling uneasy, Old Mrs. Mu wanted to check the chicken coop, but afraid of encountering something unclean so late at night, she decided to sleep first and check later.

Early the next morning, Old Mrs. Mu went to the chicken coop to pick eggs from the chickens' bottoms, only to find one chicken missing. After counting, she realized there were originally five chickens, but now only four remained, missing exactly the egg-laying hen.

The floor of the chicken coop was littered with feathers, clearly indicating someone had entered last night and stolen the chicken.

"Oh no, we've been robbed!" Old Mrs. Mu slapped her hands against her thighs and cried out loudly.

"Oh, which heartless scoundrel, shamelessly dared to steal my chicken, may they have children without backsides, truly lacking conscience, evil-hearted..."

The entire Old Mu Family was awakened by this heart-wrenching wailing, they climbed up from their beds bewildered, and crowded in front of Old Mu Family's chicken coop.

Mu Danian rushed over first, squeezed into the coop and asked Old Mrs. Mu in surprise.

"Mother, what's going on? What's been stolen from us?"

"What else could it be, my lifeblood, my heart, the egg-laying Queen Chicken has been stolen."

Speaking of this Queen Chicken, it was personally crowned by Old Mrs. Mu because its eggs were bigger and more punctual than others.

The other chickens, if they missed the laying time, required Old Mrs. Mu to pick eggs from their bottoms, which resulted in smaller eggs.

"What should we do, it's quite a fortune for our family." Mu Danian said with a face full of grief, contrary to his usual indifferent attitude.

Mr. Mu dressed, stepped past several juniors, entered the chicken coop, and asked the same question as Mu Danian but in a more reserved and genuine manner.

Mu Shuangshuang didn't initially want to join the commotion, but early in the morning, Yu Si Niang ran to her room saying it wasn't just Old Mu Family that was robbed, their third branch was robbed too.

Old Mu Family lost a chicken, the third branch lost three pounds of mung beans and half a jar of lard Mu Shuangshuang had bought from the town yesterday.

For farmers, this was a significant loss, just the mung beans alone were worth twenty-four cents, plus the half jar of lard, totaling around seventy or eighty cents, equivalent to half month of Yu Si Niang's wages.

This incident seemed peculiar to Mu Shuangshuang, Mu Dashan's room door latch was always flimsy, could be pushed open with a little force, but few knew about this, mainly those who often kicked the third branch's door in Old Mu Family.

Mrs. Lin, Old Mrs. Mu, and Mu Danian.

With her investigative skills learned in her past life and knowledge of these people's character, Mu Shuangshuang finally identified the suspect as Mu Danian.

Only he had the audacity to break into the third branch, stealing without fear of the third branch's man, Mu Dashan.

Meanwhile, after hearing the conversation between Old Mrs. Mu, Mu Danian and Mr. Mu, Mu Shuangshuang became more certain that Mu Danian was responsible.

Stealing her mung beans and lard, as well as Old Mu Family's hen.

"So, what do you all think we should do about this?"

Mr. Mu himself had no ideas, so he asked the juniors for suggestions.

Old Mrs. Mu continued cursing, from their ancestors down to their descendants, she cursed everyone.

During this, Mu Shuangshuang observed Mu Danian's expression, noticing it became unnatural whenever Old Mrs. Mu cursed.

"Father, if something is stolen, it's stolen. There's nothing we can do. Moreover, we asked earlier for a chicken to replenish our bodies, but mother was reluctant.

Now, it's been stolen, benefitting someone else. If it had been given to us earlier, this wouldn't have happened."

Mu Dazhong was a master of sarcastic remarks. He was angry too, but realizing their chicken raised and nurtured ultimately benefited the eldest, he preferred to have it stolen, at least the eldest wouldn't get to eat it.

"Indeed, Gou Dan's father is right. Gou Dan has grown so thin, yet mother wouldn't spare a chicken. If given to Gou Dan earlier, no thief would have thought to steal."

The second branch was unreliable, no one from the first branch had come over yet.

"Fourth son, do you have any thoughts?"

Mu Dajiang quickly shook his head, "Father, whatever you say goes. Mrs. Liu and I don't understand a thing."

"What about Zhenzhen and Zhuangzi? Where are they?" Mr. Mu inspected the crowd, Zhuangzi and Mu Zhenzhen were indeed absent.

"Probably still sleeping, Zhenzhen won't get up until noon."

Mrs. Liu replied but was eyed by already upset Old Mrs. Mu.

"You wicked woman, what are you implying, trying to smear our Zhenzhen? How can you be so vile? Now, come here and clean up the chicken coop's droppings."

Because she was venting, Old Mrs. Mu's voice was louder than before, scaring Mrs. Liu into trembling, almost dropping the dustpan and broom from her shaking hands.

Mu Dajiang's face turned slightly red, he struggled for a while and could only speak up stiffly, "Mother, Xiao Xia's mother isn't that kind of person."

"If she isn't that kind of person, then what is she? She dares to speak poorly of the second aunt."

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't stand it anymore, Old Mrs. Mu was purely acting out, Mrs. Liu was clearly taking the blame for others' anger, and the instigator was just watching the spectacle.

Shameless!

"Grandfather, I think we can search nearby to see if any clues were left behind, like in the chicken coop, whether anything was left behind by the person."

The crime scene usually contains the most traces.

Mu Shuangshuang wanted to go in and inspect, but with all these people from Old Mu Family present, she couldn't simply enter, even if the thief was caught, Old Mrs. Mu might think she was framing others.

"Let's search nearby then; you from the second branch, see if anything is dropped around here."

"You from the fourth branch, glance around the yard for any clues."

Chapter 190: Messed Up

Mr. Mu, after all, isn't a professional. Although Mu Shuangshuang reminded him to look for clues, he couldn't figure anything out.

Without even knowing what the clues were, he just randomly instructed people to search.

Mu Shuangshuang knew she couldn't rely on the Old Mu Family.

She had to save herself.

Taking advantage of the moment, Mu Shuangshuang slipped into Mu Dalian's room, searched around, but found nothing—no lard, no green beans.

If not for the two chicken feathers scattered in the corner of the room, she would have thought it wasn't Mu Dalian who was stealing.

Due to Mr. Mu's incorrect guidance, the Old Mu Family naturally found nothing, and Old Mrs. Mu cursed even more fiercely.

Mu Shuangshuang, having not found any stolen goods, couldn't accuse Mu Dalian, but she kept her wits about her and started on a door latch as soon as she returned.

Knowing Mu Dalian's behavior, he got addicted to stealing this time, he would surely return again.

She lengthened the latch on Mu Dashan's room door, patched where wood was needed, and made sure the door couldn't be easily pushed open. Only then did she feel at ease.

After a busy stretch, she broke out in a light sweat.

It just happened to be time for breakfast, so Mu Shuangshuang naturally went to the upper room for breakfast.

Old Mrs. Mu's face was still dark over the morning's events, bringing the entire Old Mu Family's mood down.

"Mom, don't be upset anymore, maybe we should get a few more chicks?" Mrs. Jin actively comforted Old Mrs. Mu.

"Sister-in-law makes it sound easy; raising one chick into a big chicken takes over half a year." Mrs. Lin replied defiantly.

Mrs. Lin thought to herself, Mrs. Jin was shameless. Who didn't know the eggs laid by the family chickens were either sold by Old Mrs. Mu or eaten by the main house, even cheap chicks would still end up benefitting the main house.

"Gou Dan's mother, I'm just suggesting to mom, no other intentions."

Mrs. Jin was already displeased but remembered her husband advised her not to confront the Old Mu Family at such times, so she swallowed down her resentment.

A meal filled with tastelessness went by, and the people of the Old Mu Family began to mind their own business.

After breakfast, Mu Danian went out, claiming he was going to work, but no one saw him in the fields.

...

...

"Danian, if your mother finds out the chicken was stolen by you, won't she beat you to death."

In a dilapidated clay house in Er Gui Village that had long been unoccupied, Chen Hong dressed in a brightly colored long skirt, which appeared brand new, clearly indicating it was made not long ago.

Chen Hong's face was covered in thick rouge, her lips were painted bright red, alarmingly so, resembling a gaping mouth full of blood.

Yet she didn't think this attire was rustic. On the contrary, she felt there wasn't anyone in Er Gui Village or Tie Dao Village who could compete with her beauty.

"My mother is too dumb to know anything, but you, little vixen, hanging around with me all day, aren't you afraid of that wicked mother-in-law of yours?"

Mu Dania's eyes were playful, filled with lasciviousness as he looked at Chen Hong.

"Afraid of that dead old woman? If it weren't for the land she has, I would have kicked that dead son of hers long ago, wanting me to claim some chastity arch, ridiculous!"

Chen Hong was married into Tie Dao Village as Wang the blacksmith's daughter-in-law. But Wang Xiaojiang died early, just three months after their wedding, leaving his parents to deliberate. Believing their son loved Chen Hong, they didn't allow her to remarry, serving her good food and drink every day.

It was arranged that as long as Chen Hong remained unmarried, she'd inherit six acres of land and a smithy after their death.

Six acres of land could easily sell for up to thirty-four taels of silver. Moreover, Wang the blacksmith's land was fertile. Counting everything, Chen Hong calculated she could get around a hundred taels from those old folks.

Having someone serve her and pay her, wouldn't remarrying be foolish?

"As expected, the little vixen is missing my treasure. Come on, since I'm not working today, let my treasure handle you a few more times."

Saying this, Mu Dania pounced, wanting to tear off Chen Hong's clothes. In a single pull, her flowery dress was ripped apart.

"You... you dare tear my dress? Do you know how expensive it was?" Chen Hong's face instantly twisted in rage.

Touch a woman's face, touch a woman's clothes, end up on a dead-end road.

Mu Dania placed his hand on Chen Hong's rear, grabbing forcefully. "It's just a dress, right? When my brother becomes a scholar, I'll buy you a hundred of them."

Come, let me feel it more, I've been holding back for so long..."

Mu Danian's words grew increasingly obscene, and Chen Hong bashfully hammered his chest.

"Annoying, be gentle, it's going to break..."

"How could it be broken? If it weren't for my help, it might be flat by now. I'm telling you, you better be good to me, I've got good days ahead." Mu Danian laughed.

"You better stop, with your brother's weak-willed nature, how many times has he taken the exams? I know he's the first scholar in your village, but that was fifteen years ago. If he keeps testing, he could become a grandfather."

The issue of Mu Dade having no son was well-known among nearby villages, some even joked that he burned through his life's luck on becoming a scholar, resulting in no sons... hehe...

"Little vixen, don't underestimate my brother; this time he has a big plan, I heard he might buy the exam questions, and once he gets those, how could he fail?"

Mu Danian's face was full of pride, while others didn't believe his brother would pass, he was convinced.

Moreover, his brother wasn't really a lamb; the other day, when he went to the third branch to cozy up, surely he was plotting something there.

Only his third brother was foolish, thinking his brother is some good-hearted person.

Nonsense, the most scheming in the family is his brother.

"So we've agreed, once your brother becomes a scholar, you'll marry me..."

"Didn't you say you wanted the land and the shop from those two old folks? If you become mine, won't you not want those things?"

"Who said I don't want them, if your brother becomes a high official, aren't you his brother? By then, let him help me take those things, won't they still be mine?"

"Haha, I knew it, you're a crafty little vixen..."

After some playful moments, Mu Danian was satisfied, while Chen Hong still felt like she hadn't had enough, her hands kept tracing circles on Mu Danian's body, hoping for something more to happen.

"Tell me, where did that brat in your family get the silver to buy all those things?"

"How would I know? That brat had good luck, there's a fool protecting her. I heard those two are inseparable. If not for that, I'd have beaten that brat long ago."

Thinking of how Mu Shuangshuang rejected him yesterday, Mu Danian grew angry.

"Then it's simple, find a reason to separate those two, and catch that brat to teach her a lesson, won't that do!"