

## Folly 881

Chapter 881: Offending Others

The voice of Aunt Zhang calling Ruan Xiao Jiao was, in others' eyes, merely a relative of the County Magistrate's concubine.

But to Mu Dade, it meant something different.

Since Aunt Zhang was a relative of Ruan Xiao Jiao, she had some connection with Mu Dade.

Both publicly and privately, Mu Dade should open this back door, allowing Aunt Zhang to gain this small benefit.

The brush Mu Dade held paused as he said to Mrs. Jin beside him, "Dan Dan's mother, let's change the rules. Start from the back and write one, then let one leave! There are too many people upfront, I'm getting a headache trying to write!"

Mrs. Jin instantly understood, Mu Dade changed the first-come-first-serve rule because he heard Aunt Zhang say she was a relative of Ruan Xiao Jiao.

At this moment, she increasingly felt that Ruan Xiao Jiao was indeed a troublesome woman.

As for this Aunt Zhang, she's hardly Ruan Xiao Jiao's aunt; if anything, there's a grudge between her and the Ruan Family.

Aunt Zhang's sister was the first wife of Ruan Family's younger brother, who was divorced for not bearing children.

A few years ago, when Ruan Xiao Jiao hadn't let the villagers know she was a concubine for the County Magistrate, everyone looked down on the Ruan Family.

Village families, though poor, would rather be a poor man's wife than a rich man's concubine. Ruan Xiao Jiao was even publicly scolded by Aunt Zhang's sister as a slut.

But Mrs. Jin couldn't say these things in front of Mu Dade.

Men most dislike women's jealousy; if she wants to stand by Mu Dade as an official's wife, she must have a calm heart to defeat troublesome women.

The reason Mrs. Jin hadn't flipped out yet was because she believed, with the County Magistrate around, her husband, however foolish, wouldn't cross moral boundaries with Ruan Xiao Jiao.

"Dan Dan's father, if I may say, this might be hard to handle. Everyone here is kin; we see each other often.

If we let Aunt Zhang from the end be the first to write couplets, those at the front surely won't be happy, which might cause trouble."

Of course, Mu Dade understood this logic; everyone has a tendency to protect their own; the villagers had no significant connection with him, Mu Dade.

Helping is goodwill, not helping is duty!

Besides, as a scholar, Mu Dade, however average, would spend his life in the county. Did this group of villagers think they could be treated well by him?

Wishful thinking.

"What trouble? I'm not charging them money anymore, what else do they want? If really so troublesome, they can go to the town and pay someone to write," Mu Dade asserted.

Mrs. Jin couldn't think of any other way, so she tried to maintain a good attitude.

She cheerfully addressed the crowd still lined-up: "Everyone, could you listen to a couple of my words?"

In the courtyard, as Mrs. Jin's voice rose, the previously noisy crowd quieted down, each staring at her.

"Dade's wife, whatever it is, say it quick; we need to write the Spring Festival couplets and get them up!" someone said.

"I understand everyone wants the couplets quickly, but Dade's energy is limited, and he has to go to the Capital for exams after the New Year, so..."

Mrs. Jin hadn't finished speaking before Aunt Zhang from the back gave a loud spit.

"Bah! Old Mu Family's eldest daughter-in-law, are you saying you won't write for us?"

Just now, it was the elder and old lady asking us to come; otherwise, you think we'd come here for Mu the eldest to write couplets?"

Aunt Zhang spoke without thinking, and her words were especially irritating.

Mrs. Jin was half-dead from anger, wanting to shut Aunt Zhang up once and for all.

In annoyance, Mrs. Jin retorted, "Aunt Zhang, I hadn't finished speaking yet. Could you not interrupt? Let me finish at least."

"Then speak, will you? It's like you're out of breath, segmenting your words, and I don't know how Old Mu Family found such a wife!" Aunt Zhang replied.

This Aunt Zhang spoke as viciously as her son, Ma Houhou.

Back then, Ma Houhou's careless words almost made Mu Shuangshuang, newly arrived, vomit blood.

She later found a big hornet's nest, sending it all to Ma Houhou for payback.

This made Aunt Zhang and Ma Houhou wary of confronting the Third Branch directly.

"What's wrong with the wife Old Mu Family found? You see a problem?" Mrs. Jin countered.

"I say, Mu the eldest's wife, how come your words are so unpleasant? It's a festival; are you deliberately trying to ruin it for people?" Aunt Zhang added.

By now, the conversation was indeed quite hurtful.

Usually, one would have sent Aunt Zhang away.

It's free stuff; without gratitude is fine, but blaming the hosts is unreasonable anywhere.

Yet, Mu Dade was inclined to protect Aunt Zhang, saying, "I'm not feeling well; everyone crowding upfront isn't convenient.

So let's start writing couplets from the last person, and after writing, leave through the side yard of the Third Branch, so folks disperse quickly."

Mu Dade rushed; once he spoke up, Mrs. Jin's prepared speech was nullified.

What's more, Mu Dade's words gave the impression he sided with Aunt Zhang.

Aunt Zhang became even more brazen, shrieking, "Ah, starting from last, that's me. I always said, being early isn't as good as timing it right. Look, now you know my prowess!"

Aunt Zhang's words displeased those ahead in line.

"Mu the eldest, that's not how it should be said. We've come without eating just to line up, and when it's finally our turn, it goes from the back?"

This is too unfair!" said a man about to take his turn.

At this point, Aunt Zhang squeezed through the crowd, retorting, "It's free, so why fuss? If you're capable, don't let the scholar write for you; if he writes for you, obey his rules.

What the scholar does is beyond your mud-brained understanding."

Aunt Zhang spoke while presenting her backside to the man.

The man, upset, picked up his red paper on the table, angrily stating, "It's just couplet writing, I, Zhu San, won't do it here!"

A scholar's pride is not to be insulted; Mu Dade blatantly favored Aunt Zhang.

Several friends of Zhu San also stood up.

"Let's go, we'd better go to town and write a pair; at least we won't wait only to lose our turn!"

The men headed towards the direction of the Mu Family's Third Branch.

Meanwhile, Aunt Zhang arrogantly asked Mu Dade for a couplet.

After one couplet was complete, she asked for couplets for the Kitchen God, coop, and granary.

After much bustling, Aunt Zhang alone utilized the time of three incense sticks.

But Mu Dade showed no intention of sending her away.

## Chapter 882: On the Same Wavelength

Aunt Zhang was holding the written Spring Festival couplets, chatting idly with Mu Dade.

Mu Dade responded patiently, and the two of them were talking and laughing.

The people waiting behind Aunt Zhang were becoming increasingly impatient.

Someone urged, "Aunt Zhang, since you've finished writing, hurry up and go put up the couplets. We are all still waiting for the head of the Mu Family to write our couplets."

"Exactly, occupying the latrine without using it, it's been almost as long as it takes for four cups of tea. If this goes on, it will be lunchtime already.

If we'd known, we should have just gone to town for them. We might have been back by now," someone complained.

Aunt Zhang replied irritably, "Then go to town for them. What's the matter with waiting here? No one begged you to stay, seriously, all you men nagging like women, it's driving me crazy!"

Aunt Zhang was quite brazen; the villagers dared not make a fuss in front of Mu Dade, so they lowered their expectations and said to Mu Dade:

"The head of the Mu Family, it was Old Mu who had us come here for free couplets, that's why we're here.

Otherwise, we could go to town, and by lunchtime at the latest, we'd be back, and it would only cost five large coins.

It's not that we can't afford five coins. Neighbors, you see how brazen Aunt Zhang is, and yet you don't do anything about it; we really can't stand it."

Someone in the village stood up and spoke fairly.

Initially, they hoped Mu Dade would say a few good words; everyone knew Mu Dade's status and didn't want to offend him, but if it was too humiliating, they would rather forgo this windfall.

"Everyone, please wait a bit. I, Mu Dade, will definitely help everyone with the couplets today. If not, how about you all leave your red paper at my desk, and I'll do them one by one?"

Someone sighed, holding their red paper, and walked away.

Elsewhere, the third branch's courtyard was bustling, with Zhu San, who helped build the academy for the third branch, bustling at the forefront.

Upon reaching the third branch, he couldn't help but complain to Mu Dashan about this matter.

Who was right or wrong was clear to Mu Dashan too, but both he and his wife were coarse people and had never done meticulous tasks like writing or painting.

Every one of them, apart from sighing along with Zhu San, couldn't think of any other way to help.

"If only we had someone who could write and draw, then we wouldn't have to be subjected to the humors of the head of the Mu Family!" someone sighed.

But what's the use of sighing? There's still no one to write the couplets.

It so happened that Lu Yuanfeng returned with a load of manure, heard about this matter, and after thinking for a bit, he placed the manure bucket by the third branch's latrine and went into the kitchen to talk to Mu Shuangshuang about it.

The two exchanged a knowing smile, and instantly, both had an idea.

"Shuangshuang, how about we go find Mr. Luo to write free couplets for the villagers?" Mu Shuangshuang suggested.

Mu Shuangshuang's mouth curled gently, and her big, bright black eyes were full of mischievous animation.

"That's exactly what I was thinking!"

Mu Shuangshuang took a basket, and she and Lu Yuanfeng quietly left the third branch. They then split up: Mu Shuangshuang went to the vegetable garden to pick some greens, while Lu Yuanfeng went to Fu Wu's house to borrow a cart.

Neither side wasted any time. In the time it takes for two sticks of incense to burn, Lu Yuanfeng drove the cart to Luohe Village with Mu Shuangshuang.

After a few simple words with Luo Juren, he agreed to accompany Mu Shuangshuang to Er Gui Village.

The greens they brought were returned untouched.

But when Mu Shuangshuang drove away, she left the basket and the vegetables in Luo Juren's courtyard.

On the way, Mu Shuangshuang briefly explained the reason for the events to Luo Juren, and mentioned that her uncle was also a scholar.

Fortunately, Luo Juren didn't say much.

When they arrived at Er Gui Village, outside the third branch's courtyard, Mu Shuangshuang led Luo Juren inside.

Everyone gathered around at once.

"Shuang, what's going on, why is there someone arriving by cart?" It wasn't Mu Dashan or Yu Si Niang who spoke first, but Aunt Zhao Yun instead.

Aunt Zhao Yun had previously planned to save money by having a couplet written at the Old Mu Family, but ended up being frustrated with nothing gained and had just been complaining to the villagers.

Mu Shuangshuang smiled and introduced Luo Juren, "This is Luo Juren from Luohe Village, like my uncle, this year's scholar. I invited him to write free Spring Couplets for everyone."

After hearing this, the villagers looked at Luo Juren as if he were a novel sight.

Mu Dade was the first scholar and scholar in the village; other than that, they hadn't heard about anyone else being scholars or jurens.

Even Liu Zian, many people didn't know him.

"Shuang, you really have skills, in just a blink of an eye, you've managed to invite a scholar," Zhao Gouzi laughed.

"Uncle Gouzi, let's get to work and try to have everything done before noon," Mu Shuangshuang said.

As she spoke, Zhang Yutou and Mu Dashan entered the house, removing the kitchen door plank and using it as a table.

The third branch didn't have a study desk; if Luo Juren wanted to write Spring Couplets for everyone, it would have to be on a table and a door plank.

And just a single chair.

The conditions were, of course, extremely simple.

"Luo Juren, we'll bother you, and you can have lunch with us," Mu Dashan said.

Luo Juren blushed slightly, embarrassed, "Uncle, I'm not much older, you don't have to call me juren, just call me Luo Bai."

"What? Radish? Who's named Radish?" asked Da Long, who hadn't heard clearly from the side, suddenly asking.

Everyone couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Zhao Yun's face turned crimson, pretending to hit her son Da Long, stopped by Luo Bai.

"Auntie, don't hit him, when educating a child, you should reason with him."

Then Luo Bai squatted down and said to Da Long in a soft voice, "My name is Luo Bai, Luo as in the Luo River, Bai as in white. If you have time, I'll teach you to write!"

Hearing this, Zhao Yun's heart swayed towards Luo Juren.

Mu Shuangshuang had already told Zhao Yun about Luo Juren's character, but words were just words; seeing was believing.

Now, having met him, she realized that although Luo Juren was young, he was polite and patient, making Zhao Yun feel assured to send her son to Mu Shuangshuang's private school.

Mu Dashan and Zhang Yutou laid the table, then placed a piece of red paper on it.

Only then did they start writing for everyone, with Xiao Han helping to grind ink, stealing glances to learn how Luo Bai wrote.

Mu Shuangshuang lined everyone up, first writing the Spring Couplets, and for the others, she planned to deliver them to each family in the afternoon.

In the third branch, because everything was orderly, they finished writing the Spring Couplets quite quickly.

Moreover, because Luo Bai spoke little but worked swiftly and neatly, those who were still waiting at Mu Dade's to have their couplets written, also came over.

### Chapter 883: Worth Every Penny

Luo Bai didn't spend much time writing Spring Festival couplets for those who came over from Mu Dade's place.

Everyone gathered happily, chatting away, asking what was written on this home's couplets, peeking at the characters written on that home's couplets.

As they talked, they started cursing Mu Dade.

"Pfft! I'm telling you, we were clearly there first, but Mu Dade insisted on sticking with that Aunt Zhang, letting those at the back go first. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"Exactly, we were first, but the old witch cut in! It's just infuriating. I won't go next time even if you ask me!" someone said angrily.

"At the end of the day, it's all because Aunt Zhang claims to be Ruan Xiao Jiao's aunt. Does Mu Dade even know how Ruan Xiao Jiao was scolded by that old witch's sister?"

Without comparison, there's no hurt. Everyone was already upset with Mu Dade over the previous incident.

Because Mu Dade was a scholar, they dared not speak out.

Now that Luo Bai was also a scholar, people gathered the courage to speak, and once they started, they couldn't stop.

All sorts of dirt about the Old Mu Family came out, from every branch, except the third.

Mu Shuangshuang stood aside, initially wanting to see if there was anything she could help with, but she ended up hearing a lot of gossip, comparable to modern tabloids.

She kept the useful information in her mind.

Seizing this opportunity, Mu Shuangshuang started promoting her family's private school.

The most important aspect was, of course, Luo Bai, the scholar and teacher. Mu Shuangshuang said, "Everyone knows our third branch is opening a private school in the village.

People have been asking who the teacher is. Now the mystery is revealed: it's Luo Bai, the scholar from Luohe Village.

He will be teaching at our village's private school, for an initially set period of three years. After three years, if there's still a need for the private school, I will hire another teacher."

The courtyard of the third branch was very spacious, and Mu Shuangshuang's words carried far.

As people listened to Mu Shuangshuang's promotion, they occasionally chimed in, but their main concern was the issue of school fees.

Just like buying something, you first ask the price, and only if it's within your budget do you consider the quality.

Although the village folks wanted to send their children to study, school fees were a significant burden.

"One tael of silver per year, plus three strips of dried meat, over three years that's three taels of silver and nine strips of dried meat.

If any of you are familiar with the town's prices, you know how much the academies there charge.

Our teacher is on par with those in town, our environment is equally good, yet our school fees are more than halved," Mu Shuangshuang said.

After laying out the private school's conditions, Mu Shuangshuang didn't go into further detail. Firstly, the private school's rules were not yet set in stone.

Secondly, sending kids to school is not a decision made on the spot; it needs a family discussion at the very least.

On one side, Mu Shuangshuang enthusiastically explained things to the villagers.

On the other side, Mu Dade was writing Spring Festival couplets and noticed the courtyard was emptying out. He had only written about a dozen and half of the people were gone.

The scene was vastly different from the bustling start.

"What's going on, where did everyone go?" Mu Dade asked Mrs. Jin.

Mrs. Jin was full of grievance and didn't want to respond to Mu Dade at all.

"Wife, speak up!" Mu Dade hadn't called Mrs. Jin 'wife' in a long time, but to get to the bottom of this, he actually used the term again.

Mrs. Jin finally said, "They all went to that stinking girl's place at the third branch. I just went to take a look; the stinking girl got that Luo Bai to be the teacher at her private school."

"Luo Bai? She actually managed to invite Luo Bai?" Mu Dade was astonished.

Luo Bai, like him, was a scholar this year, but Luo Bai was the only one among them who hadn't attended the Lu Ming Banquet.

The reason was simple: Luo Bai's father had died.

Luo Bai was in mourning, and for the next three years, he would not be taking the Imperial Examinations, meaning he wouldn't participate in next spring's Imperial Examination either.

People said that this time, Qingshan Town produced three scholars.

One was Liu Zian, the top scorer in Qianzhou Prefecture, and then there was Luo Bai, the fifth, exceptionally gifted.

Only Mu Dade seemed to have come out of nowhere, having taken the exams for many years, and finally at over thirty years old, becoming a scholar.

"I also find it strange, that stinking girl is really not simple," Mrs. Jin said.

Mu Dade also felt that, at this rate, his status as a scholar was not enough to suppress the third branch.

"Wife, go tell Father and Mother about this, let them handle it, say that the third branch is trying to steal the limelight by having someone write couplets at their place, stealing our good fortune."

Mrs. Jin wasted no time and went straight to the main hall.

\*

In the backyard of the third branch, Lu Yuanfeng finished his work and held a dustpan filled with lotus roots freshly dug from the pond, for the noon's pork rib stew.

Luo Bai seldom visited, so Mu Shuangshuang wanted to make something nice, and take the opportunity to introduce him to everyone.

"Shuangshuang, you go rest, Aunt Zhao Yun and I will make lunch," Yu Si Niang took the chance to pull Mu Shuangshuang aside and said.

For lunch, we'll make pork rib stew with lotus root, braised pork, steamed fish, and for the rest, I have my own hot pot base.

Mu Shuangshuang felt that Yu Si Niang could handle these dishes and didn't insist on cooking herself.

She had other matters to discuss with Luo Bai, regarding the private school.

Luo Bai had only his widowed mother at home, who wasn't in the best health, and Mu Shuangshuang's plan was to have Luo Bai bring Mrs. Luo to live together in Er Gui Village.

She would arrange for someone to cook meals daily, and Luo Bai agreed since he couldn't be without his mother after losing his father.

Warmth filled every corner of the courtyard.

Luo Bai really liked this atmosphere; he was especially looking forward to his time at the private school, confident in his ability to be a good teacher.

Taking a spare moment to glance at Lu Yuanfeng, Mu Shuangshuang noticed the boy was helping with the fire, and whatever he said, it made Yu Si Niang laugh heartily.

It seemed his mother-in-law had been won over by Lu Yuanfeng.

Sometimes Mu Shuangshuang found it curious; the boy seemed so shy he could barely utter a word in front of her, yet he was such a chatterbox with her mother?

Lost in her thoughts, she even missed Luo Bai speaking to her, and when she snapped back, she saw Zhu San, who had come earlier to complain in the third branch's courtyard.

Zhu San beamed when he saw Mu Shuangshuang.

He said, "Shuang, is your private school really that good?"

Mu Shuangshuang nodded without hesitation, "Worth every bit, anyone wishing to send their children to study can come to me.

Luo Juren will handle the academics, and as for life issues, you can manage it yourselves or leave it to the private school's cafeteria."

"Cafeteria? What's that?" Zhu San looked puzzled.

"It's a dining hall, the private school can cook for the children, especially when the adults are busy, like during spring planting and autumn harvesting!"

Chapter 884: Mrs. Jin Gets Kicked Away

After hearing Mu Shuangshuang's explanation, Zhu San roughly understood.

He was particularly interested in the private school Mu Shuangshuang mentioned.

"Shuang, my son is also old enough to go to school. I just heard you say that the school is accepting a limited number of students?

Can I register my son first?" Zhu San asked.

After saying this, Zhu San took out his pocket, intending to pay a deposit or something.

Seeing this, Mu Shuangshuang quickly stopped him: "Uncle Zhu San, the private school isn't completely set up yet, let's not worry about the gift for now. You should go back and discuss with Aunt Zhang whether you really want to send Mao Mao to the private school."

All from the same village, Mu Shuangshuang wasn't worried about Zhu San defaulting. On the contrary, since this was the first year of the private school, she wanted to make sure everything was perfect without any disputes.

Because Zhu San was the first one to inquire, Mu Shuangshuang gave Zhu San a fairly detailed plan in private.

In a short while, Zhu San had a deep understanding of Mu Shuangshuang's private school.

In his heart, he was already determined to send his child to Mu Shuangshuang's school.

"Shuang, your father said he wants to put up spring couplets, could you come and help make the rice paste?" At the kitchen door, Yu Si Niang took a moment to call out to Mu Shuangshuang.

Mu Shuangshuang grinned and agreed: "Alright, Mom, I'll be right there!"

Zhu San then knowingly said, "Shuang, you guys are busy, I'm heading back to put up my spring couplets!"

Mu Shuangshuang did not decline.

Everyone was busy today, she had already taken time to talk with Zhu San for a long time, it was not appropriate to continue chatting.

"Let me see you off!"

Mu Shuangshuang escorted Zhu San to the courtyard gate, watching him leave the third branch. She was just about to turn back and help when she saw Old Mrs. Mu storming toward the third branch.

Behind the old lady was Mrs. Jin, looking as though she was enjoying the spectacle, and Mrs. Lin, who looked sly.

Following them were Huang Bitu and Mrs. Liu, both looking anxious.

Apparently, Old Mrs. Mu brought the daughters-in-law and granddaughters-in-law to cause trouble for the third branch.

Mu Shuangshuang quickly called out to Zhu San: "Uncle Zhu San, my grandma is here, probably about my uncle's matter. Can you help explain?"

During the New Year, Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to argue with the Old Mu family, nor did she want to resolve things with violence.

Thankfully, Zhu San, who initially walked out of the Old Mu family courtyard, hadn't left, solving quite a bit of trouble for her.

When Zhu San heard Mu Shuangshuang calling him, he turned around and saw Old Mrs. Mu and Mrs. Jin behind her.

He roughly guessed what might have happened, and he increasingly disliked Mrs. Jin.

He felt Mrs. Jin acted completely unlike how village folks thought; she wasn't generous yet pretended to be.

"From the third branch, come out! What kind of heart do you all have, making the villagers dislike Da De? You just want to pick up the pieces, huh!"

Old Mrs. Mu always liked to yell loudly, unreasonably.

Whenever something involved Mu Dade, everyone else was wrong.

Zhu San rushed up and politely said to Old Mrs. Mu: "Auntie, you've misunderstood Da Shan's family. About the spring couplets, it's Da De himself being not decent with his ways.

How to prioritize the later ones over the earlier ones, Aunt Zhang who came later got hers written first."

Zhu San was a rough man, straightforwardly speaking whatever came to his mind.

As soon as he spoke, he broke Old Mrs. Mu's biggest taboo, saying something negative about Mu Dade.

Old Mrs. Mu immediately spat on Zhu San's face.

"Nonsense, my son kindly writes spring couplets for you poor devils, he writes as he pleases.

If he wants to write for someone first, they can be written first. If you can't take it, just don't go to him!"

Old Mrs. Mu shouted loudly.

Having Old Mrs. Mu's spittle, sticky on his face, even the hardy Zhu San almost felt nauseous.

Mu Shuangshuang hadn't expected Old Mrs. Mu to disregard neighborly bonds and behave so crudely toward Zhu San.

When it happened, she stepped forward to block Old Mrs. Mu.

"Grandma, why are you acting so domineering? Everyone did go for free spring couplets, but we're not Uncle's dogs, coming and going as commanded!"

Speaking of dogs, Old Mrs. Mu felt increasingly justified.

"Shuang, you shouldn't call them dogs. A dog, if you give it a bone, knows how to wag its tail at you, but these people benefited from Da De and still don't know how to be grateful!"

Mu Shuangshuang let out a cold snort. She seriously wanted to split open Old Mrs. Mu's brain and see what was inside.

She could shamelessly say such words.

"Mom, this matter isn't the villagers' fault, it was Shuang who stirred things up. Don't forget, Auntie said earlier it was Shuang who went to call Luo the Scholar!"

No one knew if Mrs. Lin was really dumb or pretending.

Overall, she publicly betrayed Mrs. Jin in front of everyone.

Mrs. Jin's immediate reaction was to deny, and she argued with a flushed face: "Gou Dan's mother, don't wrong me, when did I ever say such words."

Mrs. Lin rolled up her sleeves and raised her voice, "Sister-in-law, what you said yourself, why aren't you admitting it? We all heard it."

Mrs. Jin was enjoying the spectacle by the side, but after Mrs. Lin's accusation, she was furious enough to tear Mrs. Lin apart.

In her mind, she thought: This dumb woman is no good!

"Grandma, let's just go back; surely it's not Shuang's fault." Huang Bitu stood up, trying to say something for Mu Shuangshuang.

But was harshly shoved by Old Mrs. Mu.

"Old woman speaking, mind your own business, don't meddle in the third branch's affairs." Old Mrs. Mu sternly said.

"But, Grandma..." Huang Bitu continued.

Old Mrs. Mu raised her hand, ready to hit Huang Bitu, but Mu Shuangshuang quickly pulled her aside.

Mu Shuangshuang's fist clenched tightly, she glared angrily at Old Mrs. Mu: "Grandma, Luo Bai is invited by me and is the teacher for our private school.

Don't say he's writing couplets for villagers now, he will write in the future whenever he has time! You neither can control nor manage it.

If you think villagers coming to write spring couplets should be grateful to Uncle, then you're mistaken; everybody can choose to write here or spend money in town!"

This saying 'the wheels of fortune rotate', remember it, one day Uncle might not be a scholar anymore."

"You..." Old Mrs. Mu stomped in anger at Mu Shuangshuang's words.

Her hand slapping her thigh, almost tearing her pants.

In the entire Old Mu family, no one dared to say anything bad about Mu Dade but Mu Shuangshuang.

This darn girl.

"Miserable girl, you've gone too far, I'm going to kill you today!"

Old Mrs. Mu's hand, previously paused, swung towards Mu Shuangshuang.

With a "bang", Mu Shuangshuang wasn't hit, but instead Mrs. Jin was kicked away.

She lay on the ground, her face ashen.

Her gaze at Mu Shuangshuang was full of disbelief.

Clearly earlier, the old woman and this miserable girl were about to clash, how come she ended up suffering instead?

Chapter 885: Done With This Life

Mu Shuangshuang knows what Mrs. Jin is thinking, so she kindly explains: "Today's matter, there wasn't really anything major, everyone, we're neighbors, it should just blow over!

But my aunt just has to stir things up, talk bad about our third branch, and even wants grandma to discipline us!

The guilty has a head, and the debt has a host, so naturally, I'm confronting the instigator, my aunt!"

After speaking, Mu Shuangshuang steps forward and grabs Mrs. Jin's collar.

She grabs Mrs. Jin's hair twice, messing it up.

Mrs. Jin, scared, covers her face, shouting for help: "Mother, help... help! This rotten girl is going to kill!"

Old Mrs. Mu is dumbfounded by Mu Shuangshuang's actions, unable to react for a while.

Once she comes to her senses, her well-behaved daughter-in-law has turned into a madwoman.

Mu Shuangshuang drags Mrs. Jin to the yard of the third branch and deliberately dusts off non-existent dust from her body.

Looking at Mrs. Jin, who is lying on the ground like a dead dog, Mu Shuangshuang says, "Aunt, if you dare step into our third branch again, I'll break your dog legs!

I'll act as I say, those barefoot aren't afraid of those in shoes, if you have the guts, come on!"

After Mu Shuangshuang finishes shouting, Mrs. Jin quickly gets up from the ground, covering her face, and escapes swiftly.

The remaining ones are either insignificant like Mrs. Lin or have a good relationship with Mu Shuangshuang.

Old Mrs. Mu wants to confront Mu Shuangshuang but fears that kick landing on herself.

She hurriedly shouts: "Madwoman! Madwoman... This rotten girl has gone mad!"

In the blink of an eye, the people of Old Mu Family are gone.

Zhu San is still wiping spit from his face, wiping a whole arm of dirty stuff, all he wants now is to go back and change clothes.

Mu Shuangshuang feels really embarrassed.

Originally wanted someone to testify, but ended up with dirt sprayed on his face, especially during the New Year.

"Uncle Zhu San, head to my kitchen, I'll get you some mugwort leaves to wash your face!"

Mu Shuangshuang avoids saying unlucky words, fearing Zhu San's taboo.

Zhu San shakes his head, "It's nothing, I'll wash at home! Fortunately, today isn't the New Year's Day yet, if this happened tomorrow, I wouldn't know what to do!"

After speaking, Zhu San pats his mouth and quickly shakes his head.

"Shuang, thank you!"

Mu Shuangshuang turns around intending to return to the kitchen to help, only to find a line of people standing behind her at some point.

Mu Dashan, Yu Si Niang, Lu Yuanfeng, and even Luo Bai is there.

Mu Shuangshuang remembers the actions she took earlier, twitching the corners of her mouth.

"You all saw?"

Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to be so violent, it's just this Mrs. Jin is really too rubbish.

Not only did she offend the villagers, but she helped to clean up the mess and now even dares to complain about her.

Bringing Old Mrs. Mu to deal with her.

That isn't like an aunt, more like a wolf with white eyes.

The four people nod in unison.

Lu Yuanfeng accepts it the most, Mu Dashan knows his daughter is protecting the family, so he says nothing, but Luo Bai, with his education, believes the younger generation shouldn't hit the elders.

He hesitates for a while before speaking: "Miss Shuangshuang, actually... earlier, you could have reasoned with those people, there's no need necessarily to resort to violence, disrespect from the younger to the elder might violate the laws of the Da Ning Dynasty."

Mu Shuangshuang is indifferent.

"Luo Juren, people respect me three parts, I respect them seven parts. People don't offend me, I don't offend them, if they do, break their bones!

This is my life credo as Mu Shuangshuang!"

"..."

After saying that, apart from Lu Yuanfeng, everyone can't help but twitch the corners of their mouths.

\*

The morning's work was done particularly fast.

The third branch is rejuvenated, even the courtyard walls have fewer dead grass.

Mu Shuangshuang keeps waiting for Mrs. Jin to come for revenge, but Mrs. Jin doesn't come, so Mu Shuangshuang goes to Lu Yuanfeng's house to help with work.

Although only two people live and eat there, Lu Yuanfeng's house is much larger than Mu Shuangshuang's.

Moreover, those things are more cluttered than those in Mu Shuangshuang's house.

Various sundry things, various old dirt.

Mu Shuangshuang wears an apron, locking Lu Yuanfeng outside.

Starting with the room, Mu Shuangshuang, with previous life training, knows how to tidy up a room cleanly and neatly.

By the time she comes out of Lu Yuanfeng's room, it's transformed, the quilt is made like tofu blocks, Yuan Bao's hidden old clothes are found and submerged in a wooden basin.

Lu Yuanfeng stands aside, wanting to help several times, but Mu Shuangshuang stops him.

While tidying the kitchen, Lu Yuanfeng refuses to remain idle.

He snatches the rag from Mu Shuangshuang's hand, starting his cleaning mode.

Having not eaten at home for a long time, the kitchen at Lu Yuanfeng's house really isn't very clean.

Clearing spider webs, dirt, it takes a great effort to clean up item by item.

The two work together, expending a great deal of effort.

At the other end of the Old Mu Family, a frightened Old Mrs. Mu, after resting for a noon, still feels unwilling.

She heads straight to Mu Xiangxiang's room, telling Mu Xiangxiang about Mu Shuangshuang's crimes, originally wanting to rely on her daughter for help, who knows, Mu Xiangxiang simply doesn't care.

Not only that, she also makes a request to Old Mrs. Mu.

"Mother, I want to go out for the New Year! I don't want to stay in this room, it stinks!"

Mu Xiangxiang can't go out, so she resolves eating, drinking, and excretion all in her room.

Where she sleeps, less than a foot away, is a chamber pot.

The chamber pot is both shitted and pissed in, not smelling weird would be strange.

"Xiangxiang, bear with it, the family thinks you're mad, if you go out, everyone will know it's just an act?" Old Mrs. Mu comforts Mu Xiangxiang.

"Mother, I don't care, I want to go out! This stink, let you endure it for ten days half a month and see if you can bear it?" Mu Xiangxiang insists on going out.

Old Mrs. Mu sighs, with a face full of pity, "My girl, mother knows you're struggling, but choosing this means you don't have to marry.

If you go out now, what can be done if your father makes you marry that cripple Qin Shijie?"

"Marry then marry, marrying is better than being suffocated by the smell here!"

Mu Xiangxiang retorts.

Old Mrs. Mu freezes, suddenly slapping her own thighs: "Oh my sins, what sins have I committed..."

Seeing this, Mu Xiangxiang becomes more brazen.

"Mother, if you don't agree, I'll tell father I'm not mad, it's you who made me act stupid! You're the one not letting me marry."

Mu Xiangxiang's words terrify Old Mrs. Mu.

If her deception is discovered by Mr. Mu, there's no doubt she'll be divorced.

By then, she'd become Er Gui Village's biggest laughing stock.

"Alright... alright, Xiangxiang, don't say anymore, mother will find father, say whatever it takes to get you a proper New Year's meal!"

After speaking, Old Mrs. Mu excitedly heads to Mr. Mu.

Before reaching him, she thinks up countless excuses, but upon seeing Mr. Mu, she forgets them all...

Chapter 886: These Years, Not Easy (Part 2)

Old Mrs. Mu stammered for quite a while, but she still couldn't bring herself to mention Mu Xiangxiang coming out for the New Year's Eve dinner.

Mr. Mu was getting impatient, "Xiangxiang's mother, if you have something to say, just say it directly. Speaking half and leaving half unsaid isn't your usual style!"

Old Mrs. Mu decided to get straight to the point: "Old man, that matter with Xiangxiang happened so long ago, and no one in the village talks about it anymore. Why don't we let Xiangxiang join us for the New Year's Eve dinner tomorrow?"

Regarding Mu Xiangxiang's situation, Old Mrs. Mu felt guilty, so she didn't dare to be too brazen, speaking in a negotiating tone.

Mr. Mu furrowed his brows and thought for a moment, saying, "Xiangxiang is crazy. If we let her out and she cuts someone's hair again like last time, what are we going to do?"

Mrs. Lin's head was bald, and it had only just started to grow some hair.

If Mu Xiangxiang has another episode, she might shave someone's head entirely.

"She won't. Xiangxiang listens to me. I spoke to her and told her not to cause trouble! Old man, she's the only unmarried daughter we have left now.

Xianxian doesn't care about us, and Zhenzhen has disappeared. If you don't treat this last daughter well, the two of us will really have nothing left."

Old Mrs. Mu clutched Mr. Mu's sleeve and cried to him.

Mr. Mu pulled his sleeve free with a look of displeasure.

"It's not that I don't want her to come out; you know how serious the ridiculous things Xiangxiang did are."

Mr. Mu turned away, ignoring Old Mrs. Mu's words.

"Old man, if you don't agree to let Xiangxiang out, I won't eat the New Year's Eve dinner either."

"Are you threatening me?"

Old Mrs. Mu shook her head: "I'm not threatening you. If our daughter can't have one comfortable day, then why should I, as her mother, have good days?"

Xiangxiang is my precious, and if she's not well, neither am I."

Old Mrs. Mu was unreasonable.

Mr. Mu had no choice with her, and besides, he hadn't seen Mu Xiangxiang in a long time, so he relented.

After thinking for a while, he said, "How about this, Matchmaker Sun mentioned to me yesterday that his nephew is about the same age as Xiangxiang. He's from our village, do you know Sun Dali? If Xiangxiang wants to come out, she has to marry Sun Dali."

To Mr. Mu, Mu Xiangxiang already seemed insane, and as long as there's a family willing to take her, it doesn't matter who the person is or their status; he wouldn't consider those aspects.

"You're crazy! How much does Sun Dali weigh? How much does our Xiangxiang weigh?" Old Mrs. Mu screamed sharply.

In farming families, the children are either extremely thin or as fat as a mountain. Few have a proportionate build, especially in the past few years when the Da Ning Dynasty was at war and everyone ate and drank less, making the situation even more evident.

That Sun Dali is indeed the fattest in the village, probably around two hundred pounds. When he walks, his arm fat jiggles, which makes Old Mrs. Mu shudder.

Moreover, Mu Xiangxiang is a frail and weak young girl.

"Why is Sun Dali bad? He's willing to work, and he manages four or five acres of paddy fields and three acres of dry land all by himself. Xiangxiang just needs to give him children! No need to think about anything else.

If he weren't so fat and no other girls wanted him, do you think he'd choose your daughter? A girl who was jilted and nearly killed someone?"

Mr. Mu was still angry about the things Mu Xiangxiang did, so he spoke harshly.

"Old man, how can you say such unpleasant things? What's 'my daughter,' isn't she your daughter too?" Old Mrs. Mu retorted.

"Fine, don't shout in front of me. These days are big days for New Year, I don't want to argue with you and risk bad luck for the Old Mu Family.

If you don't want to marry Xiangxiang to the Sun Family, then lock her in the room, don't let her out where people can see. The Old Mu Family's face won't have a place to hide!"

After saying this, Mr. Mu ignored Old Mrs. Mu.

No matter what Old Mrs. Mu said, he wouldn't budge, determined to use these two things as a trade-off.

If Mu Xiangxiang wants to come out, Old Mrs. Mu must agree to the marriage with the Sun Family; otherwise, there's no point discussing her coming out.

Seeing Mr. Mu so steadfast, Old Mrs. Mu temporarily forgot to argue back. By the time she found the excuse she wanted to use to discuss with Mr. Mu, he was already gone.

\*

At night, Yu Si Niang finished tidying up the kitchen and burned two red candles and some yellow paper on the stove.

Mu Shuangshuang stood beside her, waiting for Yu Si Niang to return to sleep so she could go to bed.

After offering incense, Yu Si Niang asked Mu Shuangshuang to worship the Kitchen God and reminded her not to kick the blanket during the night, to soak her feet before bed, and not to come out if she heard anything during the night.

These were Yu Si Niang's experiences during past New Years.

In previous years, around New Year, thieves would be especially rampant, especially in the days leading up to the new year, dog thieves and chicken thieves would be everywhere.

The third branch was only keeping an old hen for the time being; the rest of the medicinal chickens raised in the mountains were at Lu Yuanfeng's place.

Lu Yuanfeng was the local hunter, a genuine man. Even though he raised a lot of chickens, no one would dare to steal from his home.

Because it would mean delivering one's head on a platter.

As for the dog, the family only had the pig-fat Little Black Dog, who spent all day inseparably with Little Black in Mu Shuangshuang's room. During cold weather, it hardly went outside, so there was zero chance of it being stolen.

"Mom, I know all that you've said. It's so late, you should go to bed early, we have to get up early tomorrow."

Mu Shuangshuang replied cheerfully to Yu Si Niang, also reminding Yu Si Niang to be careful herself.

Yu Si Niang prepared a basin of hot water for Mu Dashan before leaving the kitchen.

Once Yu Si Niang left, Mu Shuangshuang didn't leave immediately.

She remembered Yu Si Niang's reminder that many materials needed for the New Year's Eve dinner were left in the kitchen earlier.

Initially, she thought they could just stay there for one night, no big deal.

Now it seemed they needed to be moved to her room.

Even the old hen shouldn't be left in the chicken coop.

Mu Shuangshuang moved everything into her room, breaking into a thin layer of sweat.

After a quick wash, Mu Shuangshuang climbed into her bed.

From under the bed, the warmth of the fire basin spread, and inside the blanket, it felt cozy.

Mu Shuangshuang squinted her eyes and could faintly hear sounds coming from Mu Dashan's room next door.

In the room, as usual, Yu Si Niang would prepare for Mu Dashan to soak his feet. Just as Yu Si Niang crouched down with the wooden basin, Mu Dashan stood up, supporting Yu Si Niang onto the bed.

"Si Niang, before you would wash my feet, but tonight I'll wash yours," Mu Dashan said.

Mu Dashan wasn't washing Yu Si Niang's feet for the first time, she was surprised but didn't refuse.

Her daughter had advised her to learn to rest occasionally, not to be like a donkey always working. So today she's trying to enjoy the comfort given by her husband, exactly as her daughter suggested.

Chapter 887:

Mu Dashan tested the water temperature with his hand; it was still a bit hot. He didn't hurry to soak Yu Si Niang's feet but instead placed her feet on his lap, gently massaging them.

Yu Si Niang had worked as a cook's assistant in town for many years, her feet constantly walking back and forth every day.

The ten-mile mountain road, one trip in the morning and another in the evening, regardless of wind or rain, except for rest times as ordered by the owner, she had to go to town.

This resulted in Yu Si Niang's feet being much rougher than those of ordinary women, and even somewhat deformed.

Touching the calloused feet, Mu Dashan felt a twinge of pain in his heart.

He gently kneaded Yu Si Niang's feet, sighing softly, "Shuangshuang's mother, you've suffered following me. Back then, I had nothing, yet you were willing to be with me."

At this point, Mu Dashan's face was full of sorrow, his facial muscles twitching slightly.

Back then, all the Silver from the Old Mu Family was used to support Mu Dade's studies. For the remaining sons, getting married became almost a luxury.

Especially among the sons, Mu Dashan, unlike Mu Dazhong, didn't know how to make the old man and old lady happy.

So, his marriage was something even Matchmaker Sun, the number one matchmaker in the village, didn't dare handle.

It wasn't until Mu Dashan accidentally met Yu Si Niang, who was selling tea with Mr. Yu from street to street, that they got to know each other and decided to get married.

Yu Si Niang stood firm against all opposition, refusing even a single copper coin as a betrothal gift, which allowed Mu Dashan to marry a wife.

Otherwise, Mu Dashan might still be like Mu Danian, having not married even one wife, known in the village as an old bachelor.

"What grievance? This is my own choice. I like you and am willing to be with you, no matter how hard or tiring it is, I'm willing."

Yu Si Niang's face blushed slightly, as if feeling somewhat embarrassed with the two little children in the room.

Xiao Han, originally asleep on the small bed opposite, sensed the atmosphere between his parents, which was something others couldn't intrude upon, and quietly got up.

He signaled to Little Zhi, who immediately said knowingly, "Mom, Dad, since tomorrow is New Year's, Xiao Han brother and I want to sleep with Sister Shuangshuang tonight."

Without waiting for Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan to reply, the two little ones leaped out of bed like fish, dressed themselves, and rushed out of the room.

Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang were both amused and touched by the children's understanding nature.

Yu Si Niang watched Mu Dashan, realizing that in the past half year, this was the only time he hadn't aged but instead looked younger.

Yu Si Niang increasingly liked their current way of life. At least now, she could say some intimate words to her man.

Mu Shuangshuang had just started feeling sleepy when the two kids knocked on the door outside. She struggled to get up and opened the door.

A gust of cold wind blew in, causing Mu Shuangshuang to shiver.

"What are you doing up so late, not sleeping in your own room?" Mu Shuangshuang asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Sister, Mom and Dad are whispering. Xiao Han brother and I will keep you company in bed, okay?"

Little Zhi grinned, showing his new grown little front teeth.

"You little rascal! At night, don't kick the quilt, don't disturb me, and don't move around!"

Mu Shuangshuang set her rules, and the two little ones nodded in agreement.

Thus, the three kids squeezed onto one bed.

They soon fell asleep.

\*

At midnight, a shadow emerged from the Old Mu Family's home, wearing a thick, worn-out cotton coat, clutched tightly at the chest.

The shadow left the Old Mu Family and headed straight for the third branch's house.

First, he entered the third branch's kitchen, but found nothing there but a few green vegetables, no meat, not even a single fish.

Then he went to the third branch's chicken coop, and found nothing there either.

The shadow stamped his foot in anger, muttering under his breath, "Damn it, wasted my effort coming out here late at night to steal something, and found nothing! I bet that brat has already taken everything."

The voice of the shadow was somewhat familiar; wasn't it Mu Danian?

That night, Mu Danian had arranged with another village rascal, Hu Sheng, to steal some things from the village.

So the next morning, they could exchange them in town for Silver, to have some money for the New Year festivities.

In previous years, Mu Danian chose to work in the twelfth lunar month, but this time, the villagers seemed to have wised up.

The village chief would arrange for villagers to patrol during the night, only letting down their guard on New Year's Eve.

Unwilling to give up, Mu Danian continued to lurk outside the third branch's courtyard, accidentally knocking over a chair in the kitchen.

He was nearly scared out of his wits, hiding desperately at the hearth entrance.

The sleeping Mu Shuangshuang instantly woke up, sensing someone in the kitchen. Because she had closed the kitchen door before bed, there shouldn't be any noise inside.

Nor could it be mice, as since they had Little Black, the mice within a few miles had moved away.

Little Black particularly enjoyed playing with mice.

She quickly got up from bed, put on her shoes, and grabbed a wooden stick from the corner.

The door opened slightly, and just as she stepped out, she drew back.

In her kitchen, there was nothing valuable other than pots and pans, which every household had.

No thief would go to the trouble of stealing those.

Most importantly, the New Year was approaching; Mu Shuangshuang didn't want trouble, nor did she want to bring trouble home.

She just raised her voice and called out, "Mom, it's so cold, I'll go to the outhouse later. Let me warm up in bed a bit more first."

In the kitchen, Mu Danian knew that Mu Shuangshuang was about to come out.

Getting out of the kitchen, he dashed out of the third branch's yard.

He ran to the village entrance where he had agreed to meet Hu Sheng.

Hu Sheng had been waiting at the village entrance for the time it takes to burn two sticks of incense and was nearly frozen into an ice sculpture in the cold wind.

Seeing Mu Danian, Hu Sheng said unkindly, "Mu Danian, did you fall into a latrine? Why are you so slow?"

Mu Danian was still recovering from the scare when Hu Sheng suddenly spoke, almost scaring him half to death again.

"Oh, gee, can't you keep it down? I almost lost my life because of you!" Mu Danian patted his chest and complained to Hu Sheng.

"Look who's talking, how long have I waited for you? If you were any later, I would've frozen here selling iced meat tonight."

Hu Sheng and Mu Danian weren't conspiring for the first time to steal from the villagers, so they knew each other's backgrounds.

When it came to talking, there was just one word—crude!

"Alright, weren't we going for a big haul? Stop nagging, be careful not to get caught when everyone wakes up." Mu Danian replied impatiently.

## Chapter 888: Down with a Shovel

"Who do you think we should rob first?" Hu Sheng turned his eyes and asked Mu Danian who was exhaling beside him.

"Of course, it's Old Wang Family. Wang Fugui is half-dead lying on the bed, and Old Wang has let go of all the servants at home; there's definitely a lot of money left there."

An astute gleam flashed in Hu Sheng's eyes, and he instantly agreed with Mu Danian's idea.

The two big men stealthily headed to Wang Fugui's house because during the New Year, everyone would go to bed early.

Furthermore, the dog at Wang Fugui's house was frightened away by Mu Shuangshuang last time to scare Xia Guagua, and later it was skinned and stewed by Gu Jiulian.

Now, the Wang Family wouldn't have anything to stop Mu Danian and Hu Sheng.

The two thieves walked boldly to Old Wang Family, as if strolling on a main road.

"Hey, Danian, you climb the wall and steal things, I'll keep watch outside. If there's any danger, I'll bark like a dog, and you should quickly hide!"

Hu Sheng pointed at Wang Family's courtyard and said to Mu Danian.

Mu Danian and Hu Sheng had stolen things before, usually entering together without keeping watch.

Mu Danian thought Hu Sheng was pushing him into danger and would abandon him if anything happened.

"You sly guy, why don't you say I'll keep watch, and you go in to steal?" Mu Danian rolled his eyes and shouted.

"How dare you talk back? Who was late? Who left me selling frozen meat alone in the cold wind? I'm telling you, Mu Dalian, if you don't go in, let's forget about stealing things; I don't care for that little money anyway."

Hu Sheng's tone was harsh, seemingly still angry about earlier events.

Mu Dalian widened his eyes, unable to express his anger at the man daring to confront him in the dead of night.

"Fine, I'll go, but don't say I shared less money with you later!"

"Steal it first, then talk!" Hu Sheng said dismissively.

Leaving those words, Mu Dalian spat into his hands, stepping on the uneven wall of Old Wang Family's courtyard, and climbed over.

Upon landing, he twisted his foot as he didn't control his fall well.

He cursed under his breath, crouched, and headed to the backyard of Old Wang Family.

Mu Dalian went straight to Old Wang's room, but he didn't know that Old Wang had already given the biggest room in the Wang Family to his son Wang Fugui for easy care.

Old Wang's room, whether ventilation or warm bed-stove, was the best among all rooms in the Wang Family.

As soon as he entered, a wave of warmth hit him.

The chill in Mu Dalian's body instantly dispersed considerably.

Mu Danian paused for a moment and then began searching the room carefully, looking for valuables on the table, inside cabinets.

He made no sound.

Suddenly, Mu Danian sensed something was amiss.

Through the moonlight shining from outside the window, he saw only one person lying on the bed.

Logically, this was impossible; Old Wang and his wife should be in the same room.

Bravely, lighting the flint, Mu Danian saw that the person lying there was Wang Fugui.

Mu Danian was startled at first, then relaxed.

"Damn it, scared me for so long, turns out it's this bastard! Half-dead thing."

Wang Fugui lying half-dead on the bed for so long, if Mu Danian was afraid, that would be truly suspicious.

Mu Danian didn't extinguish the flint, boldly rummaging the room under its light.

He found some scattered copper coins, Wang Fugui's fine clothes made of silk, good material, which could fetch money in town.

Besides that, there was nothing valuable.

Unwilling, Mu Danian continued searching the room, focusing on Wang Fugui's bed and pillow.

Soon, Mu Daniaan reached Wang Fugui's bedside, glanced at Wang Fugui's overly pale face, and frowned disdainfully.

Suddenly, he saw a embroidered pouch beneath Wang Fugui's pillow, bulging as if containing something.

Mu Daniaan was delighted, thinking it might be silver notes or a title deed.

He reached out and grabbed the pouch.

"Little rascal, hiding something so good, in the end, isn't it still benefiting me."

Without bothering to open the pouch, Mu Daniaan quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

Considering good things come in pairs, Mu Daniaan thought there must be more under Wang Fugui's pillow; he reached out and lifted Wang Fugui.

"Damn it, this dead thing is so skinny he's just skin and bones, still can't be moved!"

Mu Daniaan continued using his hands to pry, passing Wang Fugui's neck, his movements were large.

But he wasn't worried about waking Wang Fugui; this bastard was half into a coffin already, how could he wake?

Outside the courtyard, Hu Sheng waited left and right, seeing no sign of Mu Daniaan coming out, nor any activity in the courtyard.

He suddenly remembered Mu Daniaan's remark about sharing less money.

Hu Sheng stomped anxiously.

"Damn it, could Mu Danian have found silver and doesn't want to come out?"

The Wang Family was the richest household in Er Gui Village, even Fu Wu's business couldn't compare.

It's no surprise they have money.

The more Hu Sheng thought about it, the more he felt if he stayed, Mu Danian would earn a fortune.

Learning from Mu Danian's method, he spat into his palms, cheerfully climbing over Old Wang Family's courtyard wall.

As soon as he landed, he was spotted by Old Wang, who came out with a candle to check on his son.

"Thief... thief... catch the thief!" Old Wang shouted, the candle extinguished, he didn't see Hu Sheng's face.

Hu Sheng was startled before stabilizing, trying to climb out the courtyard wall in a panic, but due to urgency and darkness, he failed several attempts.

By then, Old Wang had grabbed a shovel left in the courtyard.

He rushed forward, still shouting, "Catch the thief!"

A shovel strike almost flattened Hu Sheng's back skull, his head swayed, nearly falling.

Hurriedly, he imitated dog barking.

Inside the room, Mu Danian, still trying to find another pouch, heard the noise, knowing Hu Sheng was discovered.

Hugging the clothes he found in Wang Fugui's room, he ran outside.

Reaching the courtyard, Hu Sheng thought his savior had arrived.

Unexpectedly, Mu Danian abandoned him, fleeing for life!

"Damn it, you... you actually..." Hu Sheng didn't dare call Mu Danian's name, afraid Wang Fugui would hear and later find Mu Danian, who would confess about him.

In the moment of his daze, his behind got shoved again, Hu Sheng screamed miserably.

He lifted his foot, kicked Old Wang's belly, "Damn old thing, go to hell!"

Chapter 889: Forced Interrogation (Part 2)

Old Wang fell to the ground, giving Hu Sheng a chance to escape from the Old Wang Family's yard.

The first thing after escaping was to find trouble with Mu Danian.

The two of them had agreed where to meet after the deed was done.

When Hu Sheng arrived at the designated spot, Mu Danian was indeed there.

This time, it was Mu Danian who was all smug: "Yo, Brother Hu Sheng, how come you, the lookout, ended up inside Old Wang's house?"

Couldn't hold back your loneliness and took a fancy to Old Wang's old cucumber at home? Let me tell you, if you don't have a wife, spend some money to buy one from human traffickers. Falling for those over-the-hill types, what's that all about."

Mu Daniaun unabashedly teased Hu Sheng, looking as if he was in a pretty good mood.

Hu Sheng, who had a short temper, retorted angrily at Mu Daniaun: "You're full of crap. Do you know how badly that old thing beat me?"

That whack on the head nearly laid me out, and my butt, I'm almost dying from the pain."

Hu Sheng's face was indeed twisted out of shape from the pain.

Mu Daniaun deliberately lit the flint and looked Hu Sheng up and down, noticing indeed a few shovel marks on Hu Sheng's butt.

He clutched his stomach, laughing uproariously.

"You idiot, you couldn't even beat that old thing!"

"Stop jabbering, what exactly did you steal?" Hu Sheng asked impatiently.

"Here!" Mu Daniaun pointed to the clothes of Wang Fugui thrown aside on the ground: "The old man swapped rooms with that brat Wang Fugui. I didn't find a single penny, so I ended up stealing his clothes.

That brat's clothes are actually nice. I swiped a few good pieces. Tomorrow morning, we'll go to town and sell them."

Hu Sheng was a bit unhappy, fussing all night and ending up with nothing but some ragged clothes...

"No way, it's almost New Year's Eve, we can't possibly not make any money. Listen to me, this time, we're not stealing money, we're going to steal chickens!"

— —

Early the next morning, Mu Shuangshuang woke up from her dreams, and the sound of chopping vegetables was already crackling in the kitchen.

Yu Si Niang had gotten up early to make breakfast for the family.

She had saved up seven poached eggs for a long time, pairing them with a bowl of steaming hot vegetable porridge.

After eating, everyone was just about to get busy with their own tasks when news came from the village.

Old Wang was injured!

Old Lu Family's chickens were stolen!

Last night, thieves tried to rob Old Wang Family but were caught by Old Wang when he got up at night. He prevented the Wang Family from being robbed but got kicked in the stomach by the thief, and today he couldn't get up.

Such an unlucky event happening right around New Year, the Old Wang Family was naturally having a hard time.

However, considering it was the New Year, they didn't want the villagers to be unhappy along with them.

Originally, the Old Wang Family intended to wait until after the New Year to have the village chief deal with it, but who would have thought that the matter would spread after several village gossips found out.

Moreover, those thieves went to Old Lu Family during the night and swiped all the chickens.

Gu Jiulian was out in the yard first thing in the morning, crying and cursing the chicken thieves, disrupting the neighbors' festive New Year atmosphere.

The two incidents together made everyone in the village wary, and the New Year's cheer diminished significantly.

"Shuang, let's go and take a look, after all, it's a big village affair."

Despite the bad omen, Mu Dashan called Mu Shuangshuang, asking her to join him.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded: "Dad, I'll call Fengzi along."

Yu Si Niang stayed home preparing ingredients for the New Year's Eve dinner, while the three of them went to Old Wang Family.

A lot of people were standing outside Wang Family courtyard to watch the commotion, but not a single person was willing to actually go in.

Everyone was there, craning their necks to peek inside.

When they saw the third branch, everyone exchanged New Year's greetings, wishing prosperity, and then Mu Dashan led the way into the Wang Family house.

Mu Shuangshuang took the opportunity to survey the scene in the courtyard.

Perhaps it was a professional habit, she observed very carefully, noting the corners of the courtyard wall, the wilting little tree pressed down, the distorted mud floor trampled on.

And then the piece of clothing discarded on the ground at Wang Fugui's room door.

Mu Dashan went inside and had a chat with Old Master Wang who was lying on the kang.

Old Master Wang's eyes reddened: "Da Shan, I never thought, after the incident, you would be the first to come to our Old Wang Family.

I wronged you and Si Niang back then, made you... made you..., it was all my fault."

After all, it was the New Year, and Old Master Wang still remembered the ancestral taboos.

You can't say the word death, you can't speak ill words...

"Old Master, that's all in the past, we've long forgotten about it. You take care and get well, who's going to make the New Year's dinner?" Mu Dashan asked.

"I dismissed some long-term workers a few days ago, but the short-term workers are still around, so someone will make the New Year's dinner. Da Shan, wait a moment!"

Old Master Wang couldn't move, but Mrs. Wang who was attending to him, at his words, knowingly took out three red envelopes from the cupboard to hand to Mu Dashan.

"This is New Year money, it's the first time giving it out, not much, don't mind it."

Mu Dashan blushed and said, "I can't accept it. Already so old, what do I need a red envelope for?"

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng also said, "We don't want it either, we're adults now."

Judging by age, Mu Shuangshuang hadn't even reached her coming of age, Lu Yuanfeng hadn't reached legal adulthood, they were both still considered children.

But they said it not wanting to take money from Old Wang.

"Oh dear, what are you doing, you can't refuse New Year money, old lady, go grab some fruits for Da Shan and them to eat."

After Old Wang said that, Mrs. Wang went to the side storeroom, and Mu Shuangshuang followed, saying she was going to help, but in fact, she went to inquire about the situation.

Mrs. Wang didn't know much, but whatever Mu Shuangshuang wanted to know, she told her.

For instance, the thieves came after midnight and there were two of them.

Mu Shuangshuang suddenly recalled that at midnight, the thief had visited her house too.

If it wasn't for her being a light sleeper, her house might have suffered too.

But after a bit of analysis, Mu Shuangshuang always felt that the thief was someone she knew, and was from the village.

However, today was New Year's, so Mu Shuangshuang was in no position to say too much.

The three of them took a short rest, then, saying that there was work to be done at home, they left Old Wang's courtyard.

Once they stepped out, the villagers gathered around, each expressing concern about Old Wang's condition.

"Da Shan, have you seen Old Wang? Is it really that serious? Did he see the person?"

A flurry of questions came at him, rendering Mu Dashan a bit speechless.

It was Mu Shuangshuang who stepped up to untangle the situation.

"Uncles, aunties, today is New Year's, we still have to prepare the New Year's dinner.

Besides, Old Master Wang is okay, let's all go home and celebrate New Year!"

With Mu Shuangshuang putting in a word, Mu Dashan added his voice: "Yes, it's New Year's, let's all go home and celebrate it. Wishing everyone a happy New Year!"

Chapter 890: Entering the Inner Circle

On the way back, Mu Dashan couldn't help but feel a bit emotional, both for the Old Wang Family and for the thief who suddenly appeared.

This year, Er Gui Village had the strictest precautions against thieves, yet who would have thought, the night before the New Year, a thief would still show up.

"Fengzi, last night the thief stole from Old Lu Family's chickens, did your chicken coop lose any?"

Mu Dashan realized there was another victim, so he asked Lu Yuanfeng, whose home was separated from the Lu Family by just a courtyard wall.

"No, I went to bed early last night, but I didn't hear any noise." Lu Yuanfeng shook his head.

"Well, regardless of what the Old Lu Family did, losing all the chickens they've raised this year is still heartbreaking." Mu Dashan muttered.

Mu Shuangshuang's reaction was somewhat unexpected.

"That thief is indeed despicable, but in my view, this incident is absolutely not accidental.

First, they came to our house, then stole from the Wang Family, and next was the Old Lu Family; the underlying issues here are quite significant."

As soon as Mu Shuangshuang finished speaking, Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Dashan spoke up in unison.

"What? Our house was also visited by a thief?" Mu Dashan said.

"Dad, keep your voice down, I don't plan to tell anyone outside our family." Mu Shuangshuang said.

Mu Dashan quickly covered his mouth, but his eyes were filled with eager anticipation, waiting for his daughter to continue.

"Shuangshuang, tell me, what exactly happened? You didn't go out last night, right?" Lu Yuanfeng grabbed Mu Shuangshuang's hand, looking back and forth, afraid of missing anything.

"Relax, it's all fine. I didn't go out, but I scared away the thief. However, last night, only one thief came to our house. The most important thing is that I noticed he went directly to our kitchen."

"In general, thieves should scope out the situation and then go into a room to steal, wouldn't they? Rooms have money, deeds, and the like. In the kitchen, there's at most a bit of ingredients for today's New Year's Eve meal."

"Last night, I moved all those ingredients to my room in advance. Normally, if it were a thief, seeing there's nothing, he should have left. But that person lingered in the kitchen for quite a while and even kicked a chair."

"I think that thief might be someone we know. Last night, they might have come to steal from us purely out of revenge, that's why they lingered in our kitchen for so long."

Mu Shuangshuang shared her thoughts with Mu Dashan and Lu Yuanfeng, and then discussed the details she observed at the Wang Family with them.

Mu Shuangshuang's analytical skills have always been quite strong.

As she went through each point, Mu Dashan's mouth opened wide in surprise, unable to close.

It wasn't just because of Mu Shuangshuang's analytical ability, but also because of the notion that the thief is known to the third branch and might be seeking revenge on the third branch.

"Oh my, what should we do? We don't even know who that person is..." Mu Dashan's face was filled with anxiety, his heart about to leap out.

"Dad, you don't need to scare yourself, it's just a petty thief. Fengzi stayed in the military camp for quite a while, his skills are certainly unremarkable.

Besides, aren't you here too? What are we worrying about? We don't need to worry about anything, let's just enjoy New Year, after which we can ask around at the market in town to see who sold chickens."

Mu Shuangshuang isn't worried that the petty thief might escape, as the village and town aren't that large, and there are only a few who hold grudges against the third branch.

If needed, they could find them anytime.

It's just that now isn't the right timing, so they don't want to delve deeper into it.

After returning home, the three maintained a tacit understanding and didn't mention the incident to Yu Si Niang to avoid her worrying.

The children were sound asleep last night, clueless about anything.

Actually, the New Year's Eve dinner doesn't necessarily have to be at night, it can be anytime throughout Danyan.

Some people have it in the morning, others at noon, and some in the evening.

The third branch chose to dine at noon, with the family gathering in the evening to eat dumplings.

In the kitchen, Yu Si Niang hasn't gotten around to slaughtering chickens or fish, so as soon as Lu Yuanfeng entered, he took on those tasks.

During New Year, carp is served, symbolizing good fortune and prosperity.

The pound-plus carp in Lu Yuanfeng's hands quickly had its scales removed, belly opened, cleaned, and he was off to busying himself with handling the chicken.

In the kitchen, everyone started getting busy.

Once the dishes are ready, it's sure to be a lavish feast.

This time, Yu Si Niang was the head chef, with Mu Shuangshuang only needing to get the fire going as the fire tender.

After a while, the third branch received the first wave of New Year's visitors.

It was Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu; last night they went to the Huang Family Village, so Huang Bitu was still immersed in the joy of returning home.

"Third Uncle, Third Aunt, and Shuangshuang, Fengzi, Happy New Year! Bitu and I are here to wish you a Happy New Year!"

Huang Bitu, being newly married, was due for red packets during New Year's greetings.

Fortunately, Yu Si Niang prepared the red packets ahead of time, and as soon as she entered the kitchen, she directed Xiao Han outside to fetch them.

"This is a token of sincerity from your Third Uncle and Third Aunt. Once you accept it, may your days be joyful and harmonious," Mu Dashan chimed in from the side.

Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu happily accepted the red packets, exchanging a few celebratory words.

Mu Dalang took over the task of tending the fire from Mu Shuangshuang, letting her chat with Huang Bitu for a while.

The two friends left the kitchen and went into Mu Shuangshuang's room, closing the door to share secrets.

Their conversation naturally revolved around her return home and the recent happenings in the Old Mu Family.

When happy topics were mentioned, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but join in on the laughter.

"By the way, who's handling the New Year's Eve dinner? At the Old Mu Family?" Mu Shuangshuang asked curiously.

"My mom and Fourth Aunt; Grandma said my generation isn't dignified enough, so I'm not allowed in the kitchen to help today."

"That's a good thing, not having to help with cooking," Mu Shuangshuang replied.

"Yes, and a lot of New Year's visitors came to our home today, both from within the village and outside. Oh, Ruan Xiao Jiao also came, saying she plans to spend New Year at our house."

Everyone else returned to their homes after presenting their New Year greetings, except for Ruan Xiao Jiao, who stayed at the Old Mu Family and intended to eat their New Year's Eve dinner.

This, to Huang Bitu, could be considered gossip.

Mu Shuangshuang burst out laughing and said, "Am I hearing this correctly? The County Magistrate's concubine is spending the New Year at the Old Mu Family? Doesn't she have her own family?"

Despite saying that, Mu Shuangshuang found Mu Dade's audacity much more amusing.

In the county, he dared to book—rooms with Ruan Xiao Jiao at a hotel.

Back in the village, he went directly to the Old Mu Family, frequently showing off, as if he believed his scholar status exceeded the County Magistrate's, or did he think everyone was blind to what he and Ruan Xiao Jiao had?

Moreover, they were even discussing marriage back then.

"Yeah, I was shocked too. I heard from my mom that eldest aunt was about to go crazy, asking grandpa and grandma to chase that woman away," Huang Bitu lowered her voice to talk to Mu Shuangshuang.

"What did grandpa and grandma say?"