

Rebirth: Regaining Joyful Moments

#Chapter 1 - 001 I Didn't Jump into the Lake - Read Rebirth: Regaining Joyful Moments Chapter 1 - 001 I Didn't Jump into the Lake

Chapter 1: Chapter 001 I Didn't Jump into the Lake

In the solitary courtyard, the fire blazed up to the sky. At the top of the adjacent villa, a petite figure swayed dangerously, as though a gust of wind could blow her straight into the burning yard below.

"You acknowledged me as your daughter again just for the sake of your precious daughter Gu Mingzhu, right?"

Xu Nianhua's face was ashen as she looked indifferently at the man before her, her biological father by blood.

"Just say the word, and I'll save Gu Mingzhu, even if it costs me my life, I wouldn't refuse, I'd be willing."

The glaring firelight illuminated the resolve in Xu Nianhua's eyes as her tears pit-a-patted down. She choked out, "But, you clearly promised me, you would take good care of them, you promised me that."

Xu Nianhua stepped back, her crying turning into laughter, and she said, "Do you really think Gu Mingzhu can survive?"

"Hahaha~" Xu Nianhua laughed uproariously to the sky. Amid his stunned gaze, she leaped into the Sea of Fire.

She was dead, and Gu Mingzhu had no chance of living either!

"What did you do to Mingzhu?"

Gu Hai yelled at Xu Nianhua, but she had disappeared into the Sea of Fire, her figure no longer visible, and only her eerie laughter could faintly be heard.

Madness, utter madness!

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It was uncomfortable, impossible to breathe, as if something were desperately squeezing her all around.

Xu Nianhua's instinct to survive made her struggle, trying to escape this unbearable feeling.

"Little sister."

Who was calling her?

Xu Nianhua made a great effort to open her eyes.

'Cough~'

After coughing up water, seeing Xu Nian'an, she embraced him excitedly, crying, "Second brother, I've finally seen you again. Have we been reunited in hell? Where are mom and dad, and big brother? Where are they?"

Xu Nianhua's vision was blurry with tears as she looked around at the mountains, still thinking to herself, why does this hell look so familiar?

"What reunion in hell? What nonsense are you spouting? Look, how many fingers am I holding up?" Xu Nian'an wiggled two fingers in front of Xu Nianhua.

Xu Nianhua stared blankly at Xu Nian'an and said, "Two."

"You're not silly, so why speak foolish words?" Xu Nian'an reached out to feel her forehead. It was cool to the touch, and she didn't have a fever.

"Second brother."

Suddenly, Xu Nianhua gripped Xu Nian'an tightly, feeling his warmth, and looked at him bewilderedly. She had clearly already died, so how come she woke up to see her young Second Brother?

Where was this place?

"Silly girl, why are you being so foolish? So what if you didn't do well in English? So what if you don't get accepted this year? There's always next year, isn't there?"

"I know you're worried the family's too poor to afford school, but don't worry, even if I don't go to school, I'll make sure you do."

"You don't need to worry about our grandparents either, I will persuade them to let you continue your studies."

"Little sister, you mustn't think of doing something foolish like jumping into the lake again."

Xu Nian'an's incessant words left Xu Nianhua stunned. After her memories overlapped, she recalled that during her first college entrance exam, she had missed the English exam due to a stomachache, and fearing she wouldn't be able to attend school, Xu Nianhua ran off to cry on the back mountain. Afterwards, it seemed she saw something and then accidentally slipped into the lake.

So, she was not only alive but had also returned to the past?

Xu Nianhua stared wide-eyed in shock at the placid lake surface, looking dazed and bewildered.

"Little sister, life is only once, and you must not let this upset you to the point of despair." Xu Nian'an, still thinking his little sister was troubled, tightly grasped Xu Nianhua's hand and said, "You still have mom and dad, you still have me, your second brother, and our big brother who also cares about you. You can't just leave us behind."

Startled by Xu Nian'an's urgent shouting, Xu Nianhua's consciousness gathered back. Seeing Xu Nian'an so anxious and worried she might jump into the lake, she suddenly laughed and said, "Second brother, I didn't jump into the lake."

Chapter 2: Chapter 002: Fever

"Little sister, I know you're upset now, but things will get better."

Xu Nian'an thought that Xu Nianhua was too embarrassed to admit she had tried to take her own life by jumping into the lake, which is why he said it that way, especially given how eerie her smile was at that moment?

Xu Nianhua's smile grew even brighter as she said, word by word, "Big brother, I really didn't jump into the lake."

"Don't tell me you thought it was hot and decided to take a cold bath?" Xu Nian'an asked skeptically, raising an eyebrow and clearly not believing Xu Nianhua's words.

"Big brother, how could I bear to leave our parents, or you and our eldest brother?" Xu Nianhua's voice was soft but not weak, conveying a sense of gentleness. Her eyes twinkled as she added, "I just accidentally fell in."

As for what she had seen at the back hill, Xu Nianhua didn't say, after all, she couldn't clearly remember who was with whom.

"Oh right, big brother, how come you are here?"

Xu Nianhua countered.

"You still have the nerve to ask." Xu Nian'an was still somewhat frightened as he said, "Little sister, would you be okay if I hadn't come?"

Xu Nian'an stood up, draped his white shirt over her, only wearing a tank top himself, squatted down in front of her, and said, "Let's go, we're going home."

Going home.

Xu Nianhua immediately burst into tears, clutching tightly at the white shirt, and said, "Big brother, I can walk on my own."

"Hurry up, don't catch a cold from all this fussing."

Xu Nian'an urged, without any intention of getting up.

Xu Nianhua carefully leaned against his broad and solid back. He carried her, each step steady and firm. In her memories, the eldest brother and big brother always carried her around everywhere. Whether it was the eldest brother, big brother, or their parents, they were the ones who loved her most. She would never allow anyone to hurt them!

The Xu family lived in Shuangzhu Village, named for the two large bamboo forests there. People built their homes along the streams on both sides of the mountains, a cluster of old, yet orderly houses. From halfway up the mountain, the curling smoke enveloped the homes, casting an aura of tranquility.

"Little sister?"

Xu Nian'an felt Xu Nianhua was unusually quiet on his back and couldn't help but call out softly, sidelong glancing at her. She had already fallen asleep, and he wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but his back, warmed by Xu Nianhua, felt as hot as a furnace.

Xu Nian'an quickened his pace, worried his sister might catch a cold from her fall into the lake.

"Little sister, we're home." It was only when Xu Nian'an reached home that he softly called out Xu Nianhua's name.

"Big brother?"

Xu Nianhua opened her eyes groggily, feeling a fever engulf her body. She responded hazily and then closed her eyes again.

Xu Nian'an touched her forehead, finding it alarmingly hot. He carefully put Xu Nianhua back into bed and then rushed off to the fields to find his mother, Ji Ying.

It was July, and the early rice had just been harvested. The Xu family was working in the fields, preparing to plant the late rice.

Xu Nian'an was supposed to work in the fields too, but Ji Ying and her husband were worried about Xu Nianhua, so they asked him to stay at home to tend to the drying rice. Taking advantage of the dried rice, he hadn't seen his little sister and went to look for her.

When Ji Ying heard that Xu Nianhua had fallen into the lake and got a fever, she immediately returned from the fields. Seeing Xu Nianhua confused with fever on the bed, Ji Ying looked at her daughter with a heartache and immediately fetched some fever-reducing herbs from the house to brew and gave it to her. Then, she asked Xu Nian'an anxiously, "Nian'an, tell me, do you think Nianhua accidentally fell into the lake, or did she..." contemplate otherwise?

Chapter 3: Chapter 003 What Books to Read?

"She said she accidentally fell into the lake."

Xu Nian'an explained how he had rescued Ji Ying, adding, "I don't see her as the kind of person who would give up hope. Mom, I know we are poor, and being a man, it's not a big deal if I study a little less. I still have plenty of strength. I can work at the brick factory just like my older brother to support myself and help the family live a little better, but Ji Ying cannot."

Xu Nian'an looked at Ji Ying, her little face flushed red like a ripe red apple. He said, "Ji Ying has been frail since she was young. What will she do if she doesn't pursue more education?"

"Nian'an."

Ji Ying felt guilty as she looked at Xu Nian'an. Shaking her head, she said, "No, you need to study. Your grades are so good; it would be a waste if you didn't study."

The eldest son, Xu Nianji, hadn't caught a good break; he had gone to work at the brick factory after middle school. When the college entrance exam was reinstated, Xu Nianji stubbornly refused to participate and continued working at the brick factory. Now, with the younger son, Xu Nian'an scoring well, he was sure to pass the upcoming college entrance exam.

"Mom, I definitely won't pass," Xu Nian'an thought about the questions he had intentionally left blank. Even if a deity intervened, he was destined to miss out on college.

"Why?"

As soon as Ji Ying asked, she realized her question was redundant; he had evidently decided to give his study opportunity to his sister.

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Ji Ying was groggy, dreaming of her relatives leaving her one by one. She felt heartbroken, but ultimately, it all traced back to the Gu Family, especially Gu Mingzhu, whom she blamed for their misfortunes, filling her with intense anger.

The raging fire burned incessantly, and Ji Ying felt as if she were trapped in a sea of fire with no escape.

"What's happening?"

No sooner had Ji Ying changed Ji Ying's clothes than she noticed the distressed expression and continuous tears on Ji Ying's face.

"Good child, don't cry anymore."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you get an education."

"You are my daughter, even if I have to pawn everything, I'll support your schooling."

Ji Ying was reluctant to see her son stop his education, just as she did not want her daughter to stop hers.

Ji Ying's gentle voice comforted her, as if coaxing a child, gently patting Ji Ying's shoulder. Sure enough, the painful expression on Ji Ying's face faded, and the tears at the corners of her eyes slowly stopped.

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'Clang'

The enamel cup fell to the ground, clanging loudly. Xu Zhong glared at Xu Qinghe with a furious expression, saying, "A girl studying, reading books - why bother?"

"She didn't pass herself and wants to study another year? Do you think the Xu family's money comes from the wind or falls from the sky?"

"If anyone should go to school, it should be a boy. A girl spending so much money, it's good enough if she finished high school. You better not even think about college," he continued.

Xu Zhong was furious, his chastisements coming out in rapid succession, pausing not even for a moment.

"Old man, don't be angry," Grandma Xu soothed while patting Xu Zhong's back, trying to calm him down. She signaled to Xu Qinghe, saying, "Qinghe, don't blame your dad. We're already poor and Zhiyuan is about to enter college. We really can't afford to educate so many children."

"He was born to infuriate me," Xu Zhong felt immediately relieved as his wife helped calm him down. He then summed up his decision, "Ji Ying will stop studying. As for Nian'an, if he passes, he can study; if he doesn't, then he won't."

"Let him follow his older brother to work in the brick factory. He can make thirty yuan a month," Xu Zhong added.

Chapter 4: Chapter 004 Why Can They Go Up

"Dad, I know it costs money to send another child to college, but both Nianhua and Nian'an have good grades, and the teachers all say that it would be a pity not to educate them." Xu Qinghe was simple and honest, and although he was the eldest in the family, he had no say at all.

"What do you know?"

Xu Zhong scolded him, saying, "Nian'an's grades are far behind Zhiyuan's, which has earned our Xu Family much honor."

"Dad." Ji Ying timidly mentioned, saying, "Isn't there financial aid for college that doesn't require us to pay out of our own pockets?"

"Doesn't it still require living expenses? Travel expenses?" Xu Zhong rebuffed without a second thought.

Xu Zhong, in his sixties, had a weather-beaten face with dark skin and a pair of eyes like copper bells that, when widened, were particularly frightening.

Ji Ying instantly dared not speak anymore and could only look pleadingly toward her husband, Xu Qinghe.

The two children had to go to school. The eldest had not had the chance, and that was regret enough for the couple. The second and third had to be sent to school, even if it meant smashing the pot and selling the iron.

"Grandpa." Xu Nian'an, the younger one, was not supposed to interrupt, but he could not hold back anymore and said, "Being biased is one thing, but this isn't the way to show favoritism. Dad is your son too, and I'm your grandson. When the eldest was schooling, you said there wasn't enough money to send Zhihao and all of us to school."

"Now, when my siblings and I need to go to school, you say there's still no money because we need to fund Zhiyuan's education, and you tell me to work at the brick factory. Are all the money my brother and I earn supposed to just fund my uncle's family's education?"

"Even Xu Jiaojiao can go to school, why can't my sister?"

Xu Nian'an had been holding back a stomach full of anger and didn't care about repercussions, letting out everything he had wanted to say.

"Nian'an." Xu Qinghe said sternly, "Apologize to Grandpa. How can you speak to Grandpa like this?"

"Dad, why can't I say it when I haven't said anything wrong?"

Xu Nian'an stood his ground, unwilling to apologize.

Xu Zhong rushed forward and slapped him mercilessly.

"Smack!"

The loud slap echoed, and Xu Nian'an looked shocked at Ji Ying, who had stepped in front of him, quickly supporting her and asking, "Mom, are you okay?"

Ji Ying, dizzy from Xu Zhong's slap, steadied herself with Xu Nian'an's help.

The room was in chaos, and although Xu Zhong felt he had been impulsive, he had slapped his own grandson after all; who asked her to step in?

Ji Ying sat on the stool feeling that all the grievances she had accumulated over the years burst forth at that moment.

"We can't go on like this, Xu Qinghe, we either split up the family or get a divorce." Ji Ying's eyes were blurred with tears as she raised her head. She thought of the girl who, unable to attend school, had nearly lost hope. Her heart ached as if punctured by needles, and her sons—the two sons—she had already delayed the eldest's future, was she going to hinder the younger son's future as well?

If before Ji Ying thought that as a daughter-in-law, she should be obedient to her in-laws, harmonious with her sisters-in-law, and respectful to her husband, now she felt she had endured everything for the sake of this family. In the end, all the suffering fell on them.

It didn't matter if she and her husband suffered, but the future of their two children was at stake, and she no longer wanted to endure any further.

The eldest hadn't had great grades from childhood, so she did not mention him much. But the second and third had good grades, and every time, the teachers said they should be well-educated. Why, just because their grandfather didn't allow it, should they be denied education?

Chapter 5: Chapter 005: Dividing the Inheritance

"I'm not dead yet!" Xu Zhong, having felt he had gone a bit too far when he heard the words "dividing the family," now wished he could slap them again.

Grandma Xu hurriedly grabbed Xu Zhong, giving him meaningful looks.

"Xu Qinghe's wife, even if you're angry, don't say such things." Grandma Xu stepped forward, her sharp and nasty face showing concern as she said, "Let's talk this over gently. Old man, not letting the two children go to school definitely won't do. Since Nian'an is willing to give his school slot to Nianhua, let Nianhua attend school."

"I disagree."

Ji Ying, dragging her sick body, staggered in. The commotion had awoken her after the teacup had crashed to the floor earlier. Her fever hadn't subsided, and she felt weak, moving slowly. When she heard the sound of a slap, Ji Ying felt her blood roiling with anger.

The wicked-hearted step-grandmother was scheming to have their family support Xu Zhihao's family!

As Liu Sanmei kept talking Ji Ying's head off, contemplating her next words, she heard Ji Ying's voice. Turning around and seeing Ji Ying's frail body, which a gust of wind could knock over, she was overwhelmed with heartache. She got up, quickly supporting Ji Ying, saying, "Why did you get up, your fever hasn't gone down yet?"

Liu Sanmei reached out to touch her forehead, scorching hot to the touch.

"Mom, did Grandpa hit you?"

Ji Ying didn't respond, but her thin face and round, bright eyes focused on Liu Sanmei's slapped face, which bore five bright red marks, swollen and red.

"No, it was just an accident," Liu Sanmei subconsciously explained.

Ji Ying looked towards Xu Qinghe standing to the side and said, "Dad, what do you say?"

Facing his daughter's bright, clear eyes, Xu Qinghe felt a twinge of guilt and could not look Ji Ying in the eyes. He lowered his head, avoiding her gaze, and said, "Dad, I

haven't achieved much in my life. The eldest isn't cut out for schooling either; he works at the brick factory and barely makes thirty yuan a month, working himself to exhaustion."

Xu Qinghe took a deep breath, looked up at Xu Zhong with determination, and expressed his stance, saying, "Both the second and third children get good grades ordinarily. Even if I have to smash the pot and sell the iron, I want to support the two of them in their studies."

The room fell silent.

Xu Zhong sat in the chair, his eyes like brass bells fixated on Xu Qinghe.

Grandma Liu Sanmei sat to the side, looking downcast.

Uncle Xu Qingjiang and Aunt Zhao Juxiang, like outsiders, sat there silently.

After the college entrance exams, Xu Zhiyuan took Xu Jiaojiao to the county to find his older brother, Xu Zhihao.

Ji Ying was made to sit in a chair forcibly, with Liu Sanmei sitting by her side, and Xu Nian'an stood close by with a guarded expression.

"Good-for-nothing."

Xu Zhong looked disdainfully at Xu Qinghe, angry at his son who only knew how to toil away and not how to be assertive. He pointed at Xu Qinghe and said, "If I were you, and my own wife dared talk about divorce, I would break her legs."

Upon hearing this, Grandma Liu Sanmei immediately gave him a sharp look.

Clearing his throat, Xu Zhong's voice rose as he said, "Whose wife uses divorce as a threat? If she wants to leave, let her go. Does she think the Xu family can't survive without her?"

Liu Sanmei felt even more sour inside upon hearing this.

"As long as I'm alive, don't even think about splitting up the family!" Xu Zhong's naturally loud voice, along with his brass-bell-like eyes and an authoritative face, filled the room.

There was silence in the room. Xu Qinghe and Xu Qingjiang, having grown up under the stern authority of Xu Zhong, dared not utter a word now.

"Grandpa." Suddenly, Ji Ying spoke up, breaking the silence.