ZHEN AI

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Contents

01	“Will the shipment fail?”	4
02	“Can I really make six thousand a month?”	12
03	“Where is the bathroom?”	21
04	“How can she know?”	29
05	“Will you take me to her?”	37
06	“Did your daughter work here too?”	45
07	“Will he wait for me?”	53
08	“Is enough saved for my brother’s bride-price?”	62
09	“Am I pregnant?”	71
10	“Is the boss going to lay people off?”	80
11	“What did you write in there?”	88
12	“Did someone die here?”	95
13	“Aren’t you afraid of her?”	104
14	“Why are you telling me this?”	112
15	“Which goddess does the shrine serve?”	120
16	“If we sign, will we get paid?”	128
17	“Has Old Sheng changed brands?”	135
18	“Can the cameras see the alley?”	143
19	“Why did they fire her?”	151
20	“Where do we welcome her?”	159
21	“Will the wages really come before New Year?”	167
22	“Who do we tell?”	175

23	“What if she’s wrong?”	183
24	“Can the trucks move on the night of the fifteenth?”	192
25	“Why did you stay?”	200
26	“Will the boss run?”	208
27	“Go or stay?”	216
28	“When the lanterns are lit, who can see us?”	224
29	“Has Zigu come?”	231
30	“Did the trucks leave the gate?”	238
31	“Did the money land?”	246
32	“Caifeng.”	254
33	“What color is the water tomorrow?”	261

CHAPTER ONE

“Will the shipment fail?”

At two in the morning the drain ran the color of a bruise.

He Mei knew the drain by its weather. The concrete tunnel under the north wall kept its own hours. After the evening shift it coughed out rinse water gone pink and thin; by midnight the color deepened to tea; near dawn, when the dye house dumped the last of the black lot, the stream turned opaque and carried a skin of oil that broke against her boots. On a normal night the black lot ran at four. Tonight it ran at two.

She set the flashlight on a brick, angled at the pipe. Its beam made a yellow hole in the mist. The water came fast. Not black. Purple. A dark, living purple with red under it, the color of a bruise three days old.

She pulled on the rubber glove. The left glove had a split at the thumb. She held her hand in the water and let it push at her fingers. Warm. Too warm. The sizing kitchen had sent its wash-down through the same line, and the starch made the surface slippery. She caught a string on the grate and drew it out. The string was thin as a hair, water-beaded, the color of the lot. She rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. The dead tips of her fingers gave her nothing but pressure. She used the live part of her thumb.

Polyester.

A radio played at the gate, low, the way Old Zhou kept it. Some nights it was music. Some nights, after four-thirty, it was the book-field, one man’s voice telling a long story to people who were already awake. Now it was only static with a thread of a song in it. The gate light made a yellow pool on the wet concrete.

Old Zhou came down the wall with his kettle. He stopped at the corner where the drain turned toward the canal. He did not look at the pipe. “The American order,” he said.

He Mei turned the string around her finger once, twice.

"Container is booked for Thursday," Old Zhou said. "The inspector comes Thursday. Will the shipment fail?"

She dropped the string into the water. It curled once and went under. "It will fail," she said.

Old Zhou took the lid off the kettle. Steam climbed between them and disappeared. "From the color."

She said nothing.

"You're a witch, He Mei."

"Get off my drain."

He laughed and went back toward the gate. The radio swallowed his footsteps. The static widened.

He Mei took the scoop from her cart and pushed it into the pipe mouth. The water ran over the rim and filled the scoop with a warm weight. She poured it out and did it again. The purple came in pulses against the concrete. Every pulse carried a little more red. When the dye house ran clean, the pulses came slow and even. When they skipped the wash, the color went dark and then darker.

Three days before a fabric order came back from a Korean buyer in 2014, the reds had bled through the packing paper exactly like this. In 2011, the Miller brothers sent back five thousand meters of black lining. She had never told anyone except the drain. The drain had no mouth.

Beyond the fence the canal lay flat and black under the yard lights. In summer the water carried a green scum that broke apart when the pumps started. In winter it ran clear enough to show the tires and bottles on the bottom. Once, years before, the fish had come up in the morning all the way to the bridge, silver bellies turned to the sky. The men from the newspaper had stood on the bank in their good shoes. Now nobody came down to look at the water unless they had a reason. He Mei had a reason every night.

The catch basket on the grate had filled with lint and a knot of blue thread. She lifted it out with the hook and knocked it against the side of the cart. The wet mass came away in one piece, heavy as a dead bird. She turned it over with the toe of her boot. Inside the blue there was a fine gray web, the kind that came off the looms when the tension slipped. She left it for the burn barrel.

The rain began at four, a thin December rain that made the fire door stick. He Mei pushed her cart along the outside walk, past the dye house where the windows sweated yellow, past the loading bay with its mouth open on bales wrapped in clear plastic. The cloth inside the bales looked like something sleeping.

She stopped under the office window to empty the outside bin. The window was open a hand's width, warm air coming out with the smell of instant coffee and paper. The shipping supervisor stood at his desk with his phone against one ear. He was a round man who wore his belt high and kept a pencil behind each ear. His voice came through the gap in flat pieces.

"Thursday. No, Thursday morning. The container is already at the dock."

He listened. The pencil behind his left ear moved as he chewed his cheek.

"The dye house says the last lot is clean. I don't care what the dye house says. Get the inspector here at nine. If he sees the rolls on the dock, we lose the whole order."

He Mei tied the bin liner and set it on the cart. The supervisor turned toward the window. She lowered her head, but his eyes were on the yard.

"Three days," he said into the phone. "Three days is all I need."

She pushed the cart toward the bright floor.

The floor at shift change was bright. Fluorescent tubes ran down the ceiling in rows, each one humming behind its white cover. The looms stood in banks of forty, their lights blinking. Mist hung over the aisle and beaded on the rails. The women moved between the machines in rubber aprons, their hair pushed into caps, their ears sealed with foam.

He Mei kept to the edge. She mopped where the water had already gathered, pushed the gray foam into the gutter, wrung out the mop with a twist of her wrists. The work smelled of bleach and machine oil and the warm wet breath of the looms. Her knees counted: left, right, left, right, from the loading bay to the office stairs and back.

At the end of the first aisle the day supervisor stood with the dye master, a thin man in a brown jacket with his collar turned up though the floor was warm. They spoke under the looms, their heads together. The sound did not carry. Across the aisle the supervisor's mouth made the shape of Thursday. The dye

master shook his head once, then again. The supervisor put his hand on the man's shoulder and said something else. The dye master tipped his head toward the ceiling.

He Mei wrung out the mop and moved on.

On the stairs to the office corridor she met the shipping supervisor coming down two at a time. His shirt had come loose at the back. He smelled of coffee and the peppermint sweets he kept in his drawer.

"The black lot is still rinsing," He Mei said.

He stopped with one hand on the rail. "What?"

"The rinse water. It is still purple at two. It will crock."

His eyes went to her cart, the mop, her face. "Did the dye master send you?"

"No."

"Then tell the floor supervisor. I have a container." He went past her, his shoes ringing on the metal treads.

He Mei stood on the stairs until the door at the bottom closed. Then she went up to the office corridor and emptied the bins.

The *laoban-niang* came across the bright floor.

He Mei knew her by the heels. They struck the concrete in even strokes, a sound that made the nearest supervisor straighten his clipboard. The woman wore a gray coat with a pale collar, no apron, her hair straight to her shoulders. The jasmine came before her face. It crossed the dye smell the way a knife crosses cloth.

At the sample table the laoban-niang took up a length of the black cloth. She snapped it once. The sound ran down the aisle and disappeared under the looms. She snapped it twice more, each time at the same corner, then held it to the light. Her hands moved over the surface the way a hand moves over a child's forehead.

He Mei stood by the drain grille, mop upright, and wiped the back of her wrist across her mouth. The laoban-niang's nails were pale pink, perfect except for a white scar across the side of the right thumb. Under the manicure the scar still showed.

"Tell the dye house I want the second run held," the laoban-niang said to the supervisor. She said it in the old talk, the words round in a way the Guizhou girls

could not follow. “If the rinse comes out like this again, they can pour the whole vat into their own tea.”

She dropped the cloth on the table and walked on. The supervisor wrote something. The heels went away.

He Mei dipped the mop and dropped it on the floor.

Old Zhou had called her a witch. The women on the floor did not. They called her *ayi*, the cleaning aunt, the one who came at night with the bleach and the cart. Some of them did not call her anything.

At six the whistle ran through the floor. The looms did not stop. They never stopped. The women came off in a wave, hair stuck to their foreheads, shoulders bent. The next wave went in. A girl at the end of the aisle stopped beside the cart and held out a paper cup. Her hands were mottled red from the cold water and the dye. He Mei poured tea into the cup.

“Thursday,” the girl said. “They say if the American order goes, the bonus goes.”

He Mei put the thermos back on the cart.

“Did you hear something?” the girl asked.

“The drain is loud.”

The girl looked toward the drain, then at He Mei’s face. She was young enough to have a soft chin and a burn scar on one wrist. She took the cup with both hands and went back into the aisle.

He Mei emptied her bucket in the sluice and poured the last of the tea into her own cup. The cup was white tin with a chipped blue rim. The thermos was older. It had a glass liner and a black plastic shell, the kind they had given out at the factory in 1994. The red letters on the side had once said ADVANCED WORKER. Under the dent, the paint had gone soft. The dent was where it had fallen the first week. The seal had swollen in the years since and had to be opened with the flat of her hand.

She held the cup against her lower lip. The steam stung a crack at the corner of her mouth. She took a sip. The tea was jasmine, the cheap kind, sold in a plastic bag that turned the cupboard sweet. She drank it for the heat.

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The inspector came on Thursday.

He Mei was in the loading bay when the truck turned around. The driver did not shut the cab door. The bay door rolled up and the bales came out in the rain, five of them, six, the clear wrapping fogged. A red tag had been wired to the end of each bale. The tags were bright. They moved in the wind.

The shipping supervisor stood by the scales with his arms folded. "Color transfer," he said to the driver. "And uneven dye. The first two rolls."

The driver spat into the gutter. "The container is at the dock."

"Tell the container."

Workers climbed into the truck and dragged the bales back across the wet concrete. The plastic made a sound as they pulled. A young man at the end caught He Mei's eye and shrugged. His hands were black to the wrists.

Another girl came out of the aisle with a bundle of waste cloth. She stopped at the edge of the bay and studied the red tags. "Not even one roll?" she said.

The shipping supervisor turned. "Get back inside."

She went. The bay door began to come down and stopped halfway, the motor whining. The supervisor hit the button with the heel of his hand. It went down all the way.

Old Zhou came around the corner of the gatehouse with his kettle. The truck pulled away empty. The red tags stopped moving. The rain had made the road black and the tires left a long wet line toward the highway.

"The witch of the north wall," he said.

He Mei took the lid off her thermos. The tea had gone cold. She poured a little into the cup and held it against her stomach.

"They will want someone to blame," Old Zhou said.

"They always do."

"Will they blame the drain?"

"The drain is quiet."

He laughed without opening his mouth. The radio under his arm gave a small burst of music, then settled back into static.

He Mei turned her cart and went to the wall. The drain ran pale now, tea-colored, the gray scum already broken into islands. The rain had stopped. The

line of water went under the fence and into the canal with its usual thin shine. On the far side a heron stood in the shallows, gray and unbothered.

She took the thermos from the cart. The tea had gone cool in the last hour. She poured a little into the cup anyway and stood with it against her stomach. Through the office window the shipping supervisor had his phone to his ear again. His free hand was flat on the desk. The inventory sheet in front of him had a red circle drawn at the bottom, one line, no figures. She could not read the words from the yard, only the shape of the page.

At the end of the loading bay the laoban-niang's heels struck the concrete twice, then stopped. He Mei did not turn. The smell of jasmine came through the diesel, thin, almost gone. The laoban-niang's face was turned toward the truck, the bales, the red tags moving against the wet plastic. The cloth snap had got into her coat pockets, into the folds, into the air, and for a moment nobody on the bay moved.

Then the heels went back toward the bright floor. The door opened. The hum of the looms came out, steady and enormous, and the door closed on it.

He Mei pushed the cart to the utility sink behind the boiler room. The tap coughed twice before the water came. She held her hands under it. The brown ran off her knuckles and into the drain. The soap was the yellow bar from the canteen, harsh enough to take the oil off the floor. She worked it into the split at her thumb until the water stung. Then she rinsed, turned off the tap, and rinsed again.

In the boiler room the burn barrel ticked as it cooled. The wad of blue lint she had pulled from the drain sat on the bricks where she had left it. She picked it apart with her fingers. The gray fibers came away in damp clumps. The blue thread held. She pulled it until it cut into the live part of her thumb, then let it go. A blue line lay across her skin. She wiped it on her apron, and the line did not come off.

He Mei took the cup from the cart and held it between her palms. The tin had gone cold. She drank the last of the tea in one swallow. It went down past the place in her chest that stayed cold, and for a moment the wet heat of the boiler room and the cold at her back were the only two things in the world. Her hands smelled of bleach and wet lint. The blue line on her thumb had begun to dry.

She put the cup in the cart and pushed it toward the yard.

CHAPTER TWO

“Can I really make six thousand a month?”

The bus had been running for twenty-six hours when the driver shut off the engine and the floor stopped shaking under Xiaoman’s feet.

For a moment the world kept moving anyway. The seat in front of her slid forward, the sleeve of the woman beside her slid back, the yellow light in the aisle swayed. Xiaoman put both feet flat on the rubber mat and pressed until the shaking was only in her calves. Her toes had gone numb somewhere after the second night. The window beside her had fogged into a gray square, and beyond it the town was a row of low roofs and wet lights.

“Everybody off,” the driver called. “Shengze.”

The luggage came down from the racks in a crush. Xiaoman pulled her woven bag from under the seat and held it against her chest. The bag held two changes of clothes, a pair of sneakers wrapped in a plastic sack, a towel, a bar of soap, and a glass jar of chili oil packed inside her winter sweater. The jar was the only thing she had bought new for the journey. It had a red lid and a paper label with a woman’s face on it. Her mother had wrapped the lid with tape and made her promise not to put it in the checked luggage.

Her mother had done *dagong* in Guangdong for six years and come home with a wrist that clicked in wet weather.

The cold hit her at the bus door. It was not the cold of home. At home the cold came down from the mountains dry and sharp and made the smoke from the cooking fires stand straight up. This cold was wet. It got into the cuffs of her jacket and under her collar and lay against her skin like a wet cloth.

A woman stood at the station gate holding a sheet of cardboard with three names written on it. Xiaoman’s name was second. The woman had a fur collar and a phone in a plastic case. Her eyes went from Xiaoman to the bag.

“Xiaoman?”

“Yes.”

“From Tongren?”

"From Jiangkou."

"Same road." The woman turned and walked toward a white van. "Come. The others are already in the mill."

The others. Xiaoman looked around the station yard. A man was selling steamed buns from a cart. A woman in a blue apron was washing a pot in a bucket of gray water. The air smelled of diesel and wet cement and, under that, something sweet and rotten, like fruit left in a closed room. The van had a cracked window and a wire cage between the front seats. Xiaoman climbed into the back with her bag on her knees.

Shengze went past in pieces: a wide road, a canal with black water, a row of shops with their shutters half up, a wall painted with a picture of a woman carrying a basket of white cocoons. Then the road narrowed and the buildings got taller. The noise arrived before the mills did. It came through the van window as a vibration in the door, in the seat, in the back of Xiaoman's teeth.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Looms," the woman said. "You'll get used to it."

The van pulled up at a gate in a long gray wall. Above the gate was a sign with gold letters and a red seal. Xiaoman could read the first two characters, then the letters turned into a row of birds. The woman took her into a small office beside the gatehouse. A man sat behind a desk with a fan heater under it. On the wall behind him was a poster of a woman in a white cap holding a length of cloth.

The woman put a form on the desk. "Name, age, province, identity number. Sign at the bottom."

Xiaoman held the pen. The form had lines for her name and her village and a line for emergency contact. At the bottom, under the place for her signature, there was a paragraph of small print. She moved her mouth over the first line but the characters ran together.

"What does it say?"

The woman leaned over. "It says you agree to the factory rules. No smoking in the dorm. No visitors after nine. No stealing. The usual."

"And the money?"

"Base two thousand twenty. Piece rate on top. Average girl makes six thousand."

Xiaoman put the pen down. “Can I really make six thousand a month?”

The woman smiled. Her front tooth had a gold edge. “You work, you make. This isn’t a state factory. Here your hands make your money.”

She pulled a scrap of paper from the desk and wrote on it. “Twenty-eight days. Twelve hours. That’s three hundred thirty-six hours. Six thousand divided by three hundred thirty-six is nearly eighteen yuan an hour. The base is only two thousand twenty. The rest is piece rate. You tie fast, you make more.”

Xiaoman read the numbers. At home, a day of picking tea brought sixty yuan if the leaves were good. In the first month at the factory, if the woman was telling the truth, she would make more than her mother made in three months. She picked up the pen and signed.

The woman took her to the dormitory behind the mill. The building had four floors and a wet concrete stair. On the second floor a long room held eight metal bunks in two rows. The mattresses were covered in blue plastic. A window at the far end looked onto the mill roof and a tangle of pipes. Someone had strung a wire between the bunks and hung a blanket over it. Another blanket had been clipped to the same wire with two wooden clothes pegs. A strip of light came through the gap.

“Bed six,” the woman said. “Top. The girl under you is on nights.”

Xiaoman climbed the ladder. The mattress sighed under her. She put her bag at the foot of the bed and the jar of chili oil on the windowsill, where the light could reach the red lid. From the next bunk a woman with a wrapped wrist looked over the rail. She had a broad face and a small gold hoop in one ear.

“New?”

“Yes.”

“Guizhou?”

“Jiangkou.”

“Tongren. I’m Axiang.” She nodded at the jar. “You brought the good kind.”

“My mother made it.”

“Keep it away from the radiator. It goes soft.”

The woman from the office came back with a plastic bag. Inside were a folded gray uniform, a pair of rubber gloves, a bar of soap, and a small paper envelope. “One pair of earplugs. Don’t lose them. Next pair costs eight yuan.”

Xiaoman turned the envelope over. It was light. Inside, two pieces of orange foam lay like small sleeping things. Eight yuan was two meals at the canteen.

"Thank you," she said.

The woman was already at the door. "Shift starts at seven-thirty. Don't be late."

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The loom hall was louder than the van had been.

It was not one noise. It was a wall of noise with a hundred seams in it. The looms stood in long banks, each one throwing its weft through a sheet of water, each one clacking and hissing and slapping at the same time. The floor vibrated through the soles of Xiaoman's sneakers and up into her knees. Mist drifted between the lights. The lights above the looms were white and close, and the water on the floor turned them into a second row of lights that shivered when anyone walked.

Axiang walked ahead of her with a canvas tool bag on her shoulder. The other women moved in the aisles as if the noise were a kind of weather. They wore gray aprons and caps and foam plugs in their ears. Their mouths moved when they spoke to each other but Xiaoman could not hear the words.

At the end of the first bank, a supervisor in a blue shirt pointed at a loom and then at Xiaoman. A red light blinked above the machine. The fabric had stopped coming out. A thread had broken somewhere in the maze of steel and water.

Axiang pulled a small pair of scissors from her apron and handed Xiaoman a spool of fine thread. "Watch my hands."

She stepped into the gap between two looms. Her fingers went into the water and came out with a thread end. She laid it over her index finger, crossed it under her thumb, and made a loop. The other thread end went through the loop, around, and back. She pulled. The knot closed small and tight. Her scissors clicked once. The thread went back into the machine.

"One pinch, two wraps, three pulls. Tail no longer than three millimeters."

Xiaoman tried. The thread slid out of her fingers. She tried again. The second end crossed the first, but the loop collapsed when she pulled and the tail came out long. Axiang took the scissors and snipped it.

“Again.”

The third one held. The fourth did not. The machine’s red light went off and the loom began to run again. Water sprayed across Xiaoman’s wrists. The thread disappeared into the cloth.

“Six,” Axiang said. “In a minute.”

“Six is good?”

“Six is nothing. A beginner does three. A veteran does twenty. The champion does thirty-six.” Axiang pulled her own earplug out, turned the orange foam over, and pushed it back in. “You need to do at least twelve before they give you your own bank.”

By mid-morning Xiaoman’s fingers had gone white at the tips. The water from the looms ran down her wrists and into the cuffs of her apron. She tied one knot after another, each one a small battle against the thread’s wish to slip. A thread broke on the next loom, then another on the loom beyond it. The red lights blinked in a row. Axiang moved down the bank with her scissors clicking, her hands going into the water and coming out with the ends already crossed.

Xiaoman tried to follow. Her fourth knot of the hour came loose when she pulled. The loom beside her stopped with a clack that went into her teeth. The supervisor in the blue shirt came down the aisle, his mouth already open.

“What are you doing?”

“The knot slipped,” Xiaoman said.

He pointed at the loom. “That is four meters of cloth. You know what four meters is?”

Axiang stepped between them. She did not raise her voice. “She is learning. I will fix it.”

The supervisor’s eyes went to Axiang’s wrapped wrist. “Fix it fast.”

He went away. Axiang put her hand into the water and found the broken end. Her fingers moved without hurry. “Don’t pull from the elbow,” she said. “Pull from here.” She touched Xiaoman’s thumb. “The knot is not a rope. It is a hook. It only has to hold until the cloth takes it.”

The shift went on. The lights above the machines made a bright tunnel of the aisle. Xiaoman followed Axiang from one broken end to the next, her fingers cold and wet, her shoulders tightening. By noon she had tied thirty-one knots.

Her thumb had a red crease across it. The foam plugs made the world sound as if it were happening on the other side of a wall.

At lunch the women went to the canteen in a crowd. The canteen was a long room with folding tables and a poster of a rice bowl on the wall. The food was served from steel trays: rice, cabbage, a gray sauce with bits of potato, a thin slice of pork for those who paid extra. Xiaoman took the rice and cabbage. Axiang put her tray down across the table.

"Eat fast. The whistle goes in twenty minutes."

Xiaoman ate. The cabbage was soft and tasted of the water it had been boiled in. The chili oil sat upstairs on the windowsill. Tomorrow.

"How much did you make last month?" she asked.

Axiang tore a piece of bread from a roll. "Five thousand seven hundred before dorm and food. Five thousand two hundred after."

Xiaoman put her spoon down. "So six is true."

"Six is a good month. No days off. Both hands working. No machine lying down for half a shift." Axiang dipped the bread in her soup. "The first month you will not make six. The first month you pay for training and your hands are slow."

"How much?"

"Three thousand? Four? Depends." Axiang reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a folded strip of paper. The paper had gone soft at the creases. She opened it on the table and turned it toward Xiaoman.

Xiaoman read the columns. At the top was a number she did not understand, then a line of meters, then another line of hours. Near the bottom, in a column by itself, the total: five thousand seven hundred and forty-two. Under that, three lines of deductions. Dormitory one hundred fifty. Meals three hundred ten. Electricity thirty-eight. At the very bottom, five thousand two hundred forty-four.

"This is last month," Axiang said. "I worked twenty-eight days. Two night shifts. No sick days."

Xiaoman did the arithmetic in her head. Five thousand two hundred forty-four was less than six. It was still more than she had ever held at one time. She read the top line again. "What is this number?"

“Base. The piece rate goes on top. If the machines stop, the base stays. If the machines run, the piece rate grows.” Axiang folded the slip and put it back in her pocket. “The woman at the gate counts the days you could work. She does not count the days the machine is down, or the hours you spend waiting for thread, or the money the dorm takes back.”

“Then six is possible.”

“Six is possible the way a good harvest is possible.” Axiang nodded at Xiaoman’s bowl. “Eat. The whistle goes in six minutes.”

Xiaoman ate the rest of her rice without tasting it. The chili oil was upstairs on the windowsill, and the jar was farther away than Guizhou.

The whistle went. Xiaoman carried her tray to the washing window and went back into the noise.

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At seven-thirty that night the shift changed. The day women came out with their hair flat against their heads. The night women went in. Xiaoman’s legs shook on the stairs to the dormitory. Her ears rang with a high thin note that did not go away when she pulled out the plugs. The orange foam had gone gray at the edges. She put the plugs back in their envelope and put the envelope under her pillow.

Axiang sat on the lower bunk with a basin between her knees, soaking her feet. The water was gray. Her wrists were wrapped in a brown bandage that had begun to unravel at one end.

“Hot water?” Xiaoman asked.

“Cold water and a kettle. The hot water comes at six. If you are on the day shift, you miss it.”

Xiaoman climbed to her bunk. She took the jar of chili oil from the windowsill and unscrewed the red lid. The smell came up sharp and warm, smoke and pepper and something her mother put in that she had never been able to name. She took a plastic container from her bag. The rice in it had been cooked that morning. It was cold now, stuck together in a white block.

Her phone lit up on the blanket. The screen showed her mother’s name. On the third ring she answered.

"Meimei?"

"Ma."

"Have you eaten?"

"Just now. The canteen gave us fish. And pork."

"Fish and pork on the same day?"

"The fish is small. The pork is in the sauce."

Her mother's voice came through in pieces. The signal was weak. In the background Xiaoman could hear a rooster and the little sister calling from the yard.

"Are you warm?"

"Very warm. The dorm has a heater."

The radiator under the window was cold enough to hold a hand against.

"You are eating well?"

"Yes."

"Then send me a picture."

Xiaoman held the phone up to the ceiling. "The signal is bad. I'll send one tomorrow."

"Don't lie to me."

"Would I lie?"

Her mother said something else. The rooster crowed again, closer to the phone. Then the call broke into a crackle and silence.

Xiaoman set the phone face down on the blanket. The screen glowed through the plastic case. In the next bunk Axiang turned over and the metal frame creaked. Somewhere down the corridor a girl was laughing at something on her phone, a short bright laugh that stopped when the dorm auntie's slippers came past the door.

Xiaoman picked up her spoon and dug into the cold rice. The first bite was dry in the back of her mouth. She opened the jar and took a spoonful of chili oil. The red oil ran into the rice and made a small dark hole. The first taste reached the roof of her mouth and stayed there, hot and smoky and four hundred kilometers from home. She chewed slowly. On the windowsill the jar sat with its lid off. The smell of it filled the narrow space between the bunks, and for a moment the room was not the room.

She ate around the edge of the hole first.

CHAPTER THREE

"Where is the bathroom?"

The women's toilet at the end of the second weaving hall had three stalls and one door that did not lock.

He Mei pushed the yellow bucket against the broken door and poured bleach into the first bowl. The bleach went in blue and came up white where it hit the water. The smell opened her sinuses and made her eyes run. She counted to thirty, then went in with the brush. The bristles had gone stiff at the ends. They scraped the porcelain and left gray marks that faded when she poured clean water after them.

The tiles were wet all the way to the sink. Somebody had walked out with dye on her shoes. The footprints were small and pointed, the color of weak tea. He Mei followed them with the mop, then went back to the bucket. The floor drain had a knot of hair in the grate. She pulled it out with her gloved fingers and dropped it in the black bag. The hair was long and dark and had been washed with cheap shampoo. It smelled of the same jasmine as the hand soap.

The mirror above the sink had a crack across one corner. The crack had been there since summer. In it her face came apart into two pieces. She did not look at her face. She faced the bin.

The bin was a plastic pedal bin with a black bag. The lid did not close. Inside were pads folded into newspaper, some of them dark, some clean enough that the girl had wrapped them carefully before throwing them away. There were wadded tissues and an empty packet of painkillers. Under the sink there was a bottle of bleach and a bottle of blue toilet cleaner, and behind them a lunch box with the lid off. Rice had dried in the bottom. A piece of cabbage stuck to the side. The food had not been touched.

He Mei put the lunch box in her cart. She did not know whose it was. She knew the rice had been cooked in the dorm kitchen, because the dorm rice was always a little yellow and stuck together in the same way.

The door opened.

The light in the corridor made a long yellow shape on the wet tiles. A woman from the winding room came in first, a cone of thread still caught in the cuff of her sleeve. She put one hand against the wall and stood with her eyes closed. Then she went into the first stall and pulled the door shut. The lock did not catch. She held it with her foot.

When she came out she did not wash her hands. She went to the sink, filled her palm with water, and pressed it against the back of her neck. Then she left.

A girl came in with her cap pushed back and her hands held away from her apron. The hands were red to the wrist. The new one. The one from the bed above Axiang. Xiaoman.

"Where is the bathroom?" Xiaoman said.

He Mei stood up with the mop. "You found it."

"The woman at the gate said it was by the loading bay."

"That one is for the men."

Xiaoman's eyes moved across the three stalls. Her face had the flat, careful look of a girl who had been holding something in for too long. "Which one?"

"Second. The first one sticks. Hold the handle until it stops."

Xiaoman went into the second stall. The door did not close all the way. The tap ran. He Mei took the mop to the far end of the room and pushed the water toward the drain. She kept her back turned. When the stall door opened again, Xiaoman stood at the sink with her sleeves rolled up. Her forearms were thin and pale. The cold water made the veins stand up.

"Ayi," she said.

He Mei's hand closed around the mop handle.

"What do you use to get the dye off?"

"Soap."

"The soap in the dorm is for clothes."

He Mei reached into the cart and took out the yellow bar from the canteen. She put it on the edge of the sink. "Wet your hands first. Then the soap. Then wait. If you scrub right away, it goes into the cracks."

Xiaoman wet her hands and worked the soap into a lather. The water in the sink turned pale brown. She scrubbed her fingers, then her knuckles, then the

soft place between her thumb and forefinger. The dye did not come off. It had gone into the skin around her nails. She stopped scrubbing.

"It doesn't come off," she said.

"Not the first week."

Xiaoman faced the mirror. Her reflection was split across the crack. She pushed her cap back and a strand of hair fell against her cheek. "The woman at the gate said six thousand."

He Mei said nothing.

"Is it true?"

"Ask the women who work the looms."

"I asked Axiang. She said five."

He Mei took the bar of soap and put it back in the cart. "Five is a good month."

Xiaoman's hands stayed under the water. "I thought it would be more."

The door opened again and Yanzi came in.

She was small and quiet and wore her cap low. Her face had no color under the fluorescent light. She went past them without speaking and into the second stall. The lock did not catch. She held the door with one hand and turned on the tap with the other. The water ran and ran. He Mei moved the mop around the sink, close enough to hear the small sounds behind the door. A zipper. Paper. The tap stopped. The tap started again.

Xiaoman looked toward the stall. He Mei touched the handle of the mop, a small movement, and Xiaoman's eyes came back.

"Don't stand there," He Mei said.

"I'm not."

"Go and eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"That is what the rice in the bin says."

Xiaoman's mouth opened and closed. She faced the cart, the lunch box, the closed stall door. She took her hands out of the water and dried them on the front of her apron. "I didn't throw it away."

"I did not say you did."

The girl went out. The door swung shut and the spring pulled it back with a click.

Yanzi came out of the stall. Her hands were wet. She washed them again at the sink, using the yellow soap, working it into the palms and between the fingers and under the nails. Her wrists were thin. A blue mark showed above the left one, just under the cuff of her uniform. She rinsed and dried her hands on her apron and went to the door.

"Yanzi," He Mei said.

Yanzi stopped. Her shoulders went up a little, then down.

"There is hot water in the boiler room at six," He Mei said. "The kettle on the shelf. Use the cup with the blue rim. Not the black one."

Yanzi met her eyes. Her own were dry and very steady. She did not say thank you. She went out.

At the ten o'clock break the room filled.

Qiaoyun came in first, holding her phone against her stomach. A man's voice came out of it, low and quick. She was smiling at the screen. When she saw He Mei she thumbed the phone dark and went into the first stall. The smile stayed on her mouth for a moment without her.

Chunxia came in behind her with a scrap of paper in one hand. She stood at the mirror and moved her lips. "Eighty-eight thousand. Three gold. Banquet, maybe fifteen. My mother says twenty tables but the pork alone is..." She stopped and wrote something on the paper with a pencil she kept behind her ear. "Four more months. If nothing goes wrong."

The pencil went back behind her ear. She studied her own face in the cracked mirror, then He Mei's reflection.

"Ayi, is the water hot?"

"At six."

"It is never six when I am here."

Chunxia went into the second stall. Qiaoyun came out and washed her hands beside the sink. She did not look at He Mei. A voice message began again, three notes of a man's laugh, and she pressed the phone against her chest to stop it.

Axiang came in last. Her wrists were wrapped in the brown bandage, and she held them out in front of her as if they belonged to someone else. She turned on

the hot tap and let the water run over her fingers. Steam came up from the sink. She closed her eyes.

"Don't get old in here," Axiang said. She said it to the mirror, not to He Mei. "Nobody ever asks what happens to us after."

The tap ran. Qiaoyun put her phone in her apron pocket and went out. Chunxia followed, still counting under her breath. Axiang stayed until the water ran cold. Then she dried her hands on the front of her apron and went back to the looms.

He Mei stood in the empty room. The first stall had blood in the bowl. The water was pink and the paper had gone dark. She flushed it twice and poured bleach after it. The water went pink, then gray, then clear. The second stall smelled of vomit and chili. The third had not been used at all. The bin had two new pads in it, one of them still folded in its paper. She lifted the black bag out of the bin. The bag was heavier than it looked. She tied the top and put it in the cart. Then she took the mop and went back over the floor, from the far corner to the door, then from the door to the far corner. Her knees made their count. The bleach began to sting the split in her thumb.

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At half past ten she took the lint trap from the drain behind the dye house. The trap was a wire basket set into the concrete, and the basket had filled with the soft gray waste that came off the looms. He Mei lifted it out and carried it to the boiler room. The boiler room was warm and dark except for the red eye of the burner and the bare bulb above the shelf. The air smelled of coal and wet wool and the sour breath of the drain.

She put a wad of the lint on the brick beside the burner. It was mostly polyester, fine as dust, with a few blue threads caught in it like veins. She took a match from the box and struck it.

The flame caught the edge and ran. The lint curled, drew back from the heat, then melted. A thread of black smoke went up to the bulb. The smell filled the room: sweet, chemical, the smell of sugar burned in a pan. The blue threads shrank into small hard knots. When the flame went out, He Mei poked the end

with the poker. It had become a black bead. She picked it up on the tip of her thumb and pressed it against the brick. It did not crumble.

Polyester.

Years before, when the mill still kept a sample room, she had burned a thread of real silk from a sample card. The card was gray with handling, the swatch stitched along the top edge. The flame had taken the thread slowly. The smell was the smell of hair burning, not the chemical sugar smell of the new cloth. The ash had broken between her fingers and left a gray smear. She had not thought of that in a long time. The memory came and went like a moth at a window.

She dropped the bead into her apron pocket and put the rest of the lint into the burner. The flame caught it with a soft blue edge. The boiler ticked. Somewhere above her the looms were still running, their noise coming down through the pipes as a low steady knocking, like someone far away hitting a wall. The black bead sat in her pocket against her hip.

At eleven the day supervisor came into the boiler room with a clipboard. He was a thin man who always smelled of cigarettes and had a habit of standing too close.

"Clean the manager's office," he said. "The laoban-niang is coming at two."

He Mei picked up her bucket. "The women's toilet needs paper."

"Paper is in the cupboard."

"The cupboard is locked."

"Then ask the office." He was already going. "And take the bin out before she comes. The one in the corridor. It smells."

He Mei stood in the doorway with the bucket against her leg. The boiler ticked. She went back to the sink and filled the bucket with hot water. The steam came up into her face. She put both hands into it and held them there. The water was hot enough to turn her fingers red. She kept them in until the heat went past the skin and into the bone, then pulled them out and dried them on the apron. The cracks in her knuckles had opened again.

She washed them a second time.

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At two the laoban-niang came down the office corridor.

He Mei was on her knees by the waste bin, tying the top of the bag. The heels came first, even and unhurried. Then the jasmine. The laoban-niang stopped beside the door and considered the wet floor. He Mei got to her feet. The bin was between them.

"You," the laoban-niang said.

He Mei kept her face down.

"The drain," the laoban-niang said. "The black lot. You told the shipping supervisor it would fail."

He Mei held the bag against her leg. The laoban-niang's shoes were black and polished, the toes narrow. Her arms were crossed. The scar on her thumb was white against the pale nail.

"Yes," He Mei said.

"Why?"

"The rinse was still purple at two."

The laoban-niang held her gaze for a moment. Her face did not move. Then she turned her head toward the window at the end of the corridor, where the gray afternoon lay over the mill roof.

"You worked the looms," she said.

It was not a question.

He Mei said nothing.

The laoban-niang put her hand out. For one breath He Mei thought she would touch her. Instead she took the waste bag from He Mei's hand and set it outside the door. "Finish in here. Then do the stairs. The inspector is coming back Friday."

She went down the corridor. The heels struck the concrete away and away, and the jasmine stayed behind in the air, mixing with the bleach.

He Mei stood in the doorway. She took the black bead from her apron pocket and turned it over in her fingers. It was small and hard and had no smell now. She went to the sink and turned on the hot tap. The water came out in a white cloud. She put her hands under it and let the heat climb into her knuckles. The bleach had dried on her skin in pale lines. The jasmine from the corridor thinned in the steam. Under it was bleach and wet lint and the iron smell of the tap.

The water ran clear. She kept her hands under it until her wrists began to ache. Then she turned off the tap and dried her hands on the apron, and washed them again.

CHAPTER FOUR

“How can she know?”

The dormitory water was cold by the time Xiaoman came off the day shift.

She stood at the basin with her hands in it anyway. The water had been standing in the plastic bucket since morning. A gray film floated on top. She rubbed the yellow soap into her palms. The dye came out of her knuckles in weak brown threads. The soap was the same soap He Mei had left on the sink in the women’s toilet. Xiaoman had not gone back for a second piece. The first one had gone soft in the damp and was nearly finished.

The room smelled of wet cloth and instant noodles and the sweet powder the girls shook into their shoes. Eight bunks ran in two rows under a ceiling that had been painted white so many times the corners had gone soft. Blankets hung on wires between the beds. Some of the blankets were printed with flowers, some with cartoon rabbits, some had been cut from old curtains and hemmed by hand. The strip of light from the corridor made a long yellow line down the middle of the floor.

Axiang’s bed was empty.

Xiaoman poured the water into the floor drain and dried her hands on the front of her shirt. Her thumb had begun to swell at the joint. The knot work had done it. She could tie nine in a minute now if no one spoke to her. Ten if the thread was dry.

The door opened and Qiaoyun came in with her towel over her shoulder. She had been to the washroom and her hair was wet at the ends. “Axiang is not back?”

“No.”

“She went to the alley.”

Xiaoman sat on the edge of her bunk. “What alley?”

Qiaoyun studied her for a moment. She checked the door, then the ceiling, where the wire ran between the beds. “The old woman,” she said. “The one who cleans at night.”

"The one in the toilet?"

"She does readings."

"Readings of what?"

Qiaoyun sat on the lower bunk across the aisle. "People go to her. She tells them things."

"Like fortune-telling?"

Qiaoyun shrugged. Her shoulders were thin under the towel. "She told Yanzi to keep her ID card in her sock. Yanzi did. The dorm auntie checked the drawer and found nothing."

"Why would the auntie check?"

"Ask Yanzi."

At the far end of the room Yanzi was lying on her side with her face to the wall. Her blanket was pulled up over her shoulder. She had not eaten at lunch. Xiaoman had seen her put the rice into a napkin and slide it into her pocket when the supervisor turned away.

The door opened again. Axiang came in with the cold air behind her. She was still wearing her work coat. Her face had gone red across the cheekbones. She sat on the edge of her bunk and untied her shoes without speaking.

"Did she read your hands?" Qiaoyun asked.

Axiang pulled off her left shoe. Her wrist was wrapped in the brown bandage. "She said the bones will hold until the fifteenth."

"And after?"

"She said to ask her after the fifteenth."

Xiaoman leaned over the rail. Axiang's collar had come open. Inside it, pinned to the fabric with a safety pin, was a small knot of red thread.

"What is that?"

Axiang put her hand over her collar. "Nothing."

"That is not nothing."

"It is a thread."

"Why did she give it to you?"

Axiang turned to the door, then to Xiaoman. "She told me not to eat the fish tomorrow."

"Fish?"

"The canteen is serving fish. She said the cold store went off."

Qiaoyun made a small sound. "The whole dorm?"

"She did not say the whole dorm. She said me."

"But you are not eating fish?" Xiaoman said.

"I do not eat fish when someone tells me not to."

Xiaoman laughed. It came out before she could stop it. "You are listening to the cleaning woman about fish."

Axiang's face did not move. "You have been here two weeks. You do not know anything."

The room went quiet. Qiaoyun checked her phone. Yanzi did not turn around. At the end of the aisle a girl named Meihua was sitting on the floor with a basin of water between her knees, washing her socks. The water was gray.

"Last year," Axiang said, "a girl was fired because of a message. She wrote it in the group. She said the supervisor was stealing the overtime. The next morning the supervisor knew every word. A screenshot. Somebody in the group took a picture and gave it to someone. That is why we do not use names in the group."

"I didn't say anything in the group."

"You said enough in here."

Xiaoman turned her hands over. The red crease across her thumb had begun to sting. "I'm sorry."

Axiang took the bandage off her wrist and rewrapped it. Her fingers were slow. The skin under the bandage was pale and shiny. "The old woman does not write anything down. She must not. If she wrote it down, the office would know."

"How would the office know?"

"Because it is a factory. The walls are thin. The group is thin. You are new. You will learn."

Meihua looked up from her sock water. "My cousin said the old woman told her not to take the night shift on the new looms. Three days later the new looms stopped. The whole bank. They sent the girls home without pay."

"That is not a reading," Xiaoman said. "That is maintenance."

"Then how did she know the maintenance?"

"She cleans the floor. She sees the men with the tools."

"The men came at night," Meihua said. "After she left."

"Maybe she heard them coming."

"You always have an answer."

Axiang pulled her blanket up over her knees. "She does not read the future. She reads what is already here. The rest is the rest."

Xiaoman turned that over. It was the closest thing to an explanation anyone had given her. It also made no sense. If the signs were already there, then everyone could see them. Nobody did.

"How much does she charge?" Xiaoman asked.

Axiang met her eyes. "She does not charge."

"Everyone charges."

"She takes what is given. A bun. Cigarettes. A pair of gloves. Once a girl gave her a chicken."

"A whole chicken?"

"It was a small chicken."

Qiaoyun laughed. The laugh turned into a cough and she pressed her hand over her mouth. "I have not been to her for a reading. I only went with Meihua. She sat in the alley with her bucket and her basket. There was a boy there. He wanted to know about a girl in another dorm. She told him to go home."

"What did the boy do?"

"He went home."

Xiaoman lay back. The metal frame of the bunk creaked. Above her the wire with the blankets cut the ceiling light into pieces. She could see the knot inside Axiang's collar only when Axiang moved. It was red and small and looked like a drop of blood that had dried.

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The canteen served fish at noon.

The line went past the steel trays and the woman with the ladle. The fish lay in a shallow pan under a film of yellow oil. The flesh had broken into gray flakes. The skin was silver and black and had curled at the edges. The smell was not bad, exactly. It was flat, like water left in a bucket.

Xiaoman took the cabbage and the rice. She held her tray out and the woman with the ladle dropped a piece of fish on it before she could speak.

"Fish is meat," the woman said. "Eat."

Xiaoman carried her tray to the table. Axiang was already there with her own tray. Her fish lay on the rice untouched. Qiaoyun sat beside her. Chunxia came with two bowls of rice and a plate of fish. Yanzi did not come to lunch.

"The cold store," Xiaoman said.

Axiang picked up her fish with her chopsticks and put it on Xiaoman's tray. "You are not eating it either."

"I don't have to."

"Then don't."

Xiaoman put the fish on the edge of her tray. The gray flakes sat there while she ate the cabbage. The canteen filled with the noise of bowls and spoons and the women talking around mouthfuls. At the next table a girl from the winding room pinched her nose and put a piece of fish in her mouth. She made a face and chewed. Her friend laughed.

Xiaoman broke off a piece of the fish with her chopsticks. The flesh came apart too easily. It tasted of oil and the metal of the pan. She chewed and swallowed. Axiang glanced at her and away.

"See," Xiaoman said. "Nothing."

"Wait until six."

Axiang let the question stand. She ate her rice and left the fish.

At two o'clock the first woman came out of the winding room with her hand over her mouth. She went fast down the corridor, one hand on the wall. At three there were two more. The supervisor came onto the floor with his clipboard and told everyone to keep working. The looms did not stop. The bathroom at the end of the second hall filled and did not empty. Someone had thrown up in the third stall and left it for the next person. The water in the sink ran brown because the floor drain had backed up.

Xiaoman carried a bundle of waste cloth to the sluice and saw Meihua sitting on the steps with her head between her knees. Her face was the color of wet paper. "The fish," she said. "I ate two pieces."

By six the canteen had put a paper sign on the door. The sign said the kitchen was closed for cleaning. The women who had eaten the fish sat in the dorm with basins and towels. The smell of vomit came through the curtains. The dorm auntie walked up and down the aisle with a bucket of bleach. She said it was the flu. She said the water was bad. She said no one should eat in the canteen until the office fixed the pipes.

The dorm became a place of small sounds. Water ran in the washroom and stopped. A basin scraped the floor. Someone retched into a plastic bucket and then apologized to the room. The bleach fought the other smell and lost. On the wall above the door the dorm rules were taped under plastic: no cooking, no visitors, lights out at ten, no men on the women's floor. Someone had drawn a small face beside the rule about cooking. The face had its tongue out. Xiaoman sat with her back against Axiang's bunk and her knees drawn up. Her own stomach turned over once, then settled. She had eaten one piece of fish. One piece. It sat in her like a stone at the bottom of a river.

Qiaoyun came back from the washroom with her hair stuck to her forehead. "The office says it is not the fish," she said. "They say it is the water."

"Which water?"

"The cold water. The tank." She sat down heavily. "If it is the water, why is only the fish eaters sick?"

No one answered.

Axiang sat on her bunk with her back to the wall. Her collar had come open. The red knot lay inside it. Xiaoman sat on the floor across from her with her knees pulled up.

"How can she know?" Xiaoman said.

Axiang closed her eyes. "I don't know."

"Did she see the fish?"

"She's a cleaner. She sees everything."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only one I have."

Qiaoyun came over from her bunk with her phone in her hand. She checked the door first. "Six," she said. "Six girls. Maybe seven. Yanzi didn't eat. Do you think she knew too?"

Yanzi was on her bunk with the blanket over her head. She had not been sick. She had not eaten the fish. She had not eaten much of anything for three days.

"The fish was fine," Xiaoman said. "My mother ate fish that had been frozen for a year and she was fine."

"Your mother is not here."

"My mother once paid a blind man to find a lost pig," Xiaoman said. "He told her to look east. The pig was in the west. She said he was close."

Qiaoyun laughed. The laugh turned into a cough. "So you don't believe in anything."

"I believe in what I can see."

"Then you are lucky."

Meihua came over from her bunk, walking slowly, one hand pressed to her stomach. "Maybe it was the oil," she said. "The oil in the pan was old. My grandmother says old oil makes a poison."

"Then why did she only warn Axiang?" Qiaoyun said.

"Maybe she did not only warn Axiang."

Every face turned toward Yanzi. Yanzi's blanket did not move.

"The old woman told her something," Qiaoyun said. "She must have."

"We don't know that," Xiaoman said.

"You don't know anything."

Xiaoman found the knot in Axiang's collar. It was a simple knot. Not a loop. A knot. The kind He Mei tied for a girl who was supposed to go somewhere or do something. She only knew the knot was there and that Axiang had changed.

Qiaoyun held up her phone. The group chat was open. The last message was from the supervisor: Tomorrow all day shift starts at seven. No excuses. Below it a girl had written a row of smiling faces. Below that another girl had written nothing. The screen was bright in the dark room.

"Type something," Qiaoyun said. "Everyone is waiting to see who talks first."

Xiaoman's thumb hovered over the cursor. The letters waited. In the group there were thirty-eight women, two supervisors, the dorm auntie, and the woman from the office who had met her at the bus station. Somewhere in those thirty-eight was a person who took screenshots.

"No," she said.

"Smart." Qiaoyun put the phone away. "Last year Zhang Lili wrote that the supervisor was eating our overtime. She wrote it at night. By lunch the next day the manager had a printout. They said she was spreading rumors. They said she could leave. She left."

"Who took the picture?"

"Nobody knows. That is the point."

The dorm auntie came past with her bleach bucket and told them all to sleep. The smell came through the curtain. Axiang turned her face toward the wall.

"Tomorrow," Xiaoman said. "After shift. Will you take me to the alley?"

Axiang did not turn around. "Why?"

"I want to see her."

"You don't believe."

"I want to see how she does it."

Axiang was quiet for a long time. The bleach smell faded. Somewhere down the corridor a girl began to cry, and another girl said, "It's okay, it's okay," in a low voice.

"After shift," Axiang said. "Wash your hands first. She doesn't like dirty hands."

The lights went out at ten. In the dark, the bunks creaked and the pipes knocked. Xiaoman lay on her back with her hands folded over her stomach. One piece of fish sat in her like a stone at the bottom of a river. She had not been sick. She did not know whether that meant anything. At the other end of the room the red knot was a small shape she could not see. It was there anyway. She could feel it in the dark, the way she could feel a broken thread under her fingers before the loom stopped.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Will you take me to her?"

"Will you take me to her?" Xiaoman asked.

"Put on your coat," Axiang said.

Axiang took her through the gate at half past eight, after the day shift had emptied and the night shift had gone in.

The lane behind the mill was narrow enough that two women could not walk side by side without touching shoulders. The wall on the left was the mill's, gray brick to the height of a man and then a row of small windows with wire in them. On the right were the backs of the old houses, red doors gone brown, a line of buckets under a dripping pipe, a bicycle with no chain. The drain ran down the middle of the lane. Steam came off it in the cold air. A cat sat on the lid of a trash bin and did not move when they passed.

Xiaoman carried a paper bag with two sweet buns in it. Axiang had told her to bring something. Not money. Money was not the custom. The buns had cost two yuan each at the shop by the gate. Xiaoman had eaten rice and cabbage for lunch so she could buy them.

A girl came out of the lane toward them with her head down. She was young, younger than Xiaoman, and she held one hand closed against her chest. Her eyes were red. She passed them without speaking. Axiang stepped aside to let her by. The girl's shoe had a split across the toe, and the wet had got into the leather.

At the end of the lane a bare bulb hung over a doorway. Under it sat a woman in a black padded coat. Her hands were in her lap. A thermos stood beside her on the step, the white tin cup balanced on its lid. Behind her the door was open a hand's width. A curtain moved in the draft.

He Mei.

She was older in the alley than she was on the factory floor. The fluorescent light on the bright floor had made her look hard and flat. Here the bulb made shadows under her eyes and in the folds of the coat. Her hair was pulled back

with a black elastic. A winnowing basket lay on the step beside her, half full of thread ends and scraps of cloth.

"There she is," Axiang said.

Xiaoman stopped a few steps away. "Ayi."

He Mei's eyes went from her to Axiang. "You brought the new one."

"She wants to ask."

"Everybody wants to ask."

Axiang put a small paper packet on the step. Xiaoman did not see what was in it. He Mei moved the packet aside with one finger.

"What do you want?" He Mei said.

"I want to know how you knew about the fish."

"Who said I knew about the fish?"

"Axiang."

Axiang turned toward the drain. He Mei picked up a thread end from the basket and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger.

"The cold store was off," she said.

"The cold store?"

"The motor. It stopped two days before the fish came. I mop the passage behind the kitchen."

"You mopped a passage and told Axiang not to eat the fish."

"I told Axiang not to eat the fish."

"You did not tell the others."

"The others do not ask."

Xiaoman's face went hot. "Everyone ate it. Six girls got sick."

"I know."

"You could have told the canteen."

He Mei looked up. The skin under her eyes was loose and dark. "The canteen pays me to clean the floor. The floor is not the fish."

The cat jumped down from the bin and went along the wall. The drain steamed between them. Somewhere beyond the roofs a truck changed gear, long and low.

"Ask your question," He Mei said.

"I don't have a question."

"You came all the way down the alley with two buns to tell me you don't have a question."

Xiaoman turned the paper bag over in her hand. She had forgotten she was holding it. She put it on the step beside the packet.

"Will we get paid before New Year?" she said.

He Mei unwrapped the buns. The paper opened with a soft crack. The smell of sugar and hot dough came up into the cold air. She put one bun on the step in front of Axiang. She did not put one in front of Xiaoman.

"Some of it," she said.

"How much?"

"Some."

"That's not an answer."

"It is the answer I have."

Xiaoman stepped closer. The drain steam touched her ankles. "Axiang says you read things. She says you knew the fish was bad. She says you knew the new looms would stop. She says you told Yanzi to keep her card. I want to know how."

He Mei bit into the bun. She chewed slowly. A little sugar clung to her lower lip.

"You want proof," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe in that stuff."

He Mei nodded. She put the bun down and wiped her fingers on a rag from her sleeve. Then she reached behind the step and pulled out a tin. It had once held milk powder. The lid had rust on the rim. She opened it and took out three flattened cigarette wrappers, a folded receipt, and a red-stamped envelope.

She laid them on the newspaper that covered the step. The bulb made a small yellow circle around them. The drain ran warm and dark below. The cat had gone. The cold had got into Xiaoman's knees. The step was wet under her shins. Steam from the drain touched her cheek and then thinned into the darker air. He Mei's hands moved over the paper without hurry. The nails were cut short and black at the edges. The thumb with the dead tip pressed each wrapper flat. The

thermos stood beside her, the cup on its lid, and the tea inside it smelled of jasmine and hot tin.

"Look," she said.

Xiaoman knelt on the step because there was nowhere else to put her knees. Axiang stood behind her with the bun in her hand.

"Three weeks ago," He Mei said. She touched the first wrapper. It was gold and red. "Liqun long filter. Twenty-two yuan a pack. The office trash had two empty packs in one week."

She touched the second wrapper. It was blue and silver. "Then this one. Liqun new. Fourteen yuan. Three packs in four days."

She touched the third wrapper. It was white with a red stripe. "This week, Daqianmen. Soft. Seven yuan."

"Smoking cheaper," Xiaoman said. "Maybe he likes it."

"The shop by the gate keeps a book," He Mei said. "The boss's name is in it. Three weeks ago one hundred and ten yuan owing. Last week two hundred and sixty. Two days ago the shop owner stopped writing his name in red and wrote it in black. Black means cash only."

"Old Sheng buys cigarettes on credit."

"Old Sheng buys cigarettes on credit. When he can."

Axiang shifted behind her. The white cup on the thermos lid caught the light.

He Mei touched the receipt. It was thin and gray at the folds. "The office trash. A bank receipt. Two hundred and forty thousand. Due on the twentieth."

Xiaoman read the number. The digits were printed, not written. Two, four, zero, zero, zero, zero. "That is not his cigarette money."

"No."

"What is it?"

"A loan. Or part of one." He Mei opened the red-stamped envelope with two fingers and slid out a folded letter. The red stamp was on the outside. The letter itself was in small print. Xiaoman could not make out the words.

"His name?" she asked.

He Mei turned the envelope. The name was written in red ink. Xiaoman could make out the first character of Old Sheng's name and the character for money.

"The bank wants the payment on the twentieth," He Mei said. "The payroll goes out on the fifteenth. The shipment came back on Thursday. The American order is sitting on the dock. The next order is not paid yet."

Xiaoman studied the cigarette wrappers, the receipt, the letter. The drain steamed. The cat had come back and sat under the bicycle, its eyes two small green lights.

"So the wages will be late," Xiaoman said.

"The wages will be paid. Some of them." He Mei touched the receipt with one damaged finger. "He will pay the bank first. Or the bank will take the account. Then the wages."

"How do you know the payroll date?"

"The office calendar. The fifteenth is circled in red. The bank letter says the twentieth."

"A bank cannot take our wages."

"A bank can take the account. The wages are paid from the account." He Mei put her finger on the red stamp. "If the money is not there on the fifteenth, the office will say the transfer failed. Then they will pay half. Then they will ask for patience. The bank will not ask for patience."

"Then we should go to the labor bureau."

Axiang made a sound behind her. He Mei did not laugh.

"The labor bureau is in town," she said. "The town is not in this alley."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the girls who complain are not standing where you are standing."

Xiaoman returned to the wrappers. The first one was gold. The second was blue. The third was white with a red stripe. The sequence was as clear as a row of knots. She could read it. She had seen the same thing in her mother's house when the price of feed went up and the brand of salt changed.

"It could still be nothing," she said.

"Then don't believe."

"How did you know about the new looms?"

He Mei put the wrappers back in the tin, one by one. "The maintenance men came to the office. They left the work order in the trash. I saw the number of the loom bank. The same number the girls were sent home from."

"That's not a reading. That's paper."

"Yes."

"You just read the trash."

"I read what the factory throws away."

"That is not a skill. That is being a scavenger."

He Mei's face did not change. "You think the trash is the same every day. It is not. The office bin on the first floor has the bank paper. The office bin on the second floor has the invoices. The dye house bin has the empty drums. I know which bag comes from which room because I carry it. I know which day it is because the canteen throws out the bones on Tuesday and the fish on Friday."

"And Old Sheng's cigarettes?"

"His office is the small one at the end. The one with the window that does not open. He puts his ashtray in the waste bin at four. The cleaning woman before me used to empty it at six. I empty it at five."

"So you go through his rubbish."

"I empty his bin. If he puts a letter in it, I see the letter."

Xiaoman looked past her into the open door. The room behind was small and clean. A bed with a board under the mattress. A chair with a coat over the back. A shelf with three cups and a tin of tea. Under the bed, half hidden by the board, was a shoebox. The cardboard had gone black with age. A corner of blue plastic showed at the top, the edge of a work badge. Xiaoman's eyes stopped there.

"Ask your question," He Mei said again.

"I did."

"You asked about wages. That was not your question."

Xiaoman sat back on her heels. The cold from the step went through her jeans. Axiang moved closer to the drain and held her hands over the steam. The warm water smelled of starch and machine oil and something green.

"All right," Xiaoman said. "Why do you give them knots?"

He Mei tied a thread end around her finger as if she had been waiting for the question. "Because a knot is a thing you can hold."

"Anybody can tie a knot."

"Anybody can."

He Mei pulled the thread from her finger and held it up. It was red. She held Xiaoman's eyes for a moment, then reached past her and put it into Axiang's hand.

"For the fifteenth," she said.

Axiang closed her hand around it. Xiaoman's palm stayed empty.

"Why her?" Xiaoman said.

"She asked."

"I asked too."

He Mei picked up the second bun. She put it on the step between them. "You asked for proof," she said. "That is not the same thing."

She reached into the basket and came out with a thread end. It was blue and fine, the kind that broke on the loom. She held it out.

"Tie."

Xiaoman took the thread. Her fingers were cold and stiff. She laid one end over her index finger, crossed it under her thumb, and made the loop. The other end went through and around. She pulled. The knot closed, but the tail stuck out almost to her knuckle.

He Mei took it back. She did not use scissors. She pinched the tail between her thumbnail and forefinger and snapped it off. The end was shorter than the nail on her little finger.

"Too long. You pull from the elbow."

"I have been doing it for two weeks."

"Then do it for two more."

He Mei dropped the blue thread into the basket. Xiaoman turned her empty hand over. The cold had made the lines stand out, and the red crease across her thumb had begun to open at the corner.

"Does that mean I cannot ask?" Xiaoman said.

"It means you cannot tie."

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They walked back along the lane without speaking. The drain steamed on both sides of them. Axiang's hand was closed around the knot. Xiaoman could hear the paper bag crackling against her leg. She had left the buns there. He Mei had not said thank you.

At the end of the lane Axiang stopped and looked back. The bulb still burned over the doorway. A shape moved behind the curtain.

"She doesn't like you," Axiang said.

"She doesn't know me."

"She knows enough."

They went through the gate. The night shift was running. The noise came through the wall as a low steady pressure that Xiaoman could feel in her teeth. The gate light was yellow. Old Zhou sat in his booth with the radio turned down. The static was a soft hiss.

Xiaoman looked down at her empty palm. The cold had made the lines stand out. She closed her fingers.

"Why did you bring me?" she asked.

"Because you asked."

"That's not why."

Axiang walked on. The knot was inside her collar now. Xiaoman could not see it. She knew it was there.

At the dorm door Axiang stopped again. "The cigarettes," she said. "The bank letter. The work order. She showed you all of it."

"Yes."

"Then you know more than the rest of them."

"What do I know?"

Axiang met her eyes. "That she is not guessing."

Xiaoman put her empty hand in her pocket. The lining was torn at the bottom and her fingers went through to the cold. Behind them the gate light made a yellow square on the wet road. The noise of the looms came over the wall, steady and enormous, and under it the drain ran in the dark.

CHAPTER SIX

"Did your daughter work here too?"

The blood was already on the floor by the time He Mei reached the winding room.

It made a line from the door of the supply closet to the end of the aisle, small round drops that darkened as they dried. A girl sat on a stack of empty cloth bales with her hand wrapped in a gray rag. Yanzi. Her face had gone the color of the wall behind her. The supervisor stood over her with his arms crossed.

"She put her hand on the frame," he said. "Clean it up."

He Mei put down her bucket. "Where is the first-aid box?"

"The office."

"Get it."

The supervisor measured her with a glance. He was young and had a thin mustache that did not suit him. "You clean. I'll decide who goes to the office."

He went. He Mei knelt beside Yanzi and took the rag away. The cut ran across the base of her thumb and into the palm. It was not deep, but it was long and had bled into the crease of her wrist. A piece of blue thread was caught in the wound.

"Hold still."

Yanzi held still. Her hand was cold. He Mei poured water from her bottle over the cut. The water ran pink into the drain in the floor. She picked the thread out with her fingernails and washed the cut again.

"It hurts," Yanzi said.

"Yes."

The supervisor came back with a tin box. He set it on a bale and went away again. He Mei opened the box. There was a roll of gauze, a bottle of iodine gone brown at the neck, and a packet of plasters that had stuck together in the damp. She poured iodine onto a pad of gauze. Yanzi's fingers curled.

"Open."

Yanzi opened her hand. The iodine went into the cut. Her breath came out through her teeth. He Mei wrapped the gauze around the thumb and palm, then tied it at the back of the hand.

"Keep it dry. Tomorrow the office will send you to the clinic."

"I don't want to go to the clinic."

"Then keep it dry."

"The clinic marks you absent," Yanzi said. "If you go during the shift, it comes off your pay. The supervisor said so."

He Mei tied the end of the gauze. "Then go after the shift."

"The clinic closes at six."

He Mei examined the hand. The gauze had begun to spot red at the base of the thumb. "Keep it dry," she said again. "If the red goes through, come to the boiler room. I have another cloth."

Yanzi nodded. Her eyes were dry. She looked from the blood on the floor to He Mei's hands. "You should not have to clean that."

"I clean everything."

"That is what I mean."

Xiaoman was standing in the doorway. She had a bundle of waste cloth against her hip. Her cap was pushed back and there was a smear of oil on her cheek. She had been on the floor since morning, and her eyes had the flat look of someone who had not slept enough.

He Mei stood up. The blood on the floor had begun to congeal at the edges. She took the mop from the bucket and pushed it through the drops. The water in the bucket turned pink.

Xiaoman came into the room. "Is she all right?"

"She will live."

"That's not what I asked."

He Mei wrung out the mop. Yanzi sat on the bales with her hand in her lap. Her eyes were fixed on the gray rag on the floor.

"Ayi," Xiaoman said.

He Mei did not look up.

"You called her child."

"I call everyone child."

"You don't call me child."

He Mei pushed the mop to the end of the aisle. The red line on the floor broke into a pale wash. She emptied the bucket into the drain and filled it again from the tap. The water was cold. It made her knuckles ache.

"Did your daughter work here too?" Xiaoman said.

The mop stopped.

He Mei stood with her hands on the handle. In the winding room the spools turned on their frames and the thread went up through the guides and the lamps buzzed over the tables. The noise was thinner here than in the weaving hall. It left room for a question.

"What did you say?"

"Your daughter," Xiaoman said. "Did she work here?"

He Mei studied the red water in the bucket. A thread of blood was still coming from the mop head, thin as a vein.

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody."

"Then why ask?"

Xiaoman's hands tightened on the bundle of waste cloth. "You were careful with her. You are not careful with me."

He Mei put the mop back into the bucket. The water splashed over the rim and wet the toe of her boot.

"Clean your face," she said. "You have oil on it."

She took the bucket and went out.

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The boiler room was empty at four. The burner ticked. The bulb above the shelf made a small yellow circle on the wall, and outside the circle the pipes were dark.

He Mei washed the mop head in the deep sink and hung it on the hook. Her hands had begun to shake. They did that sometimes when the weather turned, not from cold. She held them under the hot tap until the shaking stopped.

The door opened behind her. The heels came first. Even and unhurried. Jasmine.

The laoban-niang stood in the doorway with a folder under her arm. She was wearing the gray coat and a pair of black gloves. The office light was behind her.

"The winding room floor," she said. "The girl's hand."

He Mei turned off the tap. "It is cleaned."

"The supervisor says she was careless."

"The frame was open. The guard was not on."

The laoban-niang considered her. Her eyes moved over He Mei's face and then past her to the shelf. "You were a weaver."

He Mei dried her hands on the apron. "A long time ago."

"Which shed?"

"The third."

The laoban-niang's mouth moved a little. It was not a smile. "The third shed had the oldest frames."

"Yes."

"The women in the third shed tied the best knots. The supervisor used to say so."

He Mei folded the towel and put it on the sink. The laoban-niang took a step into the room. The jasmine came with her. The boiler ticked.

"I want the office cleaned before the bank man comes tomorrow," she said. "The floor, the desk, the windows. Do not leave the bucket in the corridor."

She went out. The heels struck the concrete away and away. He Mei stood in the boiler room and listened until the sound was gone.

Then she sat down on the stool by the shelf and took the thermos from the cart. The tea was cold. She drank it anyway. The red letters under the dent had gone soft, and the white cup had a chip at the rim. Twenty-four years. The glass liner was the same. The factory had given her the thermos the year they gave prizes. The same year the list went up.

She put the cup down and turned her hands over. The hot water had turned the skin red. The cracks at the knuckles had opened again.

※

The third shed was hot even in winter.

The water-jet looms stood in two rows, the water in the gutters running under the frames, the lights hanging low over the cloth. The air smelled of sizing and machine oil and the wet wool smell that came off the bobbins when the thread was warm. The floor was wet all day. The women worked in rubber boots and cotton aprons, and by the middle of the shift the aprons were heavy at the hem. Lint floated in the light. It caught in the throat and in the corners of the eyes. The looms threw their weft through the water and the water came back off the cloth in a fine spray that settled on the forearms and dried there.

He Mei stood at a loom with her hands in the water. Caifeng stood at the next loom.

Caifeng was thirty-one then and had not yet begun to wear her hair long. It was cut at the jaw. Her arms were bare to the elbow. Her hands went into the water and came out with the ends crossed. She tied faster than anyone in the row. Her knots were small. They sat in the cloth without a lump. The scar on her thumb was still red in those days, a thin line that ran from the nail down into the web of the hand. She said she had caught it on a reed when she was seventeen. She said it had never hurt after the first year.

"Look," Caifeng said. She snapped the length of cloth she was holding. The sound ran down the shed and came back off the metal wall. "Listen to that. That is a good run."

He Mei listened. The cloth sounded clean. She snapped her own piece. The sound was dull at the edge.

"Your reed is dirty," Caifeng said.

"The reed was cleaned yesterday."

"Then clean it again."

They worked. The shift ran from six to six. The water in the gutters carried the loose fibers down toward the drain at the end of the shed. The women tied their knots and changed their shuttles and snapped their cloth. At noon they ate rice from tin boxes with their hands still wet. Caifeng ate standing up. She never sat.

The list went up on the door of the shift office on a Tuesday in 1994.

He Mei was thirty-three. Caifeng was thirty-one. The two of them had worked the same row for eleven years. They had eaten from the same tin boxes

and washed their hands in the same sink and walked home through the same gate. When one of them was late, the other covered her looms. When one of them was sick, the other brought her rice.

He Mei did not remember who told her. She remembered the crowd at the door, the women in their aprons pressing against each other, the paper under a sheet of plastic. The office girl had typed the names. The ink was blue. The paper was thin enough to show the shape of the wall behind it.

He Mei's name was there. Caifeng's was not.

She read it twice. The blue ink was the same blue as the ink on the wage sheets. Her name was in the third line from the bottom. The letters were small and even. The paper had a crease down the middle where someone had folded it before posting.

Caifeng stood behind her. She read over He Mei's shoulder. Her breath touched the back of He Mei's neck. Neither of them spoke. The crowd moved and the paper shook under the plastic. A woman at the front said, "They are keeping the fast ones." Another woman said, "They are keeping the ones who know where the bodies are buried." Someone laughed and then stopped.

Caifeng's hand came up and touched He Mei's elbow. It stayed there for a moment. Then it went away.

At the end of the shift He Mei took her thermos from the shelf. The cup was on the lid. The red letters were new then. She put her apron in the bin and took her coat from the hook. The other women were still at their looms. The water ran in the gutters. The lights over the cloth were white and close.

At the shed door Caifeng stood with her hands still wet. She had not put on her coat. The water from the loom had darkened the front of her apron. The thermos under He Mei's arm drew her eyes, then He Mei's face. Her mouth opened. Nothing came out.

He Mei carried the thermos out through the gate and did not go back to the shed. Behind her the shed kept running. The sound followed her across the yard and into the street, and for a long time afterward she could hear it in the walls of whatever room she was in.

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"Did your daughter work here too?"

The question came back to her in the boiler room with the boiler ticking and the tea cold in the cup. He Mei sat with her hands in her lap. The burner made a small blue ring under its grate. The bulb above the shelf had begun to flicker.

She had not answered Xiaoman. She had not answered. The answer was not in the winding room. It was in the alley, under the bed board, in a box with a cracked lid.

He Mei put the cup on the shelf and stood up. She went to the sink and turned on the hot tap. The water came out in a white cloud. She held her hands under it. The heat went into the cracks and up through her wrists. The jasmine from the corridor was gone. The boiler smelled of coal and wet lint.

She washed her hands until the water ran cold. Then she turned off the tap and dried them on the apron. The cloth was gray at the hem. She folded it once and put it on the sink.

Outside, the night shift had begun. The looms were running. The noise came through the wall and into the floor and up through the soles of her boots. He Mei took the thermos and went back to the corridor with the bucket.

At the end of the hall Xiaoman was waiting with the bundle of waste cloth still against her hip.

"Ayi—"

"There is blood on the floor in the winding room," He Mei said. "Go and tell the supervisor to put a guard on that frame."

Xiaoman did not move. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For asking."

He Mei met her eyes. The girl's cap was still pushed back. The oil on her cheek had dried to a dark line. Her hands were empty. The corridor light lay along the floor between them. The mop handle was cold against He Mei's palm. The water in the bucket had gone still. Behind her the boiler room door stood open. The bulb above the shelf had gone dark. The corridor smelled of bleach and cold metal and the jasmine the laoban-niang had left behind. He Mei kept her eyes on Xiaoman and did not turn around.

"The floor," He Mei said. "Tell him."

She walked past her with the bucket and did not look back.

At the far end of the corridor the office window was bright. A man in a dark coat stood at the desk with a folder under his arm. The bank man. He was early, and his shoes were wet. He Mei pushed the mop along the baseboard. The water ran ahead of it in a gray line. The mop handle was cold in her hands. A truck went past on the road outside, its tires hissing in the wet street. The glass in the office window shivered in its frame. The bank man did not look up. The looms went on behind the wall. They did not stop. Behind her the corridor smelled of bleach. Under the bleach, faintly, the jasmine was still there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Will he wait for me?"

Qiaoyun came down the alley with an orange in each pocket and her phone held against her chest.

The night was colder than the ones before. Frost had formed on the tarpaulin over the drain, and the steam came up through it in thin white seams. He Mei sat on the step with her basket between her knees and a woolen glove on her left hand. The right hand was bare. She was sorting thread ends by color: red, blue, black, the pale gray that came off the loom when the tension slipped.

Qiaoyun stood at the edge of the bulb light for a moment. Her breath came out in clouds. She was wearing two sweaters under her work coat, and the collar of the inner one was pulled up around her throat. The phone in her hand lit her face from below.

She carried that phone the way another woman carried a child. It was in her hand when she came off the shift, in her lap at the canteen, under her pillow at night. In the dorm she played the messages at the lowest volume, the speaker pressed against her ear. Sometimes she smiled at the screen and then looked up to see who had seen her smile. When she was alone she played them over again. The other girls knew the sound of Li Wei's voice without knowing his face.

"Ayi."

"Sit."

Qiaoyun sat on the step. She took an orange from her pocket and put it beside He Mei's knee. He Mei left it there.

"I want to ask you something."

"Ask."

Qiaoyun looked down the lane. The drain steamed. A bicycle leaned against the wall at the corner, and beyond it the old houses had their shutters closed against the cold. Somewhere a television played a Spring Festival advertisement, the same song repeating behind a wall.

"Will he wait for me?" Qiaoyun said.

He Mei picked a blue thread from the basket and rolled it between her fingers. “Who?”

“You know who.”

“I know a voice on a phone.”

“Li Wei. My boyfriend. From my village.” Qiaoyun said the name quickly, as if she had been holding it in her mouth all evening. “He says by spring.”

“Spring is a long way from here.”

“Not that long.”

He Mei turned to the phone. “Let me hear him.”

Qiaoyun hesitated. Then she put the phone on the step between them and pressed the screen. A voice came out, low and compressed by the speaker. The man spoke in the flat, quick way of the village. He said the roof was done. He said the bricks had come. He said his mother had asked about her. Then he said, “By spring.”

The message ended. The screen went dark. Qiaoyun’s thumb hovered over it.

“Play the one before,” He Mei said.

Qiaoyun played it. The same voice. The roof was not done yet. His mother had asked about her. “By spring.”

“Play the one before.”

Qiaoyun’s jaw tightened. She scrolled. The third message was shorter. The background had a television in it, and a woman’s voice saying something that the phone did not catch. Li Wei said, “Tell your mother I said by spring.”

“When did he say this one?” He Mei asked.

“October.”

“And the roof was not done.”

“No.”

“And in November?”

“The roof was half done.”

“And now?”

“The roof is done.”

He Mei took the orange from beside her knee and dug her thumbnail into the peel. The skin came away in one long spiral. The smell was sharp and bright in the cold air.

"Will he wait for me?" Qiaoyun said again.

He Mei put the orange down. "How much have you sent him?"

Qiaoyun's thumb moved over the screen. "For the house."

"How much?"

"I don't keep count."

"You keep count of the knots."

"That is different."

He Mei reached into the basket and drew out a red thread. She tied a small knot in it and left it on the step. "October."

Qiaoyun stared at the knot. "One thousand five hundred."

He Mei tied another. "November."

"One thousand two hundred."

Another. "December."

"Eight hundred."

He Mei tied a fourth knot. "That is this week?"

Qiaoyun made no reply. The phone lit up in her hand. A message had come in. She turned it over before He Mei could see the screen.

"He says the wedding will be after the spring planting," Qiaoyun said.

"He said that in October."

"He says it again because he means it."

He Mei counted the four knots on the step. The red thread lay between them like a row of small cuts.

"Your mother," she said. "What does she say?"

Qiaoyun put the phone in her lap. "She says a girl who sends money home is a good girl."

"And his mother?"

"His mother says I am sensible."

He Mei picked up the red thread and held it between her fingers. She did not tie another knot.

"He will wait," she said.

Qiaoyun's face lifted. "You think so?"

"He will wait until the roof is paid. Then he will wait for the next thing."

The smile stayed on Qiaoyun's mouth for a moment, then went out. "That is not what I asked."

"It is the answer I have."

The phone lay face down between them. Its screen glowed through the plastic case, a small green rectangle in the dark. The drain steam touched Qiaoyun's boots and thinned. The orange peel lay in a spiral on the step, the white pith turning brown at the edges. He Mei's hands rested on the basket. The knuckles were split from the cold water, and the red thread lay across her thumb like a cut. Somewhere beyond the wall a truck changed gear. The mill kept running. Qiaoyun's breath came out of her in small clouds and did not stop.

The screen had gone dark again. Her reflection lay in it, small and warped by the curve of the glass. She put the phone face down on her knee.

"My mother says if I go home with empty hands, the village will talk."

"What will it say?"

"That I have a man in Jiangsu. That I spend my wages on clothes. That I think I am too good for the village." Qiaoyun pulled her sleeves down over her hands. "Last year a girl from the next village came back with a gold ring and no husband. They still talk about her."

"What happened to her?"

"She went back to Guangdong."

"And the man?"

"There was no man. There was a ring." Qiaoyun counted the four knots. "My mother says a daughter is a guest in her parents' house. You eat their rice, you sleep under their roof, and then one day you go to another house. If you go with nothing, the other house does not want you. If you send money back, they say you are a good daughter. If you keep it, they say you have forgotten where you came from."

He Mei turned the red thread between her fingers. "And what does Li Wei's mother say?"

"That I am sensible."

"Sensible."

"She said I know how to save."

"Then she knows what you are saving for."

Qiaoyun was quiet. The phone glowed and went dark. "My mother says I am twenty-two. She says the matchmaker has already asked about me twice. If I stay here another year, the good families will think something is wrong with me."

"What could be wrong with you?"

"That I am too old. That I have seen too much. That I will not be quiet."

"Are you quiet?"

"No." Qiaoyun smiled. "That is what I tell him. He says he likes it."

"Then he should marry you now."

"He says by spring."

"He said that in October."

Qiaoyun's thumb moved over the screen. She did not turn it on.

"Maybe I should go home for the New Year," she said. "My mother says the village is different now. There is a new road. There are men with cars."

"Then go home."

"I can't go home with nothing."

"You have a phone," He Mei said. "You have two oranges."

Qiaoyun laughed. The laugh broke in the middle. She put her hand over her mouth and looked toward the end of the lane, where the mill wall went dark against the sky.

"He said by spring," she said. "He said it in October, too."

He Mei cut the red thread with her thumbnail. She tied a knot in the middle of it, then another at the end. The knot was small and tight. She held it out.

"Give him this."

Qiaoyun took the thread. "What does it mean?"

"It means you are still here."

Qiaoyun turned the thread over in her fingers. She studied the four knots on the step, then the single knot in her palm.

"He will not know what it means," she said.

"Then he will ask."

Qiaoyun pinned the thread inside her collar. The phone lit up again. She did not look at it.

※

The next night Qiaoyun came back with a transfer receipt.

She put it on the step without speaking. He Mei was scraping the mud from the drain grate with a piece of wood. The paper was thin and curled at the edges. The amount was eight hundred yuan. The name at the top was Li Wei.

"He asked for the bus fare," Qiaoyun said.

He Mei read the receipt. "And you sent it."

"He said he would come in the spring."

"You sent him the fare in December."

Qiaoyun's hands were in her sleeves. "He said the ticket would be cheaper if he bought it early."

He Mei put the wood down. The drain ran warm at her feet. The steam rose and thinned and disappeared. Qiaoyun's phone began to play a voice message, very low. The man's voice said something about the road and the bus and the spring. Qiaoyun held the phone against her chest. Her smile came and went.

"Did he say when?" He Mei asked.

"After the New Year."

"Which New Year?"

Qiaoyun met her eyes. "Ours."

"Ours is in February."

"There is still time."

He Mei took the receipt and folded it in half. She held it out. Qiaoyun took it and put it in her pocket with the orange peels.

"Keep the fare in your own hand next time," He Mei said.

The phone lit up again. Her face changed. She stood up and walked to the end of the lane. Her voice was low. He Mei could not hear the words, only the rhythm. A question. A pause. Another question. Then Qiaoyun laughed at something.

When she came back she stood beside the step with the phone against her chest. "He says he will come with his cousin. They will both work here. He says we can save faster."

"He says."

"He does."

He Mei picked up the orange from the step. She peeled it with her thumb and split it in half. The juice ran down her wrist. She gave one half to Qiaoyun. Qiaoyun took it in both hands and ate it standing up.

"Will he wait for me?" she asked again.

He Mei turned to the drain. "He will wait for the fare."

The phone lit her face. Qiaoyun chewed the orange. Her eyes stayed on the screen. She did not ask again.

※

On Sunday Qiaoyun came to the alley with her mother's voice in her hand.

She did not sit down. She stood under the bulb with the phone held out, and the message played into the cold air. Her mother's voice was small and far away. She said the roof of the old kitchen had begun to leak. She said Qiaoyun's father had been coughing since the first frost. She said the New Year was coming and the village would expect to see her. She said, "Don't come home with a man's name in your mouth and no money in your hand."

The message ended. Qiaoyun put the phone in her pocket.

"My mother has never seen him," she said. "She does not know his name. She says it anyway."

"What does your brother say?"

"He is fourteen. He says I should send him a phone." Qiaoyun turned toward the drain. "He does not know what a phone costs. He thinks I have money because I am in Jiangsu. They all think that. The village thinks the road is paved with wages."

He Mei bit the thread. The needle went into the coat lining and came out. "What does your mother think?"

"She thinks I should come home with a husband or enough money to buy one." Qiaoyun's voice was flat. "She does not say it like that."

"How does she say it?"

"She says, 'A girl must have something to carry into her new house.'"

He Mei bit the thread and tied a knot at the end of the seam. The thread was gray, the color of the drain water in winter. "What will you send her?"

"Two thousand. Maybe three. If I take the night shift next week."

"And what will you send him?"

Qiaoyun did not speak. The drain steamed between them. He Mei waited. The thread lay across her knee. Qiaoyun's phone glowed and went dark in her lap. The cold pressed against the step. On the step the orange peel had dried into a hard spiral.

"If you take the night shift," she said, "you will be too tired to hear the phone."

"I can hear it."

"Then you will hear it in your sleep."

Qiaoyun picked up the orange peel and turned it over in her hand. "He says he will come with his cousin. He says we can save faster. He says his cousin knows a factory in the next town where the pay is better."

"Then let him go to the next town."

"He wants to come here."

"Why?"

Qiaoyun turned toward the drain. "Because I am here."

He Mei put the needle back in her coat. "He wants his cousin to come here. That is not the same thing."

Qiaoyun's phone lit up. Her thumb moved over the glass. She said nothing. The light went out. She stood under the bulb for a moment with the dried peel in her hand, then put it in her pocket and went back up the lane.

At the top of the lane she stopped under the streetlamp. The phone lit her face. He Mei could not hear the words, only the rise at the end of Qiaoyun's voice, the same rise a question makes. Then Qiaoyun laughed. The sound came down the lane and reached the step.

He Mei took the second orange from the step and put it in her basket. She tied a knot in the red thread and put that in the basket too. Behind the wall the looms kept their time. The television inside the old house had moved on to the news. A woman's voice read the weather for the next day: cold, rain by evening. He Mei listened until the voice stopped. The drain ran under the tarpaulin. The steam went up into the dark. The orange was cold against her palm. She held it until the cold went out of it. The rain did not come. The lane was quiet. She put

the orange in her coat pocket. She could hear the mill. It did not stop. The mill hummed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Is enough saved for my brother’s bride-price?”

Chunxia came down the alley counting under her breath.

She had a notebook under one arm and a pencil behind her ear. Her lips moved as she walked. When she reached the step she was still counting, and she stood there with her eyes on the middle distance until the number finished in her head.

“Seventy-five thousand three hundred,” she said. “And four more months.”

He Mei moved the basket aside so there was room on the step. “Sit.”

Chunxia had come to the mill at nineteen with a woven bag and a pair of shoes her father had cut from an old tire. She still wore the same shoes in winter, with a second pair of socks inside. Her work coat had been mended at both elbows. The thread was a different gray from the cloth. She ate rice and cabbage and put chili oil on it to make it taste like meat. The phone in her pocket had a cracked screen and a battery that went flat before the end of the shift. She charged it in the office when the supervisor was not looking.

Chunxia sat. She opened the notebook on her knees. The pages were thin and gray from handling. Every line had a date and a number. Some numbers were circled. Some had been crossed out and written again in the margin. At the top of the first page, in pencil pressed hard enough to shine, was a single figure: 88,000.

“Bride price,” Chunxia said. “Cash. The three golds are separate. My mother says she will find the gold.”

“Your mother says.”

“My mother says the girl’s family has already had one offer. If we wait past the spring, they will ask for more.”

He Mei took the notebook and turned it toward the light. The bulb above the step made a small yellow circle on the page. The numbers were small and

neat. Chunxia had good handwriting. She had written the months in a column, and beside each month she had written what she had saved.

"Last month," He Mei said. "Four thousand one hundred."

"I took the night shift."

"And the month before?"

"Three thousand eight."

"And before that?"

"Three thousand one." Chunxia took the pencil from behind her ear. "This month I will make four thousand if the looms do not stop. Then four more months."

He Mei turned the page. There were other numbers at the bottom, smaller, in a different column. Two hundred for the dorm. Three hundred for meals. Forty for electricity. A line for soap, a line for a phone card, a line for the clinic when she had the flu in October. The savings column was the only one that had been added up twice. The pencil marks were dark where Chunxia had gone over them. The page smelled of cold paper and the inside of a pocket. A drop of water had fallen on the corner and dried in a gray ring. Chunxia's thumbnail was black at the edge from the loom. She held the pencil in her right hand and the notebook in her left, and she kept her shoulders turned so the wind could not take the pages.

"Your brother," He Mei said. "How much has he saved?"

Chunxia's pencil stopped.

"He is a man," she said.

"How much?"

"He has expenses."

"What expenses?"

"He works in the city. He needs a motorcycle. He needs good clothes for the clients. My mother says a man must show he can provide."

"So your mother bought him a motorcycle."

"She helped him."

"And you are buying him a wife."

"That is not how my mother says it."

"How does she say it?"

"She says a family builds a house together. The son brings the roof. The daughter brings the walls." Chunxia turned back to the notebook. "I am the walls."

"Your brother went to school until sixteen," He Mei said. "You went until fourteen."

"He had a better hand for numbers."

"So do you."

Chunxia's pencil moved along the edge of the page. "My father was sick that year. Someone had to stay home. My mother said I was quicker with the cooking."

He Mei closed the notebook and put it back on Chunxia's knees.

"Your brother should be here," she said.

"He cannot leave his job."

"You left yours."

"I did not have a job. I had a village."

The drain ran between them. The steam had thinned in the dry cold. On the wall behind He Mei's step a line of ants was moving up from the drain toward a crack in the plaster. They went up in a thin black thread and disappeared into the wall.

"Eighty-eight thousand," He Mei said. "How did they choose the number?"

"The bride's family chose it."

"Did they choose it before or after your brother bought the motorcycle?"

Chunxia let the question stand. She opened the notebook again and smoothed the first page with the flat of her hand.

"Four more months," she said. "Don't tell me about the factory. The factory doesn't fit in the number."

"The factory is where the number comes from."

"I know where it comes from." Chunxia's pencil moved over the page. "The wedding is in the spring. The gold is twelve thousand. My mother will pay for the banquet. The bride's family wants the cash before the wedding so they can buy the furniture. If I have eighty-eight thousand, we are all right."

"And if you do not?"

"Then my brother will marry later."

"And you?"

Chunxia looked up. "What about me?"

"When will you marry?"

Chunxia's pencil stopped. "I am not the one getting married."

"You are the one paying."

He Mei studied the number. The pencil had been sharpened with a knife. The point was long and thin, and the lead had broken and been sharpened again, and then broken again. The paper at the top of the page had a hole where the pencil had gone through.

"Your wages will not come the way they came before," He Mei said.

Chunxia looked up. "Why?"

"The order came back."

"That was one order. The American order."

"The bank man came."

"What bank man?"

He Mei made no reply. Chunxia's pencil hovered over the page.

"How many months?" Chunxia asked.

"Seven."

"Seven?" Chunxia's voice went up. "Why seven?"

"Because you count the money you make. You do not count the money that does not come."

Chunxia turned back to the notebook. Her fingers found the savings column and moved down the page as if she could push the number higher. "I can take more night shifts."

"Then you will sleep less."

"I can sleep after the wedding."

"Whose wedding?"

Chunxia's hand stopped. The pencil lay across the page. For a moment the only sound was the drain and the low hum of the mill behind the wall.

"My brother's," she said.

He Mei picked up a thread end from the basket. She tied a knot in it and held it out.

"For the number," she said.

Chunxia took the knot. She turned it over in her fingers. “Does it mean yes?”

“It means you should ask your brother for his numbers.”

Chunxia’s mouth opened. Then she closed it. She put the knot inside her collar and pinned it there with a safety pin. The red thread lay against the gray cloth of her work shirt.

※

At the end of the week Chunxia came back with the notebook open to a new page.

She had written her brother’s name at the top. Under it there were three lines: motorcycle, phone, clothes. The motorcycle was circled. The phone had a question mark beside it. The clothes had no number at all.

“He says he will send two thousand,” Chunxia said. “In the spring.”

“Did he say that in October?”

“He said it in November.”

“And in December?”

Chunxia put the notebook on the step. The pencil was behind her ear again. The point had broken to a stub.

“He says the wedding can wait,” she said. “He says the bride’s family is not serious about the offer.”

“He says.”

“He does.”

He Mei read the three lines. The motorcycle was circled twice. The phone had a question mark. The clothes had no number.

“You have not written what you spend,” she said.

Chunxia turned the page. The hidden column was there: dorm, meals, electricity, soap, phone card, clinic. At the bottom of the page she had written a new line. It said: *brother’s motorbike — 4,000*. The number had been erased and written again. The page was gray where the eraser had gone over it.

“You gave him four thousand,” He Mei said.

“He needed it for the license.”

“And the wedding?”

“The wedding is later.”

A message came into her phone. She kept the screen turned toward her. The man's voice was too low for He Mei to hear, but the tone was quick and bright. Chunxia's face changed while she listened. When it ended she put the phone in her lap and turned back to the notebook.

"He says the motorcycle is for work," she said. "He says he can carry parcels on it."

"A motorcycle is not a roof."

"It will help him save."

"Then let it save."

He Mei put the notebook down. The steam came up from the drain and touched the edge of the page. Chunxia moved the book away before the paper could curl.

"Seven months," He Mei said.

Chunxia studied the savings column. Her lips moved. She counted. Then she took the pencil from behind her ear and drew a line through the four at the bottom of the page. She wrote a new number below it. Seven. The lead broke before she finished the last stroke. The point lay on the page. The page was still.

She stared at the broken point. Then she put the pencil in her pocket and closed the notebook.

"My mother will not wait seven months," she said.

"Then your mother can pay the difference."

"She does not have it."

"Neither do you."

Chunxia's face went still. Her hands lay on the notebook, one on each side, as if she were holding it shut against something. The drain steamed under the step. The page had begun to curl at the corner where the water had dried. Chunxia pressed it flat with her thumb.

"I am twenty-six," she said. "If my brother does not marry this year, my mother will say it is because of me. The village will say I stayed too long in Jiangsu and forgot my family."

"And if you stay seven more months?"

"Then I will be twenty-seven."

The drain ran. The ants had found something on the step, a crumb of the bun He Mei had eaten, and were carrying it away in a dark line.

"Ask your brother what he will give you," He Mei said.

Chunxia looked up. "What?"

"Ask him what he will give you when you come home."

"He does not have to give me anything."

"Then he will not."

Chunxia's fingers tightened on the notebook. Her fingers went to the red knot inside her collar.

"He is my brother," she said.

"He is your mother's son."

Chunxia opened the notebook again. She turned to the back page, where the numbers had not been ruled, and wrote something He Mei could not see. Her hand moved slowly. When she finished she closed the book and put the pencil behind her ear.

"How many months of my work is his motorcycle?" she asked.

He Mei met her eyes.

"Four thousand," Chunxia said. "I gave him four thousand. I make three thousand five hundred in a good month. If I do not eat, if I do not buy soap, if nothing goes wrong, it is one month and five days."

"And how many months is the bride price?"

Chunxia turned the notebook toward herself. "Twenty-five. If I save three thousand five hundred every month and nothing goes wrong."

"You have been here six years."

"Seven in the spring."

"What did the other years buy?"

Chunxia turned the page. The columns went back further than He Mei had seen. There were lines for her father's medicine. There was a line for a refrigerator. There was a line for the roof of the kitchen. There was a line for her brother's school fees. None of the lines had her name on them.

"The years do not buy anything," she said. "They just go."

He Mei put her hand flat on the notebook. The paper was cold under her palm. "Then do not give him the next year."

Chunxia stared at He Mei's hand. Her eyes were dry. She did not pull the notebook away.

Chunxia did not speak. She put the notebook under her arm and stood up.

"Ask me again after the fifteenth," He Mei said. "Bring the numbers."

Chunxia walked back up the lane with the notebook against her chest. The red knot showed at the open collar of her coat. At the top of the lane she stopped under the streetlamp and opened the notebook again. He Mei could see the pale page under the light. Chunxia's pencil moved. Then her hand stopped. She stood there for a while with the pencil against the paper.

The lamp buzzed. The drain ran under the tarpaulin. He Mei took the last of the thread ends and put them in the basket. The number was still on the page. The number would be there tomorrow. Behind the wall a loom stopped and started again. Chunxia's shadow moved on the wet ground. She closed the notebook and went through the gate without looking back. The streetlamp made a yellow circle around her. The red knot at her collar was a small dark mark against the gray. The drain kept running in the dark.

※

On the last night of the month Chunxia came to the alley without the notebook.

She stood at the edge of the bulb light with her hands in her sleeves. Her face was gray under the cold. She had been on the night shift for a week. The skin under her eyes had gone thin and dark.

"I asked him," she said.

He Mei waited.

"He said he would give me a gold ring when I marry."

"Did he mean it?"

"He said it the way he says everything." Chunxia's voice was low. "By spring."

She put a small paper packet on the step. He Mei opened it. Inside was a pair of silver earrings, small and thin. They had cost forty yuan at the gate shop. The paper had a price written on it in pencil.

"He sent them," Chunxia said. "He said I should look nice for the wedding."

"Whose wedding?"

Chunxia said nothing. She looked down the lane. The television inside the old house was playing the weather again. The woman's voice said the cold would break by the weekend and the rain would come from the south.

He Mei put the earrings back in the paper. She held them out.

"Keep them," she said.

Chunxia took the packet. Her hand closed around it. The red knot was still pinned inside her collar. The thread had begun to fray at the edge.

"How many months?" she asked.

He Mei turned toward the drain. The steam was thin tonight. Under it the water ran dark and quiet toward the canal.

"Bring me the number when it is real," she said.

CHAPTER NINE

“Am I pregnant?”

The bathroom bin told He Mei the month before the women did.

She had learned to read it in the first year. The pads came wrapped in newspaper, some folded small and tight, some thrown in loose with the blood still wet. The brands changed with the pay packet. In a good month the bin held pink plastic wrappers from the supermarket. In a bad month it held the cheap white packets from the gate shop, the ones that split at the edge. Some girls used cloth. Some used paper. Some used nothing and washed themselves in the sink with the cold water running.

Yanzi had used the pink packets since the autumn.

Now the pink packets were gone.

He Mei knew the cycle of the bin better than any calendar. The first week of the month brought four or five pads from the weaving hall, two from the winding room, one from the office woman who used the bathroom before the shift and never spoke to anyone. The middle of the month was quiet. The end brought the girls who worked nights, the ones whose bodies had learned to bleed on a schedule the factory did not respect. Yanzi had been in the middle of the month for three months in a row. In October the pink packets had come on the ninth. In November they had come on the eleventh. In December there had been none.

He Mei stood in the bathroom at ten past six with the yellow bucket against the broken door and the bleach bottle in her hand. The first stall had been used and not flushed. She poured bleach and waited. The second stall had a smear on the seat, thin and brown. She wiped it with a rag and dropped the rag into the bag. The third stall was dry. She checked the bin. There were two pads in it, both wrapped in newspaper, both from other girls. The pink packet was not there. It had not been there for six weeks.

She counted on her fingers. The first week of November. The second week. The week the fish came. The week the bank man came. The week Qiaoyun sent her fare. Six weeks. Maybe seven.

The door opened.

Yanzi came in with her cap low and her hands in her sleeves. She was smaller than she had been in the summer. The uniform hung loose at the shoulders. Her face had the flat, careful look of a girl who had been holding her breath for a long time.

"Ayi."

He Mei put the rag in the bag. "You are early."

"I could not sleep."

"Your hand?"

"It is better."

Yanzi went into the second stall. She did not close the door all the way. The tap ran. He Mei moved the mop around the sink and listened. The tap stopped. The tap started again. Then the toilet flushed, and the tap ran again, and Yanzi came out with her sleeves pushed up to the elbow. Her wrists were thin. The blue mark above the left one had faded to yellow.

She stood at the sink and washed her hands with the yellow soap. She washed them for a long time. He Mei took the mop to the far end of the room and pushed the water toward the drain.

"Ayi," Yanzi said.

He Mei stopped.

"Am I pregnant?"

Neither of them moved. The fluorescent light buzzed. The tap dripped once and then stopped. He Mei studied Yanzi's face in the cracked mirror. The girl's eyes were on the sink.

"Why do you ask me?" He Mei said.

"You know things."

"I know what I see in the bin."

Yanzi's hands went still under the water. "What did you see?"

"No pink packets."

Yanzi's mouth opened. Then she closed it. Her hands came out of the water and hung at her sides. The sleeves had slipped down over her wrists. The blue mark above the left wrist had faded to the color of old tea.

"When was the last time?" He Mei asked.

"Before the fish."

"Before the fish is six weeks."

"Maybe seven."

"Did you bleed?"

"A little. In November. It stopped."

He Mei put the mop against the wall. She took the yellow soap from the sink and put it back in the cart. "What did he say?"

Yanzi's gaze dropped to the floor. "He said it would be all right."

"Who is he?"

"A boy from the next dorm. He works in the dye house."

"Does he know?"

"No."

"Does anyone know?"

"No."

"Your mother?"

Yanzi shook her head. Her mouth worked. "She would say I have brought shame on the family. She would say the village will know. She would say I should have come home in the spring."

"You did not go home in the spring."

"I did not have the fare." Yanzi turned toward the sink. "I sent it to my mother for the roof."

He Mei took the black bag out of the bin and tied the top. The bag was light today. The smell of bleach rose from the drain and mixed with the smell of the cheap soap. The bin was empty. The corridor was quiet. She carried the bag to the boiler room. The night shift was still running. The night was long.

"You need the clinic," she said.

Yanzi's shoulders went up. "I can't go to the clinic."

"You can."

"The supervisor will mark me absent. If I miss a shift, I lose the full attendance. I lose the night bonus."

"Go before the shift. The clinic in town opens at eight on Saturdays. Axiang knows the address. She has the slip."

Yanzi's eyes widened. "You told Axiang?"

"I have not told Axiang anything."

"Then how do you know she has the slip?"

He Mei picked up the bucket. "Because Chunxia's cousin went last spring. Axiang kept the paper."

Yanzi's eyes filled. She did not let the tears fall. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, then took it away.

"I don't have the money," she said.

"How much?"

"One hundred and twenty. Maybe more. The test is forty. The doctor is eighty."

He Mei reached into the pocket of her apron and took out a folded note. It was not much. She had been saving it inside the lining of her coat for a new pair of work shoes. She put it on the edge of the sink.

"Take it."

Yanzi stared at the note. "I can't."

"Then leave it."

"I will pay you back."

"After the fifteenth."

Yanzi took the note and folded it into her sleeve. Her hands were shaking. He Mei took a red thread from the basket in her cart and tied a loop in it. Not a knot. A loop. She held it out.

"This is a loop," she said. "A knot means go. A loop means wait. Do you understand?"

Yanzi studied the red circle in He Mei's fingers. "Wait."

"Wait until Saturday. Then you will know."

Yanzi took the loop. She turned it over in her palm. The thread was thin and red and closed on itself. She pinned it inside her collar.

"What if it is yes?" she said.

"Then you will know that too."

"What if he does not come with me?"

"Then Axiang will."

Yanzi's face changed. "Axiang does not know."

"She will know before Saturday."

"How?"

"I will tell her."

The girl stood at the sink for a moment. Then she went to the door. Her hand was on the handle before she turned around.

"Ayi."

"What?"

"Did you ever have to wait?"

He Mei turned her eyes to the drain. The water ran black at the bottom and then gray where the light touched it. The bleach burned in the split of her thumb. She held the mop handle with both hands. The handle was wet and cold. The girl's question stayed in the room, and the room did not make space for it. He Mei counted the drip of the tap, one, two, three, and then she put the mop back in the bucket and wrung it out. The water came out gray and ran over her wrists. She let the question stand.

Yanzi went out.

※

At ten the break bell rang and the bathroom filled.

Qiaoyun came in with her phone. Chunxia came in with her pencil. Meihua came in with a basin and washed her face at the sink. Axiang came last. Her wrists were wrapped in the brown bandage, and she held them out in front of her as she walked.

He Mei was on her knees by the drain, scraping the hair out of the grate with a piece of wire.

Axiang stopped beside her. "Yanzi came to see you."

He Mei pulled a wet knot of hair from the grate and dropped it in the bag.

"She is frightened," Axiang said.

"Then take her to town on Saturday."

"The clinic?"

"Eight o'clock. You have the slip."

Axiang looked toward the stalls. The door of the second one was open. Yanzi was not there. "She is only nineteen."

"I know."

"She does not have money."

"I gave her some."

Axiang's eyes came back to He Mei's face. "You?"

"The shoes can wait."

Axiang leaned against the sink. Her wrists hung at her sides. "If the boy does not go with her, I will."

"I told her."

"You told her a lot."

"I told her where the clinic is."

Axiang looked toward the door of the stall. She had not seen the loop. He Mei did not explain. She went back to the grate.

At the end of the break Yanzi came in to wash her hands before the line started. The red loop showed inside her collar. Xiaoman was behind her. Xiaoman saw the loop. She stopped.

"What is that?" she asked.

Yanzi put her hand over her collar. "A thread."

"A knot?"

"A loop."

Xiaoman turned to He Mei. He Mei kept her eyes on the drain. Xiaoman's mouth opened, then closed. She went into the stall.

※

On Saturday it rained.

He Mei was in the boiler room when Axiang came to the door with her coat already on. The sky outside was gray. The water ran down the windows in long threads.

"We are going," Axiang said.

"Who is we?"

"Yanzi and me. Chunxia is coming too. She says she knows a shop near the clinic where the noodles are cheap."

"Good."

"The boy is not coming."

He Mei looked up from the sink. "Does Yanzi know?"

"She knows."

"Does she want him?"

"She wants the answer."

He Mei dried her hands on the apron. "Take the bus at the gate. Do not let her walk in the rain."

"We will take the bus."

"Take the umbrella."

Axiang turned to the umbrella in the corner. It was He Mei's. The handle had been mended with tape.

"You will need it," Axiang said.

"I am inside."

Axiang took the umbrella. At the door she stopped. "If it is yes, what will happen?"

He Mei checked the boiler. The fire was low. The pipes ticked.

"She will decide," she said. "You will go with her."

"And if she does not decide?"

"Then she will come back. The loop means wait."

Axiang nodded. She opened the umbrella and went out into the rain.

※

They came back at half past eleven.

He Mei was in the bathroom cleaning the floor when she heard their shoes in the corridor. The door opened. Axiang came in first, her coat dark with rain. Then Chunxia. Then Yanzi. The red loop was still inside her collar.

"Well?" He Mei said.

Yanzi met her eyes. Her face was pale and calm. "It is negative."

The word sat in the room. Axiang let out a breath. Chunxia put her hand on Yanzi's shoulder. Yanzi did not move.

"The doctor said it is too early to be sure," Yanzi said. "He said to come back in two weeks if nothing happens."

He Mei put the mop against the wall. "Then you will come back in two weeks."

"I don't have more money."

"We will find it."

Yanzi turned toward the drain. "I thought I would be happy."

"And are you?"

Yanzi made no reply. She touched the loop at her collar. "I thought I would feel something."

He Mei took the mop and pushed the water toward the grate. The drain swallowed it. The red loop was small against Yanzi's gray shirt. Axiang put the umbrella in the corner and shook out her coat. Chunxia said something about the noodle shop. The room smelled of bleach and rain.

"Keep the loop," He Mei said. "Until the next test."

Yanzi nodded. She went out with Axiang and Chunxia. The door swung shut.

※

At noon the rain had stopped, but the floor outside the boiler room was still wet. Axiang came back with her coat over her arm and the umbrella closed. She had walked Yanzi and Chunxia up to the dorm and come down again. She stood in the doorway and let the water drip off the umbrella onto the concrete.

"The doctor was kind," she said. "He asked her questions. He did not shout."

"And the woman at the desk?"

"She wanted the money first." Axiang put the umbrella in the corner. "Yanzi could not say the word. I said it for her. The doctor wrote something on a paper and gave it to her. Then he said to come back in two weeks."

"Did she ask what would happen if it is positive?"

"She did not ask."

"Did you?"

Axiang's eyes dropped to the floor. "I asked if it would cost more."

The boiler ticked. He Mei took the kettle from the shelf and poured hot water into a cup. She gave it to Axiang. Axiang wrapped her bandaged wrists around the cup and held it against her chest.

"If it is positive," she said, "she will need more than the clinic. She will need a place to sleep. The dorm auntie will know. The supervisor will know. The whole floor will know by lunch."

"Then she will need us."

Axiang drank the water. Her throat moved. "You gave her a loop. Not a knot."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I do not know."

Axiang studied the cup in her hands. "A knot means go."

"A loop means wait."

"Who told you that?"

"No one."

Axiang was quiet. The boiler ticked. Then she said, "I have never seen a girl keep a baby in the dorm."

"Neither have I."

"The last one went home."

"Then Yanzi will decide whether to go home."

※

He Mei went back to the bathroom with the bucket. The water in it had gone cold. She lifted her hands out and turned them over. The skin had begun to crack at the knuckles. The bleach had dried in white lines around her nails. The fluorescent light buzzed over the sink. The mirror held her face in two pieces. She turned on the hot tap and held her hands under it. The water came up through her fingers and ran into the drain. Steam gathered on the cracked glass.

She washed them again. The water ran clear. On the edge of the sink a loose red thread from her basket had made a small loop in the wet. She left it there and dried her hands on the apron.

CHAPTER TEN

“Is the boss going to lay people off?”

The maintenance board was empty.

On Monday He Mei carried the office bins down the corridor and stopped at the empty maintenance board. The board hung outside the weaving supervisor’s door, a rectangle of cork under a sheet of scratched plastic. For two years it had held the same three sheets: the loom-cleaning schedule, the oil-change schedule, the list of fitters on each shift. Now the cork showed through in pale squares where the paper had been pinned. A single brass tack remained in one corner. The board had hung there since before He Mei came back to the mill. The plastic cover had gone yellow at the edges. In the summer the sun found it through the corridor window and bleached the cork a shade lighter on one side. The hooks at the top still had a loop of old string on them.

She set the bins down and faced the empty board. The office door was open. Inside, the supervisor’s desk was covered with the usual papers, a cold cup of tea, a bag of sunflower seeds. The waste bin beside the desk had been emptied the night before. The new bag was already half full of torn paper.

He Mei lifted the bag out and carried it to the boiler room. She was not supposed to go through the office bin until after the supervisors had gone home. It was half past seven. The night shift had started. The day supervisors were still in the building, but their doors were closed.

She spread the torn papers on the brick beside the burner. Most of them were carbon copies of shipping forms. Some were printed pages with columns she could not read. One was a maintenance schedule, torn into four pieces. She fitted the pieces together with her fingers.

The top line said the loom bank numbers. The second line said the week. The third line had a column for oil, a column for belts, a column for reed cleaning, a column for the water pumps. The oil column had been filled in for the first two weeks of December. The belt column had two checks. The water-pump column had none. At the bottom of the page someone had written a note in blue ink. He

Mei could not read all the characters, but she knew the shape of the word for delay. It had been written twice, and then crossed out. The date at the top was the first week of December. Since then the board had been empty, and the machines had kept running.

She put the pieces in the burner and struck a match.

The paper caught quickly. The flame ran up the edge and turned the blue ink black. The smell was dry and hot. The burner ticked. The schedule curled and broke into ash. Then she went back to the corridor with the empty bag.

※

On Tuesday the fitter came to the boiler room for hot water.

He was a thin man named Xiao Li with oil under his nails and a burn scar on one cheek. He carried a tin bucket in each hand. One bucket held water, the other a dark sludge that had come out of a loom gearbox. He set them down and held his hands over the boiler.

"The third bank is down again," he said.

"Which one?"

"The one with the old pumps. The seals are gone. I asked for new seals last month. The office says wait."

"How long?"

"Until the seals come."

"When will they come?"

Xiao Li glanced at the boiler. "The office says wait." He warmed his hands over the grate. "We are washing the old oil and putting it back. The belts are slipping. The reed cleaners are not being replaced. The machines will run until they will not."

He picked up the buckets. At the door he stopped. "Do not tell the girls on the third bank. They will stop working."

"They will not stop."

"No," he said. "They never do."

He went out. The door clicked shut behind him. The boiler ticked.

※

The question came three days later, in the alley.

Axiang came first. Then Qiaoyun, then Chunxia. They stood at the edge of the bulb light with their hands in their sleeves. The drain steamed between them and the mill wall. A cold fog had come up from the canal and settled in the lane. The light from the bulb made a yellow circle in it.

"Is the boss going to lay people off?" Axiang said.

He Mei was mending the handle of her mop with a length of wire. She did not stop. "Who told you that?"

"Nobody told us," Qiaoyun said. "The line stopped twice today. The supervisor walked up and down with his clipboard. He did not write anything."

"Then he is not laying people off."

"He did not write anything," Chunxia said. "That is worse."

He Mei twisted the wire. The mop handle creaked. "The maintenance board is empty."

Axiang turned toward the drain. "What does that mean?"

"It means they are not fixing the pumps. It means they are not ordering belts. It means the machines will run until they stop."

"And then?"

"Then the night shift goes first."

The three women were quiet. In the mill behind the wall a loom started with a clatter and settled into its rhythm. Another followed. The drain ran warm at their feet.

"The night shift is the youngest," Qiaoyun said. "They cannot cut the young ones."

"They can cut whoever costs the most," Axiang said. "The night shift gets the bonus. The night shift gets the overtime. The old ones have the day shift and the bad wrists."

"Then they will keep the old ones?"

"They will keep the ones who can still tie." Axiang held up her bandaged wrists. "Don't get old in here. Nobody ever asks what happens to us after."

Chunxia took the pencil from behind her ear. "If they cut the night shift, I lose four hundred a month. That is another month on the bride price."

"Everything is another month on the bride price," Qiaoyun said.

Chunxia's pencil stopped. "Do not."

"I did not mean it."

"You did."

"How many?" Axiang asked.

He Mei did not speak.

"Tell us how many."

"I do not know how many. I know what is missing."

"What is missing?"

"The oil. The belts. The pump schedule. The night-shift supervisor has not ordered parts in three weeks. The office bin has the same delivery forms from before the American order. The work orders for the third bank have been taken off the board." He Mei put the mop against the wall. "The machines are being run on what is left."

Qiaoyun looked toward the mill gate. "So they will cut the night shift."

"Maybe."

"Maybe is not an answer."

"It is the answer I have."

Chunxia folded her arms. "Four hundred is four hundred," she said. "It is not a story."

"And if they cut the day shift?" Qiaoyun said.

"Then I lose everything."

Axiang turned to He Mei. "What do we do?"

He Mei picked up the mop. "You do not stand in a line and wait to be counted."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the supervisor counts looms. He does not count faces. Not if the faces keep moving."

※

The next morning the girls began to rotate.

It started with Axiang and Qiaoyun. They came in at seven-thirty and signed each other's names on the attendance sheet. At noon they swapped banks. By the next day Chunxia had joined, and Meihua, and two girls from the winding

room. The night shift did the same. The supervisor's roster said one name beside one bank, but the woman standing there was someone else.

On the third day the supervisor came down the aisle with his clipboard against his chest. He had combed his hair wet that morning and it had dried in a ridge across the top. He stopped at the first bank and confronted the woman threading a broken end. "You are Wang Lili."

The woman shook her head. "I am Chen Yan."

The supervisor checked his clipboard. "Chen Yan is on the night shift."

"Not today."

He moved to the next bank. "You are Zhang Xiuying."

"I am Wang Lili."

"Wang Lili is on the first bank."

"Not today."

He stood in the middle of the aisle with the clipboard in both hands. The looms clattered around him. Water sprayed the rails. The women kept their heads down and their hands in the water. One of them laughed into her shoulder. The supervisor's ears went red. He flipped the top sheet of the clipboard and read the next name. "Liu Mei."

"Night shift," the woman at the next loom said.

"You are not on the night shift."

"Not today."

The supervisor raised his eyes to the ceiling. The looms clattered. A red light blinked at the end of the bank. The woman nearest it went to the loom without waiting to be told. The supervisor wrote something on the sheet and crossed it out. Then he wrote it again.

"Show me your card," he said.

Axiang reached into her apron and gave him an identity card. The photograph on it was Qiaoyun's. The supervisor compared the photograph with Axiang's face. "This is not you."

"I lost weight," Axiang said.

The supervisor held the card closer. The woman at the next loom put her hand over her mouth. The supervisor held the card against her face. He held it out. "Bring your own card tomorrow."

Axiang took it. Her jaw moved once. Then she turned back to her loom.

"Nobody moves banks without my permission," the supervisor said.

The women said nothing. The looms kept running. At the end of the aisle Cao Caifeng stood with her arms folded. She had come in without anyone hearing the heels over the noise. The jasmine reached the first bank before she did.

The supervisor turned and saw her. "They are switching places."

"I can see that."

"They think I cannot tell them apart."

"Can you?"

He checked the clipboard. The names were there in blue ink. The faces in front of him were gray with fatigue and mist. "They are all wearing the same caps."

Cao Caifeng walked to the first bank. She ignored the clipboard. She studied the cloth coming off the loom, then the woman threading the next broken end. "This one ties a double knot," she said. "Wang Lili ties a single."

The supervisor wrote something.

"Count the looms," Cao Caifeng said. "Not the names."

She walked back down the aisle. The heels struck the concrete away and away. The jasmine stayed in the air after she had gone. The supervisor stood with his clipboard open. His eyes moved from the first bank to the second, then to the sheet. The woman at the first loom put her hand into the water and tied a knot without looking up.

"Wang Lili," the supervisor said again.

"Not today," the woman said.

He closed the clipboard. The women did not look at each other. They kept their hands in the water. At the end of the shift they signed the sheet with their own names again. The supervisor stood by the door and checked each face against the paper. He let them go one by one. Nobody said anything.

※

That night He Mei was coming down the corridor with the mop when Xiaoman came up the stairs with a bundle of waste cloth. Xiaoman's cap was

pushed back and there was a new red mark on her wrist from the water-jet rail. She stopped on the landing.

"Did you tell them?" Xiaoman asked.

"Tell who?"

"The girls. About the night shift."

"Axiang asked."

"They are switching names."

"I know."

"The supervisor is writing everyone down."

"He was always writing everyone down."

Xiaoman looked down the corridor. "What if he finds out who started it?"

He Mei's hands tightened on the mop handle. "He will find a name. It will not be yours."

Xiaoman's mouth opened. Then she went on up the stairs.

At the gate Old Zhou had his radio turned low. The night shift was coming through in a slow line. The women carried their bags and their rice boxes and their earplugs in paper envelopes. None of them spoke. Old Zhou checked each face as it passed, then the clipboard in the gatehouse. The clipboard had a list on it. The list had names and numbers. The numbers were the loom banks.

"They are counting them," Old Zhou said.

He Mei stopped beside the gatehouse. "They are counting the looms."

"Same thing."

She studied the line of women going in. Axiang was at the end, her wrists wrapped, her cap pulled down. Qiaoyun was ahead of her. Chunxia was not on the list. She had taken the day shift again.

At the gatehouse Old Zhou turned the radio up a little. The book-field had begun, one voice telling a long story over a plucked string. The sound followed the last woman through the gate and stopped when the door closed. He Mei stood in the dark and listened to the drain.

In the office bin the maintenance schedule was folded into a square and held with a rubber band. The same three columns. The oil column was blank all the way down. At the bottom, where the blue note had been crossed out, someone

had written a new line. He Mei could not read the characters, but she knew the shape of the number: the date of the fifteenth.

She put the schedule in the burner. The flame took it slowly this time. The paper was damp from the office air. It smoked before it caught, and the smoke went up to the bulb and spread in a gray sheet under the ceiling. The blue ink turned brown. The columns of checks and blank spaces curled inward. He Mei held the poker and turned the page until the date of the fifteenth was face up. The flame ate the number last.

Through the boiler-room window she could see the bright floor. The looms were running. The women moved between the banks in their gray caps. On the office stairs the shipping supervisor stood with his phone against his ear. His free hand was flat on the rail. His eyes were on the floor, not the women.

He Mei put the last piece of the schedule into the fire. The number of the fifteenth curled and went black. Outside the window the last of the day shift came out through the gate. Their coats were dark against the yellow light. One of them stopped and looked back at the mill, then went on. He Mei did not need to read the rest.

The boiler door clicked shut. The flame in the grate made a small red line under the ash. She picked up the mop and went back to the corridor. The water in the bucket had gone cold. The night shift was still running. The sound came through the floor and into her knees. The corridor was empty. The light hummed overhead. She pushed the mop through the door and down the hall. The bleach smell rose from the bucket. The water made a dark trail behind her. At the end of the hall the office door was closed. She did not stop.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What did you write in there?”

At three in the morning the archive room smelled of hot paper.

He Mei stood in the doorway with the yellow bucket in one hand and a clean rag over her shoulder. The room was at the back of the second floor, behind the office where the shipping supervisor kept his phone and his pencils. She had cleaned it twice a week for six years. It held four metal cabinets, two shelves of ledgers, a table with a green lamp, and a shredder the size of a small refrigerator. The shredder sat in the corner on a square of cardboard. Its bin was full.

The office clerk was standing beside it. She was a young woman from town with a good coat and a pair of boots that came up to her knees. She had a stack of papers against her hip and a plastic bag in her other hand.

“You took your time,” the clerk said.

“The stairs are wet.”

“Empty the bin. Then take the bag down to the boiler. Do not put it in the general rubbish.”

He Mei set the bucket down. The clerk fed the last of the papers into the shredder. The machine ground them into strips and dropped them into the bin with a sound like rain on a tin roof. Then she switched it off.

“The third box goes next,” she said. “The samples and the old order books. The boss wants the archive empty before the bank man comes back.”

“The sample cards?”

“All of it.” The clerk pulled on her gloves. “The old ones are no use. Nobody weaves silk here.”

The words stayed in the room after the door clicked shut. The shredder was still warm. The bin smelled of hot paper. He Mei studied the box of sample cards. The top card had a white swatch stitched under plastic. The swatch was gray with age, but the weave was still visible, a tiny grid of threads. She put the lid on the box.

The room was quiet. The green lamp made a pool of light on the table. On the table there were three cardboard boxes with their lids off. One box held old order books. One held sample cards in clear plastic sleeves. The third was empty. The ledgers on the shelves had red seals on the spines and dates going back to the eighties. Some of them had never been opened. The dust on the top edges was thick enough to write in. The shredder had been pushed out from the wall, and the cardboard under it was dark with oil.

He Mei lifted the shredder bin out. The strips were still warm. They shifted against her arms like dry hay. She carried the bin to the table and set it down. A few strips had fallen on the floor. She knelt and picked them up.

The shredder had cut the paper into ribbons a finger wide. Most of them were white or gray. Some had columns of numbers. Some had red stamps at the corner. One strip had a line of typed characters she could not read. Another had a date: 2012. She turned it over. The other side was blank.

She put the strips in the bag and went back to the bin. Near the bottom, caught on the metal teeth of the shredder, was a piece of paper that had not gone through. It was glossy and colored, not office paper. She pulled it out.

It was a travel flyer. The picture showed a blue bay with white boats and a bridge. In the corner was a red sun and a line of characters. At the bottom were a telephone number and a price. The paper had been folded twice and then unfolded. A date had been written on the back in pencil: the sixteenth of February. Under it, in the same pencil, was the word Hanoi.

He Mei turned the flyer over. The picture was bright enough to look new. The blue water had a shine on it, as if the paper had been printed that week. She folded it small and put it in her apron pocket.

Then she saw the thread.

It was caught in the same metal teeth, a fine white strand, almost invisible against the gray of the machine. She took it between her thumb and forefinger. It was smooth. It had a shine that polyester did not have. She drew it out slowly. It was longer than her hand. When she held it up to the green lamp, the light ran along it in a thin white line.

Her fingers knew it. She had not touched it in years. The old sample room had been full of it: cards of silk in every weight, the threads tied through holes at

the top, the little white labels in the corner. The mill had stopped weaving real silk before the water-jet looms came. The sample cards had stayed in the archive until the archive was cleaned out.

He Mei looked into the bin. The strips were all paper. The thread had come from somewhere else, or it had been caught in the machine from another room, or it had been in the box with the sample cards. She did not know. She wound it around her finger once and put it in her apron pocket with the flyer.

She fed the loose strips into the shredder and ran them through again. The machine coughed them out in finer strips. The smell of hot paper rose. She emptied the bag into the boiler sack and tied the top.

The door opened.

He Mei did not hear the heels until they were already in the room. The jasmine came after. Cao Caifeng stood in the doorway with her coat still on and her gloves in one hand. The green lamp lit the side of her face. Her gaze went from the shredder to the bag to He Mei.

"What did you write in there?" she said.

He Mei turned to the cleaning log on the table. It was a sheet of paper with columns for the room, the time, and the cleaner's name. She had signed it before she started. The pen was still lying beside it.

"My name," she said. "The time."

Cao Caifeng came to the table. She picked up the log and turned it toward the lamp. Her nails were pale. The scar on her thumb showed white against the paper. She read the line.

"The archive room," she said. "Three o'clock."

"Yes."

"You did not write what you found."

"I found paper."

Cao Caifeng put the log down. She checked the shredder bin. The bin was empty now except for a few strips caught at the bottom. She reached in and took one out. It was a strip with a red stamp. She held it up to the light. Her face did not change.

"The boxes are old samples," she said. "The office is cleaning out the archive. Nothing else."

He Mei said nothing.

"Take the bag to the boiler," Cao Caifeng said. "Then clean the table. Do not leave the strips on the floor."

She put the strip back in the bin and went out. The heels struck the corridor and faded. The jasmine stayed in the room for a moment, then the smell of hot paper came back.

He Mei stood at the table with the bag against her leg. She took the flyer from her apron and opened it. The blue bay shone under the lamp. On the back, under the date, someone had written a name in pencil. She could not read the name. She folded the flyer again and put it back in her pocket.

Then she took out the thread.

※

The boiler room was dark except for the red eye of the burner. He Mei set the bag down and took the thread from her pocket. She found a match in the box on the shelf and struck it.

She held the end of the thread over the flame.

The thread shrank back. It did not melt into a bead. It burned slowly, with a small blue edge, and the smell that came up was the smell of hair burning. The ash fell away gray and soft. She pressed it between her fingers and it broke.

Silk.

She had seen the sample room once, years before, when the archive was still open and the cards were kept in drawers. The room had been cold and dry. The cards had been laid flat in long gray boxes, each swatch stitched to the cardboard with a white thread. You could put your face close and smell the old size and the dust. The silk had a luster that came from the fiber itself, not from a finish. When you rubbed it between your fingers, it made a small sound, almost too soft to hear.

She sat on the stool and turned the rest of the thread in her palm. It was white and fine. The boiler ticked. The bag of shredder strips stood beside her, the top folded over. In the morning the bag would go into the furnace with the rest of the rubbish. The flyer would stay in her pocket. She put the thread against the

black sleeve of her coat, then against the gray of the concrete floor. In both places it disappeared. Only against her skin did it show.

She held the flyer under the lamp. The blue bay was printed so brightly that it looked wet. A white bridge crossed the water. Tiny figures stood on the deck of a boat. At the top of the paper there was a row of characters and, under it, a word in fat red letters she did not know. She turned the flyer over. The pencil date was the sixteenth of February. The word Hanoi was under it. The name below the date was written in a hand that was not the clerk's.

She tied the thread around her finger once. Then she untied it and put it inside the lining of her coat, next to the folded flyer. The lining was split at the seam. She pushed both into the gap and pressed the cloth flat.

The door opened. Old Zhou stood in the doorway with his kettle.

"The boiler is low," he said.

He Mei stood up. "It is always low at four."

He came in and set the kettle on the shelf. His eyes went from the bag to her face. "The office is burning paper."

"The office is always burning paper."

"Not at three in the morning."

He Mei took the poker and opened the grate. The fire was a dull red under the ash. She pushed the bag of strips into the furnace. The paper caught all at once. The flame went up the chimney with a sound like a sigh. The strips curled and turned black. The red stamps went last.

Old Zhou stood beside the grate. His face was red in the light. "What did you write in there?" he asked.

He Mei closed the grate. "My name."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

Old Zhou nodded toward the furnace. "The bank man is coming again Friday," he said. "If he finds the archive empty, he will ask where the papers went."

"Then he will ask the shredder."

Old Zhou laughed without opening his mouth. He picked up his kettle and went out. The door clicked shut. He Mei stood in front of the furnace until the flames went down. Then she went back to the corridor with the empty bucket.

※

The flyer stayed inside her coat for three days.

During the day she carried the coat to the boiler room and hung it on the nail. When she mopped the office corridor, she could feel the weight of it behind her. The flyer was light, but the thread made a small point against the lining. She did not look at it.

She did not take it out in the dorm or the boiler room. She did not show it to Axiang or Old Zhou. At night, when she hung the coat on the nail behind the door, she could feel the paper against the lining. The thread was there too, thin as a hair, wound around the paper. She slept with her back to the wall and the coat on the nail. On the second night the shredder ran in her sleep. She woke with the sound of it in her ears and the green lamp still burning behind her eyes. The room was dark. The coat was on the nail. The thread was in the lining.

On the fourth day the laoban-niang came to the boiler room again.

She had a folder under her arm and a pair of gloves in her hand. She set the folder on the shelf. Her eyes stayed on He Mei.

"The archive room," she said. "You cleaned it."

"Yes."

"The shredder bag went into the furnace."

"Yes."

"Did you see anything in the bag?"

He Mei turned to the boiler. The fire was low. The pipes ticked.

"Paper," she said.

Cao Caifeng studied her for a long moment. The jasmine came off her coat in a thin line. The boiler ticked. He Mei kept her hands in her apron pockets. The flyer and the thread were in the coat behind the door, not on her. She had left the coat on the nail. She had not thought about it until now.

Then Cao Caifeng took the folder from the shelf.

"The office is moving some of the old files to the storage room downstairs," she said. "Do not clean in there until I tell you."

She went out. The heels struck the concrete away and away.

He Mei stood in the boiler room with her hands in her apron pockets. The thread was in the lining of her coat, and the flyer was with it. The fire made a small blue ring under the grate. She did not move until the ticking of the boiler filled the room again.

Then she took the poker and opened the grate. There was nothing to burn. The ash under the grate was gray and fine. She stood with the poker in her hand and listened to the boiler. The bag of strips had gone up the chimney, and the office was empty, and the laoban-niang had told her not to clean the storage room.

He Mei closed the grate and put the poker back on the shelf. In the corridor the night shift was running. The sound came through the wall and into the floor. She picked up the bucket and went to find the next room.

At the end of the corridor the office door was closed. A line of light showed under it. She heard the clerk's chair scrape. Then the shredder started again. The sound came down through the pipes, thin and steady, like rain on a tin roof. He Mei stood with the bucket against her leg. She could not feel the thread through the cloth. She knew its weight against the lining. She went to the stairs. The bucket knocked against her knee on every step. The stairs smelled of wet concrete and jasmine. She did not look back. The office light stayed behind her. The jasmine faded. The night shift went on. The shredder did not stop again above her. The stairs were cold. The bucket rang once on the rail. The boiler ticked behind her again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Did someone die here?"

The power went out at ten past nine.

Xiaoman was on her bunk with her knees drawn up and her phone in her hand. The screen had been at twelve percent. When the light went out, the whole room disappeared: the bunks, the wires, the blankets, the wet towel hanging from the end of Axiang's bed. For a moment there was only the dark and the sound of eight women breathing.

Then someone laughed. It was Qiaoyun.

"Don't move," she said. "I have a torch."

A phone light came on. Then another. The beams cut across the room and made the blankets into walls. Axiang sat up in the lower bunk with her bandaged wrists in her lap. Meihua was on the floor with her basin. Chunxia had her notebook open on her knees and a pencil in her mouth. Yanzi was at the end of the room with her face to the wall.

"Did the office pay the electricity?" Chunxia asked.

"The office never pays," Axiang said. "The office says the bill is being checked."

"The bill is always being checked."

"Then the bill is never paid."

The phone lights moved. The room was colder without the bulb. Xiaoman could see her own breath when she held the phone close to her mouth. The cold came up through the floor and into the mattress. Outside the window the mill was still running. The looms made their low continuous sound behind the wall, and the water in the pipes knocked. Somewhere on the floor above a chair scraped. The dorm auntie's radio played in her room at the end of the corridor, a thin thread of music under the noise.

"We should tell stories," Qiaoyun said.

"No," Axiang said.

"Something to pass the time."

"Tell the one about the third bank," Meihua said.

Axiang made a sound in the dark. "Not that one."

"Which one?" Xiaoman asked.

Qiaoyun pulled her blanket up over her shoulders. The phone light under her chin made her face hollow. "A girl died here," she said. "On the third bank. Before you came."

Xiaoman stared up at the dark ceiling. The wires with the blankets hung above her like something caught in a net. "Did someone die here?" she said.

The room went quiet. The mill kept running.

"Everybody dies somewhere," Axiang said.

"Tell me."

"It is a story."

"Then tell me the story."

Qiaoyun leaned forward. The phone light moved across her face. "My cousin knew a girl who worked the third bank. She said the girl's hair got caught in the roller. It pulled her in. They found her in the morning. The machine was still running."

"That is not what happened," Axiang said.

"You don't know what happened. You were not here."

"I was here. I was on the second bank that night. I heard the ambulance. I did not see the floor. The machines were still running."

"Then you tell it."

Axiang turned her bandaged wrists over in the phone light. The bandage looked white. "There was a girl," she said. "She was not on the third bank. She worked the second. She was from Guizhou. She went to the canal after her boyfriend left her. They found her at the lock. The water was low. It was February."

"That is not the story," Qiaoyun said.

"That is my story."

"You always make it sad."

"It was sad."

Meihua pushed her basin away with her foot. "My cousin said she was pregnant," she said. "She took something from the clinic. She bled in the dorm. They carried her out before the shift."

"No," Chunxia said. "She was the boss's daughter. She had everything. She jumped from the second floor."

"The second floor is not high enough," Qiaoyun said.

"She fell on the concrete."

"Into what?"

"There was a heap of cloth."

"A heap of cloth does not kill you."

"It does if you land on your head."

"You don't know."

"No one knows," Axiang said. "That is the point."

Xiaoman studied the faces around her. Each phone light showed a piece of a face: Qiaoyun's chin, Meihua's cheek, Chunxia's pencil, Axiang's bandage. Yanzi's light was off. She lay at the end of the room with her back to all of them.

"What year?" Xiaoman asked.

"2012," Qiaoyun said.

"2011," Axiang said.

"2014," Meihua said.

"You are all wrong," Chunxia said. "It was before I came. 2010."

The room was quiet. The loom noise came through the wall. Somewhere in the corridor a door opened and closed.

"Was she from Guizhou?" Xiaoman asked.

"Maybe," Qiaoyun said.

"Everyone is from Guizhou."

"That is not true."

"Most of us are."

"What was her name?" Xiaoman asked.

No one answered.

"Her name," Xiaoman said again.

"I heard it was Lan," Qiaoyun said.

"Not Lan," Axiang said.

"Then what?"

"I don't remember."

"You don't forget a name."

"She was not my friend."

At the end of the room Yanzi spoke. Her voice was small in the dark. "She had a name."

Everyone turned. Yanzi's phone was off. Her blanket was pulled up to her chin.

"Who?" Qiaoyun asked.

"The girl."

"What was it?"

Yanzi was quiet for a long time. Then she said, "I don't remember."

"You brought it up."

"I thought I remembered."

The phone lights began to dim. Xiaoman's own was at eight percent. She turned it off and lay in the dark. The story was still in the room. She could feel it there, broken into pieces that did not fit: the third bank, the second bank, the canal, the clinic, the heap of cloth, the boss's daughter, the girl from Guizhou. The same girl had been pulled into a machine and jumped from a window and drowned in the canal. The same girl was pregnant and thin and rich and poor. The story could hold all of it because it had no shape.

"My mother says the third bank is haunted," Chunxia said. "She says the machine starts by itself."

"Your mother has never been here."

"She heard it from my aunt."

"Then your aunt has never been here either."

"She was here for three years."

"That does not make her right."

"There is a ghost," Meihua said. "In the bathroom. The third stall. If you flush it after midnight, the water comes up red."

"The water comes up red because the pipes are old," Axiang said.

"Then why does it only happen at midnight?"

"Because at midnight everyone flushes."

"You have an answer for everything."

"There is no ghost," Axiang said.

"The third bank stops by itself. At night. The machine starts and stops."

"A belt."

"Maybe."

"Then it is a belt."

"Maybe the belt is the ghost."

Axiang laughed. It was short and tired. "Go to sleep."

The phone lights went out one by one. The room became a place of breathing and blankets. Xiaoman lay on her back with her eyes open. She could not see the ceiling. She could not see the wires. She could hear the mill.

She slept badly. At some point in the night she woke because the noise had stopped. Not all of it. The mill was still running, but one loom in the distance had gone quiet. The silence had a shape, a small hole in the wall of sound. She lay still and listened to it until it closed. In the dark the third bank was a row of machines she had never seen. She imagined the girl there anyway: a shape in a gray cap, a hand in the water, a thread pulled tight. The image did not last. It broke into the other versions—the canal, the clinic, the heap of cloth—and none of them fit together.

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In the morning the power was back.

The bulb above the room was on. The room looked smaller and dirtier in the yellow light. The wet towel was still hanging from Axiang's bed. The floor was marked with footprints. On the wall above Yanzi's bunk there was a crack Xiaoman had not seen before.

The girls went to the canteen for breakfast. The line was short. The rice porridge had burned at the bottom of the pot. The woman with the ladle scraped it into the bowls and said nothing.

"You should not tell that story," Xiaoman said to Qiaoyun.

Qiaoyun looked up. "What story?"

"The one about the girl."

"It is only a story."

"Whose story?"

"The girls' story."

"Which girls?"

Qiaoyun shrugged. "The ones who were here."

Xiaoman put her spoon down. "Who was she?"

"I don't know. I did not see her."

"Then why tell it?"

Qiaoyun's eyes fell to her bowl. "Because it could be any of us."

At the next table two girls from the winding room were talking. Their voices carried. One of them said a girl died on the third bank. The other one said no, it was the second. The first one said she had been there, she had seen the machine. The second one said she had not seen it because she was not here yet. The first one said she had heard it from her cousin.

Xiaoman carried her bowl to the washing window. Through the window she could see the mill wall and the boiler-room chimney. A thin line of smoke went up into the gray sky. At the next table the two girls from the winding room were still arguing. One of them said the dead girl had been a threader. The other said she had been a cleaner. The first one said a cleaner could not get caught in a loom. The second one said a cleaner could get caught in anything.

After breakfast Xiaoman passed the gatehouse. Old Zhou sat inside with his radio on. She stopped at the window.

"Old Zhou."

He looked up. "You are late for the line."

"Did a girl die here?"

He turned the radio down. The static thinned. "Who told you that?"

"The girls."

"The girls tell stories."

"Did she?"

Old Zhou turned toward the gate. A truck was backing into the loading bay. The driver leaned on the horn twice. "I have been at this gate for fifteen years," he said. "I have seen girls come and go. I have seen girls go home. I have seen girls not go home."

"Did one die?"

He picked up his kettle. "Ask the office," he said. "The office keeps the papers."

Xiaoman stood at the window for a moment. Old Zhou turned the radio up again. The book-field voice filled the gatehouse.

In the yard she met a new girl. The girl was small and thin and had a woven bag over her shoulder. She tilted her head toward the looms behind the wall.

"Which dorm are you in?" Xiaoman asked.

"Three."

"Who is your bunkmate?"

"A girl called Yanzi."

Xiaoman took in the wet shoes and the plastic clip in her hair.

"Did you come last night?"

"Yes."

"Then you do not know anything yet."

"That is what my mother said."

Xiaoman stood by the door for a moment. The new girl waited. The mill noise came through the wall and made the bowl tremble in Xiaoman's hand.

"Did someone die here?" the new girl asked.

Xiaoman opened her mouth. The story was there, ready: the third bank, a girl from Guizhou, a machine that was still running. She could feel how easy it would be to hand it over.

"A girl died," she said. "A long time ago. Before we came."

She stopped. The new girl waited.

"What was she called?" the new girl asked.

Xiaoman faced the wall. The mill was running. She could not remember the name. She was not sure she had ever known it.

"I don't know," she said. "Nobody knows."

The new girl nodded as if this were the end of the story. Xiaoman went back through the canteen door with her bowl and spoon. The new girl followed her. Behind them the looms kept running. The story kept running too, from table to table, from mouth to mouth, getting smaller and larger at the same time.

After lunch Xiaoman went into the women's bathroom. The room smelled of bleach and wet newspaper. The third stall was open. The water in the bowl

was rust-brown. The rim had a dark stain that had been there since before she came. She pressed the handle. The water rose and turned in the bowl, then went down. A little rust came up with it and settled again.

She stood there until the tank filled. The pipes knocked in the wall. On the other side of the partition someone laughed. Xiaoman put the lid down and went out.

In the corridor she met the dorm auntie carrying a bucket of water. The auntie said the power would be back by noon. She said the office had promised. She said the red in the pipes was rust and had been there for years.

On the afternoon shift a fitter came to the third bank with a new belt over his shoulder. Xiaoman was threading a broken end at the next machine. The fitter climbed behind the loom and worked with a wrench. When he came out his hands were black. He dropped the old belt on the floor. It was frayed at the edge and split along one side.

"That is why it stops," he said to the supervisor. "Not a ghost. A belt."

The supervisor wrote something on his clipboard. The fitter picked up the old belt and carried it away. Xiaoman kept her eyes on the machine. It was running. The cloth came out in a smooth gray sheet. She did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

At the end of the day Xiaoman was on her bunk with her boots off when Qiaoyun climbed the ladder and sat on the end of the mattress.

"What did you tell the new girl?" Qiaoyun asked.

"That a girl died here."

"What else?"

"Nothing else."

"Did you tell her the name?"

"There was no name."

"There is always a name."

Xiaoman lay back and addressed the ceiling. The wire with the blankets was still there. The blankets had been pulled down for the night. The room was gray in the light from the corridor. "What was her name?" she asked.

Qiaoyun was quiet. "I don't know," she said.

"Then why did you tell me Lan?"

"Because a story needs a name."

Xiaoman found the red knot inside Qiaoyun's collar. It was small and tight. Then her hand went to her own empty collar.

"I am not a storyteller," she said.

"You will be," Qiaoyun said. "Everybody here is."

Xiaoman lay back on the bunk. The blanket smelled of damp and the cheap soap from the washroom. Through the wall the girls in the next room were telling the story again. The girl had a name now: Lan. She had been a threader from Guizhou. She had died on the third bank in 2012, or maybe 2011. The machine had pulled her in by the sleeve. The new worker asked what Lan was like. The storyteller said she was quiet. She said Lan had a red thread around her wrist.

Xiaoman turned her face to the wall. The words came through the plaster in pieces. She pulled the blanket over her ear. The blanket was cold against her cheek. Xiaoman lay still and counted the looms. One. Two. Three. The fourth did not start. She waited. The blank in the sound was still there. The story was still there too. She closed her eyes. The loom noise went on. The mill kept its low sound. She said nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Aren’t you afraid of her?”

The laoban-niang came down the bright floor at four o’clock and stopped at the third bank.

He Mei was on her knees by the drain, scraping a clot of lint from the grate with a piece of wire. The heels came first. Then the jasmine. She did not look up. The shadow fell across her hands and the water went dark.

“The pump on the third bank,” Cao Caifeng said. “It is leaking again.”

He Mei pulled the lint out and dropped it in the bag. “I will mop it.”

“Not just mop it. Tell the fitter.”

“The fitter knows.”

“Then tell him again.”

He Mei stood up. The laoban-niang was close enough that the jasmine was not a smell in the air but a thing against the face. Her coat was gray. Her gloves were black. The scar on her thumb showed white at the edge of the glove.

“I will tell him,” He Mei said.

Cao Caifeng stood with her for a moment. The noise of the looms filled the space between them. Her gaze moved from He Mei’s hands to the drain and back to her face. The jasmine was so close that He Mei could smell the soap under it, the clean sharp smell of the office sink. Then she turned and walked back down the aisle. The heels struck the concrete away and away. The women at the looms kept their heads down. One of them looked up when the laoban-niang had passed, then looked away again.

At the end of the row Xiaoman was standing with a bundle of waste cloth against her hip. She had seen the whole thing. Her cap was pushed back and her mouth was slightly open.

At the alley that night, the cold had driven the other girls inside. The drain steamed under its skin of ice. The alley room was warm only within the circle of the bulb. He Mei sat on the step with her basket between her knees and a brick on the lid so the wind would not take the threads. Xiaoman stood with her

hands in her sleeves. Axiang and Qiaoyun stood behind her. Qiaoyun had her phone in her hand. Axiang held a cup of hot water between her bandaged wrists. The four of them made a small wall against the draft.

"Aren't you afraid of her?" Xiaoman said.

"Afraid of who?" He Mei said.

"The laoban-niang."

"Why would I be afraid of her?"

"She is the boss."

"She is not the boss. Her husband is the boss."

"She runs the floor."

"She runs the floor because he lets her."

"She fired a supervisor last year," Qiaoyun said. "For leaving the sample table."

"He was stealing cloth," Axiang said.

"That is what the office said."

"The office says a lot of things."

"She made him carry his box out through the gate in front of everyone. He was crying."

"He was not crying."

"He was." Qiaoyun checked her phone. "My cousin saw him."

Xiaoman stepped closer. The drain steam touched her knees. "She stopped at your drain today. She spoke to you like she knew you."

"She has known me for a long time."

"How long?"

He Mei picked up a thread end and rolled it between her fingers. It was red. She tied a knot in it and left it on the step.

"A long time," she said.

Qiaoyun turned to Axiang. Axiang studied the steam. Xiaoman did not move.

"What was she like?" Xiaoman asked. "Before?"

He Mei let the question stand. The red thread lay across the blue and gray in the basket. "She was the fastest in the row," she said. "She could tie a knot with her eyes closed."

“Was she pretty?” Qiaoyun asked.

“She had a mole by her mouth.”

“Was she kind?”

“She was quick.”

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The third shed in 1994 had a radio on the windowsill.

It played the morning news and then a program of old songs. The women worked with the radio under the looms, the music coming in pieces between the slap of the shuttle and the hiss of the water. He Mei could not remember the songs now. She remembered the radio. It had a black case and a silver dial, and someone had tied a red ribbon to the handle.

Caifeng worked the next loom. Her hair was cut at the jaw. Her arms were bare. She tied faster than anyone in the row. Her knots were small. When she snapped a length of cloth, the sound came back off the metal wall like a bell.

They had worked the same row for eleven years. They ate from the same tin boxes. They washed their hands in the same sink. When one of them was late, the other covered her looms. When one of them was sick, the other brought rice.

In the spring the mill cut the piece rate. The women met behind the dye house at the end of the shift. There were twelve of them. The dye house wall was warm. The smell of the vats came through the bricks, sour and sweet at the same time. The ground was wet with the wash water. They stood in a circle with their arms folded and their voices down. Beyond the wall the last of the day shift was going out through the gate. The gate bell rang each time someone passed.

“We should go to the manager,” one woman said. “We should tell him we cannot live on this.”

“He knows,” another said. “He is the one who cut it.”

“Then we should all stop.”

“For one day?”

“For as long as it takes.”

Caifeng stood at the edge of the circle. Her hands were still wet from the loom. She did not speak for a long time. Then she said, “We need a list. A list of names. If we go in together, he cannot pretend he did not hear us.”

They made the list on the back of a shipping form. The paper was thin and gray. It had a carbon smudge down one side from the office. Each woman signed it or made a mark. He Mei signed her name. The woman with the burned hand made a cross. The young one from the winding room wrote her name slowly, with her tongue between her teeth. Caifeng signed last. The women folded the paper into a square and put it in Caifeng's apron pocket because she was the one who could speak to the manager without crying. The woman nearest the wall took a stub of pencil from behind her ear and wrote the date at the top. The date was the fourteenth of March. He Mei remembered that because it was the day after her daughter's birthday.

"Do not let him keep it," one woman said. "If he keeps it, he will use it against us."

Caifeng tied the apron string. "He will not keep it."

The next morning Caifeng was called into the office.

He Mei was at her loom when the office girl came. The girl said the manager wanted Caifeng. Caifeng put down her scissors and went. The shed door closed behind her. The radio played a song about a river. The women worked. The water ran in the gutters.

Caifeng came back before lunch. She did not look at He Mei. She went to her loom and put her hand into the water and tied a knot. Her face was the same as always.

At the end of the week the list went up on the door of the shift office.

He Mei pushed through the crowd. She read it twice. The ink was blue. Her name was in the third line from the bottom. The paper was thin under the plastic. Caifeng's name was not on it.

A woman behind He Mei said, "Where is your name?"

Caifeng made no reply. The woman said it again. Caifeng kept her eyes on the paper. Her face was still. The manager came to the door of the office with his hands behind his back. He said the list was final. He said the mill could not carry everyone. He said the women whose names were on the paper should collect their pay at the end of the week.

The crowd moved. Caifeng stood behind He Mei. Her breath touched the back of He Mei's neck. Neither of them spoke.

That evening He Mei went back to the shed for her thermos. She had left it on the shelf above the sink. The shed was empty. The looms were still. The water in the gutters had stopped moving. The radio on the windowsill was off.

The office door at the end of the shed was open a hand's width. A light showed through. He Mei heard the manager's voice. Then she heard Caifeng's voice, lower, saying something she could not make out.

She walked to the door and looked through the gap.

Caifeng was standing at the manager's desk. She had the shipping form in her hand. The manager had a pen. The desk lamp made a yellow circle under his hand. A cup of tea sat at his elbow with a skin on the surface. The room smelled of ink and cigarettes and the sweet oil the manager put on his hair. Caifeng's finger was on the paper, moving down the list. The manager wrote a name. Then another. Caifeng's finger moved again. The pen scratched at the paper. He Mei could hear it over the ticking of the clock on the wall. The clock had a cracked face. The second hand jumped.

"This one," she said. Her voice was low and even. "And this one. She was the one who spoke first. The woman with the burned hand has been talking to the other shed. The young one only signed because the others did."

The manager's pen scratched. "You are sure?"

"I am sure."

"And your name?"

Caifeng did not speak. The manager laughed. The pen moved again.

"Your name is not on the form," he said. "You will take the new row when the shift changes. The women will listen to you."

Caifeng's finger stayed on the paper. Her face was turned toward the desk lamp. He Mei could see only the side of her jaw and the white line of the scar on her thumb. The manager wrote another name. Then he put the pen down and folded the shipping form in half.

"You did the right thing," he said. "The mill has to keep the good workers."

Caifeng did not move.

He Mei stood in the dark. The red ribbon on the radio handle moved in a draft from the door. The manager's pen scratched. Caifeng's hand was steady. Her face was turned away. The desk lamp made a long shadow of her arm across

the wall. The shipping form was the same one the women had signed. He Mei could see the fold.

Then Caifeng looked up.

She saw He Mei through the gap. Her finger stopped on the paper. Her mouth opened. She said one word.

"He Mei."

He Mei said nothing. She took her thermos from the shelf and went out through the shed door. Behind her the manager's pen began to move again. The office door stayed open. The light from the desk lamp lay on the wet floor of the shed and did not reach the looms. He Mei walked between the rows with the thermos under her arm. The red ribbon on the radio handle was the last thing she saw before the shed door closed.

She carried the thermos through the gate and did not go back to the shed. The guard at the gate checked her badge, then her face. He did not ask why she was leaving early. The other women were still inside. The radio on the windowsill was still off. The red ribbon had stopped moving. At the bus stop she stood with the thermos under her arm and listened to the looms. The sound came over the wall and through the ground and into her teeth. She had heard it every day for eleven years. That night it sounded like something behind her, following her home. At home she did not tell her husband what she had seen. She put the thermos on the shelf and washed her hands at the basin. The water was cold. She washed them until the skin was red.

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In the alley the drain hissed. The ice at the edges of the gutter had begun to melt. The bulb buzzed.

"Aren't you afraid of her?" Xiaoman asked again.

He Mei saw the red knot on the step. She had tied it and left it there. She did not pick it up.

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I know her name."

The three girls were quiet. Qiaoyun's phone lit up in her hand and went dark. Axiang held her cup without drinking. Xiaoman's eyes went from the alley door to He Mei.

"What is it?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei took the knot from the step and put it in her basket. The thread lay in the bottom with the others, red on gray.

"She has not said it in a long time," He Mei said. "Neither have I."

"Then how do you know she is afraid of you?" Axiang said.

He Mei turned to the door of the alley room. The paint had worn away around the handle. Inside, the thermos sat on the shelf with its cup on the lid.

"She knows what I saw," she said.

"What did you see?"

"A list. The same list we gave her. She had it in her hand. She was reading the names to the manager. He wrote them down. My name was one of them."

Qiaoyun's phone lit up. She did not look at it. Axiang set her empty cup on the step. Xiaoman stood with her mouth open.

"A list of what?" she asked.

He Mei opened the door. The warm air from the room came out into the alley. It smelled of tea and thread and the coal from the boiler.

"Names," she said. "That is all."

"What does she want from you?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei picked up the basket. "She wants me to be quiet."

"You are quiet."

"That is why she is afraid."

The wind moved the tarpaulin. The ice cracked at the edge of the drain. She went inside. The door closed. The bulb burned over the step. For a moment the girls did not move. Axiang poured the last of her water into the drain. Then they went back up the lane without speaking.

Inside, He Mei set the basket on the shelf. The thermos was cold. She drank the last of the tea and put the chipped cup back on its lid. The red knot lay in the basket with the blue and gray threads. It was the only red thing in the room. Outside, a bicycle passed, its wheels hissing on the wet stone. The bulb flickered. She put her hands under her arms. The looms came through the wall and into

the floor and into her knees. She closed her eyes. The room smelled of cold tea and wet thread. The boiler ticked. The drain was quiet. She did not light the lamp. The thermos was empty. Outside, the lane was quiet. The mill kept its time. The night went on again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Why are you telling me this?”

Xiaoman came to the alley on the night the first snow melted.

The lane was wet from end to end. Water ran off the roofs and down the walls and into the drain. The drain was running high. The steam came up through the cold air and made the bulb over He Mei’s door look farther away than it was.

Axiang had told her to go alone. “She will not talk if there are too many of us,” she said. “Ask her about the girl. Ask her why the office is asking questions.”

Xiaoman walked down the lane with her hands in her sleeves. The gate light was behind her. The mill was running. She could hear it through the wall, the same low pressure, the same water in the pipes. The story from the dorm was still in her head: the third bank, the girl with the red thread, the machine that ran all night. She had told herself it was a story. Now she was walking toward the old woman who had no name for it.

He Mei was sitting on the step with a cardboard box beside her. The box was open. Inside were a pair of work shoes, a folded apron, a tin of tea, and the thermos. The thermos lay on its side with the cup off.

“What are you doing?” Xiaoman asked.

“Cleaning.”

“Are you leaving?”

He Mei fitted the lid on the box. “They are closing the third bank on the fifteenth. The girls on the night shift will be sent home. The day shift will be cut to half. The office has not said which half.”

“Then you are leaving?”

“I am not on the shift list.”

Xiaoman stood at the edge of the step. The drain ran between them. The water was brown with the mud from the roofs. It carried a few dead leaves and a piece of red paper that turned over and over in the current.

"The supervisor asked about the names," Xiaoman said. "He asked who switched the rosters. He asked who started it."

He Mei put the apron in the box.

"Did you tell him?" Xiaoman asked.

"I did not tell him anything."

"He thinks it was the night shift."

"Then he will look at the night shift."

"He is looking at all of us."

He Mei folded the apron again. The cloth was gray at the hem. The red letters on the thermos had gone pale. The cup was on the step beside her, empty.

"Go home," she said.

Xiaoman turned. "What?"

"Go home before the fifteenth. Take the bus to Guizhou. Do not wait for the New Year."

"I do not have the fare."

"Then borrow it."

"From who?"

He Mei tapped the lid. "From someone who wants you to come back."

"Why are you telling me this?"

He Mei let the question stand. She put the thermos in the box and closed the lid. The box had a shipping label on the side, from a pair of shoes she had bought three winters before. The label was still there. She had never peeled it off.

"Why are you telling me this?" Xiaoman said again.

"Because you are nineteen."

"So is Yanzi."

"Yanzi has her own road."

"What road?"

He Mei turned toward the drain. The water went under the fence and into the canal. The red paper caught on the grate and stayed there.

"You do not belong here," He Mei said.

"Nobody belongs here."

"Some of us have nowhere else."

Xiaoman stepped closer. The step was wet. The box was between them. “You have nowhere else?”

He Mei’s hands stopped on the lid of the box. Her fingers were dry and cracked. The nail on the thumb was black at the edge. The rain had got into the cardboard; one corner had gone soft and dark.

“My mother sent me here to make money,” Xiaoman said. “She did not ask if I belonged.”

“Then your mother should have come herself.”

“She is sick.”

He Mei held her eyes. The rain dripped from the edge of the roof and fell between them. “Then go home and see her.”

“I need the money.”

“You need your mother more.”

“You do not know my mother.”

“No,” He Mei said. “I know mine.”

“What happened to her?”

“She died when I was twenty-nine.”

Xiaoman did not know what to say. The drain ran. The box was between them. He Mei’s hands were still on the lid.

“I had a place once,” He Mei said.

“What happened to it?”

“A room with a window. A bed with a board under the mattress. A tree outside the window that lost its leaves in November and got them back in April.” He Mei touched the box. “I had a pot with a lid. I had a cup with a blue rim.”

“And then?”

He Mei made no reply.

“What happened to her?” Xiaoman said.

The words were out before she could stop them. The alley went quiet. The drain ran. The bulb buzzed. He Mei’s hands lay on the box, one on each side of the lid, and she did not move.

“Who?” she said.

“The girl who died here,” Xiaoman said. “The one the girls talk about. The one with the red thread around her wrist. Was she your daughter?”

He Mei faced her. The yellow light from the bulb made her face flat and old. She did not blink. The drain water ran over the red paper and carried it under the fence.

"Who told you that?" He Mei said.

"Nobody told me."

"Then why ask?"

"Because you know everything," Xiaoman said. "You know the fish. You know the bank. You know the looms. You know what the office throws away. But when I asked you about your daughter, your hands stopped. They stopped in the bathroom. They stopped when Yanzi cut her hand. They have stopped now."

He Mei's hands came off the box. She put them in her lap. For a moment she looked small. The black coat made her shoulders narrow. The bulb above the door made a circle on the wet step.

"I do not know what you are talking about," she said.

Xiaoman's face went hot. "You do."

"I do not."

"You are lying."

He Mei stood up. The box was between them. She picked it up and held it against her stomach.

"Go home," she said. "Go home before the fifteenth. If you stay, you will be here when the office counts the names. You will be here when the night shift goes. You will be here when the girls start looking for someone to blame."

"You are telling me to leave because you are afraid."

"I am telling you to leave because I am old."

"That is not the same thing."

He Mei turned toward the door. Her hand was on the handle. The box tilted against her hip.

"Was it your daughter?" Xiaoman said.

He Mei stopped.

The alley was silent except for the drain. The water ran over the step and under the door. The bulb cast He Mei's shadow across the lane. The shadow reached the wall and stopped. Xiaoman could see the cardboard box trembling against He Mei's hip. The rain had soaked the bottom of the box. A drop of

water hung from the corner and fell. He Mei's mouth opened. Then it closed. The bulb buzzed. The drain ran over the red paper and under the fence.

"I do not know," He Mei said.

It was not an answer to the question. It was not an answer to anything. The words came out flat and low and did not fit the question.

"You do not know if it was your daughter?" she said.

He Mei opened the door. The room behind was dark. The thermos was in the box. The shelf was empty.

"Go back to the dorm," she said. "Do not come to the alley again."

The door closed. The bulb kept burning. Xiaoman stood on the wet step with her hands in her sleeves. The drain ran. The red paper had gone under the fence.

※

Axiang was waiting at the mouth of the lane.

She had her coat pulled up around her chin and her hands inside her sleeves. Qiaoyun was with her. The gate light made a yellow square on the road. The snow had gone to water. The water ran in the gutter.

"Well?" Axiang said.

Xiaoman walked past her.

"Xiaoman."

She stopped. The road was dark ahead. The mill wall was dark. The windows of the dormitory were lit in squares.

"She would not answer," Xiaoman said.

"Answer what?"

"I asked her if the girl who died here was her daughter."

Axiang was quiet. Qiaoyun's eyes went to the gate. The guard's radio was playing the book-field, the voice going on and on. Qiaoyun's phone lit up in her hand. She let it ring.

"What did she say?" Axiang asked.

"She said she did not know."

"That is not an answer."

"I know."

Qiaoyun put her phone in her pocket. "Maybe she really does not know. Maybe the girl was not her daughter. Maybe the story is just a story."

Xiaoman faced the alley. The door was closed. The bulb was still on. "She knew about the fish," she said. "She knew about the bank. She knew about the loom bank before the supervisor did. She knew about the ID card. She knew about the girl in the bathroom before the fitter found the belt."

"That does not mean she knows everything."

"It means she knows enough."

Axiang dried her hands on her coat. "Enough for what?"

"Enough to know her own daughter."

They stood in the road. The drain ran under the grate. A car went past on the main road with its headlights on, and the light swept across the puddles, and then it was dark again. Through the gatehouse window the guard's radio played the book-field. The voice went on in the old language, telling a story about a river and a bridge. The guard laughed at something. The sound came out through the glass and was gone.

"She knows everything," Xiaoman said. "She knows what is in the trash. She knows what the fish will do. She knows what the bank will do. But she does not know what happened to her own daughter?"

Axiang turned toward the lane. The bulb was still burning at the end of the alley. It was the only light on that side of the wall.

"Maybe that is why she knows everything else," Axiang said.

"What do you mean?"

"Because she looks at everything except that."

Xiaoman turned the words over. The drain ran. The mill kept running. The red knot was inside Axiang's collar. The one inside Qiaoyun's collar was hidden under her coat. Xiaoman had no knot. She had never had a knot.

"She knows everything," Xiaoman said. "Except one thing."

"What happened to her daughter?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Nobody knows," Axiang said.

"She does," Xiaoman said.

Axiang pulled her coat tighter.

"Go to bed," Axiang said. "Tomorrow the office counts the names."

They went back through the gate. The night shift was coming out. The women passed in a slow line with their bags and their rice boxes. Some met Xiaoman's eyes. Some kept their faces down. The guard's radio followed them all the way to the dorm door.

※

At the dorm, Xiaoman sat on her bunk with her boots on.

The room was cold. The bulb above the door was on. Yanzi was asleep with her face to the wall. Chunxia was at the table with her notebook. Qiaoyun was on the lower bunk with her phone against her ear. Axiang was soaking her feet in the basin. On the wall above the door the dorm rules were still taped under plastic. Someone had drawn a second face beside the first one, a small mouth turned down.

Xiaoman touched the empty collar of her own shirt.

"What happened?" Chunxia asked, without looking up from her notebook.

"She told me to go home."

"Maybe you should."

"I am not going home."

Chunxia's pencil moved. "Then you will be here on the fifteenth."

"I know."

"I will be here too," Chunxia said. "The list goes up at noon. The office will read the names. If my name is not on it, I will take the night shift. If it is on it, I will go to the office and ask for my money."

"And if they will not give it to you?"

Chunxia turned her notebook around. On the page she had written the date of the fifteenth and a number. The number was smaller than eighty-eight thousand. It was smaller than seventy-five thousand three hundred. She had crossed it out and written it again.

"Then I will ask again," she said.

Qiaoyun took the phone from her ear. "What did she say about the girl?"

Xiaoman stared up at the ceiling. The wire with the blankets was there. Above it the paint had begun to peel in a long strip.

"She said she did not know."

Qiaoyun was quiet. Axiang lifted her feet out of the basin and dried them on the edge of her apron.

"She is not a witch," Xiaoman said.

"No," Axiang said. "She is a woman."

Xiaoman thought of the box with the shipping label. The cup with the blue rim. The room behind the door. The old woman had carried all of it into the alley and set it on the step.

Xiaoman lay back on the bunk. The mattress sighed. The room smelled of wet boots and cheap soap. Outside, the night shift was still going in. The looms were still running. The girl in the next room was telling the story again, in a voice too low to follow.

Xiaoman turned her face to the wall. She had no knot. She had no name. She had the empty collar of her shirt and the sound of the drain.

In the next bunk Axiang turned over. The basin scraped the floor. At the far end of the room Yanzi made a small sound in her sleep. Qiaoyun's phone glowed under her blanket. The list would go up at noon. Xiaoman would be there.

She had asked the one question the old woman would not answer. The answer was not in the drain or the trash or the shredder. It was behind the closed door of the alley room. She did not know what was behind it. She knew the door had a lock. The lock was new. The brass was still bright against the old wood.

Through the wall the new worker laughed at something. The story had changed again. Xiaoman could not hear the words, but she could hear the shape of it: a girl, a machine, a red thread. The story would be there in the morning. It would be there when the list went up. It would be there when the girls read the names.

She closed her eyes. The room was still and cold. The blanket was thin. The looms filled it. She listened until the sound was only sound. She pulled the blanket to her chin. The room was dark. The air was cold. She did not sleep for a long time that night. Outside, the drain ran under the alley in the dark. The mill did not stop. The night went on again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Which goddess does the shrine serve?”

The Xiancan Shrine stood on the main street with its back to the canal and its face to the shops.

The four of them went on a Sunday afternoon, when the market was open and the town was loud. Xiaoman had seen the gate from the bus on the first day, but she had not known what it was. The lintel was gray stone. The tiles above it curved at the corners. Two stone lions sat on either side of the steps, their faces worn smooth by hands.

Axiang stopped at the bottom of the steps. “This is the place.”

“How do you know?” Qiaoyun asked.

“The stage,” Axiang said. “My mother told me about the stage.”

They went in. The courtyard was paved with stone and open to the sky. At the far end a hall with a high roof held three dark figures behind a screen of incense smoke. On the left was a stage with a red curtain and a wooden floor. The stage had been rebuilt; the paint on the pillars was too bright. A plastic bucket stood at the corner of the courtyard with a mop leaning out of it.

An old woman was sweeping the stones.

She wore a dark blue cotton jacket with a padded collar. Her hair was white and pulled back with a black comb. Her hands were small and brown, and the nails were lined with black ash. She swept in short strokes, the broom head whispering on the stone.

Axiang went to the incense burner and put a stick in the sand. Qiaoyun did the same. Chunxia took a stick, then put it back. Xiaoman stood by the stage and looked up at the red curtain.

“Which goddess does the shrine serve?” she asked.

The old woman stopped sweeping. “The First Silkworm,” she said. “Leizu. The goddess who taught the people to raise silkworms and make silk. The shrine was built by the silk merchants in the year the foreigners came to the river. The

stage is for the opera. The hall is for the goddess. You are standing in the courtyard."

"Who is the other one?" Xiaoman asked. "The one the girls in the dorm talk about?"

The old woman's broom went still. It stood on its bristles between them.

"You mean *Zigu*," she said.

She said the name with a small pause before it, as if she were taking a thread from a knot. Zigu, the latrine goddess, the one the women welcomed on the fifteenth night of the first month. The name was not carved anywhere in the shrine. It was not on the lintel. It was not on the donor board. It lived in the mouths of old women and in the dark at the back of the house.

"The girls call her the Third Miss of the Latrine," Xiaoman said.

"That is one of her names."

"Is this her shrine?"

"No." The old woman picked up her broom. "This is the shrine of the silkworm. The latrine goddess has no shrine. She has a basket and a dark room and women who remember her."

Xiaoman looked into the front hall. The three dark figures sat behind the incense smoke. One held a bowl. One held a bundle of something that might have been grain. The third was a woman with a high crown and a long face. The paint on her hands had worn away. The stone floor in front of her was dark with years of feet.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"The Yellow Emperor. Shennong. Leizu," the old woman said. "The emperor, the farmer, the silkworm mother. The men built the hall. The women came to the back."

"Then why do the girls come here?"

"Because they do not know the difference. They come to the big gate and the bright stage. You're praying to the wrong goddess."

The four of them stood in the courtyard. The incense smoke went up and bent toward the stage. Somewhere in the market a speaker played a song. The old woman went back to sweeping.

On the west side of the courtyard a narrow door stood open. Xiaoman went through it. The room inside was cold and smelled of old wood. A lacquered board hung on the wall behind a glass case. The board was dark red. Names were painted on it in gold, row after row, with a date at the top and a date at the bottom. Some of the names were small. Some were large. At the bottom of the board, in letters taller than the rest, was the name of a mill.

Wansheng Silk Weaving Co.

Qiaoyun came in behind her. "That is our mill."

Axiang stepped closer to the board. "The boss paid for the roof."

"The roof still leaks," Chunxia said.

The old woman had followed them to the door. She stood with her broom in both hands. "He paid for the stage too," she said. "The old stage was torn down in 1976. The new one was built with money from the mills. Your boss gave more than most. He wanted his name on the board."

"Did the goddess want it?" Xiaoman asked.

The old woman turned to the gold letters. "The goddess watches the stage," she said. "The men watch their names."

She went back to the courtyard. The four of them stood in front of the board. Qiaoyun read the names under her breath. Some of the mills were old names, the kind that had been on the market for a hundred years. Some were new. The gold paint on the new names was brighter. The old names had gone brown at the edges.

"The board is a map," Xiaoman said.

"It is a list of who paid," Axiang said. "That is not a map."

"It is the same thing." The glass case reflected their faces over the names. Xiaoman could see her own face in the middle of the gold letters.

"Can you tell us about her?" Xiaoman asked.

The old woman stopped again and studied Xiaoman. Her eyes were dark and clear. The broom handle was smooth from her hands.

"I have swept this courtyard for thirty years," she said. "I was a weaver before that. I know the old stories. I know the songs. I know what the books say and what the women did when the books were closed."

"Will you tell us?"

The old woman leaned the broom against the stone lion. "Come into the back."

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The back of the shrine was a narrow court behind the hall.

There was a well, a stone table, a basket, and a small door that led to a storeroom. The wall was high and had been mended in places with new brick. A bare tree grew out of a square of earth. Its branches were black against the sky. A cat slept on the stone table with its tail over its nose.

The old woman sat on a low stool and put the basket on her knees. It was a winnowing basket, round and shallow, woven from split bamboo. The rim was dark with handling. Inside it lay a bundle of dry straw, a red thread, a small bowl of ash, and a square of white cloth.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Xiaoman."

"I am Grandmother Xu. That is what the girls call me. The office calls me the caretaker." Her eyes moved to the other three. "And you?"

"Axiang."

"Qiaoyun."

"Chunxia."

Grandmother Xu nodded. "You are from the mills."

"Yes."

"Then you know what a knot is."

"We know," Axiang said.

Grandmother Xu took the straw from the basket and began to twist it. Her fingers moved without hurry. A shape came out of the straw: a small figure with a round head and two arms. She tied the arms with the red thread and set the figure on the stone table.

"Some of the old books say the women made a straw woman and dressed her in old clothes," she said. "They put her by the latrine or the pigpen. They offered her horse dung. That was in the north. The other books say they used a basket and a plate of ash and a hairpin to write. The two are not the same. People have always mixed them because they do not remember."

"Which one do you do?" Xiaoman asked.

"Here we do both. We are from the water country. We keep the basket and the ash. The straw woman is for the children. The chant is for the women."

She put the basket on the stone table. She put the bowl of ash inside it. She put the straw figure in the middle of the ash.

"Kneel," she said.

They knelt on the stone. The cold came through Xiaoman's knees. The cat opened one eye and closed it again. Grandmother Xu took the red thread and tied a loose loop around the straw figure's waist.

"The story is old," she said. "There was a girl in a rich house. She was a concubine, not a wife. The wife hated her. The wife made her do the filthy work. The latrine. The pigpen. The ashes. On the fifteenth night, when the whole town was bright with lanterns, the wife had her killed. They put her body in the latrine. The gods saw. They took her up and made her a goddess."

She stopped. The cat stretched. The trees moved in the wind.

"What is her name?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Zigu," Grandmother Xu said. "The one who was thrown away."

The words sat in the courtyard. Xiaoman studied the straw figure in the basket. It was not a goddess. It was straw and red thread. But Grandmother Xu's voice had made the story sound as if it were happening in the next room. The figure had no face. The red loop at its waist was the only color in the basket. Xiaoman thought of the red knots in the girls' collars and the loops hidden under their shirts. The same hand had tied them all.

"She was killed on a night of lanterns," Grandmother Xu said. "That is why the women welcome her in the dark. The town is above. She is below. The men are at the opera. The women are at the latrine."

"Why the latrine?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Because that is where the basket and the broom are kept," Grandmother Xu said. "The lowest room in the house is the room with the tools. The women went there because they had work to do. The goddess came because they called her."

"And the husband?" Axiang asked.

"The husband had to be away. The wife had to be gone. The woman said their names and sent them out. Then she said the other name. The name of the girl. The one who could come out."

Grandmother Xu's hands moved over the straw. The ash in the basket had begun to move in the wind. The red thread around the straw figure was loose. The loop was not a knot. It was a circle.

"Say the words," Grandmother Xu said.

She sang a line in the old talk. The words came out low and round. They had a shape, but no meaning for Xiaoman. Grandmother Xu sang them again. Then she nodded at Axiang.

Axiang repeated the sounds. They came out wrong. Grandmother Xu corrected her. Qiaoyun tried. Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she stopped. Grandmother Xu waited until she put it away. Chunxia tried. She said the sounds carefully, the way she said numbers. Xiaoman tried last. The sounds sat in her mouth like small stones. She did not know what they meant. Grandmother Xu made her say them again. Then she made all four of them say the line together. The courtyard filled with the sound. The cat lifted its head. The ash in the basket shifted.

"The man is away," Grandmother Xu said. "The wife has gone."

She stopped. The girls waited. Grandmother Xu shook her head.

"The rest is for the dark," she said. "You do not need the meaning. You need the sound."

"Why?" Xiaoman asked.

"Because the sound is the door. The meaning is behind it."

The cat jumped down from the table and went along the wall. Grandmother Xu took the straw figure and put it in Xiaoman's hands. It was lighter than it looked. The straw was dry. The red loop hung loose around its waist.

"Now ask," she said.

"Ask what?"

"Ask her what you came to ask."

Xiaoman turned the straw figure in her hands. She thought of the girls in the dorm. She thought of the third bank. She thought of He Mei in the alley with

her box and her thermos. She thought of the question she had asked and the answer she had not received.

"Did someone die here?" she said.

Grandmother Xu held her eyes. The courtyard was quiet. The incense from the front hall came around the corner in a thin gray line.

"Many people died here," Grandmother Xu said. "That is not a question for a goddess."

"What is?"

"The question under it. Ask why the living are still here. Ask what they are going to do about it. The goddess does not answer that. She only listens."

Xiaoman did not know what the question under it was. She held the straw figure and listened to the loom noise coming from the street. The mill was not far. The looms were running. The sound came over the wall and into the courtyard and made the ash tremble in the basket.

"Come back when the opera is over," Grandmother Xu said. She took the straw figure from Xiaoman's hands and put it back in the basket. "The front is for the town. The back is for the women."

She picked up her broom and went around the corner. The four of them knelt on the cold stone for a moment longer. Then Qiaoyun's phone lit up. Chunxia stood and brushed the dust from her knees. Axiang held out her hand to Xiaoman.

"Did you understand any of it?" Axiang asked.

"The sound," Xiaoman said. "I understood the sound."

"What did it mean?"

"The man is away. The wife has gone."

"That is not the whole thing."

"No."

Qiaoyun said the words sounded like a song her grandmother used to sing at the New Year. Chunxia said they sounded like numbers. Axiang said nothing.

At the side gate Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar. There was no knot there. There was no loop. She could still taste the old words in her mouth, small and round and strange. She said one of them under her breath. It did not mean anything. It made the hair on her arms stand up. Axiang heard her and said the

next word. Qiaoyun said the next. Chunxia said the last. The four of them walked down the steps with the sounds between them, like stones in a pocket.

At the bottom a woman in an apron threw a bucket of water across the stone. The water ran dark into the gutter. The shrine stood behind them. The market went on. The old words stayed in Xiaoman's mouth all the way to the dorm. The gate closed behind them. The street was cold. The night air smelled of coal smoke and incense. The market shutters rattled. Somewhere a dog barked. The looms were still running. She could hear them through the buildings.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“If we sign, will we get paid?”

The news came through the office window before it came through the gate.

He Mei was on the north wall at seven in the morning, clearing the drain grate with a piece of wire. The rain had stopped in the night. The water in the gutter had gone thin and cold. The office window above her was open a hand’s width, and the shipping supervisor’s voice came down through the gap in pieces.

“They cancelled the balance. The tariff did not go up. The buyer is not taking the rest.”

A second voice, the office clerk’s, said something He Mei could not hear.

“I know what the contract says. The container is at the dock. They will not load it.”

He Mei pulled a knot of lint out of the grate and dropped it in the bag. The lint was gray and wet. The water ran under it and into the canal.

At nine the supervisor came onto the bright floor with a sheet of paper in his hand. He walked the length of the first aisle and stopped at the third bank. The looms kept running. The women kept their hands in the water. The supervisor raised the paper above his head.

“Meeting at ten,” he said. “Everybody on the floor. The boss is coming.”

The looms did not stop. The women exchanged glances across the banks. At the end of the aisle Axiang’s hands went still. Qiaoyun’s thumb moved over her phone. Chunxia took the pencil from behind her ear and held it without writing.

At ten the looms were shut down.

The silence was worse than the noise. The floor had been loud for so long that the quiet rang inside He Mei’s ears. The women stood in the aisles with their aprons wet and their caps pushed back. The water dripped from the rails. The lights buzzed. The air smelled of wet cotton and machine oil and the cigarettes the men had smoked in the office. Someone’s stomach growled. Someone else laughed and then stopped.

Old Sheng came through the office door with Cao Caifeng behind him.

He was a broad man in a gray coat that had been cut well once and had gone shiny at the elbows. His hair was combed back. He had a cigarette in his hand, and the smoke went up into the white light and stayed there. He Mei knew the smell. Daqianmen. The soft pack.

"Ladies," he said.

His voice was hoarse. It carried to the back of the floor.

"I know you have heard the American order is cancelled. That is true. The buyer has cancelled the balance. The tariff did not rise, but the buyer does not want the goods. He is afraid of the next month. He is afraid of the next year."

The women were quiet. Somebody at the back coughed.

"That is not your fault," Old Sheng said. "It is not my fault. It is the world. But the world does not pay wages."

A woman near the back said something. He Mei could not hear it. Old Sheng heard it. He lifted his chin.

"You want to know if the mill will close," he said. "The mill will not close. The American order is dead. The domestic order is alive. The bank needs to see a full floor. You are the floor. Sign the form. Go back to work. The wages will come."

He took a drag on the cigarette and let the smoke out slowly.

"I have money coming from the next order. I have a buyer in the south. I have the domestic market. The mill will not close. But the bank is asking questions. The bank wants to see that the workers are with us. So there is a paper. Everyone signs. Then the bank releases the account. Then the wages are paid before the New Year."

He nodded at the office clerk. She stepped forward with a stack of forms and a box of pens.

The floor was hot with all the women standing in it. The lights were white and close. Old Sheng's cigarette smoke went up into the light and spread in a thin gray sheet. He Mei could see the sweat on the back of the supervisor's neck. The paper in the clerk's arms was so thin that the carbon showed through the top sheet. The pens were cheap plastic. One of them had already leaked black ink onto the clerk's thumb.

"It is a standard form," Old Sheng said. "It says you agree to the new schedule. It says you agree to wait for the wage adjustment until the account is open. It says you will not take the matter outside the mill. That is all. Sign it, and you go back to work. The wages will come."

The women read the forms. The paper was thin and gray. There were carbon copies under each sheet. The office clerk set the stack on a cloth bale and put the pens beside it.

"One at a time," she said. "Sign at the bottom. Do not write anything else."

"What does it say?" Axiang asked.

The clerk turned to Old Sheng. Old Sheng took a last drag on his cigarette.

"It says you are with the mill," he said. "It says the wages will come. It says no one will be left behind."

"And if they do not come?"

Old Sheng smiled. His teeth were small and yellow. "Then you come to me. I will be here."

Axiang read the form. Her lips moved over the small print. Then she signed.

Qiaoyun signed after her. Chunxia signed after Qiaoyun. Xiaoman signed after Chunxia. The other women came in a slow line. The pen passed from hand to hand. The carbon copies went into a second box. The line moved. The looms stood silent. The paper was thin. The pens were cheap. The box grew heavy in the clerk's arms. The floor waited.

He Mei stood by the drain with her mop. She was not on the shift list. The office did not give her a form. The box filled. Axiang braced her bandaged wrist against the bale. Qiaoyun checked her phone after she signed. Chunxia wrote the date on her own receipt before she folded it. Xiaoman signed last. Her hand shook, and the carbon copy came out crooked.

When the last woman had signed, Old Sheng dropped his cigarette on the concrete and stepped on it.

"Good," he said. "The bank man will see. The wages will come before the New Year."

It was Xiaoman who asked the clerk for the carbon. The clerk's eyes went from the box to the supervisor. The supervisor shrugged.

"Give her the copy," he said. "It is her name."

The clerk separated the carbon from the original and handed it to Xiaoman. Xiaoman folded it once. The carbon stained her fingers. She put it inside her apron pocket and pressed the pocket flat with her hand.

Old Sheng went out through the office door. Cao Caifeng followed. The heels struck the concrete away and away. The office clerk closed the box and carried it up the stairs. The supervisor started the looms again. The noise came back all at once.

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The question came in the alley that night.

Axiang brought the first receipt. It was a carbon copy of the form she had signed, folded into a square. The copy was faint, but her name was at the top and the date was at the bottom. She put it on the step.

"He said the wages will come before the New Year," Axiang said.

"He said," Qiaoyun said.

"He said it in front of everyone."

"He said it to the bank."

"He said it to us."

Xiaoman turned to He Mei. "If we sign, will we get paid?"

He Mei picked up the receipt. The paper was thin. The carbon had stained the edges of her fingers. She held it up to the bulb.

"Some of you," she said.

"Which ones?"

"I do not know which ones."

"Then how do you know some?"

He Mei put the receipt down. "The payroll account was empty on Tuesday. There was a bank slip in the office bin. The account had enough for one week of wages. Not two. Not the New Year."

"Maybe the bank released the account."

"The bank man came on Friday. He studied the books. He did not look at the floor."

Axiang's jaw moved. "So the form was nothing."

"The form was for the bank."

"Then why did we sign?"

"Because you need the money. Because they know you need the money. Because if you do not sign, they will say you are not with the mill."

The women were quiet. The drain ran between them. The bulb made a small yellow circle on the step. The receipts in Axiang's hand caught the light.

"What do we do?" Qiaoyun asked.

He Mei held the receipt up. "Keep this."

"It is only a carbon copy."

"Keep it anyway. Keep every paper they give you. The pay slip. The dorm deduction. The canteen chit. The receipt for the form. Keep them in your own hand. Do not put them in the office box."

Axiang folded the receipt again. "The office has the originals."

"The office has the originals. You have the copy. The copy is yours."

Xiaoman took the receipt from Axiang and turned it over. The back was blank. "Should we write on it?"

"No." He Mei took it back. "Do not write anything they can see. Fold it small. Keep it under the bunk board. Keep it in your shoe. Keep it inside your coat. If they ask, you signed. You do not remember what the paper said."

"Then what are the receipts for?"

"For the day when they say you did not sign. For the day when they say you were paid. For the day when they say the deduction was for the dorm and the food and the electricity and the water and the training and the tool fee and the uniform and the medicine you did not take."

The women were quiet. The drain ran. The night shift was going in behind the wall. The looms made their low pressure in the ground.

"Keep them," He Mei said again. "Every one."

"For how long?" Chunxia asked.

"Until they are not needed."

"That is not a number."

"No."

Qiaoyun turned her phone over in her hand. "If we keep them, the office will say we stole the forms."

"The copy has your name on it," He Mei said. "A copy is not a theft. A copy is a witness."

Axiang folded her receipt again. "If they find them, they will fire us."

"Then hide them better." He Mei nodded toward the drain. "Not in the group. Not in the dorm drawer. Not in the trash. Under the board. Inside a shoe. Behind a picture. Where the office does not put its hands."

The women exchanged another look. The bulb buzzed. The night shift started behind the wall.

※

By the end of the week every girl on the third bank had a receipt.

They asked the office for a carbon of every form. The clerk gave them out because the boss had said to keep the workers calm. The girls folded the papers small and hid them. Axiang kept hers under the bunk board. Qiaoyun kept hers inside the lining of her coat. Chunxia kept hers in the back of her notebook, between the page with the bride-price and the page with the date of the fifteenth. Xiaoman kept hers in the pocket of her work apron, then moved it to the waistband of her jeans when the supervisor asked to inspect the aprons.

He Mei kept nothing. She had no form. She had no pay slip. She had only the drain.

But the girls changed. They stopped writing things in the group chat. They stopped leaving their pay slips on their bunks. They folded the papers and hid them. The papers were the first thing the network had that could be held in the hand and opened in a room with a locked door.

On Friday the office clerk came onto the floor with a new notice.

The notice said the wage payment would be made on the twenty-eighth. It said the payment would be made in two parts. It said the second part would follow after the New Year. It said the office thanked the workers for their patience.

The women read the notice. The supervisor pinned it to the board where the maintenance schedule had been. The office had printed forty copies. He Mei saw the rest in the clerk's drawer when she emptied the office bin. They were stacked

under a box of paper clips. The top copy had a name written on it in pencil, then rubbed out with a thumb.

He Mei read it from the drain. The numbers were in black ink. The date was the twenty-eighth. The paper was clean. It had not been in a bin. It had not been folded. It had not been rained on.

She went back to the boiler room and opened the furnace door. The fire was low. The bag of office paper from the night before sat beside the burner. She had not burned it yet. She opened the bag and looked inside. There were the usual shipping forms. There was a bank slip. There was a copy of the new notice, folded in half. On the back of the notice, in pencil, someone had written a name and a number. The name was not hers. The number was smaller than the wages.

He Mei put the notice in the fire. The flame ran up the edge. The date of the twenty-eighth curled and turned black. The girls had their receipts. The office had its originals. The bank had its number. She had the drain.

At the end of the shift she went back to the alley. The bulb was on. The step was wet. There was a folded receipt on the step, held down by a stone. It was not Axiang's and not Qiaoyun's. It was a fresh carbon copy, still white at the edges.

She picked it up. The name at the top was Xiaoman's. The date was the twenty-eighth. The amount was the same amount the office had promised before the American order.

He Mei folded the receipt small and put it in her apron pocket. The paper was still warm from the office carbon. She could feel the edge of it through the cloth. She stood on the step for a moment and looked down the lane. The gate light was yellow. The mill was running behind the wall. The night shift would be inside now, standing at the looms, their own receipts hidden in their shoes and under their bunks and inside the hems of their coats.

She opened the door and went inside to make the tea. The room was dark. She lit the lamp and put the kettle on the burner. The water began to tick. The receipt lay in her apron pocket against her hip. She did not take it out. She stood by the stove and listened to the kettle until it began to sing. The tea was hot. She drank it. The night shift was still running. The sound came through the wall. The night was cold.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Has Old Sheng changed brands?”

The cigarette question started as a joke.

It started on the third bank, where the women had begun to keep their receipts. Axiang asked it first, in the alley, with her hands wrapped around a cup of hot water. “Has Old Sheng changed brands?”

He Mei had turned toward the drain. “Not yet.”

The next night Qiaoyun asked it. Then Chunxia. Then Xiaoman. The question went from the alley to the dorm. It went from the dorm to the canteen. It went from the canteen to the floor in a whisper, and by the end of the week the girls were asking it without moving their lips.

“Has he changed brands?”

“Not yet.”

“Then the money is still there.”

“Or the money is still gone.”

They had learned the ladder from He Mei. Liqun long filter was twenty-two. Liqun new was fourteen. Daqianmen soft was seven. The brand was not a mirror of the bank account. It was something better: a cigarette was smoked and thrown away. A cigarette was a small piece of evidence that could be read in the bottom of a bin.

The girls turned it into a hand signal. Two fingers held up meant the long filter. One finger meant the new pack. A closed fist meant Daqianmen. They did it under the canteen table, in the dorm, at the end of the loom bank when the supervisor was not looking. The signal moved faster than the story. By the end of the week the whole third bank knew how to ask the question without saying a word.

On Friday the supervisor saw Qiaoyun’s closed fist under the canteen table. He stopped beside her.

“What is that?” he asked.

Qiaoyun opened her hand. “A cramp.”

"In your fingers?"

"In my hand."

The supervisor examined her hand. Then he examined the table. The girls at the table kept eating. He went away. Qiaoyun put her fist back under the table. Axiang put two fingers up. Chunxia put one finger up. Xiaoman closed her fist. Nobody laughed.

On Monday, Daqianmen.

On Tuesday, Daqianmen.

On Wednesday, two empty packs of Daqianmen and a receipt from the gate shop for one hundred and forty yuan, paid in cash.

At lunch Qiaoyun said it at the canteen table, not in a whisper. "Daqianmen again."

The supervisor at the next table put down his chopsticks. He did not turn around. The woman across from Qiaoyun glanced toward the door. Qiaoyun's face went red. She picked up her bowl and ate the rest of her rice without speaking.

"The bank man must have called," Axiang said.

"Or the bank man has not called," He Mei said.

"Which is worse?"

"Not calling."

That afternoon the office clerk came down to the boiler room with a box of old files and a new instruction.

"The executive waste is not going into the general bins anymore," she said. "Put it in the black bags. The black bags go to the loading dock at three. Do not mix them with the floor waste."

"Since when?"

"Since today."

He Mei studied the box in the clerk's arms. It was full of papers that had not been shredded. The clerk carried it out before He Mei could ask another question. At the door she passed Cao Caifeng. The laoban-niang stood in the corridor with her coat already on. She took in the boiler room, the empty bin, He Mei's wet hands. The jasmine came in with the cold air.

“The black bags go to the loading dock,” Cao Caifeng said. “Not the general bins. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“If you see a black bag anywhere else, tell the office.”

He Mei held her eyes. The scar on the woman’s thumb was white against the dark glove. “I will tell the office.”

Cao Caifeng held her eyes for a moment. Then she went down the corridor. The jasmine stayed behind her, thin and clean, over the smell of the boiler.

The next morning the clerk came to the boiler room and counted the bins. She counted them twice. She looked inside the furnace. She checked the bag of floor waste. She wrote something on a clipboard and went out. He Mei stood by the sink and let her count.

That night she did not empty the executive bins. She stood at the north wall and kept her eyes on the loading dock instead.

At three the black car came.

It was a dark sedan with a trunk that opened without a sound. The driver was a man He Mei had not seen before. He wore a black jacket and a cap pulled low. The office clerk came out with two black bags and put them in the trunk. The bags were heavy. She had to lift them with both arms. The driver did not help her. When the trunk closed, the car sat low on its tires. The gate light caught the rear window and then the car was gone. He Mei stood in the drain steam and counted the seconds until the gate opened and closed again. The car did not come back. The black bags did not come back. The driver had not signed the gate book. The guard had not written the number down. The black bags had not gone into the dumpster. They had not gone into the furnace. They had gone into the car, and the car had gone down the ramp, and the gate had closed behind it.

The bag she had been carrying was still empty.

※

On Thursday she found the red paper.

It was in the last executive bin, the one under the shipping supervisor’s desk. The bin had not been emptied into the black bags yet. The clerk was in the front

office with the door closed. The light under the door was yellow. He Mei lifted the bin and carried it to the boiler room.

The top layer was the usual: carbon copies, a bank envelope, a torn packing list. Under that, folded into a square and held with a rubber band, was a red slip of paper.

She knew the color. She had seen it at the shrine. Grandmother Xu kept a stack of red paper on the shelf behind the incense burner. The paper was thin and porous. The ink was black and had been brushed on with a small brush, not printed. There was a red stamp at the bottom, the kind the old men at the market used on New Year couplets.

He Mei opened the slip. The characters were not the office characters. They were the old ones, the ones written by hand. She could read only a few. One was the character for money. One was the character for man. One was the character for ask. The rest ran together like water. The red paper had a smell of incense and sweepings. The brush strokes were uneven where the pen had run dry. A thumbprint darkened the bottom corner. The thumbprint was small and pale. A woman's thumb.

He Mei had seen women go into the back room of the shrine with questions like that. They asked about a son's school, a husband's cough, a daughter who had stopped writing. They asked about money. They asked about the fifteenth. The old woman wrote the answers on red paper and folded them small. The women put the paper in their sleeves or their bras or the lining of their coats. They did not show it to anyone. He Mei had never asked for one. She had not needed to. She had the drain.

At the bottom of the slip, under the stamp, someone had written a number. It was not a price. It was a date: the fifteenth of the first month.

He Mei turned the slip over. The back was blank except for a faint gray line where the brush had pressed through. The red came off on her thumb. She rubbed it against her apron and the red stayed on the cloth.

She folded the slip again. She put it in her apron pocket.

The woman had not gone to the shrine in the front, where the stage was bright and the donor board was gold. She had gone to the back, to the small room where the old woman kept the incense and the red paper. She had sat on

the stool and asked her question. The receipt had gone into her bag with the bank receipts and the cigarette packs.

He Mei took the slip out again. At the top, in tiny characters she could not read, was a question. She had seen the same red paper in Grandmother Xu's basket at the shrine. The old woman had kept it under the ash bowl. She had torn a strip for the straw figure and folded the rest into a square. The paper had been soft as cloth. The ink had smelled of soot and camphor. He Mei had not asked what the old woman wrote on it. Now she wished she had.

She put the slip away.

※

The girls asked the cigarette question again on Friday.

"Has he changed brands?"

He Mei did not answer.

"Not yet?" Qiaoyun said.

"He does not have to change brands anymore."

"What does that mean?"

"The black bags go into a car at three. The car goes down the ramp. The trash does not come back."

Axiang turned toward the drain. "Then we cannot read the trash."

"No."

"What about the other bins? The canteen? The office clerk's desk?"

"The clerk keeps the black bags. The supervisor keeps the key."

The women were quiet. The drain ran. The bulb above the alley door made a small yellow circle on the wet step.

"Then the cigarette question is dead," Qiaoyun said.

He Mei put her hand in her apron pocket. The red slip was there, small and folded. She did not take it out.

"The cigarette question is dead," she said. "The rest is not."

※

The car came again on Saturday. He Mei stood at the north wall and kept her eyes on the trunk. The driver did not get out. The clerk carried four black bags

this time. The bags were heavier than the ones before. The car sat low on its tires. When the trunk closed, the driver stayed in his seat for a moment. The engine was running. The light from the gatehouse made a yellow line on the windshield.

Old Zhou came down the wall with his kettle. He stood beside He Mei and took in the car.

"Black bags," he said.

"Black bags."

"Where do they go?"

"To the car."

"Where does the car go?"

He Mei followed the car with her eyes as it turned onto the main road. The tail lights went small and red and then disappeared.

"I do not know."

Old Zhou took the lid off his kettle. Steam climbed between them and thinned in the cold. The gatehouse radio was tuned to the book-field, but the volume was so low that only the shape of the voice came through the glass.

"The boss is afraid of you," he said.

He Mei turned toward the drain. The water ran over the grate and carried a piece of red paper toward the canal. She bent down and picked it out. It was not a receipt. It was a scrap of the red paper from the shrine, the edge torn away. The brush marks were gone. The paper was blank.

"Not of me," she said.

"Of what you read."

"I read rubbish."

"That is what she is afraid of."

He Mei turned the red scrap over in her fingers. "She reads more than rubbish."

Old Zhou turned toward the gate. The car had gone. The road was empty. "Then she should be afraid of herself."

He Mei thought of the red slip in her apron. The woman had asked a question and paid in red paper. The answer was not in the black bags. The answer was under the coat, against the ribs, next to the flyer and the silk.

"The car is not for me."

"The car is for what you read."

He Mei folded the red scrap and put it in her apron with the receipt. Old Zhou went back to the gate with his kettle. The radio under his arm gave a small burst of music and then settled into static.

At the end of the night He Mei went back to the boiler room and took the red slip from her pocket. The furnace door was open. The fire was low. The black bag from the executive bin stood beside the burner, folded at the top. She had not opened it. She did not open it now.

She held the red slip over the burner. The flame made a small yellow circle on the paper. The characters came out of the dark, black on red. The stamp shone. The heat reached her fingers. She did not burn it. She took it away and put it inside the lining of her coat, next to the travel flyer and the silk thread. The lining was already split at the seam. She pushed the paper in beside the others and pressed the cloth flat. Inside the coat the lining was warm from her body. The flyer and the silk thread lay flat against the paper. She pressed them once and let them go.

The boiler ticked. The car had gone. The black bags were somewhere on the road. She put her hand over the coat and found the edge of the paper through the cloth.

She did not need to read the whole slip. She knew what it was. A woman had gone to the back room of the shrine and asked a question. The woman had paid in red paper and ink. The answer was folded in He Mei's coat. The woman would come back for it. She would not find it. The car would take the black bags to wherever the car went. The answer would be against He Mei's ribs, under the coat, under the apron.

She took the coat off the nail and put it on. The lining was split at the seam. She touched the three things inside it: the travel flyer, the silk thread, the red slip. They were flat against each other. They made no sound when she moved. She buttoned the coat and went back to the corridor with the bucket. The night shift was running. The sound came through the wall and into the floor. She pushed the mop down the hall and did not look at the office door. The floor was wet. The mop left a gray line behind her. At the end of the corridor the office window was dark. The paper pressed against her ribs with every step. The jasmine was

gone. The mill did not stop. Outside, the drain ran under the wall. The car did not come back. The gate light was still on. The guard had gone into the gatehouse. The radio played behind the glass. The boiler ticked. The hall was cold. The night was long. She went to the sink and washed her hands. The water ran clear. The soap was yellow. She dried her hands on the apron. The corridor was empty. The gate was locked. She left the light off. She went inside. The door closed behind her. The night went on again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Can the cameras see the alley?”

The men came to install the cameras on a Tuesday morning, while the looms were running.

Xiaoman was threading a broken end on the second bank when the drill started. The sound went through the noise of the looms like a wire pulled tight. She looked up. A man in a blue overall was standing on a ladder at the end of the aisle. He had a black camera in one hand and a coil of white cable over his shoulder. The camera was small. It had a red light on the front.

The supervisor stood below the ladder with his clipboard against his chest. “Keep working,” he said. “It is for quality.”

The women kept their hands in the water. The drill went on. The camera went up above the first bank, then the second, then the third. Each one had the same red light. Each one turned its small black eye toward the looms. The red lights made small points in the white glare. The women worked under them without looking up. Water sprayed the rails. The cloth came out in a smooth gray sheet. The cameras did not blink.

At lunch Xiaoman sat across from Axiang with her bowl of rice. “Can the cameras see the alley?”

Axiang tipped her head toward the canteen ceiling. There was no camera there. “Ask the old woman.”

“She will not know.”

“She knows what is in the pipes.”

“That is not a camera.”

“It is the same kind of knowing.”

After the shift Xiaoman went to the alley. The bulb was on. He Mei was sitting on the step with her basket and her thermos. The drain steamed. The night was cold. The door behind her was open a hand’s width.

“Can the cameras see the alley?” Xiaoman asked.

He Mei looked up at the mill wall. The wall was gray. Above it the roof line was black against the sky. The camera on the third bank was not visible from the lane, but the cable was. It ran along the wall in a white line and disappeared into the office window.

"No," He Mei said.

"How do you know?"

"I saw them put it up."

"Where?"

"On the third bank. The cable goes from the office to the first bank, then the second, then the third. It does not go over the wall."

"Maybe there is another one."

"There is one at the gate. The gate camera sees the road and the gatehouse. It does not see the drain. The drain is under the wall. The wall is high."

Xiaoman turned toward the drain. The steam came up and touched the bottom of the bulb. The water ran under the wall and into the canal. The alley was dark beyond the circle of the light.

"Then the alley is safe," she said.

"The alley is not safe," He Mei said. "The alley is out of the frame. That is not the same thing."

※

The next week the office closed the women's bathroom on the second floor.

A paper went up on the door. It said the pipes were being repaired. It said the women should use the bathroom by the canteen until further notice. The door was locked. A strip of yellow tape ran across it.

The women stood in the corridor and faced the tape. The bathroom by the canteen was smaller. It had two stalls and one sink. The light was dim. The floor was always wet. The bin was emptied by the canteen staff, not by He Mei. On the first morning Xiaoman saw He Mei in the corridor outside the locked door. The old woman had her bucket in one hand and a mop in the other. She considered the yellow tape. She did not touch it.

"They moved the bathroom," Xiaoman said.

"I heard."

"The bin is by the canteen now."

"I heard that too."

He Mei turned and went down the corridor. Her bucket knocked against her leg. Xiaoman stood by the tape and kept her eyes on her until she turned the corner.

Xiaoman went into the new bathroom after the shift. The first stall had a broken seat. The second stall had a line of wet footprints leading out the door. There was a pad in the bin, wrapped in newspaper. There was a smell of cabbage and bleach.

She stood at the sink and washed her hands. The water was cold. The soap was the pink liquid from the canteen. Her reflection met her in the mirror. The mirror had no crack. It was smaller than the old one. It showed her face in one piece.

That night she told Axiang.

"The old bathroom is closed."

"I know."

"The old woman cannot clean the new one."

"The canteen staff clean it."

"Then she cannot read the bin."

Axiang turned to her. "What did she read in the bin?"

Xiaoman was quiet. She thought of Yanzi. She thought of the pink packets. She thought of the six weeks when the packets were gone. She thought of the question she had asked in the alley and the answer that had not come.

"Things," she said.

"Then we will have to read them."

※

The office moved four girls to the bright floor on Thursday.

Xiaoman was one of them. Axiang was another. The supervisor said the bright floor needed experienced threaders for the new order. The new order was domestic. The pay was lower. The lights were brighter. The cameras were directly overhead.

Xiaoman stood at her new loom with her cap pulled down. The camera above the bank had a red light. The light did not blink. It was steady. She could feel it on the back of her neck.

At the end of the row Qiaoyun was threading a broken end. Her lips moved. Xiaoman could not hear her. The looms were too loud. Qiaoyun looked up at the camera, then down at her hands.

At lunch Xiaoman sat across from Axiang. "They can see us."

"They can see the looms."

"They can see our hands."

"They cannot see under the table."

Axiang put her hand under the table. Xiaoman put her hand under the table. Axiang pressed something into her palm.

It was a knot of red thread.

Xiaoman closed her hand around it. The thread was warm from Axiang's fingers. She met Axiang's eyes. Axiang's face did not move. She picked up her bowl and ate.

"What does it mean?" Xiaoman asked.

Axiang chewed. "It means they are watching the new bathroom."

"How do you know?"

"Because the old woman told me."

"How did she know?"

"She saw the man put the cable in."

Xiaoman put the knot in her collar. The thread lay against her skin. She could feel it when she moved. It was small and secret and did not make a sound.

※

The girls stopped writing things down.

Chunxia kept her notebook under her mattress, but she stopped writing in it at the mill. She wrote at night, in the dorm, under the blanket with her phone light. Qiaoyun stopped typing in the group. Axiang stopped leaving receipts in her apron. The receipts went into the lining of her coat, then into a tin under the bunk, then into a plastic bag tied to the underside of the bed frame.

The office searched the dorm on Friday.

It was not a real search. The dorm auntie came in with the supervisor and the office clerk. They looked in the drawers. They looked under the mattresses. They looked in the lockers. The supervisor had a list. The clerk had a box.

Xiaoman stood by the window with her hands in her pockets. The knot was inside her collar. The receipt was inside her shoe. She had put it there before breakfast. The shoe was tight. The paper pressed against her heel.

The supervisor stopped at Xiaoman's bunk first. He looked under the mattress. He looked in her pillowcase. He looked in her shoes. She kept her feet flat on the floor. The receipt was in the left shoe. The shoe was on her foot. The supervisor considered the shoe. He did not ask her to take it off.

The supervisor stopped at Chunxia's bunk. He lifted the mattress. The notebook was there. He opened it. Xiaoman's heart moved. The page had numbers on it. The numbers were not names. The numbers were not the office's numbers. They were the bride price. They were the months. The supervisor studied the page, then Chunxia.

"What is this?"

"Numbers."

"Numbers for what?"

"For my brother."

The supervisor turned the page. There was a line for a motorcycle. A line for a roof. A line for a school fee. No names. No wages. No receipts. The supervisor closed the notebook and put it back.

"Keep your personal business in the dorm," he said.

He went to the next bunk. Xiaoman let out her breath. She had not known she had been holding it.

The supervisor checked the window latch. The clerk checked the trash. The dorm auntie checked under the sink. There was nothing to find. The office found nothing. The clerk carried the empty box out. The dorm auntie stayed behind and told them to clean the floor. The door closed. The girls stood in the room. No one spoke.

Then Meihua began to laugh. It was a small, cracked laugh. She put her hand over her mouth. Qiaoyun laughed next. Chunxia laughed. Yanzi did not laugh.

Xiaoman did not laugh. Axiang faced the closed door and put one finger to her lips. The laughing stopped.

That night, when the lights went out, Xiaoman heard Axiang get up. The bed frame creaked. A hand touched the edge of her bunk. A piece of paper slid under her pillow. It was a receipt. It was not hers. She did not ask whose it was. She put it in her shoe with her own.

That night Axiang called them together in the bathroom by the canteen.

The bathroom was small. The six of them stood shoulder to shoulder. Axiang turned on the tap to cover their voices. Qiaoyun stood by the door. Chunxia stood by the sink. Yanzi stood at the back with her arms wrapped around her ribs. Xiaoman stood beside Axiang.

"The office is watching the floor," Axiang said. "They are watching the gate. They are watching the bathroom. They cannot watch our hands."

She held up a red thread. She tied a knot in it. She gave it to Chunxia. Chunxia tied a second knot. She gave it to Qiaoyun. Qiaoyun tied a third knot. She gave it to Yanzi. Yanzi tied a fourth knot. She gave it to Xiaoman. The thread was red against her palm. The knots were small and hard. She could feel each one with her thumb. Axiang closed Xiaoman's fingers around the thread.

"Do not put it in your pocket," Axiang said. "Do not put it in your bag. Keep it on your body. If they search you, it is a thread. If they take it, we will tie another."

"What does the fourth knot mean?"

"The fifteenth. When the opera is over."

Xiaoman held up the red thread. She could not tell which knot was which. Axiang told her to count from the end. The first knot was the list. The second was the receipts. The third was the bathroom. The fourth was the fifteenth. She ran her thumb over them and said the meanings under her breath.

Qiaoyun asked what to do with her phone. Axiang said keep it off in the bathroom. She said the group was a window and the window had a supervisor on the other side. Qiaoyun put the phone in her apron pocket and buttoned the pocket. Chunxia put her pencil behind her ear and left it there. Yanzi put her hand over the loop inside her collar.

The thread was short. The knots were close together. There was no paper. There was no writing. There was nothing the office could read.

Xiaoman pinned the thread inside her collar. The knots lay against her skin. She could feel each one. She could count them without looking. She could pass them to another girl in the dark and the office would see only a thread.

The tap ran. The door was closed. The camera in the corridor could see the door and not the room. Through the wall the looms went on. The mill was running. The girls stood in the small wet bathroom with the red thread between them.

※

On Saturday the men came back to install a camera above the bathroom door.

Xiaoman was in the canteen when she heard the drill. She put her bowl down and went to the corridor. The man in the blue overall was on a ladder. The camera was small and black and had a red light. The supervisor stood below with his clipboard.

"It is for the hallway," the supervisor said. "For safety."

Xiaoman studied the bathroom door. The camera was pointed at the handle. It could see who went in and who came out. It could see how long they stayed. It could not see the sink. It could not see the stalls. It could not see the thread.

At the end of the day she went to the alley. He Mei was sitting on the step. The bulb was on. The drain steamed.

"Can the cameras see the alley?" Xiaoman asked.

"No."

"Can they see the bathroom?"

"The door."

"Then we will use the dark."

He Mei held her eyes. The red thread in Xiaoman's collar was hidden under her shirt. The knots were against her skin. The old woman did not ask how many.

"Keep the thread dry," she said.

Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar. The knots were there. The paper was in her shoe. The alley was out of the frame. The mill was running. She went back up the lane with her hand closed around the thread. At the gate Old Zhou's radio was playing the book-field. The voice followed her through the gate and stopped at the dorm door.

Inside, the room was dark. The girls were in their bunks. Xiaoman climbed to hers and lay down with her boots on. The knots were inside her collar. The receipt was in her shoe. The camera above the bathroom door was a red point in the corridor. It could see the door. It could not see the dark.

She closed her eyes. The mill went on. Somewhere in the next room a girl laughed at something on her phone. The red light in the corridor did not move. Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar and counted the knots. One. Two. Three. Four. The thread was warm. She did not sleep for a long time. In the morning the red light above the bathroom door was still there. The door opened and closed. The girls went in one by one. No one carried paper. No one wrote anything. The thread stayed under their shirts. The knots pressed against their skin. They could feel them when they breathed. The camera did not blink. The alley was out of the frame. The camera could see the door. It could not see her hand. The night was long. The thread stayed warm. The room was still. The mill did not stop. She closed her eyes. The night went on.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Why did they fire her?"

The office clerk told He Mei on a Friday, at the end of the shift, with the mop still in her hand.

"The company is contracting out the cleaning," the clerk said. "The new company starts Monday. You do not need to come in on Sunday."

He Mei turned the mop in her hand. The handle was wrapped with wire where it had split. The head was gray. She had used it for six years.

"The laoban-niang signed the contract this morning," the clerk said. "It is not personal."

He Mei looked past her into the office. Cao Caifeng was standing by the window with a folder in her hand. She did not turn around. The jasmine came through the open door, thin and clean. The clerk shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"The new company will bring its own supplies," she said. "You can leave the mop."

He Mei did not leave the mop. She carried it to the boiler room and put it in the corner. It was her mop. The company could buy its own.

"All right," she said.

"The office will send your last pay to the address on file."

"I do not have an address on file."

The clerk checked the papers in her hand. "Then come to the office on Monday. The accountant will have it."

He Mei did not go to the office on Monday.

She went to the boiler room first. She took her thermos from the shelf and put it in a cardboard box. She took the cup with the blue rim. She took the apron with the gray hem. She took the empty bottle of bleach and the spare bar of yellow soap. The box was small. It did not take long.

At eleven she went down to the alley and turned off the bulb.

The lane went dark. The bulb had been the only light on that side of the wall. The drain still steamed in the dark. The water ran under the wall and into the canal. He Mei stood on the step for a moment and listened to the mill. The looms were running. The night shift was inside. The girls were at the banks with their caps and their earplugs and their red threads under their collars. They did not know she was in the lane. They would come at midnight and find the door closed and the bulb dead.

The alley room was already empty. She had carried her bedding out the day before. The bed board was bare. The shelf was bare. The coat was not on the nail. The coat was on her back. The flyer and the silk thread were still in the lining.

She stood on the step with the box against her hip. The drain ran under the wall. The water was warm. The night shift was starting behind the wall. The looms made their low pressure in the ground.

The executive bin was inside the office, under the shipping supervisor's desk. The black bags were still there. The car would come at three. He Mei went up the back stairs with the box under one arm and the red slip in her hand.

The slip was small and folded. She had not unfolded it since the boiler room. She had not read the answer. She knew the date. She knew the red stamp. She knew the woman's thumbprint. That was enough.

She lifted the lid of the executive bin. The bag inside was black. The smell of coffee and paper came up. The red slip was warm in her hand from the coat lining. The date on it was the fifteenth. The red stamp was still bright. The woman's thumbprint was a small pale mark at the corner.

He Mei did not unfold it. She did not read the answer. She put the red slip on top of the other rubbish. It lay there, red against the black plastic. The office lamp made a small circle on the desk. The clock on the wall ticked. The black bags waited by the door. She closed the lid.

Then she went down the stairs, through the gate, and out into the street.

※

The new cleaner came on Monday.

He Mei did not see her. She heard about her from Old Zhou. The new cleaner was a woman from the next town, hired by a company with a van. She

came at seven and left at nine. She did not work nights. She did not clean the drains. She did not empty the executive bins. The company had a contract. The company sent one woman for the whole mill.

By Wednesday the drain behind the north wall had begun to back up.

The water no longer ran under the fence. It pooled in the gutter and spread across the loading bay. The lint and the sizing waste collected in the grate. The smell came up through the floor. Axiang saw it first. She came to the gate after her shift with her hand over her nose.

"The drain is blocked," she said.

Old Zhou was in the gatehouse with his radio. "The new cleaner does not do drains."

"Who does?"

"The company."

"The company sent one woman."

Old Zhou turned the radio down. "Then the company will find out."

By Thursday the women's bathroom by the canteen had flooded. The floor was gray. The paper towels were gone. The bin had not been emptied. The office put a paper on the door. The paper said the bathroom was out of order. The women used the men's bathroom at the end of the corridor. A supervisor stood outside and counted them. The sink was stopped up. The water sat in the bowl and did not go down. Someone had written a word on the mirror with a wet finger. The word ran before anyone could read it. In the afternoon the canteen staff put a bucket under the leak in the ceiling. The bucket filled by the end of the shift. The office said the roof was being checked. The office said the drains were being checked. The office said the company was responsible.

Xiaoman came to the alley on Thursday night and found the bulb dark.

She stood at the end of the lane with her hands in her sleeves. The door was closed. The step was empty. The drain had overflowed and left a dark stain across the stones. The alley smelled of bleach and rot. The mill was running behind the wall.

Axiang came up behind her. Qiaoyun was with her. They stood in the dark.

"Why did they fire her?" Xiaoman asked.

"Because the office is cutting costs," Axiang said.

"She was the cost."

"She was the cleaning."

"The cleaning is still here. It is on the floor."

Axiang faced the dark door. "The new company charges less."

"For one woman who does not clean the drains."

"The office does not care about the drains."

"Then why did they fire her?"

Axiang did not answer. The others waited. No one spoke.

The drain made a sound. The water had risen to the top of the grate and begun to seep under the door of the alley room. The smell was stronger now. Xiaoman stepped back.

"We should tell the office," she said.

"The office knows."

"Then we should tell someone else."

"Who?"

Xiaoman studied the dark bulb. The glass was still there. The filament was dead. The office had not taken the bulb. It had simply stopped paying for it.

"Where is she?" Xiaoman asked.

"Old Zhou says she is at the next mill."

"The next mill?"

"She went to the next town. The next mill."

"Without saying goodbye?"

Axiang faced the door. "She never says goodbye."

Qiaoyun put her phone away. "The new cleaner does not clean the drains. The office will have to pay someone."

"The office will pay a company," Axiang said. "The company will pay a woman. The woman will not clean the drains either."

"Then the water will come up."

"It is already coming up."

Xiaoman studied the black stain on the step. The drain made its slow, thick sound. The office had not hired He Mei back. The office had hired a company. The company had sent a van and one woman and a contract. The drains were still there. The drains did not care about the contract.

※

He Mei was not at the next mill yet.

She was in a rented room above a noodle shop on the other side of the canal. The room had a bed, a chair, a shelf, and a window that looked onto the street. It cost three hundred yuan a month. The walls were thin. The window did not close all the way. The room was smaller than the alley room, but it had a door that locked.

She had not gone to the office on Monday. She had not gone on Tuesday. On Wednesday she went to the gate and asked Old Zhou for the pay.

"The accountant says you have to sign a form," Old Zhou said.

"What form?"

"The release form. It says you have received your final pay."

"And if I do not sign?"

"Then the accountant says the pay cannot be released."

He Mei turned toward the gatehouse. The clipboard was on the desk. The radio was playing the book-field. The night shift was going in behind the wall.

"Tell the accountant I will come on Friday."

"Are you going to sign?"

"No."

Old Zhou nodded at the radio. "Then you will not get the pay."

"I know."

She went back across the canal. The noodle shop was open. The steam from the pots came out into the street. She bought a bowl of noodles and ate it standing up. The broth was hot. The noodles were soft. She had not eaten since the morning.

※

On Friday the office found the red slip.

He Mei knew because the black car did not come at three.

She stood at the north wall in the dark and kept her eyes on the loading dock. The new cleaner had left at nine. The office window was yellow. The clerk came out at two with the black bags. She put them in the trunk. The car sat low on its

tires. The driver got out and opened the trunk again. He took out one of the black bags and carried it to the office. The clerk followed him.

The light in the office stayed on until four.

The next morning the office clerk came to the gate and asked Old Zhou for He Mei's address.

"What address?" Old Zhou said.

"The address on the release form."

"She did not sign the release form."

"The office needs the address."

"She does not have an address."

The clerk checked the clipboard. "The accountant says the pay cannot be released until the release form is signed."

"Then the pay cannot be released."

The clerk went back into the office. Old Zhou turned the radio up. The book-field voice filled the gatehouse.

※

On Saturday the drains came up through the floor.

The water in the loading bay was ankle-deep. The new cleaner had gone home. The company sent a man with a plunger. He worked for an hour and left. By noon the water was back. The smell reached the first aisle. The supervisor put a fan at the door. The fan blew the smell down the aisle.

The women worked with their aprons over their noses. The looms kept running. The cloth came out wet and gray. The water under the machines rose and fell with the pumps. At the end of the shift the women walked through the loading bay with their trousers rolled up. Their shoes were wet. Their socks were wet. The alley was dark.

Xiaoman stood in the lane with Axiang and Qiaoyun. The door of the alley room was still closed. The step was covered with a black stain. The drain made a slow, thick sound.

"We need a new place," Axiang said.

"The shrine," Xiaoman said.

Axiang turned to her.

"The back of the shrine," Xiaoman said. "Grandmother Xu said the back is for the women. There is a well and a stone table. There is a door that locks."

"The shrine is on the main street."

"The back is not."

Axiang faced the dark door of the alley room. The bulb was dead. The drain was blocked. The mill was running behind the wall.

"Tomorrow," she said. "We will ask the old woman."

They went back through the gate. The night shift was going in. The new cleaner's van was parked by the office. The company name was painted on the side in white letters. The driver was asleep behind the wheel, his cap over his face. The office window was yellow. The black car was not there. In the gatehouse Old Zhou's radio played the book-field. He turned it down when the girls came through the gate. He did not say anything. His eyes went to the dark alley behind them, then to the van.

"The new company," he said.

"The new company," Axiang said.

Old Zhou turned the radio up again. The voice filled the gatehouse. The girls went through the gate and up the road. The van stayed by the office. The driver did not move.

In the office, on the desk, the release form waited with He Mei's name at the top. The accountant had left it there for three days. The pen was beside it. The form had not been signed.

Across the canal He Mei sat on the bed in the rented room above the noodle shop. The window did not close all the way. The street light came through the gap and lay across the floor. The thermos was on the shelf. The cup with the blue rim was beside it. The flyer and the silk thread were still in the coat lining. The red slip was gone.

She took the coat off the nail and put it on the bed. The lining was split at the seam. She touched the flyer and the thread. Then she lay down on the bed with her boots on and listened to the street. The noodle shop closed at eleven. The shutters came down. A dog barked once. The canal water ran under the bridge. The mill was somewhere on the other side of the town, still running. She could not hear it from here.

She thought of the shrine. The back courtyard would be quiet at night. The stone table, the well, the basket under Grandmother Xu's stool. The girls could meet there. They would need a light. They would need a cover. They would need a reason to be there after the market closed. Grandmother Xu would give them a reason. He Mei closed her eyes. The room was cold. She pulled the coat over her and then to her chin. The lining crackled. The flyer and the silk thread were against her side. The mattress was thin. The blanket smelled of dust. She slept with her boots on. The room was dark. The canal ran under the bridge. The window rattled. A line of yellow light came through the gap. The thermos was on the shelf. The cup was beside it. She did not dream. The night was cold. The night went on again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Where do we welcome her?"

The alley was still dark when the girls went to the shrine.

He Mei's door was closed. The bulb was dead. The drain had backed up again and left a black stain across the step. The new cleaner's van was not at the mill. The night shift was running behind the wall. The four of them walked through the gate with their collars turned up and their hands in their sleeves.

Xiaoman carried the basket. It was the winnowing basket from the back room of the shrine, the one Grandmother Xu had put in her hands. Axiang carried a paper bag with the straw woman inside. Qiaoyun carried a jar of ash. Chunxia carried a red thread wound around a piece of cardboard. They went up the main street past the closed shops. The shutters were down. The streetlights were yellow. The shrine gate was open.

Grandmother Xu was sweeping the front courtyard.

She did not look surprised. She leaned the broom against the stone lion and took them through the side gate to the back.

The back courtyard was dark except for one bulb over the storeroom door. The well was covered with a wooden board. The stone table was cold. The bare tree made a black shape against the sky. The cat was not there.

"You can use the back," Grandmother Xu said. "After the market closes. Not before. The front is for the town. The back is for the women."

"Where do we welcome her?" Xiaoman asked.

The old woman touched the stone table. "Here," she said. "The floor is stone. The door locks. The wall is high. The cameras cannot see over it."

"How do you know about the cameras?"

"I am old. I know where they put them."

She went back to the front courtyard. The side gate clicked shut. The four of them stood in the dark with the basket and the ash and the straw.

"All right," Axiang said. "Let us do it."

※

The first rehearsal was a disaster.

Xiaoman put the basket on the stone table and the ash in the basket. She put the figure in the middle of the ash. The figure fell over. She set it upright. It fell over again.

"It has no feet," Qiaoyun said.

"It has a loop," Xiaoman said. "The loop is supposed to hold it."

"The loop is loose."

"Then tie it tighter."

Qiaoyun took the red thread and tied the loop around the straw woman's waist. She pulled too hard. The straw split. The figure bent in the middle.

"Not like that," Axiang said.

"You do it."

Axiang took the thread. Her wrists were wrapped. She could not make the loop with the bandage on. She took the bandage off and tried again. The loop slipped. The figure leaned to one side.

Chunxia took the pencil from behind her ear and began to write the steps on her palm. Axiang took the pencil away. "Nothing written," she said. "Remember?"

Chunxia put the pencil back behind her ear. "Then how will we remember?"

"With your hands."

Xiaoman tried to remember the chant. She sang the line Grandmother Xu had taught them. The sounds came out wrong. Qiaoyun laughed. Xiaoman laughed. The straw figure fell over again.

Axiang tried to sing the next line and forgot the middle. Chunxia tried to count the beats on her fingers and lost the count. Qiaoyun's phone went off again. This time it was a message from her mother. She read it under the table and did not say what it said. Xiaoman took the basket and tried to hold it the way Grandmother Xu had shown her. The basket tipped. The ash slid to one side. The straw woman rolled off the table and landed on the stone.

Qiaoyun picked it up. The straw was bent at the waist. The red loop was still around it. She tried to straighten it. The straw cracked. Chunxia took the figure

and held the two pieces together. Axiang took the thread and wrapped it around the break. Xiaoman held the basket. They stood around the stone table in the candlelight and considered the broken figure.

"It is only straw," Qiaoyun said.

"It is what we have," Axiang said.

At the front of the shrine a shutter rattled. They all went quiet. The side gate was closed. The wall was high. The bulb over the storeroom door buzzed.

"Again," Axiang said.

They tried again. This time Qiaoyun's phone went off in her pocket. The sound was a man's voice, low and quick. She pulled the phone out and silenced it. The screen lit her face.

"Not here," Axiang said.

"I forgot."

"Turn it off."

Qiaoyun turned it off. The courtyard was dark again. The figure lay on the stone table. The ash had spilled out of the basket.

"Maybe we should stop," Qiaoyun said.

"No," Xiaoman said.

She did not know why she said it. She did not believe in the basket. She did not believe in the goddess. But the alley was dark and the drain was blocked and the old woman had been fired. The basket was something they could hold. The chant was something they could learn. The stone table was somewhere the office did not look.

"Again," she said.

"Why are we doing this?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Because the office is counting names," Axiang said.

"That is not an answer."

"Because the drain is blocked," Chunxia said.

"That is not an answer either."

Xiaoman considered the straw woman on the stone. "Because we can." She did not know if that was an answer. It was the only one she had.

※

They came back the next night. And the next.

On the third night they brought a candle. Grandmother Xu had left it on the storeroom shelf with a box of matches. The candle was short and fat. It made a small yellow circle on the stone table. The bare tree moved in the wind. The market was closed. The street was quiet.

Xiaoman held the basket with both hands. She did not put it on the table. She held it at her waist the way Grandmother Xu had shown her. Axiang put the ash in the basket. Chunxia set the straw figure in the ash. Qiaoyun tied the loop. This time the loop held. The figure stood upright.

"Now the words," Axiang said.

Xiaoman sang the line. The sounds came out low and round. She did not know what they meant. She did not need to. Grandmother Xu had said the sound was the door. Xiaoman held the basket and made the sounds.

Axiang sang the next line. Her voice was rough. Qiaoyun sang after her. Chunxia sang last. The four voices did not fit together at first. They stopped. They started again. The candle flame bent. The ash moved in the basket. The straw woman stood.

"Again," Axiang said.

They sang the sounds again. This time the voices fit. The courtyard was quiet except for the chant and the wind in the tree. The basket grew warm in her hands. It was only the candle. It was only her hands. She knew that. She kept singing.

When the chant ended, Qiaoyun's phone was off. Chunxia's pencil was behind her ear. Axiang's bandaged wrists were folded in her lap. The candle burned. The figure stood in the ash.

Grandmother Xu was standing at the side gate. She had come in without a sound. Her broom was in her hand. Her eyes went from the basket to Xiaoman.

"Again," she said. "From the beginning."

They began again. Grandmother Xu stood by the gate. When Qiaoyun's voice went flat, she tapped the broom handle on the stone. When Chunxia lost the beat, she tapped again. When Xiaoman held the basket too high, she put her hand on Xiaoman's wrist and pressed it down.

"The basket is not a bowl," she said. "It is a door. Hold it level."

Xiaoman held it level. Grandmother Xu nodded once and went back through the side gate.

They stayed until the candle burned down. The market was closed. The street beyond the shrine was quiet. They put the basket under the stone table and covered it with a piece of sacking. They put the straw woman in the storeroom. They swept the ash into a paper bag. The courtyard looked as it had before they came. The only sign was a small circle of wax on the stone. Qiaoyun scraped it off with her thumbnail.

"Now ask," Axiang said.

Xiaoman turned the straw figure in her hands. The loop was red. The ash lay still. The basket was old and smooth. She thought of the girls in the dorm. She thought of He Mei in the alley with her box and her thermos. She thought of the new cleaner's van and the blocked drain and the dead bulb.

"Where do we welcome her?" she said.

Axiang held her eyes. "We are welcoming her here."

"No. I mean the question. What do we ask her?"

The courtyard was quiet. The candle flame stood straight. The straw woman did not move.

"We ask for the wages," Chunxia said.

"We ask for the fifteenth," Qiaoyun said.

"We ask for the girl," Axiang said.

Xiaoman took in the figure. The red loop was loose around its waist. The ash had begun to settle. She did not know what to ask. She knew what the others wanted. She knew what she wanted. The words were not the same.

"Ask for all of it," Axiang said.

Xiaoman opened her mouth. The sounds of the chant were still in her throat. She did not know what to say. The candle guttered. The straw woman leaned. She put out her hand and set it upright.

"Ask," Axiang said.

"Will we be paid?" Xiaoman said.

The words came out flat. They were not a chant. They were not a prayer. They were a question. The courtyard was quiet. The basket was warm in her hands.

The candle went out.

For a moment there was only the dark. Then the side gate opened and Grandmother Xu came through with a lantern. The light moved across the stone table, the basket, the straw figure, the four girls kneeling on the cold stone.

"The market is closed," Grandmother Xu said. "You can go out through the back."

She set the lantern on the storeroom shelf. She did not ask what they had said. She did not look at the basket. She took her broom and went back to the front courtyard.

※

The next night He Mei came.

She came through the side gate after the market closed. She was wearing the black coat and carrying the thermos. The red thread was not in her collar. There was no collar. She stood at the edge of the candlelight and took in the basket on the stone table. The light made a yellow line along the edge of her jaw. Her shoes were wet from the street.

"The new company does not clean the back," Axiang said. "We have it to ourselves."

He Mei did not answer. She took in the straw woman, the ash, the four girls kneeling on the stone.

"The office is looking for you," Qiaoyun said. "The accountant has a form."

"I know."

"If you sign it, you get your pay."

"If I sign it, I agree that I have been paid."

Qiaoyun glanced at the basket. "Then do not sign it."

He Mei put the thermos on the stone table. "I am not here about the form." She indicated the basket with her chin. "You moved it."

"The alley is dark," Axiang said.

"The alley was always dark."

"The bulb is dead."

He Mei studied the stone table. She did not sit. She did not take the basket. She stood with the thermos against her chest.

"Who is the priestess?" she asked.

Xiaoman searched the others' faces. Qiaoyun turned to Axiang. Chunxia took in the figure. Axiang met Xiaoman's eyes.

"I am," Xiaoman said.

He Mei faced her for a long time. The candle made shadows under her eyes. She did not smile. She did not frown. She put the thermos on the stone table.

"Then ask," she said.

Xiaoman held the basket. The ash was cold. The straw woman stood. The loop held fast. The words of the chant were in her mouth. She did not know if she believed them. She knew the girls were watching. She knew He Mei was standing in the dark. She knew the office was counting the names. She knew the drain was blocked and the bulb was dead.

"Will the wages come before the New Year?" she said.

He Mei did not answer. The candle flame bent. The straw figure leaned. Xiaoman put out her hand and set it upright. The ash shifted in the basket. The courtyard was quiet. The mill was somewhere beyond the wall, running.

"You are asking the wrong question," He Mei said.

Xiaoman met her eyes. "What is the right one?"

"The one you are afraid to ask."

Xiaoman held the basket. The ash was gray. The straw woman stood. The red loop held. She thought of He Mei in the alley with her box and her thermos. She thought of the drain and the dead bulb and the new cleaner's van. She thought of the girl in the story with the red thread around her wrist.

"What happened to your daughter?" she said.

He Mei held her eyes. The candle made a small light in her eyes. She did not answer. She picked up her thermos. She turned toward the side gate.

"Ask me again after the fifteenth," she said.

She went out. The gate clicked shut. The candle burned. The figure stood in the ash. Xiaoman held the basket until her arms began to ache.

"Again," Axiang said.

They began again. This time no one laughed. Qiaoyun's phone stayed off. Chunxia kept the beat. Axiang's voice was rough but steady. Xiaoman held the basket level. The chant came out low and round. The words did not mean

anything. The sound was the door. They sang until the candle burned down and the ash settled and the straw woman stood still in the middle of the basket.

When they finished, Xiaoman put the basket on the stone table. Her arms were shaking. The courtyard was cold. The market was closed. The shrine was quiet. She turned toward the side gate and thought of He Mei walking back across the canal with her thermos under her arm. Then she put the basket under the table and covered it with the sacking. Qiaoyun put the straw figure in the storeroom. Chunxia swept the ash into the paper bag. Axiang blew out the candle. The four of them went out through the back gate into the alley behind the shrine. The street was quiet. The market was dark. The camera above the front gate could see the front. It could not see the back. They walked home with the basket hidden under Xiaoman's coat and the ash on their shoes. The street was cold. The looms were running beyond the shops. Xiaoman could hear them through the buildings. The basket was warm under her coat. The thread was under her collar. The knots pressed against her skin. The gate was cold. The street was empty. The market was dark. The night was quiet. The lanterns burned. The night was cold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Will the wages really come before New Year?"

He Mei came to the shrine on the tenth night with a plastic bag under her coat.

The girls were in the back courtyard. The basket was on the stone table. The candle was lit. Qiaoyun was holding the straw figure while Chunxia tied the red loop. Axiang was counting the beats under her breath. Xiaoman stood with the ash bowl in her hands.

He Mei set the bag on the stone table.

"Stop," she said.

Axiang looked up. "What is it?"

"Put the basket under the table. Put the straw in the storeroom. Put out the candle."

"We have not finished."

"Finish later."

They did as she said. The courtyard went dark except for the bulb over the storeroom door. He Mei took the plastic bag and opened it on the stone table. The first thing she took out was a handful of packing straps.

They were white plastic straps, the kind used to bind bales of cloth. They were clean. They had not been rained on. There were twelve of them, all the same length, all cut at the same angle. He Mei had counted them on three nights. She had taken them from the dumpster one by one and put them in the plastic bag. The straps still smelled of the warehouse: dust and cardboard and the dry paper smell of the sample room.

"These came from the dumpster behind the loading bay," He Mei said. "On Tuesday there were three. On Wednesday there were seven. Tonight there were twelve. The mill has not shipped twelve bales since the American order came back. The straps are from the warehouse, not the floor. Somebody is packing the sample room."

Axiang picked up one of the straps. "Maybe they are moving stock."

"They are moving something."

He Mei took a folded receipt from the bag. It was thin and gray. The paper had the name of a truck company at the top and a date at the bottom. She put it on the table.

"Three trucks," she said. "Nine and a half meters each. Booked for the night of the fifteenth. Two in the morning. The deposit was paid in cash."

Chunxia leaned over the receipt. She read the date. "The fifteenth is five days away."

"Yes."

"Who booked them?"

"The office manager. The name is at the top. The same name is on the black bags."

Xiaoman took the receipt. "Where did you get this?"

"From the bin behind the office. The new cleaner leaves the paper for the canteen staff. The canteen staff leave it for the rats. I took it before the rats did."

He Mei took the next thing from the bag. It was the travel flyer. The blue bay shone in the dim light. The white bridge crossed the water. The red sun was in the corner. The paper was soft at the folds.

"I found this in the shredder in January," she said. "There is a date on the back. The sixteenth of February. The day after the trucks. And the word Hanoi."

Axiang took the flyer. "It is a travel agency."

"Yes."

"How do you know it belongs to the boss?"

He Mei took a small white card from the bag. It had a phone number printed on it in red. She put it beside the flyer. The number on the card was the same as the number on the flyer.

"The card was in the executive bin," she said. "The truck company gave it to the office manager. The same company arranges the trucks and the tour. The boss is on the list. The sixteenth."

The four girls took in the objects on the stone table: the packing straps, the truck receipt, the flyer, the card with the red number.

"The car that takes the black bags," Xiaoman said. "Is it the same company?"

"The car has no name," He Mei said. "But the driver carries the same card. He gave one to the office manager. The office manager left it in the bin with the receipt."

"Why would they keep the card?"

"Because they thought the bin was safe."

"And now?"

"Now they know it is not."

"The wages," Axiang said. "Will the wages really come before New Year?"

He Mei held her eyes. "The New Year is behind us."

"Then why did he say it?"

"Because we needed to keep working."

Axiang's face went still. Qiaoyun put her hand over her mouth. Chunxia read the truck receipt. Xiaoman read the flyer. The candle was out. The bulb over the storeroom door hummed.

"He is going to move the stock on the fifteenth," He Mei said. "The trucks come at two. The stock goes to the dock or the warehouse. The boss goes the next day. The money goes with him."

"What about the laoban-niang?" Axiang asked.

He Mei touched the flyer. "She is not on the list."

"Then she stays."

"Somebody has to stay with the mill."

"Does she know?"

"I do not know what she knows."

"The wages?"

"There is enough in the account for one part. The bank man has seen to that. The second part will not come."

"What is one part?" Qiaoyun asked.

"One month of the base wage. Not the overtime. Not the night shift. Not the deductions. Not the part they promised before New Year."

"Then it is not the wages."

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Because the second part is not in the account. Because the bank man came on Friday and studied the books. Because the office has stopped ordering parts. Because the trucks are booked for the fifteenth and the boss is booked for the sixteenth. Because no one books a truck and a boat on the same week unless they are leaving."

"A boat?" Chunxia said.

"The flyer is for a tour. A tour goes on a plane. The trucks go to the dock. It is the same leaving."

He Mei took the last paper from the bag. It was the bank slip. She put it on the table beside the truck receipt. The numbers were small. The balance was smaller than the payroll. She had found it in the office bin three days before, folded inside a receipt for a restaurant lunch. The restaurant receipt was for four people. The bank slip was for one account. The account had been opened in the name of the mill. The balance had gone down by half in two weeks.

"I read the bank slip," she said. "I read the truck receipt. I read the flyer. I read the packing waste. The same twelve straps. The same date. The same phone number. The same man. The same car that takes the black bags at three."

The courtyard was quiet. The girls took in the chain of paper on the stone table. The packing straps were white against the dark. The flyer was blue. The bank slip was gray. The red number on the card looked like a small mark of blood.

"Five days," Chunxia said.

"Five days," He Mei said.

"What do we do?"

He Mei put her hand on the table. The thermos was beside her. The red thread was not in her collar. She was not wearing the coat. The coat was in her room above the noodle shop. The flyer was on the table now. The silk thread was still in the lining.

"We tell someone," she said. "Not the office. Not the supervisor. Someone who can stop a truck."

"Who?"

"The labor bureau. The police. The town. Anyone who will listen."

Axiang tapped the truck receipt. "The trucks come at two. The fifteenth is a festival. The whole town will be out. The gate will be crowded. The trucks cannot move if the gate is blocked."

"The gate is not blocked yet."

"Then we block it."

He Mei held her eyes. The bulb over the storeroom door flickered. The straw figure was in the storeroom. The basket was under the table. The ashes were in a paper bag. The girls stood around the stone table with their red threads under their collars.

"Five days," He Mei said again. "Do not write it down. Do not put it in the group. Do not tell anyone who has a phone in their hand."

"Then how do we tell the others?" Qiaoyun asked.

"One by one. Hand to hand. Knot to knot."

Axiang began to name them. Meihua first. Then the women on the third bank. Then the women on the second bank who had signed the forms. Then the women in the dorm who had not signed but had heard the story. She named them in a low voice. He Mei listened. Some names she knew. Some she did not. The list was longer than she had thought. The list was the only thing the office could not take from them.

Xiaoman read the flyer. The blue bay and the white bridge. The date on the back. The sixteenth. The day after the trucks. She thought of the boss standing on the bright floor with his cigarette and his small yellow teeth. She thought of the signed forms in the box. She thought of the receipts hidden in shoes and coat linings and under the bunk boards. She thought of the drain behind the north wall, blocked and black.

"How many days?" she asked.

"Five," He Mei said. "Today is the tenth. The trucks come on the night of the fifteenth."

Xiaoman counted on her fingers. The tenth. The eleventh. The twelfth. The thirteenth. The fourteenth. The fifteenth. Five days between the tenth and the fifteenth, and then the night.

"Five days," she said.

He Mei folded the flyer and put it inside her shirt, against her ribs. The truck receipt went into the fire. The packing straps went into the fire. The bank slip went into the fire. The white card with the red number went last.

She held the card by the corner until the flame reached her fingers. The red number darkened. The white card curled. The smoke went up into the storeroom light and spread under the roof. The paper smell mixed with the incense from the front hall. The courtyard was cold. The fire was small. The girls stood in a circle around the stone table while the last of the evidence turned to ash. Then He Mei put the ash in the paper bag with the rest and tied the top. The courtyard smelled of burnt paper and incense. She put the bag under the stone table. The bulb over the storeroom door flickered. The market was quiet.

At the front of the shrine a shutter rattled. The girls went still. A car passed on the main street. The light moved across the top of the wall and was gone. Qiaoyun put her hand over her phone. Xiaoman put her hand over the basket under the table. Axiang looked toward the side gate. He Mei did not move.

"They do not know we are here," she said. "They do not know the papers are gone."

"Go home," He Mei said. "Sleep. Tomorrow we begin."

"What do we do first?" Xiaoman asked.

"Count the knots," He Mei said. "Tell the girls who can be told. One by one. The ones who cannot be told, leave alone. The ones with families, tell them first. The ones with children, tell them first. The ones whose names are on the office list, tell them first. Do not tell the ones with the phones in their hands in the group. Do not tell the ones who talk to the supervisors. Do not tell the new girl. She has not been here long enough to know the difference between a story and a warning."

"And the labor bureau?" Axiang asked.

"Old Zhou knows the number. He has the radio. He can find the number. One call. Not a crowd. Not a march. One call from the gate shop."

"Will they come?"

"They will come on the fifteenth. They will see the trucks. The trucks will not move."

"And if the labor bureau does not come?" Chunxia asked.

"Then the girls will be at the gate with their lanterns. The trucks cannot move through a crowd. The labor bureau will come because the town will be watching. The town will come because it is the fifteenth. The opera is at the front. The crowd is at the front. The trucks are at the back. We will bring the crowd to the back."

Axiang touched the stone table. "The shrine is at the front. The back is ours."

"The back is ours," He Mei said. The four girls stayed in the courtyard for a moment. The basket was under the table. The straw figure was in the storeroom. The candle was out. The market was closed. The shrine was quiet.

Axiang picked up the bag. "Five days."

Chunxia put her pencil behind her ear. "Five days."

Qiaoyun turned her phone off. "Five days."

Xiaoman turned toward the dark side gate. "Do we tell the old woman?"

Axiang glanced toward the storeroom door. "She already knows."

They went out through the back gate. The street was quiet. The mill was running beyond the shops. The looms made their low pressure in the ground. Xiaoman could hear them through the buildings. She counted her fingers again. Five days.

The shrine door closed behind them. The market was dark. The side gate was locked. The basket was under the stone table. The straw figure was in the storeroom. The ash was in the paper bag. The flyer was inside He Mei's shirt. The truck receipt was ash. The red number was ash. The night was cold. The girls walked up the street with their heads down and their hands in their sleeves. At the gate Old Zhou was in the gatehouse with the radio on. The book-field voice was low. He saw them and turned the volume down.

"Five days," Axiang said.

Old Zhou nodded at the radio. "I know a number," he said. "The labor bureau. It is in the phone book at the shop."

"Can you call?"

"I can call."

"Not today."

"Not today," Old Zhou said. "But soon."

He Mei crossed the canal alone. The noodle shop was closing. The shutters came down. The street light made a yellow square on the water. The flyer was inside her shirt. The coat was in the room above the shop. She climbed the stairs and opened the door. The thermos was on the shelf. The cup was beside it. She took the flyer out and put it on the floor beside her. The blue bay looked up at her from the paper. The white bridge was only a thin line in the dark. She sat with her back against the bed and listened to the canal. Five days. The trucks would come at two. The town would be at the front. The back would be hers. The room was cold. She pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. She put her hand on the flyer. The paper was cold. The red number stayed in her head. She counted the days on her fingers. The tenth. The eleventh. The twelfth. The thirteenth. The fourteenth. The fifteenth. The canal ran under the bridge. The room was dark. The window rattled. The thermos was on the shelf. The cup beside it was cold. The flyer stayed on the floor. She did not sleep. The night was long. The night went on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Who do we tell?"

Xiaoman counted the knots on the dormitory floor before dawn.

The room was still dark. The bulb in the corridor made a thin line under the door. The girls were asleep in their bunks, their coats over the blankets, their shoes under the beds. Xiaoman sat on the floor with her back against the wall and a bundle of ruined thread in her lap.

The thread had come from the waste bin behind the third bank. It was the short ends the winders cut away, too tangled for the loom. Axiang had brought a handful in her apron pocket and put it under Xiaoman's pillow. Red, blue, gray, green. The colors were not for beauty. They were for counting.

Red for the third bank. Blue for the second. Gray for the winding room. Green for the dorm.

Xiaoman tied a knot for each woman she could trust.

Axiang had given her the names in the bathroom the night before, with the tap running. She had said them slowly, one by one, and Xiaoman had tied a knot for each. Qiaoyun had given her the names from the second bank. Chunxia had given her the winding room. Yanzi had given her the girls in the dorm who did not talk in the group. Meihua had given her the canteen women, the ones who carried their own rice bowls and did not eat at the supervisor's table.

By the time the first bell rang, Xiaoman had forty-one knots.

Sixteen red. Twelve blue. Seven gray. Six green. She knew each one by the name she had tied into it. The names were not written anywhere. They were in her fingers and in the dark behind her eyes. The forty-one were not the loudest women or the bravest women. They were the ones who had already lost something: a month of pay, a finger, a baby, a name on the office list. They were the ones who had someone waiting at home. They were the ones who had nothing left to lose that the office had not already taken.

She put the thread in her collar and went down to the bathroom.

There was one name she had tied twice and then untied. Yanzi. The loop at Yanzi's collar was not a knot. The loop meant wait. Xiaoman did not know what Yanzi was waiting for. She knew the girl had been to the clinic. She knew the girl had a boyfriend who did not write. She knew the girl had stood in the bathroom with her hand over her mouth and said nothing. The loop was a question. Xiaoman did not tie a knot for the question. She tied a knot for the girl.

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The question came at the shrine that afternoon.

They met in the back courtyard before the market closed. The straw figure was in the storeroom. The basket was under the stone table. The ash was in a paper bag. Axiang had brought a pot of tea in a thermos. Qiaoyun had brought a plastic bag of steamed buns. Chunxia had brought her notebook, but she did not open it.

Xiaoman put the bundle of thread on the stone table.

"Forty-one," she said.

Axiang leaned over the knots. "Forty-one what?"

"Forty-one women we can tell."

"How many did we count?"

"Sixty-three in the dorm and the three banks. Maybe more in the winding room. Maybe more on the day shift."

"Then forty-one is not enough."

"It is enough to start."

Qiaoyun picked up the red thread. "Who did you leave out?"

Xiaoman named the ones she had left out. The woman on the second bank whose husband drove the office van. The woman in the winding room who talked in the group chat every night. The new girl from the canteen, the one who had asked if someone died here. The girl who had come from the same village as the supervisor's cousin. The woman who had taken the office's side in the last pay dispute. The ones with brothers in the office. The ones whose phones were never locked.

Axiang listened. Her bandaged wrists were folded on the table. "You left out Meihua's cousin."

"She is on the day shift. She eats with the supervisor."

"She is still a worker."

"She is a worker who tells the supervisor what the workers say."

Qiaoyun put the red thread down. "We cannot tell everyone. If we tell everyone, the office will know by morning."

"Then who do we tell?" Xiaoman asked.

Axiang counted the knots. "The ones who have already lost something. The ones who have receipts. The ones whose names are on the list. The ones who have children. The ones who have nowhere else to go."

"That is not a number."

"It is a start."

Xiaoman untied one red knot and tied it again. "Forty-one," she said. "We tell forty-one. One by one. Hand to hand."

"And the other twenty-two?"

"We do not tell them. Not yet. Not until the fifteenth."

Qiaoyun turned toward the gate. "What if they see us and ask?"

"Then we say we are going to the lantern market."

"We are going to the lantern market."

"Yes."

Chunxia reached for her pencil, then stopped. "What about the labor bureau?"

"Old Zhou is going to call."

"When?"

"Today."

"Will they listen to an old man in a gatehouse?"

"He is not calling as an old man. He is calling as a witness."

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The gate shop stood on the corner of the main street and the lane that led to the mill.

It sold cigarettes and phone cards and bags of sunflower seeds. It had a public telephone in a red booth by the door. The booth had a plastic seat and a receiver on a metal cord. The receiver was warm from the last person who had used it.

The shop woman sat behind the counter with a small television turned to a drama. The sound was turned down. The subtitles ran across the bottom of the screen.

Xiaoman stood across the street with her hands in her sleeves. Old Zhou came out of the gatehouse at four o'clock with a piece of paper in his hand. He crossed the road without looking at the traffic. He went into the shop, bought a phone card, and went into the booth.

He dialled the number from the paper. Xiaoman could see his lips move. He waited. He checked the paper again. He waited. Then he spoke.

The shop smelled of fried dough and cigarette smoke and the sweet chemical smell of the phone card. The red booth was scratched with names and numbers. A dead moth lay in the light fixture. The receiver cord was gray and coiled. Old Zhou stood with his back to the street and his cap in his hand. The television audience laughed again. The shop woman turned a page of her magazine. A man bought a pack of cigarettes and stood by the door, smoking, not looking at the booth. Xiaoman kept her eyes on Old Zhou's shoulders. They did not move. He listened for a long time. Then he said something. Then he listened again.

She could not hear the words through the glass. She could see his shoulders. They did not move. He was not shouting. He was not pleading. He held the receiver the way he held his kettle, with both hands. He listened. He checked the paper. He nodded. He said something short. He listened again. Then he hung up.

He came out of the booth and stood on the pavement for a moment. The receiver was still warm. The booth smelled of cigarettes. The street was cold. The shop woman did not look up from her drama. The television audience laughed.

Old Zhou crossed the road and came back to the gatehouse. Xiaoman stayed across the street for a moment. Before she crossed, she went into the shop and bought a phone card she did not need. The shop woman put it in a paper sleeve and gave her the change. The card had a picture of a red lantern on it. Xiaoman put it in her pocket and went out. The man by the door kept his eyes on her until she reached the road. He had a cigarette in his hand and a phone against his ear. She did not look at him. She crossed the road and met Old Zhou at the gate.

"Well?" she said.

He held out his hand. On his palm, in blue ballpoint, he had written a number.

"A complaint number," he said. "They asked how many. I said more than forty. They asked if there were receipts. I said yes. They asked if anyone had been hurt. I said yes. They asked if the trucks were loaded. I said not yet. They said file the complaint at the window before the festival. They said if the trucks move before the complaint is filed, call the police, not the labor bureau. Two men will come on the fifteenth."

"Two men?"

"Two. Maybe three. They said if there are receipts, bring a worker to the window."

"Which window?"

"The labor bureau window. In town. Before the festival."

"Will they come to the mill?"

"They said they will come to the mill if the complaint is filed."

"Then we need to file it."

Old Zhou studied the number on his palm. "Axiang should go. She has the receipts. She has the wrists. She has the face they will remember."

"And Chunxia."

"Chunxia has the notebook."

"The notebook has numbers. Not names."

"Then she can bring the numbers."

Xiaoman turned toward the gatehouse. The radio was on the desk. The book-field voice was low. The clipboard was on the wall. The names of the night shift were written in blue ink.

"How much does it cost?" she asked.

"The call? Two yuan."

"The complaint?"

"Nothing. The complaint is free."

"Then why did no one do it before?"

Old Zhou turned toward the gate. A truck was backing into the loading bay. The driver leaned on the horn twice.

"Because someone has to be the first to say the words," he said.

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That night Xiaoman told the first group.

They met in the bathroom by the canteen, six of them, with the tap running. The camera above the door could see the handle. It could not see the sink. Xiaoman stood with her back to the mirror and the bundle of thread in her hand.

"The fifteenth," she said. "The trucks come at two in the morning. The boss is leaving the next day. The wages are not coming."

The women exchanged glances. Meihua's hand went to her mouth. A woman from the third bank faced the door. Another woman, older, with a burn scar on her wrist, folded her arms.

"My daughter is in the dorm," the older woman said. "If I stand at the gate, she will stand with me."

"Then tell her to stay inside."

"She will not stay inside."

"Then tell her to stand at the back."

"The back is where the trucks go."

Xiaoman studied the thread in her hand. "Then tell her to stand at the front and shout."

"What do we do?" Meihua asked.

"We go to the gate. We bring lanterns. We stand in the road. The trucks cannot move through a crowd."

"The police will move us."

"The police will be at the front for the festival. We will be at the back. The labor bureau is coming. Old Zhou called."

"One call?"

"One call."

The older woman studied the tap. "My husband says the office has a list. If we stand at the gate, they will put our names on it."

"Your name is already on it," Xiaoman said. "You signed the form."

The woman's face changed. She studied the thread in Xiaoman's hand. "Then I will stand."

Xiaoman tied a knot in the red thread. She gave it to the woman. The woman put it inside her collar.

"One," Xiaoman said.

She went to the next woman. Then the next. The tap ran. The camera above the door did not blink. The knots passed from hand to hand. The women left one by one, their collars turned up, their shoes soft on the wet floor. Meihua went first. The older woman went last. She stopped at the door and looked back at Xiaoman.

"If the trucks do not come," she said, "we will look like fools."

"Then we will look like fools who kept their receipts."

"And if the labor bureau does not come?"

"Then we will still have the receipts."

The woman studied the thread in her collar. She nodded and went out.

At the end of the night there were forty-one knots in the red thread. Xiaoman put the thread inside her shirt, against her skin. The knots pressed against her ribs. She could count them without looking.

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The next morning she went to the alley.

He Mei's door was closed. The bulb was dead. The drain had backed up and left a black stain across the step. Xiaoman stood at the end of the lane with her hands in her sleeves.

The door opened.

He Mei stood in the doorway with a coat over her arm. She was not wearing the black coat. She was wearing a gray sweater and a pair of men's trousers. Her hair was flat on one side.

"Who do we tell?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei turned to her. "You already know."

"Forty-one."

"That is not enough."

"It is enough to start."

He Mei came out onto the step. The drain ran between them. The water was black. The smell was bad.

"The office will know by tonight," she said.

"Then we tell the rest tomorrow."

"Not the ones with the phones."

"Not the ones with the phones."

He Mei studied the alley. The new cleaner's van was not there. The mill was running behind the wall.

"Old Zhou called the labor bureau," Xiaoman said.

He Mei's face did not change. "What did they say?"

"Two men on the fifteenth. If we file a complaint before the festival."

"Then file it."

"Axiang will go. Chunxia will go."

"Not you."

"No."

He Mei turned to her. "Why not you?"

"Because Axiang has been here longer. Her card is clean."

He Mei was quiet. The drain made its slow, thick sound. The black stain on the step had begun to dry at the edges.

"Forty-one knots," she said. "Keep them dry."

"What if they ask who started it?"

"They will not ask. They will ask who signed the forms. They will ask who has the receipts. They will ask who was on the night shift. They will not ask who tied the knots."

Xiaoman put her hand inside her shirt. The thread was there. The knots were small and hard.

"I will," she said.

She went back up the lane. The gate light was on. The mill was running. The night shift was going in. She could hear the looms through the wall. She counted the knots under her breath again. One. Two. Three. Forty-one. The phone card in her pocket had a red lantern on it. The lantern was printed in shiny red ink. She could feel the edge of the card through the cloth. It was the only red thing she had that was not a knot. The phone card was in her pocket. The thread was in her collar. The mill was running.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What if she’s wrong?”

The new cleaner left a black bag behind the boiler room on Tuesday night.

He Mei found it at the bottom of the stairs, folded at the top, tied with a knot she did not recognize. The new cleaner came from the next town. She did not speak much. She had taken the job because the company paid by the hour and did not ask for a work card. He Mei had given her a pair of wool gloves in January and a tin of tea at the New Year. In return, the new cleaner left one bag a week behind the boiler-room door.

The bag was not supposed to leave the mill. The black bags went into the car at three. But one bag a week could be lost. One bag a week could be carried through the gatehouse in a rice sack and up the main street to the shrine. Axiang carried it on her hip like a bag of rice. She walked past Old Zhou with her face turned toward the canal. Old Zhou kept his eyes on the radio and did not look at the sack. The bag was heavy. The paper inside shifted with every step.

Axiang brought it on Wednesday evening. She put it on the stone table in the back courtyard and stepped away. The bag smelled of coffee and paper and the sweet chemical smell of the office printer.

Xiaoman stood by the storeroom door with her arms folded. Qiaoyun was at the side gate with her phone off. Chunxia was not there. She was at the labor bureau with Axiang’s receipts, waiting in a line that had not moved all afternoon.

He Mei opened the bag.

The first layer was the usual: carbon copies, a receipt for printer paper, a torn envelope, a paper cup with lipstick on the rim. Under that was a sheet of paper that had not been folded.

It was a purchase order.

He Mei lifted it out by the corner. The paper was white. The ink was black. The columns were straight. At the top was the name of a domestic buyer. At the bottom was a date, a signature, and a red stamp.

Xiaoman leaned closer. “What is it?”

“An order.”

“How much?”

He Mei read the numbers. She could not read all of them, but she knew the shape of the number. It was enough to pay the wages. It was enough to keep the mill open for a month.

“An order for cloth,” she said. “A big one.”

Axiang’s face changed. “A rescue order?”

“That is what it says.”

“Then the boss was telling the truth.”

He Mei put the paper on the stone table. The white sheet lay on the dark stone. It was very clean. There was no rain on it. There was no coffee stain. There was no crease from a pocket. The red stamp was bright. The ink smelled of the printer. The paper was warm from the office. The order had been printed that day and carried straight to the bin.

“Maybe,” she said.

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The second thing she found was a bank receipt.

It was folded once, not twice. The paper was stiff. The account number was printed in black. The deposit was large. The date was the day before. It was a Sunday. The banks in town were closed on Sunday. The ink was still sharp at the edges.

Xiaoman examined it. “He had the money.”

“He had a piece of paper that says he had the money.”

“It is a bank receipt.”

“It is a piece of paper.”

Axiang picked up the receipt. Her bandaged wrist was steady. “The bank man came on Friday. You said the account was empty.”

“I said the account was empty on Friday.”

“Then this is the money.”

“Maybe.”

“You keep saying maybe.”

“Because the paper keeps changing.”

He Mei put the receipt beside the purchase order. The two white sheets lay side by side. The ink was very black. The paper was very clean.

The third thing she found was a cigarette pack.

It was Liqun long filter. The cellophane was tight. The tax stamp was unbroken. It was the most expensive pack in the gate shop. Old Sheng had smoked Daqianmen for two years. He had smoked Daqianmen the day he stood on the bright floor and promised the wages. He had dropped the cigarette on the concrete and stepped on it.

He Mei put the pack on the stone table.

Axiang examined it. "He changed brands."

"He did not change brands."

"You just said he did."

"I said the pack was in the bag. I did not say he smoked it."

Xiaoman turned the pack over. "It is not opened."

"No."

"There is no ash."

"No."

"There is no receipt."

"No."

He Mei turned the pack over. The cellophane was smooth. The pack was cold. There was no smell of tobacco. The paper inside had not been pressed by a pocket. The carton had not been in the office for more than a day.

"He is salting the bin," she said.

Axiang's face went still. "What does that mean?"

"He is putting things in the trash for me to find. An order that says the money is coming. A receipt that says the account is full. A cigarette that says he is not afraid. He wants me to read a rescue."

"Then what if you are wrong?" Xiaoman said. "What if she's wrong?" She turned to Axiang. "What if the order is real?"

He Mei read the white paper. The courtyard was quiet. The market was closing. The shutters came down one by one. The bulb over the storeroom door buzzed.

"Then we will lose nothing by waiting," she said. "If the order is real, the trucks will not come. If the trucks do not come, we will still be at the gate with our lanterns. We will look like fools. We will still have our receipts."

"And if the order is fake?"

"Then the boss has learned that I read the trash."

"He already knew that."

"He knew I read the trash. He did not know I read the lying."

※

They did not tell the forty-one.

That was the test.

On Thursday the office put a notice on the board. The notice said the mill had received a new domestic order. It said the order would be processed after the festival. It said the wages would be paid in full before the end of the month. It said the office thanked the workers for their patience.

The women read the notice. Some of them smiled. Some of them cried. One woman from the winding room put her hand over her mouth and said a prayer. Meihua ran to the bathroom and washed her face. Another woman took out her phone and called her husband. The supervisor stood by the board with his clipboard and checked their faces. Axiang stood at the back of the crowd and did not move. Xiaoman stood beside her and did not move.

He Mei heard about it from Axiang. Axiang had been at the labor bureau all morning. The line had moved. The clerk had taken the receipts and given her a yellow slip. The complaint was filed. The clerk said a man would come to the mill on the fifteenth.

"The office says the order is real," Axiang said.

"The office says a lot of things."

"The women believe it."

"Let them believe it."

"They are not going to stand at the gate."

"They will stand at the gate."

"How do you know?"

"Because you will tell them."

Axiang turned to her. "You want me to lie."

"No. I want you to tell them the truth. The truth is that the order is on a piece of paper. The trucks are on a piece of paper. The only thing that is not on paper is the money."

※

On Friday the new cleaner did not leave a bag.

He Mei went down to the boiler room at dusk. The corridor was empty. The new cleaner's van was by the office. The office window was yellow. The black bags were stacked by the loading dock. The car would come at three.

There was no bag behind the door.

She stood in the boiler room for a long time. The fire was low. The pipes ticked. The mop she had used for six years stood in the corner where she had left it. No one had moved it. No one had used it.

On the wall by the door someone had written a mark in chalk. It was not a word. It was a shape. A circle with a line through it. He Mei examined it. She did not know what it meant. She did not need to. The office had found the missing bag. The new cleaner had been told. The channel was closed.

She went back up the stairs and through the gate. Old Zhou was in the gatehouse with his radio on. The book-field voice was low. He turned it down when she came past.

"The new cleaner is gone," he said.

"Gone where?"

"Back to the next town. The company sent another woman."

"Did she leave anything?"

"A bag. The office took it."

He Mei turned toward the gate. The van was still by the office. The driver was not asleep. He was standing by the van with his phone against his ear.

"The office knows," she said.

"The office always knows."

"Not everything."

Old Zhou turned to her. "No," he said. "Not everything."

※

On Saturday the office sent a message.

It came through the supervisor. He called the women together on the bright floor at the end of the shift. He stood on a cloth bale and held up a sheet of paper.

"The order is confirmed," he said. "The deposit is in the bank. The boss has signed the contract. The wages will be paid. The trucks are not coming. There is no need for anyone to stand at the gate."

The women exchanged glances. Some of them turned to Axiang. Some of them kept their eyes on the floor.

Axiang folded her arms. She did not say anything. Meihua put her hand over her mouth. The older woman with the burn scar faced Xiaoman. Xiaoman checked the clock above the door. The clock had stopped at four.

The supervisor held up the paper. "The office is arranging a bus for the Lantern Festival," he said. "A bus to the shrine. The boss is paying. Everyone can go. No one needs to work."

A murmur went through the women. The woman from the winding room put her hand over her mouth. Meihua faced the door. The older woman with the burn scar kept her eyes on the ground. The supervisor smiled. It was the first time He Mei had seen him smile. The smile stayed on his face too long. It did not reach his eyes. He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

The women were quiet. The looms behind them were still. The water in the pipes knocked.

"What about the night shift?" Axiang asked.

"The night shift can go after the trucks are loaded."

The women exchanged glances again.

"That is all," he said.

He went back into the office. The door closed. The women stood on the bright floor. The looms began to start again, one by one. The water ran in the gutters. The smell of oil and wet cloth came up through the floor.

Axiang turned to Xiaoman. "He said the trucks are not coming."

Xiaoman faced the closed office door. "He said the trucks are loaded after the festival. He did not say they are not coming."

"That is the same thing."

"No."

"Then what do we do?"

Xiaoman checked the clock. It had stopped at four. It had been stopped for three days.

"We do nothing," she said. "We do not tell anyone. We do not change the plan. We go to the shrine. We light the lanterns. We wait."

Axiang turned to her. "What if she's wrong?"

"She is not wrong."

"How do you know?"

"Because she told us to keep the receipts. The office told us to get on the bus. The receipts are still in our shoes."

※

That night He Mei sat in the back courtyard with the fake cigarette pack on the stone table.

The basket was under the table. The straw figure was in the storeroom. The candle was out. The market was closed. The shrine was quiet.

Axiang came through the side gate with the yellow slip from the labor bureau. She put it on the stone table beside the cigarette pack. The slip was thin and creased from her pocket. The number at the top was written in blue ink.

He Mei read the slip. "They took it."

"They took it. The man said the complaint is filed. Two men will come on the fifteenth."

"Did they ask about the order?"

"They asked if we had proof. I gave them the receipts."

"Did they believe you?"

Axiang turned the cigarette pack over. "They believe the receipts."

He Mei picked up the pack. The cellophane was tight. The tax stamp was unbroken. The brand was Liqun long filter, the most expensive pack in the gate shop. She turned it over. The bottom of the pack had a date printed on it. The

date was the sixth of the month. The pack had been made three weeks before. The cellophane had not been wrinkled. The pack had not been in a pocket. The pack had not been smoked.

"He is learning," she said.

"Learning what?"

"To lie in our language."

She put the pack in the fire.

The cellophane caught first. It shrank and turned black. The paper inside burned slowly. The smell was not tobacco. It was hot plastic and paper and something sweet. The pack curled. The Liqun name turned brown. The tax stamp went last. The flame bent toward the draft from the side gate. The ash lifted and settled on the stone.

Axiang kept her eyes on the burning pack. "What if he tries again?"

"He will try again."

"And if he lies better?"

"Then we will read better."

"What if he stops putting paper in the bin?"

"Then we will read the absence."

Axiang studied the gray ash on the stone. "The absence of what?"

"Of the things he cannot help throwing away. The cigarette he smoked before he wrote the lie. The receipt for the paper. The ink cartridge. The man who carried the bag. The car that came at three. He can plant a paper. He cannot stop leaving a trail."

He Mei put the poker back on the shelf. The ash lay still. The courtyard was dark. The gate was locked. The mill was running beyond the wall. The sound came through the ground and into the stone.

"Five days," Axiang said.

"Four," He Mei said. "Today is the eleventh."

Axiang folded the yellow slip and put it in her shoe. The market was dark. The canal carried the sound of the mill. The smoke thinned. The courtyard smelled of hot plastic. The cat was not there. A bicycle passed in the market street. The night was cold. The smoke thinned. The courtyard was cold. The gate

was locked. The market was dark. The mill was running. The night was long. The night went on again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Can the trucks move on the night of the fifteenth?”

Xiaoman drew the plan on the dormitory floor with ruined thread.

It was after lights-out. The corridor bulb made a line under the door. The girls were in their bunks, but no one was asleep. Axiang sat on the lower bunk with her bandaged wrists in her lap. Qiaoyun sat on the floor with her phone off. Chunxia had her notebook under her knee but did not open it. Yanzi was at the end of the room with her blanket over her shoulders. Meihua stood by the door with her ear against the wood.

The thread had come from the waste bin behind the third bank. Red for the shrine road. Blue for the canal. Gray for the loading dock. Green for the dorm. Yellow for the main gate. Xiaoman had wound each color around a piece of cardboard and put the cardboard under her pillow.

She laid the red thread first.

It ran from the corner of the dorm floor to the middle of the room and turned toward the door. That was the shrine road. The shrine was at the top of the main street. The market was on both sides. The opera stage was in the front courtyard. The lantern procession would start there after dark.

She laid the blue thread along the red one. That was the canal. The canal ran behind the mill and under the bridge. The back lane was narrow. A truck could not turn there. A car could.

She laid the gray thread across the blue. That was the loading dock. The dock was inside the mill wall. The trucks would come up the ramp and turn onto the main road. The ramp was wide enough for a nine-and-a-half-meter truck. The gate was wide enough for one truck at a time.

She laid the green thread around the dorm. That was the dorm. The dorm was outside the mill wall, across the yard from the gate. The girls could come out through the side door and be at the gate in three minutes.

She laid the yellow thread last. That was the main gate. The gate was old iron. It opened inward. The guardhouse was on the left. Old Zhou's radio was inside. The labor bureau men would come from the town and stand by the guardhouse.

Xiaoman put a knot on each thread. The knots were small and close together. She could feel them through the soles of her feet when she knelt on the floor. The thread map was not to scale. The shrine road was too long. The loading dock was too close. The dorm was a green circle at the edge of the blanket. But the shape was right. The shape was the whole town.

"Who is where?" Axiang asked.

Xiaoman touched the knots. "Meihua at the dorm door. Yanzi at the side gate. Chunxia at the labor bureau window until they close. Qiaoyun on the roof of the gate shop with the phone. You at the mill gate with the third bank. I am at the shrine."

"Who is at the loading dock?"

"Two women from the winding room. The ones who gave us the thread."

"Can they be trusted?"

"They have receipts."

"That is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing now."

"What about the back lane?" Axiang asked.

"Yanzi's cousin. She lives by the canal. She can see the bridge from her window."

"Can she be trusted?"

"She does not have a phone."

"That is not a reason."

"It is a reason tonight."

Axiang put her finger on the blue thread. "The back lane is narrow. A truck cannot turn there."

"A car can."

"The boss has a car."

"Then we need someone at the bridge."

"We have Yanzi's cousin."

"Does she know what to look for?"

"She knows what a car sounds like at two in the morning."

Axiang read the thread map. The red line ran from the shrine to the mill gate. The yellow line crossed it. The gray line went to the loading dock. The blue line went to the canal.

"Can the trucks move on the night of the fifteenth?" she asked.

Xiaoman read the map. The trucks would come at two in the morning. The festival would be over at midnight. The crowd would go home. The street would be empty. The gate would be closed. The trucks would move.

"Not if the crowd is still there," she said.

"The crowd goes home after the opera."

"Then we keep the crowd."

"How?"

Xiaoman reached under her pillow and took out a square of red cellophane.

She had bought it at the stationery shop for two yuan. It was the kind used to wrap candy and cheap lanterns. It was thin and red and made her fingers look like they were bleeding when she held it up to the bulb.

She put the cellophane over Qiaoyun's phone light. The light went red. It was a small red circle on the ceiling. It looked like a lantern.

"We put this over the phone lights," Xiaoman said. "Red on red. The crowd will see red lights and think they are lanterns. The supervisors will see red lights and think they are lanterns. The cameras will see red lights and think they are lanterns."

"And the truck drivers?"

"They will see a crowd with red lights in the road."

Axiang took the phone. She covered the light with her hand. Then she uncovered it. The red circle came back.

"What if the office sees the light and comes to the dorm?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Then we are playing with lanterns."

"They will search the bunks."

"Then we will not keep the lanterns in the bunks."

"Where will we keep them?"

"In the shrine storeroom. Under the sacking. Behind the basket."

Qiaoyun took in the red light on the ceiling. "And if they search the shrine?"

"They will not search the shrine. The shrine is the boss's shrine. He paid for the roof."

"Three flashes for the loading dock," Xiaoman said. "Two for the gate. One for the shrine. Long light for the trucks."

"That is a code."

"It is not a code. It is a lantern."

Qiaoyun took in the red light. "The office will see it."

"The office will see a hundred lanterns."

"We do not have a hundred lanterns."

"We will."

※

The plan was not a plan until they walked it.

On the twelfth night they went to the shrine after the market closed. The back courtyard was dark. The basket was under the table. The straw figure was in the storeroom. Grandmother Xu had left a candle on the shelf and a box of matches. They did not light the candle. They stood in the dark and went through the steps.

Axiang was at the mill gate. Qiaoyun was on the gate-shop roof. Xiaoman was at the shrine. Chunxia was at the labor bureau window. Yanzi was at the side gate. Meihua was at the dorm door.

They used their phones under the red cellophane. Qiaoyun flashed twice from the gate shop. Xiaoman flashed once from the shrine. Axiang flashed three times from the mill gate. The red lights moved across the dark street. They looked like lanterns. They looked like nothing.

"Again," Axiang said.

They did it again. This time Yanzi missed the second flash. Meihua flashed late. Qiaoyun's phone went dark. They started over.

"Again," Axiang said.

The third time it worked. The red lights went from the shrine to the gate shop to the mill gate to the side gate. The strings of light crossed the street like a net. Xiaoman stood in the shrine courtyard and kept her eyes on them as they came.

A car turned into the main street. Its headlights swept across the shrine wall. The girls dropped their phones and crouched behind the stone table. The car went past. The red lights went out one by one. The street was dark.

"Again," Axiang said.

They did it a fourth time. This time they did not stop when the car passed. They kept the red lights low and steady. The car went by. The lights stayed. The net held.

"Can the trucks move through that?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Not if the crowd is there," Xiaoman said.

"The crowd will not be there at two."

"Then we will be."

※

The lanterns were not hard to find.

The market sold them in bundles: red paper, wire frames, a candle inside, a thin bamboo handle. The cheap ones cost three yuan. The better ones cost six. The girls bought them with their own money, a few at a time, from different stalls so the shopkeepers would not remember one buyer. At the corner a woman sold *tangyuan* from a black pot. The steam came up into the cold air. The sweet smell followed them down the street. Qiaoyun bought a bowl and passed it around. The rice balls were hot. The soup was sweet. They ate standing up with the lantern bundles between their feet.

They hid the lanterns in the dorm under the beds and in the storeroom behind the shrine. They hid the candles in the rice jar. They hid the red cellophane inside the lining of Xiaoman's coat. The dorm auntie came through the room on the fourteenth with her torch. She looked under the beds. She looked in the lockers. She did not look in the rice jar. She did not look behind the basket in the storeroom. She wrote something on her clipboard and went out. The girls lay still until her footsteps reached the end of the corridor.

On the fourteenth night they brought the lanterns to the back courtyard and lit one to test it. The paper glowed red. The candle flame was small. The light did not reach the wall. The bare tree made a black shape against the sky. The cat came out of the storeroom and sat on the stone table.

"We light them at the shrine," Xiaoman said. "Then we walk to the gate. Slow. Like a procession. The crowd will follow."

"Why will the crowd follow?" Qiaoyun asked.

"Because the opera will be over and they will not want to go home."

"That is not a reason."

"It is the only reason we have."

Axiang took in the lantern. "The boss is paying for the opera. The crowd will be his crowd. They will not follow us."

"They will follow the light," Xiaoman said. "That is what a procession is."

"And if they do not?"

"Then we will stand in the road anyway."

"Forty-one of us?"

"Forty-one is enough to make a crowd."

"The boss has more than forty-one."

"The boss has the office and the supervisors and the men who drive the trucks. He does not have the town. The town will be at the shrine. The town will follow the lanterns if the lanterns are going somewhere."

"Where are they going?"

"To the mill gate."

Qiaoyun took in the lantern in her hand. The paper was red. The candle was not lit. "The boss paid for the opera," she said. "The town will think the procession is his."

"Then let them think it."

※

The plan was drawn in thread again on the night before the festival.

At seven the lanterns would be lit at the shrine. At eight the opera would begin. At eleven the opera would end. At eleven-thirty the girls would walk. At eleven-forty-five they would reach the gate. At two the trucks would come. The times were not written anywhere. They were in the knots.

Xiaoman laid the red line from the shrine to the gate. She laid the gray line from the loading dock to the ramp. She laid the blue line along the canal. She laid the green line around the dorm. She put a knot for every woman who had a

place. The knots were not all the same size. The red knots were the women from the third bank. The blue knots were the women who would stand by the canal. The gray knots were the women at the loading dock. The green knots were the women who would wake the dorm.

Forty-one knots. Forty-one names.

Axiang put a finger on the red line. "The crowd will be here at midnight. The opera ends at eleven. The lanterns are at the shrine. We walk at eleven-thirty. We reach the gate at eleven-forty-five. The trucks come at two."

"That is two hours."

"Two hours is a long time to stand in the road."

"Then we sing."

"We do not know the songs."

"We know the chant."

"The chant is for the dark."

"Then we will sing it in the dark."

Qiaoyun took in the red thread. "The truck drivers will not wait two hours."

"Then they will come early. And the crowd will be there."

Axiang read the map. The red line crossed the yellow. The gray line came down from the loading dock. The blue line ran along the canal. The green line went back to the dorm.

"Can the trucks move on the night of the fifteenth?" she said.

Xiaoman put her finger on the red line. "Not through us."

※

They pulled the map apart before dawn.

Xiaoman gathered the threads and wound them around the cardboard. The floor was bare. The knots were gone. The names were in her head. She put the cardboard under her pillow and lay down with her boots on.

Outside, the mill was running. The night shift was going in. The looms made their low pressure in the ground. Tomorrow the town would be full of lanterns. The opera would play at the shrine. The boss would stand in the front courtyard with his cigarette and his small yellow teeth. The trucks would come at two.

Xiaoman closed her eyes. The red cellophane was in her coat. The thread was under her pillow. The knots pressed against her ribs. She counted them under her breath. One. Two. Three. Forty-one.

Then she counted the hours. The morning. The afternoon. The lanterns. The fifteenth. The trucks at two.

She thought of the bus ticket in her sock. The night was cold. It was for the morning of the sixteenth. It was a ticket to Guangzhou. She had bought it before the labor bureau call. If the plan failed, she could be on the road before the mill opened. If the plan worked, she would miss the bus. She did not know which thought made her stomach turn more.

She put her hand inside her shirt and held the thread. The knots were small and hard. The mill was running. The night was cold. The plan was in her head. She did not sleep for a long time. The red cellophane crinkled softly inside her coat. When she did sleep, she dreamed of the red line crossing the floor. The line went out the dorm door and down the stairs and through the gate. It went all the way to the shrine. In the dream the line was warm. Outside, the first bus would leave at six. She could be on it. She could be in Guangzhou by the next night. The thought came and went. The knots stayed. The dorm breathed around her. The corridor bulb hummed. A spring creaked. She did not move. Forty-one. The mill ran. The night was long. The night went on again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Why did you stay?”

The alley room had been empty for a week, but the bed board was still there.

He Mei stood in the doorway with the key in her hand. The lock had not been changed. The landlord had not asked for the key. The room smelled of wet plaster and the last of her tea. The bulb over the door was dead. The drain outside ran under the wall with its old slow sound.

She went in and closed the door. The dark was complete for a moment. Then her eyes found the window and the gray line of the street beyond it. She knelt by the bed and lifted the board.

The shoebox was where she had left it.

It was a plain white box with a red lid, the kind shoes came in. The cardboard had gone soft at the corners. The lid had a water stain shaped like a leaf. She had put it under the board six years before, on the night she moved into the room. The board had not moved since.

She set the box on the bed and took off the lid.

The first thing was the badge.

It was a rectangle of white plastic with a pin at the back. The photograph was small and dark. A girl with a round face and her hair pulled back. Her eyes were open too wide, the way people’s eyes were open in photographs taken at a gate. Her name was printed under the photograph in two characters. He Mei did not need to read them. She had read them every night for six years.

The second thing was the work order.

It was a single sheet of paper, folded twice and then once again. It had been crumpled and smoothed flat. The paper had a number at the top and a date. The date was the third of March. The work order was for the interlock on loom number fourteen. At the bottom, in blue ink, someone had written a word and drawn a line through it. The word was cancel.

He Mei sat on the bed with the badge in one hand and the work order in the other. The room was cold. The window did not close all the way. The streetlight made a yellow line on the floor.

The door opened.

Xiaoman stood in the doorway. She was breathing hard. Her coat was open. Her shoes were wet.

"Old Zhou said you were here," she said.

He Mei put the badge on the bed.

Xiaoman came in and closed the door. She took in the box, the badge, the work order. She did not ask what they were. She stood by the bed with her hands in her sleeves.

"Who is she?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei held the photograph. The girl looked back with her wide gate eyes.

"My daughter," she said.

Xiaoman sat down on the floor. She did not touch the badge. The room was quiet. The drain ran outside. The mill was running somewhere beyond the wall.

"Her name was He Ling," He Mei said. "She was twenty-three."

※

She had come back to the mill the year He Ling turned eighteen.

Before that there had been the shed in 1994 and the layoffs and the years away. She had come back because the mill was hiring and because He Ling had found work on the third bank. She took the second bank. They went in through the gate together in the morning and came out through the gate together at night. He Ling walked fast. He Mei walked with her knees. He Ling waited at the corner for her. She always waited.

The third bank was Caifeng's floor.

Caifeng had come up by then. She had the office coat and the good shoes. She walked the aisle with her hands behind her back. The women called her laobanniang. She still snapped a length of cloth at the end of a run to hear the weave. Her knots were still the smallest in the shed.

He Ling was fast. She had learned the loom the way some girls learned a song. She could tie a broken end without looking. She could hear a machine before it

stopped. She was left-handed. He Mei had been left-handed too, until she was seven and the teacher beat it out of her with a ruler. He Ling had kept hers. She tied knots with her left hand. The supervisor did not like it. He said it slowed her down. It did not slow her down. She was the fastest on the floor.

The loom had a safety interlock. When the guard was open, the machine was supposed to stop. The interlock on loom fourteen had been failing for two weeks. The fitter had written a work order. The work order had gone to the office. The office had sent it back with a word written in blue ink and a line through it. The word was cancel.

The girls on the third bank knew the interlock was tied off. They knew because the machine would not run otherwise. They knew because the supervisor had tied it with a strip of gray cloth and told them to keep their hands clear. They knew because the shift was sixteen hours and the order was late and the boss had promised the American buyer a shipment before the end of the month.

He Mei knew because she was on the second bank and the second bank could hear the third bank stop and start. She knew because He Ling had told her at the gate. She had said it the way girls said everything then, with a small laugh and a look at her shoes. “The interlock is tied off,” she said. “The machine runs faster.”

“Be careful,” He Mei said.

“I am always careful.”

※

The night was the fifteenth of March.

He Mei remembered the date because it was the first day of the new order and because the canteen had served fish. She remembered the hour because the clock above the office door had stopped at four and no one had fixed it. The shift had begun at seven in the evening. By ten the floor was hot. By midnight the water in the gutters had gone warm. By two in the morning the women had been working fifteen hours.

He Ling was at loom fourteen.

He Mei was at loom twenty-two, two banks down. She had her hands in the water. The cloth was coming out gray and wet. The noise of the shed was one

long sound. She could feel the thread-break in her feet before she heard it. She could feel the machine stop.

The loom stopped. The shed did not. The other looms kept running. The supervisor came down the aisle. Someone screamed.

He Mei did not remember running. She remembered the water on the floor. She remembered the gray cloth. She remembered the light from the overhead bulb falling on the metal. She remembered He Ling's left hand.

The interlock was still tied off. The strip of gray cloth hung from the guard. The machine had stopped because the emergency switch had been pulled, not because the guard had opened. The supervisor was already there. He had a pair of scissors in his hand. He cut the cloth. He cut it before the ambulance came. He cut it before the floor was stopped.

The broken end had knotted around the roller. The knot caught her sleeve and pulled her in. He Ling was on the ground. Her cap had come off. Her hair was wet. There was blood on the concrete and blood on the cloth and blood on the white plastic badge pinned to her chest. The badge had her photograph. Her eyes were open too wide.

He Mei knelt beside her. She put her hand on her daughter's face. She did not remember what she said. She remembered the smell of the water and the hot oil and the jasmine. Caifeng was standing at the end of the aisle. She had come down from the office without a coat. Her heels were not on. She was wearing the soft shoes she wore on the floor. Her face was white. She did not come any closer.

The ambulance came. The men put He Ling on a stretcher. The supervisor went with them. The floor started again before the stretcher reached the door. The looms had to run. The order was late.

※

He Mei went to the office the next morning to collect her daughter's things.

The office was empty. The supervisor was at the shredder. He had a stack of paper on the table and a plastic bag at his feet. The shredder was running. He did not hear her come in.

She stood in the doorway while the paper went into the machine. She saw the work order. It was on the top of the stack. The number at the top. The date. The word cancel in blue ink. The supervisor fed it into the shredder.

She said his name. He turned. The paper went in. She saw the last edge of it go between the teeth. Then she saw the second copy.

It was on the floor by the bin. It had fallen. She picked it up and put it in her apron pocket. The supervisor did not see her. He was looking at the shredder. The shredder was making its rain-on-a-tin-roof sound.

She went out with the badge in her hand and the work order in her pocket.

※

The compensation table was in the same office one week later.

There was a man from the town. There was a form. There was a cup of tea with a skin on the surface. Cao Caifeng sat at the end of the table with her hands folded. She was wearing the gray coat. The jasmine was there. The man from the town read the form aloud. He said the mill accepted no responsibility. He said the machine had been in order. He said the girl had been careless. He said the mill would pay eighty thousand yuan as a gesture of goodwill. He said the money would be paid when the form was signed.

He Mei sat with her hands in her lap. The work order was inside the lining of her coat. The badge was in her pocket. She could feel the pin against her thigh.

"There is also a job," the man said. "Night cleaning. The mill needs a cleaner. The pay is small, but the job is steady. You can start on Monday."

Cao Caifeng read the form. She did not look at He Mei. The jasmine came across the table in a thin line.

She took the pen in her right hand. The signature came out crooked. The man from the town turned the form around and examined it. Then he pushed the second copy across the table.

"Initial here," he said. "And here."

She initialled the paper. She did not read all of it. She read the number. She read the word for money. She read the line that said she accepted the payment and would make no further claim.

She signed.

The man from the town put the form in a folder. Cao Caifeng stood up. She faced He Mei for the first time. Her face was still. The scar on her thumb was white against the table.

"The cleaning starts on Monday," she said. "The boiler room. The offices. The drains. Do you understand?"

He Mei turned to her. She did not answer.

"Do you understand?" Cao Caifeng said again.

"Yes," He Mei said.

Cao Caifeng went out. The heels struck the concrete away and away. The jasmine stayed in the room. He Mei sat at the table with the pen in her hand and the work order in her coat. The tea had gone cold.

※

She stayed.

That was the question Xiaoman asked her at the end of the story, in the empty room, with the badge on the bed between them. The work order was in He Mei's hand. The light from the street lay across the floor.

"Why did you stay?" Xiaoman said.

He Mei held the badge. The girl in the photograph had her eyes open too wide.

"Because I signed," she said.

"That is not a reason."

"It is the reason they gave me."

"You could have torn it up."

"I could have."

"Why didn't you?"

He Mei turned the work order over. The paper was soft at the folds. The word cancel had gone through to the other side.

"I told myself I stayed for the work order," she said. "I told myself I stayed to keep it. But the work order was in my pocket when I signed. It was in my pocket the whole time. I could have taken it to the labor bureau. I could have taken it to the town. I could have stood outside the gate with it and told the girls what happened."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was ashamed."

Xiaoman was quiet.

"I signed the paper," He Mei said. "I took the money. I took the job. If I spoke after that, I would be a woman who took the money and then said it was not enough. If I stayed quiet, I was a woman who took the money and stayed."

"That is not the same as being guilty."

"No."

He Mei put the work order in the box. She put the badge beside it. She did not close the lid.

"The job was in the office," she said. "The trash was in the office. Every night I emptied the bin. Every night I read what they threw away. The cigarettes. The receipts. The forms. The names. I learned the mill the way I learned the loom. I learned what they were going to do before they did it. I learned to read them."

Xiaoman studied the box. "And you never told anyone."

"I told the trash."

"That is not a person."

"No."

He Mei closed the box. She put the lid on. The red cardboard was dull under the streetlight.

"The girls came to the alley," she said. "They asked me questions. I gave them answers. I did not give them this."

"Why not?"

"Because the answer is not a reading. It is a signature."

Xiaoman reached for the box. She did not open it. She put her hand on the lid.

"Can I take it to the shrine?" she asked. "For tomorrow night?"

He Mei turned to her. The girl's face was thin in the dark. Her shoes were wet. Her collar was turned up. She was nineteen.

"Yes," He Mei said.

She put the shoebox in Xiaoman's hands. The box was light. The badge and the work order moved inside it with a small paper sound.

"Carry it flat," He Mei said. "Do not let it get wet."

Xiaoman held the box against her chest. She went to the door. Then she stopped.

"Why did you stay?" she said again.

He Mei faced the empty bed board. The room was dark. The drain ran outside. The mill was running behind the wall.

"Because I had nowhere else," she said. "And because someone had to be here when they threw it away."

Xiaoman went out. The door clicked shut. He Mei stood in the empty room with the key in her hand. She tied knots with her left hand. She had signed the paper with her right.

She put the key on the shelf. The key was cold. The alley was dark. She went out into the alley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Will the boss run?”

Xiaoman held the bus ticket to Guangzhou in her hand.

The station was cold. The floor was wet from the door to the ticket window. The buses stood in a row under the metal roof with their engines running. The diesel smoke went up into the gray air and stayed there. A woman with a microphone called out the destinations. The words came through the loudspeaker in pieces.

Xiaoman stood by the wall with the ticket between her thumb and forefinger. The paper was thin. The seat number was printed in blue. The departure time was six-forty in the morning. The date was the sixteenth.

The ticket had cost her two hundred and thirty yuan. She had bought it from a woman in the dorm who was going home to Guangxi. The woman had bought it for Guangzhou and then changed her mind. Xiaoman had paid her the money in a folded envelope. She had not told anyone. The woman had asked her why Guangzhou. Xiaoman had said she had a cousin there. She did not have a cousin there. She had a phone number from a recruiter and a photograph of a factory gate.

The bus to Guangzhou was at platform four. It was a long green bus with dark windows. The driver was standing by the door with a cup of tea. The passengers were loading their bags into the hold. A woman carried a child on her hip. A man carried a cardboard box tied with string. The box had a red label. An old woman sat on a bundle of bedding and ate a boiled egg. A girl in a pink coat was crying into her phone. The loudspeaker called the destination again. The words came out flat and metallic. Nobody looked up.

Xiaoman kept her eyes on the bags as they went into the hold. She thought of her own bag under the bunk in the dorm. It had two shirts, a pair of jeans, the chili jar wrapped in a plastic bag, and the red thread with the forty-one knots. If she went to Guangzhou, she would take the thread. She would not take the shoebox. The shoebox was He Mei’s.

The loudspeaker called the Guangzhou bus. The driver opened the door. The passengers went up the steps one by one. The woman with the child sat by the window. The man with the cardboard box put it on his knees.

Xiaoman went to the ticket window. The woman behind the glass had a blue uniform and a small fan. Xiaoman asked if the six-forty bus was on time. The woman said it was. She asked if the ticket could be changed. The woman said no. Xiaoman read the departure board. The characters were written in black on white. She could read the numbers. She could not read the names. She went back to the wall and stood there until the bus pulled out.

She did not move.

She put the ticket back inside her sock and went out of the station.

※

The black car was at the mill gate when she came back.

It was parked by the office with its trunk open. The office clerk was carrying a cardboard box out through the door. The box was sealed with tape. She put it in the trunk and went back for another. There were three boxes. There was also a suit bag. The suit bag was gray and long. It lay across the back seat. The driver stood by the open trunk with a checklist in his hand. He checked each box against the list and made a mark with a pencil. The office clerk went back inside. The driver closed the trunk and opened it again. He moved the suit bag to the other side. Then he closed it and stood by the car with his hands behind his back.

Xiaoman stood across the road with her hands in her sleeves. Qiaoyun came up beside her. The office clerk saw them and stopped on the steps. Her eyes went from Xiaoman to Qiaoyun to the car. She went back inside without speaking.

"Will the boss run?" Qiaoyun asked.

Xiaoman took in the car. The office clerk came out with a leather briefcase. She put it in the trunk. The driver closed the lid. The car sat low on its tires.

"He is packing," Xiaoman said.

"You are describing the car, not answering me."

"He is packing."

"Everyone packs for the New Year."

"It is not the New Year. It is the fifteenth."

Qiaoyun took in the suit bag. “Maybe he is going to the festival.”

“With three boxes and a suit bag?”

“Maybe he is taking the opera costumes.”

“The opera is at the shrine. The shrine has its own costumes.”

Qiaoyun was quiet. The office clerk went back inside. The black car stayed by the office. The engine was not running. The driver stood by the door with his phone against his ear.

Xiaoman checked the loading dock. The trucks were not there. The gate was open. The guardhouse radio was playing the book-field. Old Zhou was standing in the doorway with his kettle.

“Where is the car going?” Xiaoman asked.

Old Zhou took in the car. “The driver says the airport.”

“The airport is in Shanghai.”

“The driver says Shanghai.”

“Does the boss have a ticket?”

“The driver does not say.”

Xiaoman took in the suit bag. The airport was three hours away. If the boss left in the afternoon, he would be in Shanghai by dark. The flight to Hanoi was in the morning. He would not be at the mill when the trucks came at two.

“Will he run?” Qiaoyun asked again.

Xiaoman took in the office. The window was yellow. Cao Caifeng was standing inside with her back to the glass. Her coat was gray. Her heels were on. She did not turn around.

“The boss will run,” Xiaoman said. “The laoban-niang will stay.”

“How do you know?”

“The suit bag is his. The boxes are his. She is still wearing her heels.”

The office door opened. Cao Caifeng came out onto the steps. She had her coat on and her bag over her arm. She took in the black car. She took in the empty space where the suit bag had been. She did not look at Xiaoman. She went back inside. The door closed. The office clerk came out with a folder and went down the steps toward the gate. She did not look at Xiaoman either.

※

The girls met at the shrine that night.

The back courtyard was cold. The market was closed. The lanterns were hidden in the storeroom. The basket was under the stone table. The shoebox was under the basket, covered with a piece of sacking. Xiaoman had put it there the night before. She had not opened it.

Axiang came through the side gate with the yellow slip from the labor bureau. Chunxia came with her notebook. Qiaoyun came last with her phone off. Meihua and Yanzi stayed at the gate. The older woman with the burn scar stayed at the dorm door.

"Where is the boss?" Axiang asked.

Xiaoman told them about the black car, the three boxes, the suit bag, the driver, the airport.

Axiang listened. Her bandaged wrists were folded on the table. "Then he will run."

"The car leaves at five," Xiaoman said. "The driver says Shanghai. He will be in Shanghai by noon. The flight to Hanoi is in the morning."

"Then he will be gone before the trucks."

"Yes."

"Then what are we stopping?"

"The trucks."

"The trucks are his."

"The stock is ours. The money is ours. The trucks are only the way they leave."

"He will run tomorrow morning," Xiaoman said. "The trucks come at two the next morning, after the festival. The car goes at five. He will be in Hanoi the next day."

"And the laoban-niang?"

"She stays."

"How do you know?"

"The heels."

Axiang touched the shoebox under the basket. "What is in the box?"

"He Ling's badge. The work order."

"The daughter."

"Yes."

Axiang put her hand on the sacking. She did not lift it. "He Mei gave it to you?"

"She gave it to me last night."

"Then she is not coming to the shrine?"

"She is coming."

※

They went through the countdown again.

At six in the morning the buses would leave the station. At seven the office would open. At noon the supervisor would put the new list on the board. At four the lanterns would be lit. At eight the opera would begin. At eleven it would end. At eleven-thirty they would walk. At eleven-forty-five they would reach the gate. At two the trucks would come.

"And the boss's car?" Qiaoyun asked.

"The car goes in the afternoon," Xiaoman said. "Before the trucks. If he leaves early, we cannot stop him at the gate. We can only stop the trucks."

"Then why are we stopping the trucks?"

"Because the trucks carry the money."

"The money is in the bank."

"The money is in the stock. The trucks carry the stock. The bank pays for the stock. No stock, no money."

Qiaoyun read the thread map on the stone table. "What if he takes the money with him in the car?"

"Then the bank will have nothing to seize."

"Then we lose."

"Then we still have the receipts."

"And the labor bureau?"

"They come at two. They will see the trucks. They will see the stock. They will see the gate blocked by the crowd. They will not need the boss."

"What if they ask where he went?"

"We tell them Shanghai. We tell them Hanoi. We tell them the car left at five. The labor bureau can call the airport. The police can call the airport. We do not need to stop the car. We only need to stop the trucks."

Axiang read the yellow slip. "The labor bureau men will come at two. They will see the trucks. If the boss is gone, they will see the car gone too."

"Then we will give them the flight number," Xiaoman said. "We will give them the car. We will give them the driver. We will give them the boxes. We will give them the suit bag. The labor bureau can call Shanghai. The police can call the airport. We only need to keep the trucks at the gate until they come."

"And if the trucks do not come?"

"Then we will have a festival."

"Then we tell them about the car."

"The car is not the crime."

"The car is the escape."

Axiang was quiet. The candle had burned down to a stub. The market was closed. The shrine was dark. The cat was not on the stone table.

"Will the boss run?" Qiaoyun said.

"Yes," Xiaoman said. "But he will not get far."

※

Xiaoman went to the dorm after midnight.

She took off her shoes and sat on the bunk. The red thread was under her pillow. The bus ticket was in her sock. She took it out and held it under the blanket with her phone light.

The paper was thin. The seat number was printed in blue. The departure time was six-forty. The date was the sixteenth.

She thought of Guangzhou. She had heard of the factories there. They paid by the hour. They had dormitories with eight beds and a fan. They had a night market with noodles and fruit. A girl could disappear into a city like that. A girl could send money home. A girl could start again.

She thought of her mother in Guizhou. Her mother would ask if she was eating. She would say yes. She would not say that she had spent the winter eating cold rice and hiding receipts in her shoe. She would not say that she had stood in

a shrine in the dark and learned a chant she did not understand. She would send money. Her mother would put it in the tin under the bed. The tin would never be full.

She thought of the shrine. The basket. The straw figure. The chant. The forty-one knots. The shoebox. He Mei's face when she said the word cancel.

She put the ticket inside her sock and lay back on the bunk. In the next bunk Axiang was not asleep. Xiaoman could hear her breathing. She could hear the bandage rustle when Axiang turned over.

"You have a ticket," Axiang said.

Xiaoman did not answer.

"I saw it in your sock. The blue paper."

"It is nothing."

"It is a ticket."

Xiaoman stared at the ceiling. The wire with the blankets was there. The paint had peeled in a long strip.

"It is for the sixteenth," Axiang said. "The bus leaves at six-forty. You can be gone before the trucks."

"Yes."

"Then go."

Xiaoman turned her face toward the wall.

"I do not know yet," she said.

The dorm was quiet. The night shift was running. The looms made their low pressure in the ground. Qiaoyun's phone glowed under her blanket. Axiang turned over in the lower bunk. Yanzi made a small sound in her sleep.

Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar. The knots were there. She counted them under her breath. One. Two. Three. Forty-one.

She did not sleep.

※

In the morning the black car was gone.

Xiaoman saw it from the dorm window. The space by the office was empty. The office clerk was standing on the steps with her clipboard. The driver was not there. The suit bag was not there. The three boxes were not there.

Old Zhou was in the gatehouse with his radio on. Xiaoman went to the window.

"The car left at five," he said.

"Where did it go?"

"Shanghai."

"Did the boss go with it?"

"The boss went with it."

"Did he say anything?"

"He said he would be back for the festival."

"Will he?"

Old Zhou kept his eyes on the radio. The book-field voice was low. The volume was turned down to nothing.

"No," he said.

Xiaoman studied the empty space by the office. The black car had gone. The trucks would come at two in the morning. The boss would be in Shanghai by dark. The laoban-niang was in the office with her heels on.

"Will the boss run?" she said.

"He has run," Old Zhou said. "The trucks are still coming."

"Will the laoban-niang go?"

Old Zhou took in the office window. Cao Caifeng was standing at the glass with her phone against her ear. Her coat was gray. Her heels were on.

"No," he said. "She is still here."

The book-field voice came through the gatehouse window. The volume was low. The market was opening. The first buses were coming down the main street. Xiaoman put her hand in her pocket. The bus ticket was in her sock. The thread was in her collar. The mill was running. The festival was that night. The trucks would come at two in the morning, after the lanterns went out. The empty space by the office was a dark rectangle in the wet yard. The black car was gone. The suit bag was gone. The boss was on the road. The laoban-niang was still in the office with her heels on. The trucks were still coming. The morning was cold. The street was wet. The bus ticket was still in her sock. The thread was warm. The street was wet. The morning was cold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Go or stay?”

Xiaoman went to the bus station on the morning of the festival with her bag packed.

The bag was under her arm. It held two shirts, a pair of jeans, the chili jar wrapped in a plastic bag, and the red thread with the forty-one knots. The ticket to Guangzhou was in her sock. The bus was not until the next morning, but she wanted to see the station again. She wanted to see the bus. She wanted to know what leaving looked like before she decided.

The station was busier than it had been the day before. The festival had brought people in from the villages. The benches were full. The floor was wet. The loudspeaker called destinations in a flat metallic voice. A family sat on a bundle of bedding and passed a bag of oranges between them. A young man in a leather jacket slept with his mouth open. A girl in a red coat was crying into her phone.

Xiaoman sat on the end of a bench and put the bag between her feet. The bus to Guangzhou was at platform four. It was the same green bus. The driver was the same driver. The passengers were different. They loaded their bags into the hold. A woman carried a cage of chickens. A man carried a rolled mattress. The driver closed the hold and went around to the door.

The loudspeaker called the bus. The passengers went up the steps. The girl in the red coat wiped her face and got on. The driver closed the door. The bus pulled out of the station. The diesel smoke came back into the shed and stayed there.

Xiaoman kept her eyes on the bus until it turned onto the road. Then she examined her hands. The ticket was in her sock. The thread was in her bag. The bag was between her feet.

She could go to the ticket window and ask for a seat on the next bus. She could be in Guangzhou by nightfall. She could find the factory with the gate in

the photograph. She could send money home. She could become a girl in a red coat, crying into a phone, going somewhere else.

She sat on the bench for a long time. The station clock ticked. The loudspeaker called another destination. A woman came down the row selling tea eggs from a bucket. The smell of the tea and the soy sauce mixed with the diesel. Xiaoman bought one and held it in her hand until it went cold. She did not eat it.

She thought of the recruiter's photograph. The factory gate was white. The workers stood in a line with blue caps. The line went into a building that had no windows. The photograph had been taken in the morning. The sun was behind the building. The workers' faces were in shadow. The recruiter had said the pay was four thousand a month. He had said the dormitory had a fan. He had said the night market was close. He had not said how many girls slept in one room. He had not said what happened to the ones who did not keep up.

She thought of her mother's tin under the bed. She thought of the money she had sent home. She thought of the money she had not sent. She thought of the folding table in the village house and the bowl of rice and the empty chair where her father used to sit.

Then she picked up her bag and went back to the shrine.

※

The front courtyard was full of people.

The opera stage had been swept. The red curtain was tied back. The chairs were set in rows. The incense burner was smoking. The market stalls along the street were selling lanterns and sweets and paper flowers. Children ran between the legs of the adults. The speaker played a song. The song was old and bright and came out of the speaker in pieces.

Xiaoman went around the side of the shrine to the back courtyard. The gate was closed. The courtyard was quiet. The stone table was in the shade. The basket was under it. The shoebox was under the basket. The lanterns were in the storeroom. The red cellophane was in her coat.

Axiang was sitting on the stone table with her bandaged wrists in her lap. She looked up when Xiaoman came in.

"You went to the station," Axiang said.

"Yes."

"Did you buy a ticket?"

"I already had one."

Axiang checked the bag. "You packed."

"Yes."

"Go or stay?"

Xiaoman put the bag down. The courtyard was quiet. The market noise came over the wall in a low wave. The cat was asleep on the storeroom step.

"I do not know," she said.

"You know."

"I do not."

"You packed the chili jar. You did not pack the thread."

Xiaoman checked the bag. The red thread was inside it, wrapped around the cardboard. Axiang could not see it from where she sat.

"I packed the thread," Xiaoman said.

"Then you are staying."

"Packing a thread is not staying."

"It is not going."

※

They spent the afternoon getting ready.

The lanterns were brought out of the storeroom and laid on the stone table. The candles were taken out of the rice jar. The red cellophane was cut into squares and taped over the phone lights. The chant was practiced under the breath. The basket was wiped with a dry cloth. The straw woman was taken out of its paper bag and set upright. The ash was sifted through a sieve. The red thread was measured against the table and cut. The girls tested the red cellophane again. One flash for the shrine. Two for the gate. Three for the loading dock. The red lights moved across the back wall and disappeared. Axiang put the phone in her pocket. Qiaoyun put hers in her apron. Chunxia put the red thread inside her shirt. The cat sat on the storeroom step and did not move. The afternoon went quickly. In the front courtyard the stage hands tested the red curtain. The

opera troupe practiced the drum. The children ran between the chairs. The old women put down their mats and their baskets of oranges. The market stalls opened one by one. The smell of fried fish and sweet bean paste came over the wall. The festival was close. The town was already eating.

The shoebox stayed under the basket. No one opened it.

At four o'clock the front courtyard began to fill. The opera troupe arrived with their boxes and their instruments. The stage hands hung the red lanterns along the eaves. The smell of fried food and incense came around the side gate. The speaker played a different song. The town was bright and loud.

Xiaoman stood in the back courtyard with the basket in her hands. She could hear the front courtyard filling. She could hear the children. She could hear the old women calling to each other. She could hear the first notes of the opera.

Axiang came to stand beside her. "The labor bureau men will be at the gate at two," she said. "Old Zhou will call them when the trucks come."

"I know."

"The crowd will follow the lanterns."

"I know."

"You will lead the chant."

"I know."

Axiang turned to her. "Then why are you still holding the bag?"

Xiaoman looked down. She was still holding the bag. The straps were in her hand. The bag was against her leg. The ticket was in her sock.

"I forgot," she said.

She put the bag under the stone table. She put the basket on the table. She put the figure in the basket. She put the ash in the basket. She tied the red loop.

The loop held.

※

At five the sun went behind the mill roof. The market lights came on one string at a time. The front courtyard was full. The back courtyard was still. Xiaoman stood at the side gate and scanned the street. The town was bright. The mill was dark. She could see the gate from where she stood. She could see the

guardhouse light. She could see the empty space where the black car had been. The road was wet.

At dusk the lanterns were lit.

He Mei came through the side gate before the light changed. She was wearing the black coat and carrying the thermos. She stood at the edge of the courtyard and touched the shoebox under the basket. She did not ask what was in it. She did not ask about the bus.

"The bus leaves at six-forty," she said.

"I know."

"The station is a twenty-minute walk."

"I know."

He Mei checked the bag under the table. The straps were still in Xiaoman's hand. The bag was packed.

"You can still go," He Mei said.

Xiaoman took in the basket. The straw woman was upright. The loop held fast. The ash lay still.

"I know," she said.

"Why did you give me the box?"

He Mei touched the shoebox under the basket. "Because you asked."

"That is not a reason."

"It is the reason I had."

Xiaoman put her hand on the box. The cardboard was cold. "I am not going to open it until the rite."

"Open it when the lanterns are lit," He Mei said. "Not before."

He Mei put the thermos on the stone table. She went back through the side gate. The gate clicked shut. The front courtyard was already loud. The back courtyard was quiet.

Xiaoman held the thermos. It was the same dented thermos. The red letters had gone soft. He Mei had carried it through the alley and the boiler room and the rented room. She had not given Xiaoman a knot. She had given her a box.

Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar. The forty-one knots were there. The one He Mei had never tied was not there. It had never been there. She had stopped waiting for it.

She wanted to ask the old woman to stay. She did not. He Mei's coat was already buttoned. The thermos was on the table. The box was under the basket. The front courtyard was filling. There was no time for another question. The gate clicked shut. The market noise came over the wall. Xiaoman stood alone with the basket.

The back courtyard glowed red. The paper lanterns hung from the eaves and from the bare tree. The light did not reach the wall. The front courtyard was a wall of noise. The opera began with a drum. The crowd cheered. The speaker crackled. The whole town was on the other side of the wall.

Xiaoman stood at the stone table with the basket in her hands. Axiang stood at her right. Qiaoyun stood at her left. Chunxia stood behind her with the red thread. Yanzi stood at the side gate. Meihua stood at the front gate. The older woman with the burn scar stood at the dorm door.

The forty-one knots were in the thread. The forty-one names were in Xiaoman's head.

She thought of the bus station. The green bus. The girl in the red coat. The diesel smoke. The loudspeaker. The road out of town.

She thought of the dorm. The bunks. The blankets on the wire. The chili jar. The wet shoes. The forty-one women who had put their names in her hands.

She thought of He Ling. The badge in the shoebox. The photograph from the gate. The work order with the word cancel. The mother who had stayed.

Xiaoman put the basket on the stone table. She put her hand inside her sock and took out the ticket.

The paper was soft from her foot. The seat number was printed in blue. The departure time was six-forty. The date was the sixteenth.

Axiang held the ticket. She did not say anything.

Xiaoman folded the ticket once. She lifted the lid of the shoebox. The badge lay on top of the work order. He Ling looked up at her from the plastic.

Xiaoman put the ticket inside the shoebox. She closed the lid. The badge and the work order were under the ticket. The box was heavier than it had been. She could feel the weight of it in her hands.

"Go or stay?" Axiang asked.

Xiaoman picked up the basket. The straw woman leaned. She set it upright. The ash shifted. The red loop held.

"Stay," she said.

※

The opera went on.

The drum beat. The cymbals crashed. The crowd cheered. The front courtyard was bright with lanterns and the stage was bright with red and gold. The back courtyard was dark except for the small red lights. The girls stood around the stone table with the basket and the straw and the ash.

Xiaoman held the basket level. The ash was cold. The figure stood. The red loop held.

She began the chant.

The sounds came out low and round. They did not mean anything. They were the door. Axiang sang the next line. Qiaoyun sang after her. Chunxia sang last. The four voices fit together. The courtyard filled with the sound. The cat lifted its head. The ash shifted in the basket.

When the chant ended, Xiaoman put the basket down. Her arms were shaking. The shoebox was on the table. The ticket was inside it. The bag was under the table. The lanterns burned. The front courtyard cheered. The drum beat once, twice, three times. The opera singer's voice rose over the wall and broke into the night.

She was still there. The paper lanterns moved in the wind. The cat came down from the storeroom step and sat under the stone table. The ash in the basket settled. The straw woman stood. The front courtyard was a wall of light and sound. The back courtyard was dark except for the lanterns. The gap between the two was the width of the shrine wall.

Xiaoman considered the shoebox. The ticket was inside. The bus would leave at six-forty. She would not be on it. The forty-one names were in her head. The trucks would come at two. The labor bureau men would come. The crowd would follow the lanterns. She would stand in the road with the others. She would not run. She thought of the green bus pulling out of the station. She

thought of the girl in the red coat. She thought of the road out of town. The road was still there. The ticket was in the box. The choice was made.

The mill was running beyond the wall. The boss was on the road to Shanghai. The laoban-niang was in the office with her heels on.

Xiaoman put her hand inside her collar. The forty-one knots were there. She counted them under her breath. One. Two. Three. Forty-one.

Inside the basket the ash was gray. The straw woman stood. The red loop was tight. The chant was still in her mouth. The words did not mean anything. They were the door. The lanterns moved in the wind. The paper glowed. The night was cold. The mill was running. The crowd cheered. She picked up the basket again. The red cellophane was in her pocket. The thread was against her ribs. The drum beat. The mill ran. The night was cold. The night was very quiet and cold. The night went on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“When the lanterns are lit, who can see us?”

The festival began at the shrine before the sun went down.

He Mei heard it from the rented room above the noodle shop. The drums started at four. The loudspeaker crackled. The children began to shout in the street. The smell of fried fish and sweet bean paste came up through the floorboards. The shutters of the noodle shop went up. The woman who owned it put a basin of water on the step and washed the threshold.

He Mei put on the black coat. The coat was heavy. The lining was split at the seam. The flyer was inside it. The silk thread was inside it. The red slip was gone. She took the thermos and went down the stairs.

The street was full. The crowd thickened as the afternoon went on. The people came from the villages and the lanes and the boats on the canal. They came with their children and their mothers and their lanterns. The town filled until there was no room to walk.

The crowd was mostly women and children and old men. The young men stood at the corners with their phones. The women carried baskets and lanterns. The children carried paper animals. The shopkeepers stood in their doorways and scanned the crowd. The air was thick with smoke and steam and the smell of sugar. A man was selling roasted chestnuts from a drum. A woman was selling paper flowers from a tray. A girl was selling small red lanterns on a stick. The lanterns were the cheapest kind, the kind He Mei used to buy for He Ling. A child stopped in front of the tray and pointed at a rabbit. The mother shook her head. The child pointed again. The mother bought the rabbit and lit the candle with a match. The child held the lantern out in front of her and walked into the crowd. The red light made a small circle on the stones. He Mei kept her eyes on the circle until it disappeared.

The market stalls ran from the shrine gate to the canal bridge. Red lanterns hung from the eaves in long strings. Paper flowers were pinned to the shutters. A man sold candy figures from a tray. A woman sold boiled eggs and tea. The opera

stage stood in the shrine courtyard with its red curtain tied back and its gold pillars shining. The speaker played a song that was too loud for the street. The song came out in bursts and then broke into static.

He Mei walked with the crowd. She was the only person in the street not carrying a lantern. The children ran past her with paper rabbits and paper fish. A boy had a lantern shaped like a boat. A girl had a lantern shaped like a peach. The red paper glowed from the candles inside. The light fell on the wet stones and made the stones look warm.

She stopped at the corner by the canal bridge.

A woman was selling tangyuan from a black pot. The steam came up into the cold air. The rice balls floated in the water. The smell was sweet and faintly burnt. He Mei bought a bowl and stood by the bridge wall to eat it.

The last time she had eaten tangyuan at the festival, He Ling had been eight.

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He Ling had loved the lanterns.

She had loved them the way some children loved firecrackers or sweets. Every year she asked for a lantern. Every year He Mei bought the cheapest one: a red paper circle on a bamboo handle with a candle inside. He Ling held it so carefully that the paper never caught. She walked ahead of He Mei with the lantern held out in front of her, and the light made a red circle on the stones.

One year she had a rabbit lantern. The rabbit had long paper ears and a tail made of a tuft of cotton. He Ling carried it through the crowd and would not let anyone else hold it. A boy bumped into her and the rabbit tipped. The candle caught the ear. The ear burned away before He Mei could put it out. He Ling cried. He Mei took her to the tangyuan stall and bought her a bowl. The woman put two extra rice balls in the bowl. He Ling ate them with her face wet. Then she asked for another lantern.

He Mei bought another lantern. It was a plain red one. He Ling held it all the way home.

She had been a good child. She was quick and stubborn and left-handed. She sang songs from the radio and made up words when she did not know them. She could tie a knot before she could braid her hair. She had wanted to work at the

mill because her mother worked at the mill. She had wanted to stand at the loom and make the cloth come out in a smooth gray sheet.

He Mei had told her not to. She had told her the mill was not a place for a girl. He Ling had laughed. She had said the mill was a place for everyone in the town. She had said the pay was good. She had said she would buy her mother a new thermos.

The thermos in He Mei's hand was the old one. The dent was the size of a thumb. The red letters had gone pale. It had been a prize in 1994. It had survived the shed and the layoffs and the years away. It had survived He Ling. It was still hot.

He Ling had started at the mill in the spring. She had come home with oil under her nails and a piece of lint in her hair. She had said the loom was easy. She had said the money was good. She had said she would buy her mother a new thermos. He Mei had told her to keep her hands out of the guard. He Ling had laughed and said the guard was always open. The machines ran faster that way.

At the festival that year He Ling had brought home a paper lantern and hung it over the door of the room they shared. The candle had burned all night. He Mei had woken at three and found the paper still glowing. He Ling was asleep with her left hand under her cheek. The light made a red line across the blanket. He Mei had kept her eyes on the lantern until the candle went out.

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At the shrine gate the crowd was thick.

The opera had begun. The drum beat and the cymbals crashed. The singer's voice came over the wall and out into the street. The stage was bright with red and gold. The front courtyard was packed with chairs and bodies and lanterns. The old women sat on their mats. The children stood on the edges of the stage. The men stood at the back with cigarettes.

He Mei stood outside the gate and looked in.

The donor board was visible through the open door of the side hall. The gold names shone under the electric lights. Wansheng Silk Weaving Co. was at the bottom of the board in letters taller than the rest. The boss had paid for the roof.

He had paid for the stage. He had paid for the opera that was playing to the town while his wife stood in the office with her heels on.

Cao Caifeng was in the front row.

She sat with the town officials and the other mill owners. She wore the gray coat and a black scarf. Her hair was combed back. Her hands were folded in her lap. She kept her eyes on the stage without moving. The jasmine was not visible from the gate, but He Mei could imagine it. The heels were on her feet. The scarf was at her throat. She had stayed.

He Mei faced her for a long time. The crowd moved around her. The children ran past. The singer reached a high note and held it. The drum stopped. The crowd clapped.

Caifeng did not clap. She kept her eyes on the stage. Her face was still. He Mei could not see the scar on her thumb from the gate. She could see the way Caifeng held her hands. The left hand was inside the right. The fingers were still.

He Mei turned away from the gate.

Behind her the singer reached the end of the aria. The crowd clapped. The drum began again. The lanterns on the eaves swung in the wind. The gold names on the donor board shone through the open door. Cao Caifeng sat in the front row with her hands folded. The town was bright. The mill was dark. The trucks were coming. A woman in a good coat came out of the shrine gate and faced He Mei. She was one of the mill owners' wives. She had come to the alley once, years before, to ask about a missing bracelet. He Mei had found it in the drain. The woman studied He Mei now and did not recognize her. She went back into the shrine. The gate closed behind her.

The singer began another aria. The words came over the wall in a long line. The crowd was quiet. The drum was quiet. The only sound was the voice and the paper lanterns moving in the wind. He Mei stood in the dark alley and listened. The town was listening too. The whole town was on the other side of the wall.

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She went around the side of the shrine to the alley behind the market.

The alley was narrow and dark. The noise of the opera came over the wall in pieces. The market lights did not reach the stones. The drain ran under the wall. The water smelled of bleach and old paper. He Mei stood in the dark and listened to the town.

She had spent six years in the alley behind the mill. The noise there had been the looms. The light had been one bulb. The girls had come to the step with their questions. The boots had made half-moons under their eyes. The drain had run warm. The jasmine had come down the lane with the laoban-niang's heels.

Now the town was bright and loud on the other side of the wall. The opera was singing. The lanterns were burning. The crowd was clapping. Cao Caifeng was sitting in the front row with her hands folded. Old Sheng was on the road to Shanghai. The trucks were coming at two.

He Mei put her hand in her coat pocket. The flyer was there. The silk thread was there. The thermos was under her arm. The shoebox was in the shrine. The girls were waiting.

She went through the back gate.

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The back courtyard was dark except for the lanterns.

The girls had hung them from the eaves and from the bare tree. The red paper made small circles of light on the stone. The basket was on the stone table. The straw figure was in the basket. The ash was in the basket. The shoebox was under the table. Xiaoman stood behind the table with the basket in her hands. Axiang stood at her right. Qiaoyun stood at her left. Chunxia stood behind her with the red thread. Yanzi stood at the side gate. Meihua stood at the front gate.

He Mei stopped at the edge of the light. The little foam earplugs lay on the stone table beside the basket. The girls' ears were bare. The noise of the opera came over the wall. The drum. The cymbals. The singer. The crowd. The girls stood in the red light and listened to the town. Axiang had her bandaged wrists folded in front of her. Qiaoyun had her phone off and her hands empty. Chunxia had the red thread wound around her wrist. Yanzi had the loop inside her collar. Meihua had the broom from the storeroom in her hand. The foam plugs looked

like gray crumbs in the lantern light. The courtyard was cold. The red light did not reach the wall. The wall was high.

"You came," Xiaoman said.

"I came."

"The opera is loud."

"It is the fifteenth."

Xiaoman took in the lanterns. The red light made her face look older. "When the lanterns are lit, who can see us?"

He Mei faced the wall. The front courtyard was on the other side. The opera was on the other side. The town was on the other side. The back courtyard was dark.

"No one," she said.

"Then why are we afraid?"

"Because no one is the same as everyone."

Xiaoman held the basket. The straw figure leaned. She set it upright. The ash shifted.

"Open the box," she said.

He Mei went to the table. She lifted the sacking. The shoebox was there. The red lid was dull in the lantern light. She took off the lid. The badge lay on top of the work order. The girl in the photograph looked up from the plastic.

He Mei put the badge in Xiaoman's hand. Then she put the work order beside the basket. The paper was soft at the folds. The word cancel had gone through to the other side.

Xiaoman held the badge. Her fingers were steady. She held the photograph. She did not say anything.

"Her name was He Ling," He Mei said.

The words came out of her mouth and went into the dark. The opera drum beat on the other side of the wall. The lanterns burned. The straw figure stood in the ash.

"Has Zigu come?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei took in the basket. The loop held fast. The ash lay still. The chant was in her mouth. The lanterns burned. The front courtyard clapped. The back courtyard was quiet.

"Not yet," she said.

She put the thermos on the stone table. The girls closed around the basket. The opera drum beat once. The lanterns moved. The night was cold. The box was open. The badge was in Xiaoman's hand. The work order was on the table. The red thread was in Chunxia's fist. The chant was in the air. The front courtyard was loud. The back courtyard was quiet. The town was above. The women were below. The lanterns burned.

Xiaoman knelt. Axiang knelt. Qiaoyun knelt. Chunxia knelt. The stone was cold under their knees. The basket was on the table. The straw figure stood in the ash. The red loop held. The chant began low in Xiaoman's throat. The voice came out round and strange. The other voices joined it. The front courtyard kept singing its own song. The back courtyard sang the other. He Mei stood at the edge of the light. She did not kneel. She had never knelt for the goddess. She had knelt for her daughter on the floor of the third bank. She had knelt at the compensation table. She had knelt in the alley to lift the bed board. Now she stood. The girls sang. The straw figure stood. The red loop held. The front courtyard clapped. The back courtyard kept singing. The night was dark. The lanterns burned. The town was above. The women were below. The chant went on again. The night was cold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Has Zigu come?"

The chant began before the opera ended.

He Mei stood at the edge of the lantern light with the badge in her hand. The girls knelt around the stone table. Xiaoman held the basket at her waist. The figure stood in the ash. The loop held fast. The earplugs lay on the stone like gray crumbs.

Xiaoman sang the first line. The sounds came out low and round. Axiang sang the next. Qiaoyun sang after her. Chunxia sang last. The four voices did not fit together at first. They stopped. They started again. The front courtyard clapped for something. The drum beat. The back courtyard sang. The sound was low and round. It came from their chests, not their throats. It had no words they understood. It had a shape. The shape went up into the dark and touched the eaves and the bare tree and the lanterns. The lanterns moved. The red paper glowed. The ash in the basket shifted. The girls kept singing. Xiaoman held the basket level. Her knuckles were white. Axiang sang with her bandaged wrists pressed together. Qiaoyun's voice came out thin and true. Chunxia kept the beat with her fingers on her knee. Yanzi sang from the side gate. Meihua sang from the front gate. The red loop held. The ash shifted. The straw woman stood. The lanterns burned.

He Mei had heard the chant once before, in the shrine, when Grandmother Xu taught it to the girls. She had heard it as sound, not meaning. The old woman had said the sound was the door. The meaning was behind it. He Mei had not asked what was behind the door. She had stood in the dark and listened.

Now the girls were the door.

They knelt on the cold stone with their hands in their laps. They did not ask for wages. They did not ask for the fifteenth. They did not ask for their names to be taken off the office list. They had come to the back courtyard with the basket and the straw and the ash. They had taken their earplugs out. The little foam plugs lay on the stone table. Their ears were bare. The chant was the first sound

they had heard without the foam in weeks. It came in through their ears and into their throats. They were singing for her.

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The opera reached the end of the second act.

The crowd cheered. The lanterns swung on the eaves. The red paper glowed. He Mei held the badge in her hand. He Ling looked back with her wide gate eyes. The photograph was small and dark. The plastic was cold.

He Mei had carried the badge in her pocket for six years. She had carried it in the alley and the boiler room and the office corridor. The pin had pressed against her thigh when she knelt to clean the drain. She had never taken it out. She had never shown it to the girls. She had never said the name.

The name was in her mouth now.

Xiaoman sang the last line. The other voices stopped. The courtyard was quiet except for the opera on the other side of the wall. Xiaoman put the basket on the stone table. The ash settled. The figure stood.

"Has Zigu come?" Xiaoman asked.

He Mei took in the basket. The red loop held. The ash lay still. The straw figure had no face.

"Not yet," she said.

"Then what do we do?"

"Ask."

Xiaoman held the badge in He Mei's hand. "What do we ask?"

"The question you cannot ask for yourself."

Xiaoman was quiet. The lanterns moved. The market noise came over the wall. The cat was not on the stone table. The girls knelt around the basket. The front courtyard began the third act. The drum beat once.

"Did she know you were there?" Xiaoman said.

The words went into the dark. The figure did not move. The ash did not move. The red loop held.

He Mei's hands closed around the badge.

She had been on the second bank. The thread-break had come up through her feet. The machine had stopped. She had run. She had knelt beside her

daughter on the floor. She had put her hand on her face. She had been there. She did not know if He Ling had known.

The question was the one she had never asked. Not because she did not want the answer. Because there was no one to ask. The dead do not answer. The living do not know.

The courtyard was quiet. The girls waited. The lanterns burned. The opera singer's voice rose over the wall and broke into the night.

He Mei opened her mouth. The badge was cold in her hand. The photograph was small and dark. The girl in the photograph had been twenty-three. She had been left-handed. She had loved lanterns. She had wanted to buy her mother a new thermos. She had tied a knot without looking. She had been on the third bank when the interlock was tied off. She had been on the floor when He Mei reached her. The floor had been wet. The cloth had been gray. The light had fallen on the metal. He Ling's left hand had been on the floor. He Mei had been there. The question was the space between them. The name was in her mouth.

"He Ling," she said.

The name came out low and clear. It went into the dark and stayed there. The straw woman stood. The ash was cold. The red loop was tight. The girls did not move.

He Mei said it again. "He Ling." The name went into the dark and came back off the wall. The lanterns moved. The figure stood. The badge was cold in her hand. The front courtyard clapped. The drum beat. The cymbals crashed. The opera went on. The town was bright and loud on the other side of the wall. The singer's voice rose and fell. The crowd laughed at something on the stage. The children ran between the chairs. The lanterns swung on the eaves. The whole town was above. The back courtyard was below. The wall was between them. The basket was on the stone table. The name was in the dark. The girl in the photograph looked up from the dark.

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The girls asked their questions then.

Not for themselves. For her.

Axiang asked first. “Did she suffer?” Her bandaged wrists were folded on her knees. Her voice was rough.

Qiaoyun asked next. “Was she afraid?” She held her phone in both hands. The screen was off.

Chunxia asked, “Did she know it was you?” She said it carefully, the way she said numbers.

Yanzi asked, “Did she hear the chant?” Her voice was small. The loop was inside her collar.

Meihua asked, “Will she come back?” She put her hand over her mouth after she said it.

Xiaoman asked last. “Did she know you stayed?” She was holding the basket. Her arms were shaking.

He Mei did not answer. She could not. The questions went into the basket and the ash and the red thread. The straw figure stood. The lanterns burned. The opera went on.

The questions were not for the goddess. They were for the mother. The girls had become the priests. They asked the questions He Mei could not ask. They asked them in the dark, in the old sounds, with the basket and the straw and the ash. They asked them for her. Axiang’s voice was rough. Qiaoyun’s voice was low. Chunxia’s voice was careful, the way she said numbers. Yanzi’s voice was small. Meihua’s voice cracked. Xiaoman’s voice was steady. The lanterns moved. The ash shifted. The figure stood. No one answered. The dark held the questions and did not give them back. The opera singer reached a high note. The crowd on the other side of the wall went silent. The silence came through the stone and into the courtyard. The lanterns moved. The ash in the basket was gray. The straw woman stood. The loop held fast. The questions were in the dark. He Mei put her hand on the edge of the basket. The straw was dry. The ash was soft. The red loop held. The badge was in the basket. The work order was in the basket. The ticket was under the work order. The box was on the shelf behind the basket. The questions were in the dark. The name was in the dark. The figure stood. The girls waited. The opera went on. The opera reached the end of the third act. The drum beat. The cymbals crashed. The crowd cheered. The back courtyard was quiet. The ash in the basket was gray. The red loop was tight. The

straw figure had no face. The questions were in the basket now. The name was in the dark. He Mei knelt on the stone with the badge in her hand. The cold came up through her knees. Her hands were steady.

He Mei put the badge in the basket.

She put the work order beside it. The paper was soft at the folds. The word cancel had gone through to the other side. The ticket to Guangzhou was under the work order. The red thread was around the figure's waist. The ash was gray.

The basket was full. The badge. The work order. The ticket. The straw. The red loop. The ash. The girl in the photograph. The girl in the dark. The girl in the loom.

He Mei examined it. The badge. The work order. The ticket. The straw. The red loop. The ash. The girl in the photograph. The girl in the dark. The girl in the loom. The basket was heavy. The straw was light. The ash lay still. The loop held fast. The lanterns burned. The front courtyard clapped. The back courtyard was quiet. The night was cold. The stone was cold. The name was in the dark.

"Has Zigu come?" Xiaoman asked again.

He Mei took in the basket. The lanterns moved. The ash shifted. The straw woman stood. The ticket to Guangzhou was under the work order. The bus would leave at six-forty. Xiaoman would not be on it. The badge was in the basket. He Ling was in the basket. The name was in the dark.

"She is here," He Mei said.

The words were not a reading. They were not a prophecy. They were a name in a basket. The girls knelt on the stone. The front courtyard clapped. The opera reached its last act. The names were in the dark. The bridge was cold. The night went on. The street narrowed toward the gate. The crowd thinned. The lanterns went out one by one. The mill wall rose on the left. The gate was ahead. The guardhouse light was on. Old Zhou was in the doorway with his kettle. The trucks were coming at two. The labor bureau men were coming. The forty-one knots were in their collars. The name was in the dark. He Mei walked behind the girls with the thermos under her arm. The night was cold. The mill was running. The gate was open.

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The ritual ended before the opera.

The girls stood. Their knees were stiff. Axiang brushed the dust from her trousers. Qiaoyun put her phone back in her apron. Chunxia wound the red thread around her wrist. Yanzi put her hand over the loop in her collar. Meihua picked up the broom.

Xiaoman lifted the badge from the basket. She lifted the work order. She lifted the ticket. She put them back in the shoebox. She put the lid on. The box was heavier than it had been. She carried it to the storeroom and put it on the shelf behind the basket.

He Mei put the thermos under her arm. The tea was cold. She had not drunk it.

"The trucks come at two," Axiang said.

"I know," He Mei said.

"The labor bureau men will be at the gate."

"I know."

"The crowd will follow the lanterns."

"I know."

He Mei studied the back wall. The opera was still playing. The town was still bright. The front courtyard was still full. The back courtyard was dark.

"Then we go to the gate," she said.

They went out through the back gate. The market was closing. The lanterns were still lit. The street was full of people going home. The opera would end in an hour. The trucks would come at two. The labor bureau men would come. Old Zhou would call them when the trucks reached the gate. Axiang had the yellow slip in her shoe. Chunxia had the notebook under her arm. Qiaoyun had the phone in her apron. Xiaoman had the basket. He Mei had the thermos. The forty-one knots were in their collars and their cuffs and their shoes. The street was wet. The lanterns were going out one by one. The crowd was thinning. The market stalls were closing. The smell of fried food and incense was fading. The canal was dark. The mill was running behind the wall. The gate was waiting. The trucks were coming. The night was cold.

He Mei walked behind the girls. The badge was in the shoebox. The name was in the dark. The opera singer's voice followed them down the street and stopped at the canal.

At the corner Xiaoman turned around. The basket was under her arm. The shoebox was in the storeroom. The badge and the work order and the ticket were inside it. The name was in the dark. The opera was still playing. The town was still bright. The mill was dark.

"Will you come to the gate?" she asked.

He Mei studied the mill wall. The gate was on the other side. The loading dock was behind it. The trucks were coming. The labor bureau men were coming. The crowd would follow the lanterns. The forty-one knots were in their collars. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was in the office with her heels on.

"Yes," she said.

They walked on. The street was full of people going home. The lanterns made red circles on the wet stones. The opera singer's voice followed them down the street and stopped at the canal. The night was cold. The mill was running. The trucks were coming at two. The labor bureau men were coming. The crowd would follow the lanterns. The forty-one knots were in their collars. He Mei walked behind the girls with the thermos under her arm. The name was in the dark. She had said it aloud. The town had not heard it. The girls had heard it. The dark had heard it. That was enough. The street narrowed toward the gate. The mill wall rose on the left. The gate was ahead. The guardhouse light was on. Old Zhou was in the doorway with his kettle. The gate was open. The night was cold. The guardhouse radio was on. The book-field voice was low. The trucks were inside the yard. The night was cold. The mill was running. The women walked. The street was empty. The market was closed. The shrine was dark. The opera was over. The town was going home. The red loop held. The badge was in the basket. The name was in the dark. The names were in the dark. The bridge was cold. The night went on.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Did the trucks leave the gate?”

The crowd reached the mill gate at eleven-forty-five.

Xiaoman was at the front with the basket under her arm. Axiang was on her right. Qiaoyun was on her left. Chunxia was behind her with the red thread around her wrist. Yanzi and Meihua were at the sides. The older woman with the burn scar was at the back with the women from the third bank. The women from the winding room were at the loading dock. The women from the second bank were by the canal.

They carried lanterns. Every one of them carried a lantern. The lanterns were red paper and wire and candle. Some were rabbits. Some were fish. Some were plain circles on bamboo handles. The light made a red road on the wet stones. The street was full of people going home from the opera. The people saw the lanterns and followed.

The gate was open. The guardhouse light was on. Old Zhou stood in the doorway with his kettle. The radio was on the desk. The book-field voice was low. The black car was gone. The office window was yellow. The trucks were inside the yard.

Xiaoman stopped at the gate.

The crowd stopped behind her. The lanterns made a red wall. The people from the opera came up the street and joined the wall. The children stood on the edges. The old women stood in the middle. The men stood at the back with their hands in their pockets. The lanterns were different shapes and sizes. A rabbit. A fish. A boat. A peach. A plain red circle. The light from the candles fell on the wet stones and the mill wall and the gate. The gate was old iron. The wall was gray. The crowd was red. The street was full.

The weaving supervisor came out of the office.

He had his clipboard in his hand. He had his coat on over his pajamas. His hair was flat on one side. He scanned the crowd. He took in the lanterns. He turned to Xiaoman.

"What is this?" he said.

"It is the festival," Xiaoman said.

"The festival is at the shrine."

"The festival is over."

"Then go home."

"We are going home."

"Then go."

"We are waiting for the trucks."

The supervisor's face changed. He checked the loading dock. The trucks were there. Three of them. They were pulled up to the ramp with their engines running. The drivers were in the cabs. The loading bay was lit with one yellow bulb. The men from the warehouse stood by the ramp with their hands in their pockets.

"There are no trucks," the supervisor said.

Xiaoman checked the loading dock. The headlights came on. The first truck rolled forward. The gate was blocked by the crowd. The truck stopped.

The supervisor turned back to the crowd. "Move," he said. "Move now."

No one moved.

He walked to the front of the crowd. He grabbed the nearest girl by the collar. It was Meihua. Her collar was open. The red thread was inside it. The supervisor pulled. The thread broke. The knots spilled.

They fell on the wet stones. Red, blue, gray, green. The little knots rolled in the red lantern light. Some of them caught on the stones. Some of them went under the feet of the crowd. Meihua put her hand to her throat. Her collar was open. The thread hung from her collar like a cut vein. He Mei had told Axiang the supervisor would not touch a girl in front of the crowd. She had been wrong. The supervisor counted the knots. He did not understand what they were. The crowd did. The women closed around Meihua. The lanterns came up. The red light made a circle on the supervisor's face. He let go of the collar. He stepped back. The knots were on the ground. The crowd was quiet.

"Get out of the road," the supervisor said.

No one moved.

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Old Zhou went into the gatehouse.

Xiaoman saw him pick up the telephone. The gatehouse telephone was old and black. It had a dial, not buttons. Old Zhou dialled the number from the palm of his hand. He waited. He said something into the receiver. He waited. He said something else. Then he hung up.

He came back to the doorway.

"They are coming," he said.

"Who is coming?" the supervisor said.

"The labor bureau."

"The labor bureau is closed."

"They are coming."

The supervisor scanned the crowd. The trucks were still running. The first truck was still at the gate. The driver leaned on the horn. The sound went through the street. The crowd did not move. The driver leaned on the horn again. The children put their hands over their ears. The old women did not move.

The supervisor took out his phone. He called someone. He spoke quickly. He took in the office window. The office window was yellow. Cao Caifeng was standing at the glass. She did not come out. She did not wave. She did not turn away. She stood with her hands at her sides and scanned the crowd.

The supervisor put the phone in his pocket. He turned toward the gate. He studied the trucks. He scanned the crowd. The lanterns burned. The red light was on the wet stones and the knots and the faces.

"Move," he said again.

No one moved.

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The labor bureau men came at one-fifteen.

There were two of them. They came in a white car with a blue stripe. The car stopped at the end of the street. The men got out. They wore dark jackets and carried folders. One of them was old and thin. One of them was young and

broad. They walked through the crowd with their folders against their chests. The crowd parted for them. The lanterns made red light on their faces.

"Who is in charge?" the older man asked.

The supervisor stepped forward. "I am the shift supervisor."

"Are you the employer?"

"The employer is not here."

"Who is the employer?"

"The boss is not here."

"Then who is in charge?"

The supervisor took in the office window. Cao Caifeng was still standing at the glass. She did not come out. The supervisor looked back at the older man.

"The office is in charge," he said.

The older man scanned the crowd. He studied the trucks. He counted the red knots on the ground. He opened his folder. The folder was thin and gray. There was a form inside. There was a pen. There was a stamp. The older man put the folder on the hood of the white car and wrote something down. The younger man took another photograph. The flash went off. The crowd blinked. The trucks did not move.

"A complaint was filed," he said. "Unpaid wages. Overtime. Safety. The complaint names this mill. The complaint names this gate. The complaint says the trucks are moving tonight."

"The complaint is wrong," the supervisor said.

The older man studied the first truck. The engine was running. The headlights were on. The driver was in the cab.

"The truck is moving," he said.

"It is not moving."

"It is in the gate."

"It is waiting for the road to clear."

"Then the road will not clear."

The supervisor's mouth opened. The younger man took a photograph of the truck. The older man took a photograph of the crowd. The flash went off. The lanterns made a red afterimage.

"Until the complaint is heard, the trucks do not move," the older man said. "No stock leaves this yard. No wages are paid from this account. The office will open the books on Monday."

"Monday is a holiday."

"Then Tuesday."

The supervisor took in the office window. Cao Caifeng had not moved. The older man closed his folder.

"Who filed the complaint?" he asked.

Axiang stepped forward. She had the yellow slip in her hand. She had the receipts in her shoe. She had the bandaged wrists.

"I did," she said.

The older man took the slip. He examined it. He turned to Axiang. He scanned the crowd. He turned the slip over. He read the number at the top. He read the date. He read the name of the mill. He put the slip in his folder. The younger man wrote something in a notebook. The older man took a photograph of the trucks. The flash went off. The first truck's headlights were still on. The driver was still in the cab.

"Keep the road blocked until the trucks are gone," he said. "Then go home."

"The trucks are not gone," Xiaoman said.

The older man turned to her. "Then keep the road blocked."

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The trucks did not move.

The first truck sat at the gate with its engine running. The driver leaned on the horn once more. The crowd did not move. The driver turned the engine off. The headlights stayed on. The second truck stayed at the ramp. The third truck stayed in the loading bay. The warehouse men stood by the ramp and did not move. The supervisor stood by the office door and did not move. The labor bureau men stood by the white car and did not move.

The lanterns burned.

The crowd stood in the road. The women from the third bank stood in the front. The women from the winding room stood at the loading dock. The women from the second bank stood by the canal. The older woman with the

burn scar stood with her daughter. The children stood on the edges. The old women stood in the middle. The men stood at the back.

Xiaoman held the basket. The ash lay still. The straw figure stood. The loop held fast. The knots were on the ground. Meihua's collar was open. Axiang had the yellow slip in her hand. Old Zhou stood in the gatehouse doorway with his kettle. The radio was on the desk. The book-field voice was low.

The opera ended at midnight. The crowd from the shrine came up the street with their lanterns. They saw the crowd at the gate. They stopped. The lanterns made a red wall from the shrine to the mill. The street was full.

At one o'clock the candles began to go out. The paper lanterns went dark one by one. The red light faded. The street was gray. The trucks were still there. The crowd was still there. The labor bureau men were still there.

At two o'clock the first truck started its engine again. The driver put it in gear. The truck moved forward. The crowd did not move. The truck stopped. The driver put it in reverse. The truck moved back. The crowd did not move. The driver turned the engine off.

At three o'clock the labor bureau men went into the office. The office light stayed on. The supervisor went in after them. The office door closed. The crowd waited. The lanterns were dark. The sky above the mill roof began to turn gray.

At four o'clock the office door opened. The older labor bureau man came out with a folder under his arm. The supervisor came out behind him. His coat was open. His clipboard was gone. The office clerk stood in the door with a cup of tea. The tea was cold. The office light was still on. The sky was gray above the mill roof. The first bus came down the main street. The gate was still blocked. The trucks were still there. The older man walked to the gate. He scanned the crowd. He studied the trucks.

"The trucks will not move tonight," he said. "The office will open the books on Tuesday. The wages will be calculated. The stock will stay in the yard until the calculation is done."

The crowd was quiet. The first truck's headlights were still on. The driver was asleep in the cab. The second truck was dark. The third truck was dark. The loading dock was gray in the dawn.

The older man turned to Axiang. “Go home,” he said. “Sleep. Come to the window on Tuesday.”

Axiang studied the trucks. “And the stock?”

“It stays.”

“And the wages?”

“They will be calculated.”

“That is not the same as paid.”

“No,” the older man said. “It is not.”

Axiang put the yellow slip back in her shoe. Xiaoman adjusted the basket on her arm. The women began to walk. The gate stayed open. The sun was behind the mill roof. The sky was gray. The street was wet.

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The crowd began to go home at dawn.

The lanterns were dead. The paper was gray. The children were asleep on their mothers’ backs. The old women walked slowly. The men walked with their hands in their pockets. The women from the third bank walked together. The women from the winding room walked together. The women from the second bank walked together. The knots were still on the ground. Some of them had been crushed into the wet stones. Some of them had been picked up. Some of them were gone.

Xiaoman stood at the gate with the basket under her arm. Axiang stood beside her. Qiaoyun stood beside Axiang. Chunxia stood behind them. Meihua stood by the guardhouse with her hand at her throat. Yanzi stood by the wall. Old Zhou stood in the doorway.

The trucks were inside the yard. The gate was open. The road was empty. The sky was gray. The mill was quiet. The looms had stopped at midnight. The only sound was the canal and the first bus on the main street.

“Did the trucks leave the gate?” Qiaoyun asked.

Xiaoman studied the yard. The first truck was at the gate with its headlights off. The second was at the ramp. The third was in the loading bay. The stock was inside. The wages were not paid. The labor bureau men were gone. The office window was dark.

"No," she said.

The word was small. It went into the gray morning and stayed there. The women walked up the street. The lanterns were dead. The knots were on the ground. The trucks had not moved. The stock was inside. The wages were not paid. The office was dark. The labor bureau men were gone. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was in the office. The mill was quiet. The street was empty. The first bus came down the main street and stopped at the corner. The door opened. The door closed. The bus went on. Xiaoman stood at the gate with the basket under her arm. The ash was cold. The straw figure stood. The red loop held. The morning was cold. The trucks had not moved. The street was gray. The market was closed. The shrine was closed. The opera stage was dark. The lanterns were dead. The knots were on the ground. The women walked home. The trucks stayed. The yard stayed. The stock stayed. The office stayed. The labor bureau men got into the white car. The car turned around and went down the main street. The red stripe on the side caught the gray light. The crowd kept its eyes on it until it turned the corner. The supervisor went back into the office. The office door closed. The gate stayed open. The trucks stayed inside. The first truck's driver got out and stood by the cab with his hands in his pockets. The morning was cold. The street was empty. The sky was gray. The yard was quiet. The gate was open. The morning went on again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Did the money land?”

The money came on a Tuesday, in the rain.

Xiaoman stood in the line outside the office with her work card in her hand. The line went down the steps and across the yard and stopped at the gate. The women held umbrellas and plastic bags and their work cards. The rain fell on the umbrellas and ran off the edges. The yard smelled of wet concrete and the diesel from the white car.

The labor bureau men were inside. The older man sat at the office table with the account books open. The younger man stood by the door with a folder. The office clerk sat at the computer. Cao Caifeng sat at the end of the table in her gray coat. She had a pen in her hand. She signed the papers one by one. She did not look up.

The line moved slowly. The rain came down in a fine gray sheet. The woman ahead of Xiaoman had a daughter asleep on her back. The girl’s shoes were wet. The woman held an umbrella over the girl and let the rain fall on her own shoulders. Xiaoman studied the woman’s shoulders. They were dark with rain. The umbrellas made a low drumming sound. The women did not talk. Some of them held their work cards against their chests. Some of them held their phones. Some of them held the hands of their daughters. The line went down the steps and across the yard and stopped at the gate. The gate was open. The trucks were still inside the yard. The white car was by the office. The labor bureau men were inside. The office window was yellow.

Axiang was near the front. Her bandaged wrists were wrapped in a plastic bag against the rain. Chunxia was behind her with her notebook under her coat. Qiaoyun was behind Chunxia with her phone off. Meihua was behind Qiaoyun. Yanzi was at the end of the line with her collar turned up. The older woman with the burn scar stood under a black umbrella with her daughter.

Xiaoman was in the middle. She could see the office door. She could see the table. She could see the older labor bureau man turn a page. She could see Cao Caifeng's pen move.

At ten o'clock the older man came to the door.

"The first payment is ready," he said. "It is sixty percent of the base wages. The overtime is still under review. The stock is being valued. The rest will come after the sale."

The older man held up a sheet of paper. The paper had columns of names and numbers. The younger man held the folder. The office clerk held the box of bank cards. The women in the line pressed forward. The older man lowered the paper.

"One at a time," he said. "Bring your work card. Sign the release. Take your card. The next."

A murmur went through the line. Sixty percent. The women exchanged glances. Some of them counted on their fingers. Some of them faced the office window. Some of them kept their eyes on the ground.

"Sixty percent is not the wages," Axiang said.

"No," the older man said. "It is not."

"Then why are we signing?"

"Because it is what is in the account."

The line moved. A woman near the door asked the older man why the cleaner was not in the line. The older man checked his list. He said the cleaner was not on the payroll. The woman turned to He Mei. He Mei faced the gate. The line moved.

He Mei was standing outside the gate with her thermos under her arm. She was not in the line. She had no work card. She had no bank card. She had no name on the office list. She stood under the wall with the rain falling on her black coat and kept her eyes on the women as they went in one by one. Xiaoman saw her from the steps. He Mei did not wave. Xiaoman did not wave. The line moved. The rain stopped at noon. The yard began to steam. The women closed their umbrellas. The gate was open. The trucks were inside the yard. The white car was by the office. The line moved.

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The payment was made by bank card.

The mill had opened a card for each worker in the first month. The cards were kept in the office. The office clerk had the cards in a box. She called the names one by one. The women stepped up to the table. The clerk checked the work card. The labor bureau man checked the name. Cao Caifeng signed the release. The woman took her card and went to the door.

Xiaoman's name was called at eleven. She had been standing for two hours. Her shoes were wet. Her fingers were cold. She stepped up to the table. The office clerk found her card in the box. The card was blue. It had her name printed on it. She had never seen it before. The clerk put it on the table. The labor bureau man pushed a form across the table.

"Sign here," he said. "It says you have received the first payment."

Xiaoman read the form. The numbers were small. She could read her name. She could read the date. She could read the amount.

She signed. The pen was cold. The form was thin. The older man blotted the signature with a piece of paper. The clerk gave her the card. The card was thin and cold. Xiaoman put it in her pocket. She went out of the office and down the steps. The rain had stopped. The yard was gray. The line was still there. The women were still waiting. Some of them had their cards. Some of them were counting the money on their phones. Some of them were crying. Some of them were laughing. Some of them were quiet.

Xiaoman stood at the bottom of the steps and turned the card over. She did not know how much money was on it. She did not know how to check. Qiaoyun came down the steps behind her.

"Did the money land?" Qiaoyun asked.

Xiaoman turned the card over. "I do not know."

"Check your phone."

"I do not have the app."

"Then go to the bank."

"Which bank?"

"The one in town."

Xiaoman put the card in her pocket. The rain had stopped. The sky was gray. The line moved behind her. The women were still waiting.

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The bank was on the main street, next to the gate shop.

It had a blue sign and a row of glass windows. The women from the mill stood in a line outside. Some of them had their cards. Some of them had their phones. Some of them had their work cards. The bank clerk at the door let them in one at a time.

Xiaoman went to the machine at the back. She had never used a card at a machine. Axiang stood beside her and showed her where to put the card. The screen lit up. The numbers were in black. Xiaoman pressed the button for the balance.

The number came up.

It was not the number the recruiter had promised. It was not the number on the office form. It was sixty percent of the base wage. It was enough for the dorm fee and the food and a pair of shoes. It was not enough for her mother's medicine and the roof and the bus ticket and the money she had promised to send home.

Xiaoman stood in front of the machine and read the number.

"Is it there?" Axiang asked.

"It is there."

"How much?"

Xiaoman told her.

Axiang nodded. "That is what they said."

"It is not the wages."

"No."

"It is not enough."

"No."

Xiaoman took the card out of the machine. The screen went dark. The bank was warm. The rain had started again outside. The women were still in line. The bank clerk was still letting them in one at a time. An old woman at the next machine asked Axiang to read the number for her. A young woman was crying into her phone. A man in a blue jacket was counting notes at the counter. The

bank smelled of wet wool and paper money. Xiaoman put the card back in her pocket. Axiang put her card in her bra. Qiaoyun put her card in her phone case. The old woman at the next machine asked Axiang to read her number again. Axiang read it. The old woman nodded. She did not smile. The young woman who had been crying was still crying. The man in the blue jacket counted his notes twice. The bank was warm. The rain ran down the glass. The women came in from the street one by one. A guard stood by the door with his hands behind his back. The machine beeped. The receipt came out. The paper was warm. Xiaoman folded the receipt and put it in her pocket. The guard held the door. The rain came in with the women. The bank was full of wet coats and quiet voices.

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They ate noodles that night at the stall by the canal bridge.

The stall had a blue plastic awning and three tables. The woman who owned it sold noodles with scallions and chili oil. The pot steamed. The rain fell on the awning and ran down the sides. The canal was dark. The lamps on the bridge made yellow circles on the water.

Xiaoman sat at the table with Axiang, Qiaoyun, Chunxia, Yanzi, and Meihua. The older woman with the burn scar sat at the next table with her daughter. The women from the winding room sat under the awning with their bowls. The women from the second bank stood by the bridge with their noodles. The women from the third bank sat on the steps.

The bowls were hot. The noodles were thick. The chili oil was red. The scallions were green. The steam came up into the cold air. Xiaoman ate slowly. The food was good. The money was in her pocket. The card was in her pocket. The ticket was in the shoebox at the shrine. The forty-one knots were in her collar. The rain drummed on the blue awning. The canal ran under the bridge. The stall woman wiped the table with a gray cloth. The pot steamed. The night was cold.

"Sixty percent," Chunxia said.

"Sixty percent," Qiaoyun said.

"The overtime is still under review."

"The stock is being valued."

"The rest will come after the sale."

"Maybe."

Axiang put her chopsticks down. "It is more than last month."

"It is not the wages."

"No."

"We should celebrate," Meihua said.

No one answered.

"We should," Meihua said again. "We are alive. We have money. We have noodles."

Axiang touched her bowl. "Eat your noodles."

Meihua laughed. Then she stopped. She picked up her chopsticks and ate. Yanzi had gone back to the clinic in January. The test was negative. She had not told anyone until the night of the noodles. She said it into her bowl, not to anyone's face. Axiang's wrists had been burned by the steam pipe in the dye house three winters before. The skin had healed pale and shiny. She wrapped them because the cold made the scars ache. Qiaoyun asked if they should buy something with the money. Axiang said no. Chunxia said the money was for the bride price. Yanzi said nothing. The rain fell on the awning. The canal ran under the bridge. The women ate their noodles. No one made a speech. No one raised a bowl. The money was in their pockets. The trucks were still inside the mill yard. The boss was still gone. The laoban-niang was still in the office. The rest was still under review.

Xiaoman finished her noodles. She put the bowl on the table. She touched the card in her pocket. She took in the women around her. The older woman with the burn scar had her arm around her daughter. Qiaoyun was looking at her phone. Chunxia was writing numbers on her napkin. Axiang was soaking her bandaged wrists in the steam from her bowl. Yanzi was quiet. Meihua was eating.

The rain stopped. The sky was still gray. The stall woman turned off the pot. Qiaoyun asked if the boss would come back. Axiang said no. Chunxia asked if the laoban-niang would sell the mill. Axiang said she did not know. Meihua asked if they would have jobs next month. No one answered. The canal ran under the bridge. The lamps made yellow circles on the water. The noodles were

finished. The bowls were empty. The pot was cold. The women stood up. They walked back to the dorm in a slow line. The bridge lamps made yellow circles on the wet stones. The canal ran under the bridge. No one sang. No one raised a bowl. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The older woman with the burn scar walked with her daughter. The women from the winding room walked together. The women from the second bank walked together. The women from the third bank walked together. Xiaoman walked at the back with Axiang. The card was in her pocket. The card was thin. The card was cold.

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At the dorm Xiaoman lay on her bunk with her boots off.

The room was cold. The bulb above the door was on. The wet coats hung from the wire. The basin was on the floor. The water in the basin was gray. Qiaoyun was on the lower bunk with her phone against her ear. Axiang was soaking her feet. Chunxia was at the table with her notebook. Yanzi was asleep with her face to the wall. Meihua was on the floor with her back against the bed.

Xiaoman put her hand in her pocket. The card was there. The money was there. The ticket was in the shoebox at the shrine. The date on it had passed. She had not decided what to do next.

"Did the money land?" Chunxia asked, without looking up.

"It landed," Xiaoman said.

"How much?"

"Sixty percent."

Chunxia's pencil moved. "That is another month on the bride price."

"Everything is another month on the bride price."

Chunxia did not look up. "Not everything."

Xiaoman closed her eyes. The dorm was quiet. The rain had stopped. The night shift was not running. The looms were still. The trucks were inside the yard. The money was in her pocket. The rest was under review. She did not sleep for a long time. Axiang turned over in the lower bunk. The bandage rustled. Qiaoyun's phone glowed under her blanket. Chunxia's pencil moved on the

notebook. Yanzi breathed against the wall. Meihua's shoes dripped on the floor. The room smelled of wet wool and noodles. The bulb above the door buzzed.

When she did sleep, she dreamed of the bus. The bus was green. The road was gray. The girl in the red coat was on the bus. Xiaoman was not on the bus. She was standing at the gate with the basket under her arm. The gate was open. The trucks had not moved. The money was in her pocket. The rest was under review.

She woke before dawn. The dorm was gray. The rain had stopped. The card was under her pillow. The mill was quiet. The gate was open. The trucks had not moved. The money was in her pocket. The rest was under review. The morning was cold. The room was still. The mill was silent. The morning was gray. She closed her eyes. The rain fell. The bank was warm. The line moved. The day came.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Caifeng.”

The rain had stopped by dawn, but the alley was still wet.

He Mei stood at the mouth of the lane with the thermos under her arm. The bulb over the door was dead. The drain ran under the wall with its old slow sound. The step was black with water. The alley room was empty. The door was closed. The key was on the shelf inside.

The mill was quiet. The looms had stopped. The gate was open. The trucks were still inside the yard. The white car was gone. The labor bureau men were gone. The women were asleep in the dorm. The office window was dark.

He Mei had come to the alley before the town woke. She had the shoebox under her coat. The badge was in it. The work order was in it. The ticket to Guangzhou was in it. She had taken the box from the shrine storeroom before dawn. The basket was still on the stone table. The straw woman was still in the ash. The red loop held.

She stood at the mouth of the lane and waited.

She did not know what she was waiting for. The money had landed. The trucks had not moved. The office had opened the books. The rest was under review. The girls were asleep. The boss was in Shanghai. The mill was quiet.

She had known Caifeng for twenty-four years. In 1994 they had worked the same row in the third shed. The radio had played old songs from the windowsill. Caifeng had tied the smallest knots in the shed. She had been quick and quiet and careful. She had signed the list with the other women. Then she had gone into the office and read the names to the manager. He Mei had seen her through the gap in the door. She had gone home with the thermos under her arm and had not gone back to the shed.

The years after that had been the years away. He Mei had married. She had raised He Ling. She had come back to the mill when He Ling turned eighteen. Caifeng had come up by then. She had the office coat and the good shoes. She still snapped a length of cloth at the end of a run. She still tied the smallest knots.

She had not said He Mei's name in twenty-four years. He Mei had not said hers. Then He Ling had come to the third bank. Then the interlock had been tied off. Then the loom had run. Then the compensation table. Then the cleaning job. Then the six years in the alley. The years were not a story. They were a row of days. He Mei had counted them the way she counted stitches. The row had been long. The days had been long. The nights had been long. The loom had run through all of them. The thermos had stayed hot through some of them. The badge had stayed in the box through all of them. The work order had stayed in the box through all of them. The ticket had stayed in the box. The red slip had gone back to the trash. The silk thread had stayed in the coat. The flyer had stayed in the coat. The years had stayed in the box. The compensation table had stayed in the office. The pen had stayed in the drawer. The cleaning cart had stayed in the corridor. The drain had stayed in the wall. The name had stayed in her mouth. She had not said it in six years. She had said it in the dark behind the shrine. She had said it to the girls. She had said it to the badge. Now she said the other name. The old name. The name of the woman at the mouth of the lane.

Then she heard the heels.

They came down the main street from the direction of the shrine. They were slow. They were not the quick heels of the office corridor. They were the heels of a woman walking on wet stone in the gray light. The jasmine came after them. It was thin and clean. It cut through the smell of the drain and the wet brick.

Cao Caifeng stopped at the mouth of the lane.

She was wearing the gray coat. Her hair was combed back. Her face was gray in the dawn. The heels were on her feet. The scarf was at her throat. The scar on her thumb was white against the strap of her bag. She took in the alley, the dead bulb, He Mei.

He Mei met her eyes.

The alley was quiet. The drain ran. The mill was quiet. The town was waking on the other side of the wall. A bicycle went past on the main street. The rider did not look down the lane.

"Caifeng," He Mei said.

She said it the way it had been said in the loom shed, before either of them owned anything. The vowels were rounder. The first sound came from the back

of the mouth. The last sound was soft. It was the name of a woman who tied the smallest knots in the shed. It was the name of a woman who had signed the list. It was the name of a woman who had stayed.

Cao Caifeng did not move.

The name went into the alley and came back off the wall. The jasmine moved. The drain ran. The woman at the mouth of the lane stood with her bag over her arm and her heels in the wet.

She did not understand it. At the corner of the lane Xiaoman and Axiang stood with their collars turned up. They had followed He Mei from the shrine. They had stopped at the wall. They had heard the old name. They did not know what it meant. They had never heard the name said that way. They stood in the gray light and waited. Xiaoman took a step toward the lane. Axiang put her hand on her arm. Xiaoman stopped. The two of them stood by the wall and listened. The old name was still in the air. The jasmine was still in the lane. The drain ran. Xiaoman did not understand the word. Axiang did not understand it either. It sounded like a name from another town. It sounded like a word from another life. They stood by the wall and did not move. Xiaoman wanted to go to He Mei. Axiang held her arm. The old name was still in the air. The jasmine was still in the lane. The drain ran. The skin on Xiaoman's arms rose. She did not know why. Axiang did not know why. They stood in the gray light and waited.

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He Mei lifted the shoebox.

She took off the lid. The badge lay on top of the work order. The photograph was small and dark. The girl with the wide gate eyes looked up at the gray sky. The ticket to Guangzhou was under the work order. The red thread was not in the box. The red thread was in the basket at the shrine.

He Mei took out the work order.

The paper was soft at the folds. The date was the third of March. The number at the top was the number of the loom. The word cancel had gone through to the other side. She laid it on the wet ground between them.

Cao Caifeng looked down at the paper. Her hand moved toward it and stopped. The scar on her thumb was white. The paper was gray on the wet stone.

The word cancel was face up. The ink had faded at the edges. The fold was soft. The date and the number of the loom were still there. The paper had been in a shoebox for six years. It smelled of dust and the inside of the box. She did not pick it up. She did not step on it. She stood at the edge of it and looked down.

This is not for the labor bureau," He Mei said. "The labor bureau has the books. The labor bureau has the stock. This is not for them."

Cao Caifeng studied the paper. Her face was still.

"This is for you," He Mei said.

The alley was quiet. The drain ran. The paper lay on the wet ground. The word cancel was visible through the fold. The date was visible. The number of the loom was visible.

Cao Caifeng did not speak.

He Mei met her eyes. She had known this woman for twenty-four years. She had worked the same row in 1994. She had eaten from the same tin boxes. She had washed her hands in the same sink. She had seen her climb out of the layoffs by naming names. She had seen her walk the bright floor in the good shoes. She had seen her stand at the end of the aisle when He Ling died. The supervisor who cut the cloth had gone to Shanghai with the boss. He had not come back. She had seen her sign the compensation paper. She had seen her come down the corridor with the jasmine and the gloves. She had seen her stay.

Now she stood at the mouth of the alley with the work order on the ground between them.

Cao Caifeng studied the paper for a long time. Then she met He Mei's eyes.

"Did it hurt?" she said.

The words were quiet. They were not the words of a boss. They were not the words of a laoban-niang. They were the words of a woman who had stood at the end of the aisle and had not come any closer.

He Mei met her eyes. The drain ran. The paper lay on the wet ground. The badge was in the box. The girl in the photograph looked up at the gray sky.

"It was fast," He Mei said.

The words came out flat. They were not mercy. They were not fact. They were the only answer she had. The loom had been fast. The knot had been fast. The floor had been fast. The ambulance had been slow. The compensation table

had been slow. The six years had been slow. The words were not enough. They were what she had.

The alley was quiet. The drain ran. The paper lay on the wet stone. The badge was in the box. The girl in the photograph looked up at the gray sky. Cao Caifeng did not speak. He Mei did not speak. The jasmine moved. The heels stayed.

Cao Caifeng closed her eyes.

She did not cry. Her face did not change. The jasmine moved in the cold air. The heels stayed on the wet stone.

He Mei put the work order back in the shoebox. She put the badge on top of it. She put the lid on. The box was cold in her hands.

"Are you leaving?" He Mei asked.

Cao Caifeng opened her eyes.

"No," she said.

The word was small. It went into the alley and stayed there. The mill was quiet. The gate was open. The trucks were inside. The office window was dark. The looms had stopped. The town was waking.

He Mei met her eyes. The woman at the mouth of the lane was fifty-five. Her hair was combed back. Her coat was gray. Her heels were on. She had stayed.

"Running is for people someone is willing to hide," He Mei said.

Cao Caifeng met her eyes. She did not answer. She turned and walked back up the main street. The name went with her. The heels struck the wet stone. The jasmine stayed in the alley. He Mei kept her eyes on her until she turned the corner.

The heels were the same heels. The coat was the same coat. The woman inside them was not the same woman. He Mei had known her when they were both young. She had known her when they were both fast. She had known her when they were both poor. Now one of them had a car and a mill and a pair of good shoes. The other had a box and a thermos and a name.

He Mei turned to the box in her hands. The box was cold. The lid was on. The badge was inside. The work order was inside. The ticket was inside. The name was inside. The name was also in the alley. The name was also in the dark. He Mei had said it. Cao Caifeng had heard it. The girls had heard it. The town

had not. That was enough. The town was waking. The gate was open. The trucks were inside. The stock was inside. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was walking home. The girls were asleep. The morning was cold. The box was cold.

He Mei stood at the mouth of the lane with the shoebox under her arm and the thermos in her hand. The drain ran under the wall. The mill was quiet. The town was waking. The red thread was in the basket at the shrine. The name was in the dark.

The girls were asleep in the dorm. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The trucks were inside the yard. The boss was in Shanghai. Cao Caifeng was walking back up the main street in her gray coat and her heels.

He Mei did not follow. She stood at the mouth of the alley until the heels turned the corner and the jasmine faded. Then she turned to the box in her hands. The badge was inside. The work order was inside. The ticket to Guangzhou was inside. The lid was on. The red cardboard was dull in the gray light.

The drain ran under the wall. The gate was open. The mill was quiet. The girls were asleep. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was walking home. The town was waking. The day was coming. He Mei put her hand on the box. The cardboard was cold. The lid was on. The badge was inside. The work order was inside. The ticket was inside. The name was inside. The name was also in the alley. The name was also in the dark. She had said it. The woman had heard it. The girls had heard it. The town had not. That was enough. The town was waking. The gate was open. The trucks were inside. The stock was inside. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was walking home. The girls were asleep. The morning was cold. The box was cold. The mill was quiet. The gate was open. The trucks were inside. The stock was inside. The wages were partial. The rest was under review. The girls were asleep. The money was in their pockets. The boss was in Shanghai. The laoban-niang was walking home. The day was coming. The town was waking. The drain ran under the wall. He Mei put the shoebox under her arm and the thermos in her hand. The alley was wet. The drain ran. The town was waking. The name

was in the dark. The box was cold under her arm. The thermos was warm. The drain ran under the wall. The street was empty. The gate was open. The trucks were inside. The stock was inside. The money was in their pockets. The rest was under review. The day was coming. The mill was quiet. The town was waking. The name held. The day came. The mill was quiet. She went back through the gate.

CODA

“What color is the water tomorrow?”

The spring bus left at six-forty in the morning.

He Mei stood at the gate of the dormitory with the thermos under her arm. The sky was gray. The road was wet. The bus was green and long and had dark windows. The driver was standing by the door with a cup of tea. The passengers were loading their bags into the hold. Xiaoman was among them.

Her bag was a woven plastic bag with a broken zipper. It held two shirts, a pair of jeans, the chili jar wrapped in a plastic bag, and the red thread with the forty-one knots. The bus ticket was in her hand. The destination was not written in characters He Mei could read. The number at the top was the number of the bus.

Xiaoman put the bag in the hold. She turned around. She was wearing the coat she had worn all winter. Her hair was pinned back. Her shoes were wet.

He Mei took the red thread from her pocket.

She had cut it from the waste bin behind the third bank. It was short. It was red. She tied a knot in it. Then she tied the knot around the strap of Xiaoman’s bag.

Xiaoman touched the knot. She did not ask what it meant. She did not ask if it was a knot or a loop. He Mei did not say. The knot was small. It was tight. It sat against the plastic strap like a small red seed.

They had not spoken about the night at the gate. They had not spoken about the trucks or the money or the labor bureau. They had not spoken about He Ling. The box was in the shrine storeroom. Xiaoman had not asked for it back. He Mei had not offered it. They had eaten noodles. They had slept. They had woken in the same dorm. Now the bus was at the station and the bag was in the hold. He Mei had not brought the box. Those things were for the dark, not for the road. The road had its own weight. The bag was enough. The knot was enough. The bus went south. The road was wet. The sky was gray. The town fell

behind. Xiaoman sat by the window with the bag on her knees. The knot was on the strap. The knot was small. The knot was tight. She did not look back.

The driver called the bus. Xiaoman picked up the bag. She turned to He Mei. He Mei met her eyes. The bus station was loud. The loudspeaker called the destination. The passengers went up the steps.

Xiaoman went up the steps. She sat by the window. She put the bag on her knees. The knot was on the strap. The bus pulled out of the station. The diesel smoke came back into the shed. He Mei stood at the gate and kept her eyes on the bus until it turned onto the road.

She did not wave. Xiaoman did not wave. The knot was on the bag. That was enough. He Mei did not know where the bus was going. The ticket said a city in the south. Xiaoman had not told her. He Mei had not asked. The road was the road. The knot was the knot. He Mei stood at the station gate until the bus was out of sight. The station was quiet. The loudspeaker called another destination. The woman with the tea eggs closed her bucket. The man with the cigarette went back inside. The station was empty. The town was waking. The market was open. The gate shop was open. The woman behind the counter was watching her drama. The man by the door was smoking. The morning was cold. The road was wet. The sky was gray. The bus was gone. The town was awake. The box was hers. The name was in the dark. She went back through the gate.

He Mei walked back through the station. The loudspeaker called another destination. The woman selling tea eggs was still there. The bench where Xiaoman had sat was empty. The floor was wet. The diesel smoke hung under the metal roof. He Mei went out into the street. The morning was cold. The market was opening. The gate shop was open. The woman behind the counter was watching her drama. The man by the door was smoking a cigarette. He Mei walked past him. He did not look up. The street was full of morning traffic. The buses were coming in from the villages. The market women were setting out their vegetables. The fish were on the ice. The butcher was sharpening his knife. The town was awake. The town was already forgetting the fifteenth.

She went back to the dormitory. The room was empty. The bunks were bare. The wire with the curtains was still there. The rice jar was on the shelf. The chili jar was gone. He Mei stood in the doorway and listened to the mill. The looms

were running. The mill was not closed yet. She put her hand on the door frame. The wood was cold. She had slept in this room for six years. The room was not hers. The box was hers.

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The mill closed in April.

The looms were sold to a factory in the south. The buyers came with a truck and a crew of men in blue overalls. They took the machines apart. They numbered the parts with chalk. They loaded the frames and the beams and the water-jet heads onto the truck. The truck was long. It blocked the main street for an hour. The town stood still. The women stood at the gate and kept their eyes on the looms.

He Mei stood at the back of the crowd with the thermos under her arm. The shed was empty behind her. The drain ran under the wall. The bulb over the alley door was dead. The office window was dark. The donor board at the shrine still had the name of the mill on it. The name was gold. The mill was gone.

Cao Caifeng stood at the gate in her gray coat. She kept her eyes on the truck. She did not speak. The jasmine came off her coat in a thin line. The heels were on her feet. She stayed until the truck turned the corner. Then she went back into the office. The door closed. The office window was dark. The truck turned the corner and was gone. The town went back to its morning. The women went back to their bags. The mill gate stood open. The yard was empty. The loading dock was empty. The trucks were gone. The stock was gone. The looms were gone. The men in blue overalls walked to their cars. The gate stayed open.

He Mei did not speak to her. She had said the name in the alley. She had laid the work order on the wet ground. She had heard the question. She had given the answer. There was nothing else to say. The work order was in the shoebox. The badge was in the shoebox. The ticket to Guangzhou was in the shoebox. The box was under her bed in the rented room above the noodle shop.

The women found work where they could. Axiang went to a mill in the next town. Qiaoyun went home to her village. Chunxia went to a factory in the south. Yanzi stayed with her aunt. Meihua went to a noodle shop. Chunxia sent the last of the bride-price in the summer. Her brother married in the autumn. Qiaoyun's

Li Wei did not wait. She wrote to say she had known. The dormitory closed. The beds were taken apart. The blankets were folded. The wire with the curtains was cut and rolled up. The rice jar was left on the shelf. The chili jar went south with Chunxia. The red thread went with the women. The basket stayed at the shrine. The straw woman stayed in the basket. The ash was swept into a paper bag and put under the stone table. Grandmother Xu did not come out to say goodbye. The shrine door was closed. The market was open. The town was already buying and selling.

He Mei went to the back courtyard once before she left. The side gate was open. The stone table was in the shade. The basket was under the table. The straw woman was in the storeroom. The ash was in the paper bag. The red thread was in the basket. Grandmother Xu was sweeping the front courtyard. She did not come to the back. He Mei stood at the stone table and put her hand on the wood. The wood was cold. The market noise came over the wall. The cat was not there. She did not open the shoebox. She did not light the candle. She went out through the back gate and did not look back.

He Mei took the night shift at the next mill in the next town.

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The next mill was smaller than the old one. It had two sheds and one boiler room and a yard with a single gate. The night shift began at ten. The looms were older. The drains were narrower. The alley behind the boiler room was short and dark. There was one bulb over the door. The bulb was yellow. The drain ran under the wall and into a canal He Mei had not seen before.

She moved into a room at the end of the alley. The room had a bed, a chair, a shelf, and a window that looked onto the wall. She put the thermos on the shelf. She put the shoebox under the bed board. She put the red thread in her pocket. She put the flyer and the silk thread in the lining of her coat. The coat was heavy. The lining was split at the seam. The red slip was gone.

The first night she cleaned the boiler room. The second night she cleaned the office. The third night she emptied the bins. The trash was different. The cigarette brands were different. The paper was different. The drain was the same.

The water ran warm. The steam came up into the cold air. The bulb over the door made a small yellow circle on the wet stone.

On the fourth night a girl was waiting in the alley.

She was young. She was thin. She had a woven bag over her shoulder and a work card in her hand. She stood at the end of the lane with her collar turned up. She took in the dead bulb, the drain, He Mei.

"You are the cleaner," the girl said.

"Yes."

"They said you read the water."

He Mei studied the drain. The water ran under the wall. It was gray at the edges. It was brown in the middle. It carried a thread of something red from the dye house.

"What color is the water tomorrow?" the girl asked.

He Mei considered the water. She considered the girl. The girl was nineteen. Her shoes were wet. Her work card was new. Her collar was turned up. She was waiting. She had the same look as Xiaoman on the first night. She had the same look as He Ling at the gate of the mill.

"What color is the water tomorrow?" the girl asked again.

He Mei turned back to the drain. The water was gray at the edges. It was brown in the middle. The red thread from the dye house turned over and over. The girl waited. She was not Xiaoman. She was not He Ling. She was a girl at the end of an alley with a question. He Mei did not know her name. She did not ask. There would be time for the name. There would be time for the question. He Mei had answered questions in the old alley. She had read the water and the trash and the cigarettes and the bank slips. She had tied knots for Axiang and Qiaoyun and Chunxia and Yanzi. She had tied a loop for a girl who was not ready. She had tied a knot for Xiaoman's bag. Now she was in a new alley with a new girl. The work was the same. The water was the same. The questions were the same. The new mill had two sheds and one boiler room. The night shift began at ten. The women walked home in the dark. The men stood at the gate with their bicycles. The shops closed early. The buses stopped at nine. The town was smaller than Shengze. The work was the same. The girl was waiting. The drain was running. The bulb was yellow. The night was cold. The new mill was running. The looms

were older. The sound was lower. The women were asleep. The town was dark. The morning would come.

He Mei put her hand in her pocket. The red thread was there. She cut a length with her teeth. The thread was red. The thread was short. The girl kept her eyes on her hands. The drain ran under the wall. The new mill was running. The town was dark. The night was cold. She tied a knot in it. The knot was small. It was tight. She held it out to the girl.

The girl took it. She put it inside her collar. She did not ask what it meant. She did not ask if it was a knot or a loop. She went back up the alley with her work card in her hand. The bulb over the door made a yellow circle on the wet stone. The drain ran under the wall. The new mill was running. The looms went on. The goddess went with the looms.

He Mei stood at the end of the alley with the thermos under her arm. The new mill was running behind the wall. The drain ran under the wall. The bulb made a yellow circle on the wet stone. The girl was gone. The door at the end of the lane was closed. The light in the window was on. The night was cold. The women from the old mill were scattered. Axiang was in the next town. Qiaoyun was home. Chunxia was south. Yanzi was with her aunt. Meihua was at the noodle shop. He Mei carried their names the way she carried the knots.

The room was cold. The window rattled. The new mill had two sheds and one boiler room. The night shift began at ten. The women walked home in the dark. The shops closed early. The buses stopped at nine. The town was smaller than Shengze. The cigarette brands were different. The bank slips were different. The questions were the same. He Mei had learned the new water. The box was under the bed. The thermos was on the shelf. The new alley was quiet. The looms were older. The sound was lower. The women were asleep. She had tied a knot for Xiaoman. She had tied a knot for the girl. The thread was red. The knot was small. The night was long. The mill was running. The town was dark. The drain ran. The goddess went with the looms. She went with the women. She went with the thread. The morning would come. The room was quiet. The door was closed. He Mei put her hand in her pocket. The red thread was there. She cut a length of red thread. She tied the knot.

Colophon

子胥不在，曹姑亦归，小姑可出。

Zixu bu zai, Cao gu yi gui, xiao gu ke chu.

The husband is not home; the first wife has gone back; little sister, you may come out. — the welcome said to Zigu at the dark end of the courtyard, as the old rite books give it — the words said before any question is asked

Zigu is the goddess with no shrine — the Purple Maiden, the Third Miss of the Latrine. The legend makes her a concubine killed by a jealous first wife and deified where she died; the rite makes her the one who answers. On the night of the fifteenth of the first month, at the dark end of a courtyard, women welcome a figure of straw and cloth, ask it what they cannot ask the men — silk, luck, the dead — and read the answer in the swing of a basket. Su Shi wrote down one of her sessions a thousand years ago and could not decide whether it was a ghost or a person. This novel keeps the rite and moves it indoors: a silk mill in Shengze, a drain that runs the colour of a bruise, a winter of questions asked in dorms and offices and off the water — and at the bottom of the winter one question nobody living can answer, asked at last to the only witness who will hold the basket.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, “true love.” Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, “real,” plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

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