IF THE WORLD IMITATES ME

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

36 chapters · 4 interludes
97,227 words

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INTERLUDE 1

The Index of Ji Gongs

Compiled from a fan-made spreadsheet, three short-video accounts, one marketplace listing page, and a municipal notice. The spreadsheet is titled simply "JIGONG.xlsx." It has four hundred and eleven rows. These are the first nine. Numbers and captions are reproduced as they were; errors have not been corrected. The compiler's own notes are in brackets.

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Entry 001. *"Drunk brother saves delivery rider from debt collectors (full version, no cuts, 4K)"* 2.1亿 views · 9,400 reposts · account: 山城正能量 (Shancheng Positive Energy) [This is the original. Everyone has seen it. The compiler has marked it with a red star and the note: "the real one. do not repost. do not comment his name. he asked."] **Top comment:** *the way he bows to them. my grandfather cried.* **Second comment:** *this is* 摆拍*. look at the camera angle. fake.* **Third comment:** *i know him. he eats noodles at the shop by the battery station. he never asks for anything. leave him alone.*

Entry 002. *"Ji Gong Community — your neighbourhood's helping hand! Apply to volunteer today"* 340万 views · account: 济公互助会 (Ji Gong Mutual Aid Society) [A recruitment video for what the compiler calls "the Society." Red banners, a folding table, a QR code, a middle-aged man in a brown robe that is too clean. He does not drink. He does not sing. He says the word "善" eleven times in ninety seconds.] **Top comment:** *how do I join?* **Reply:** *scan the code. we are in every district now.* **Reply:** *is this connected to the drunk one?* **Reply:** *we are connected to his spirit. the man himself is not needed.*

Entry 003. *"JI GONG BLESSING FAN — authentic palm-leaf, hand-tied, brings merit. ¥15 each, 3 for ¥40"* 87万 views · account: 济公文创旗舰店 (Ji Gong Cultural Products Flagship Store) [The fan in the listing photograph is broken across the middle and mended

with a strip of cloth. The product description says: "The crack symbolises imperfection; imperfection is enlightenment." The seller has 4.8 stars and 60,000 orders. There is a wholesale option.] **Top comment:** *is this the same fan as the drunk guy* **Reply (seller):** *this is a cultural product. the drunk guy does not own the concept of the fan.* **Reply:** *lol*

Entry 004. *"Celebrity 'Little Ji' visits children's hospital, donates books, receives award"* 1,100万 views · account: 济公公益 (Ji Gong Public Welfare) [The handsome one. The licensed one. Clean-shaven, white robe without a stain, a fan he holds correctly. The caption is professionally punctuated. The compiler has written: "not real. hired. but look at his face at 0:41. he looks tired. i think he knows."] **Top comment:** *finally a proper one. clean. doesn't drink.* **Reply:** *the last one was a drunk and this one is a model.* **Reply:** *why not both. why is everybody so angry.*

Entry 005. *"MAN STAGES Ji Gong RESCUE for views — EXPOSED (backstage footage)"* 960万 views · account: 打假办 (Fake-Exposure Bureau) [A rescue, a river, a boy, a camera on a second camera. The exposure is framed as moral victory. The comments are the most cheerful of the whole spreadsheet.] **Top comment:** *SEE. they're all fake. all of them.* **Reply:** *not all.* **Reply:** *prove it.*

Entry 006. *"*济公法律援助 *— Ji Gong Legal Aid: WE FIGHT FOR YOU"* 310万 views · account: 济公法律援助中心 (Ji Gong Legal Aid Center) [The compiler's note, in red: "this one is not legal aid. this one helps creditors find debtors. my aunt got a call from them. they used the monk's face on the business card."] **Top comment:** *thank you for helping the little people* **Reply:** *are you licensed* **Reply:** *does the drunk monk know you're using his name* **Reply:** *the drunk monk doesn't have a name. that's the point.*

Entry 007. *"JI GONG WEDDING PACKAGE — monk blesses the couple, then the couple blesses the monk (¥3,888, all inclusive)"* 41万 views · account: 福缘堂婚庆 (Fuyuan Hall Wedding Services) [A wedding video. The groom is dressed as the monk and the bride as

the founder, and a hired priest rings a bell. The package includes a fan for each guest, a gourd-shaped decanter, and a "merit certificate." The compiler has written: "i am not joking. this is a real listing. they do three a weekend."] **Top comment:** *do they do funerals* **Reply (seller):** *yes. we do not advertise it. message us.* **Reply:** *this city has no bottom* **Reply:** *it has a floor. the floor is where the money is.*

Entry 008. *"Ji Gong Halloween — the hundred drunks! (Jiefangbei, last year)"* 2,300万 views · account: 雾都夜行 archives [The night of the hundred Ji Gongs, archived. The compiler has counted the costumes: ninety-four robes, sixty-two fans, forty-one gourds, one man in a yellow delivery jacket who is not in costume and is not in the video deliberately. Someone in the crowd is singing "鞋儿破." Someone else is filming the wrong person. This entry is the most viewed and the least true.] **Top comment:** *where's the real one* **Reply:** *he's the one not dressed up.* **Reply:** *how would you know.* **Reply:** *i don't.*

Entry 009. *"RIP* 阿光*. he tried to help. he was nineteen."* — views · account: 阿妹 (Amei) · posted 6 days ago [The compiler stops counting here. The entry is a single photograph: a thin young man in a yellow rider's jacket, holding a broken fan that he has made himself out of cardboard and packing tape. The caption is four characters: 他相信了 (*he believed it*). There are no ads under this post. There are eleven thousand comments and the compiler has read all of them, and in the note at the bottom of the spreadsheet he has written, in the only handwriting that is not a spreadsheet font: "i started this list because it was funny."]

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— end of index (partial). the spreadsheet has four hundred and eleven rows. two hundred and six of the entries are marked "real." one hundred and forty are

marked "fake." fifty-nine are marked "dead / hurt / sued / missing." the last row, added in a different session, reads:

Entry 411. *"Shancheng Ji Gong — status: unknown. does not post. does not perform. does not accept payment. last confirmed sighting: [blank]"* `compiler's note: if you see him, do not film him. he is carrying something. let him carry it.`

CHAPTER 1

The Unmourned Man

I was two hundred and thirty-one days sober when Old Feng died, and I want to put the number down first, before anything else in this book, because the number is the only thing in it that is entirely mine and the only thing I can lose.

He did not die of the beating. That is the part the city got wrong. He died of the winter, and of a kidney that had been failing since the autumn, and of a body that was seventy-one years old and had spent its last strength chasing a boy down a footbridge for a phone that belonged to a woman whose name is on no document at all. The hospital called it complications. His daughter called it complications, too, when she called me, because that is the word you use when you have run out of the other words. He died in the ward by the window on the twenty-second day of the first lunar month, which is to say in the last cold week of the winter, four days after the lanterns came down.

I had carried noodles to that ward eleven times. I do not say that to make myself good. I say it because the platform counts, and because a delivery rider is a man who arrives, and because in the last week of his life Old Feng had exactly two steady visitors: his daughter, who had stopped sleeping, and the man who brought the food. That is not a measure of my virtue. It is a measure of the city. A man can spend his whole life teaching careless children to care, and then chase a thief down a footbridge for a stranger's phone, and still end up with a delivery rider and a daughter at the bedside, and the daughter is the only one of us who is family, and she is so tired she cannot hold the chopsticks.

The funeral was at a place in the old town that rented out halls by the hour, between a car-repair shop and a noodle place, and it was paid for partly by the condolence money and partly by a loan his daughter took from a colleague, because the family had no money and the lawsuit had eaten whatever was left. There were nine people there. I counted them the way I count everything. The daughter. A cousin from the districts. Two former colleagues from the county middle school, both of them old enough that the walk down the lane cost them

something. A neighbor. A woman from the school where Old Feng had taught, who had come out of duty and left after twenty minutes. The man who ran the noodle place next door, who had brought a bottle of baijiu and did not stay. And me, in my yellow jacket, with the noodles I had bought on the way because I did not know what else to bring.

And in the corner by the wreath, a young man of about twenty-five in a clean black polo shirt, holding his hands in front of him, who did not approach the family and did not sign the book and left before the eulogy, and who I would see again in this book.

The eulogy was four minutes long. The daughter gave it. She said that her father had been a teacher, that he had liked to fish, that he had been stubborn, that he had once walked eleven kilometers home in the rain rather than pay for a bus, and that he had not deserved what happened to him. She said the last part in the flat voice of a woman who had repeated it to a lawyer and a journalist and a claims adjuster and an insurance company and a district office, and who had learned that the sentence did not change anything, and who was going to say it anyway because it was true. Then she stopped, and looked at the small room, and said, "Thank you for coming," to nine people.

Nobody cried. That is the thing I want to record. The daughter had cried in a stairwell, twice, that I know of, and not in the room. The old colleagues shook hands the way men of that generation shake hands at a funeral, which is to say they held on for one second too long and then looked at the floor. The wreath in the corner was from a company called something like Renewal, or Renaissance, or one of those words that means nothing and costs nothing, and it was the biggest wreath in the room, and nobody knew who had sent it.

I found out on the second day, when I went to help the daughter carry the boxes out of the hall, because I am a rider and a rider carries things. She was sitting on a plastic chair with a plastic bag of the condolence envelopes in her lap, and she was crying in the way you cry when no one is watching and you have stopped caring whether anyone is. I sat down on the chair next to her with the boxes and did not say anything, because the old porters on the river had taught me that a question is a claim on another person's pain.

After a while she said, without looking at me, "They bought it."

"Bought what."

"The claim." She wiped her face with her wrist. "Against the boy's family. Against the boy. Against anybody. My father's case. Somebody bought it. A company. I got a letter. They made me an offer to settle, and I signed it, because I have a mortgage and my father's pension stopped and the funeral cost eleven thousand yuan, and because the lawyer said I would lose anyway, and now the letter says the claim belongs to them and I am not to talk to journalists about it." She looked up at me then, and her eyes were the eyes of a woman doing arithmetic in a room full of grief. "I always thought the case was the one thing he had left. It turns out even that was a thing you could buy."

"Do you know who they are?"

"A company. A name with the word *culture* in it." She put the envelopes in the bag and stood up. "I don't know what a culture company wants with my father's case. I don't think I want to know."

I do know. It took me most of that spring to find out, and I will put it down here in the order I learned it. A civil claim against a dead pensioner is not worth anything. But a civil claim against the *narrative* is worth a great deal, because the story of Old Feng — the good man ruined by the 碰瓷 family, the man the city made into its own excuse — is a story that a certain kind of company would prefer to own the ending of. If the man dies and the claim is settled quietly, the story closes. If the story stays open, it keeps producing what Old Feng's death produced, which is the thing the city cannot digest: an example that proves the thesis. The thesis being that a man who helps is a man who will be destroyed, and that the destruction is nobody's fault, because the law is a machine and the machine has no tears.

So they bought it. That is the whole mechanism. You do not need to silence anyone if you can buy the paper the silence is written on.

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I need to tell you what the city looked like that spring, because it had changed while I was not looking, in the way a city changes, which is to say that everyone had agreed on something without anyone deciding.

The Ji Gong economy had gone from a joke to an industry. There were fans for sale at every tourist gate, palm-leaf ones and paper ones and plastic ones, some of them printed with a face that was meant to be mine and was not. There was a robe you could buy online, next-day delivery, with the tattered hem pre-sewn in. There was a gourd flask — stainless steel, forty yuan, thermos-grade — and a children's cartoon of the monk on a hoverboard, and a hotpot set, still, and a "Ji Gong walk" tour that took tourists down the Eighteen Stairs with a guide who told them a story about a drunk who saved a girl and got seventy percent of the details wrong.

There were, by the count of the fan-made spreadsheet that I would later be sent and never finish reading, four hundred and eleven accounts producing Ji Gong content in the municipality alone. Some were sincere. Some were frauds. Some were the same account, rebranded. Two hundred and six were marked "real," which is to say the compiler believed them; a hundred and forty were marked "fake"; fifty-nine were marked "dead / hurt / sued / missing," which is a category you do not expect to find on a spreadsheet that began as a joke.

And in the middle of all of it, walking through it every day in a yellow jacket, was the source. I was the only person in the city with no account and no merchandise and nothing for sale. I had a fan that a girl had mended with wire and a gourd that held tea and a route I walked at dawn, and I was, as far as the market was concerned, a man with a name he refused to sign a form for, which made the name available to anyone faster than I was.

The trial of the dead man's empire had been set for the autumn. I had been told this by a young officer from the district who had come to the tunnel in the last week of the first month and sat with a cup of tea she did not drink, and she had told me that I would likely be called as a witness, and that I should not talk to journalists, and that the case was bigger than any of the people in it. She was right about that in a way she did not mean. Cases are always bigger than the people in them. That is what makes them useful.

The noodle shop on the lower road had closed by then. That is a small thing and I keep putting it in because it is a true thing. The owner had put my face on a laminated sign and sold a hundred bowls to tourists, and then the tourists stopped coming, and the rent went up, and the shop is a phone-accessory store

now. The counter where the riders ate breakfast for eleven years is under a glass case full of charging cables. Jishan's note — the fourth line of the couplet, the warning about imitation, in his own hand, with the two underlines — had hung above that counter. When the shop closed, the owner's wife took the frame down and gave it to Wang Niangniang, who wrapped it in a tea towel and put it in the tunnel on the shelf where we keep the good bowls. So the note that my teacher left the city, the note that was supposed to teach the city the second half of the rhyme, spent that whole spring on a shelf behind a mahjong table, wrapped in a tea towel, waiting for a wall.

That is the thing about a warning. It is not a warning until somebody hangs it up.

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I walked the Trail that spring the way the aunties had made me promise to, once a week at dawn, a man with a route that did not end in somebody's trouble. And it was on the Trail, in the third week of the second month, that I first understood that the year was going to be worse than the last one.

There was a young man on the steps ahead of me, maybe nineteen, thin, in a yellow delivery jacket like mine but newer, and he was not walking the Trail for the exercise. He was standing at the turn where the Trail passes above the old church, where an old woman sells tea from a cart, and he was holding a fan. It was not a real fan. It was cardboard, cut into the shape of a palm-leaf fan, with the ribs drawn on in marker, and the crack drawn on too, and the mend drawn on with a piece of packing tape, and he was holding it up to the fog as if he were waiting for something to come out of it.

He saw me and his whole face changed. He knew me. Of course he knew me; everyone knew me and nobody knew me. He opened his mouth, and I understood, in the second before he spoke, exactly what he was going to say, because I had spent a year being told it by strangers, and I had never once been able to think of an answer.

"Shifu," he said. "Are you him?"

The tea seller was watching us. The fog was moving up off both rivers the way it does at dawn. And I stood on the Trail with my gourd of tea and my real

fan, the one with the wire and the knot, and I looked at a boy holding a cardboard fan he had made himself, and I did what I have done every time since, and what I am going to have to keep doing, and what I am not going to apologize for in this book.

"No," I said. "I'm a delivery rider. Do you know the way to Nanjimen?"

He looked at me for a long moment, and then he laughed, because it was a good answer, and because it was not an answer, and then he pointed up the hill and told me the way, and I walked on, and I heard him behind me, humming the old song, badly, to himself, the way my grandfather used to.

I did not know, then, that I would be asked for the boy's full name eleven days later, by a woman with a clipboard and a form, and that I would not know it, and that the not-knowing would be entered into a record, and that the record would follow me into a courtroom in the autumn.

His name was Aguang. He was nineteen. He had a younger sister and a debt and a favorite noodle order and a phone background of a monk on a hoverboard, and he is entry number nine in the spreadsheet, and he believed it. He believed it because I had not stopped him.

CHAPTER 2

Little Maitreya Ascends

The temple got its donor plaque in the third month, on a morning of soft rain, and I was there because I still swept.

I had kept sweeping through the winter the way a man keeps a habit that has stopped being a job. The new courtyard was not the old courtyard. The rebuild had kept the shape, which meant the east cloister still faced the bell the way it always had, and the stone was the same stone in the same arrangement, and the trees were the same trees, and if you did not know what had been there you would have thought it was a nice little temple and not a wound with a roof on it. The novice — Jingchen, who was sixteen now, who had learned congee from the abbot's recipe in the account book — swept the other side. Chen Popo sat in her chair by the door and corrected nothing, because the rebuild had made the courtyard too smooth, and there was nothing left to correct.

The plaque was brass, and it was mounted on the wall of the east cloister, beside the niche where the abbot's jar stood with an orange in front of it. The plaque said:

大佛塔重建功德碑 鸿发文化基金会 敬立

I am going to translate that plainly, because the plainness is the point. It said: *Merit Stele for the Reconstruction of the Grand Buddha Tower.* And under it: *Respectfully erected by the Hongfa Foundation for Cultural Renewal.*

The same foundation. The same two million yuan. The same company whose "restoration materials," delivered a week before the fire, were the reason the east cloister and the congee pot and the room with the drawer in it had become one fire in the first place. The city had watched the trial of the dead man's company be scheduled for the autumn, and in the meantime the company's foundation had rebuilt the temple it burned, and the temple had accepted, because a temple that does not accept has no roof, and a roof is what a temple is for.

I am not going to pretend I did not understand the arithmetic. Jiefeng understood it better than anyone, and Jiefeng was the one who negotiated it, and Jiefeng had spent the whole winter at the district office and the insurance office and the bank, keeping the gate open and three monks and a deaf caretaker fed, and a failure mode is not the same as a failure. He stood at the plaque that morning in his grey robe with his hands inside his sleeves, and he looked at it the way a man looks at a bill he has already paid, and he did not say anything to me, because there was nothing to say that would not have been a lie or a cruelty.

The rain came down on the new green roof. Jingchen ladled congee for the forty or fifty people who came, and the line was longer than usual because there was a ceremony, and because there was a camera, and because a camera makes a line longer the way a lamp makes moths. And in the middle of the line, under a black umbrella held by an assistant, in a grey suit the colour of good money and a white shirt without a tie, stood Tan Xiao.

He was twenty-six. He had his father's height and none of his father's weight, and he had the face of a young man who had been photographed since he was a child and had learned to hold his eyes a half-second past the shutter, so that even standing still he looked like he was being looked at. He bowed to the niche with the abbot's jar. He put an orange in front of it with both hands, the way you do a thing that you have been told is the correct way. He did not look at me. I do not think he saw me. I was a man with a broom in a grey courtyard, and I had spent a year learning that a man with a broom is the most invisible object in any city in the world.

Afterward he gave a short speech. He said that his family's foundation was honoured to serve the temple's renewal. He said that his father had loved this city, and the temple had been his father's refuge, and that the family would continue to honour his memory by supporting the city's spiritual life. He said the words *memory* and *renewal* and *healing* and *community*, and each one arrived in the air like a coin dropped into a bowl, and the people in the line nodded, because the words were kind and the man was young and grieving, and because everyone in that courtyard had watched him stand at the glass of the VIP box and watch his father fall, and had decided, in the way the city decides, that he had suffered enough.

I watched him from the far side of the courtyard with my broom. And I understood, watching, that the thing he had that I did not have was not money, though he had that, and not the company, though he had that too. It was *permission*. The city had given him permission to be the good son of a bad man. Nobody had ever given me permission to be anything. I had to keep refusing the name the city offered me, because to accept it would have been to become a product, and to refuse it was to become, in the market's eyes, a vacancy that anyone could rent.

He left before the congee was finished. His car was a black electric one and it took him away down the lane without a sound, and a boy in a rider's jacket — not Aguang, a different boy — ran alongside it for twenty meters trying to film it through the window, and the car did not slow down.

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I found out what the campaign was the way everyone finds out everything, which is by a clip arriving on a phone.

Three days after the plaque, the Hongfa Foundation for Cultural Renewal launched what it called the **New Ji Gong Initiative** — a "people's charity platform" that would "carry forward the spirit of compassion in every neighbourhood." The launch video was four minutes long and cost more than my whole year. It had drone shots of the fog coming off the Yangtze, and a slow piano, and an old woman being helped across a street by a young man in a white robe who was definitely not me. At the end there was a title card: *Compassion has a face. Join us in giving it yours.*

The "face" was a licensed performer named Zhou Yan, who had been the hired counterfeit the year before, the handsome one, and who was now, according to the campaign, "the New Ji Gong of a new era." He had a fan and a gourd and a clean white robe and a manner that was entirely correct. He did not drink. He did not sing off key. He helped people on camera, and the camera loved him, and the platform's algorithm loved the camera, and within two weeks the New Ji Gong Initiative had more followers than Yingtao's archive had ever had, and the city had a hero again, and the hero was sober and disciplined and handsome and had never once made anyone uncomfortable.

I want to be fair to Zhou Yan. I met him later, and I will write about that meeting when I get to it, and it is not a funny story. But at the launch, watching him on the small screen in the tunnel while the aunties dealt tiles and Wang Niangniang stirred something, I understood something about the market that I have never been able to unsee. The market does not want a drunk. The market wants a *brand* of drunk — a clean, controlled, photogenic version of the thing that made the original worth filming. It wants the madness with the bottle removed, because the bottle is the part that gets a platform fined, and the madness is the part that sells. So it builds one. It builds a New Ji Gong who has the robe and the fan and the good deeds and none of the cost. And the city, which is tired, and which has been sold the same thing with different labels all its life, buys it, because it is easier to love a symbol that does not need anything than a man who does.

The comment on the launch video that got the most likes said: *finally a proper one. clean. doesn't drink.* The second-most-liked said: *the last one was a drunk and this one is a model.* The third said: *why can't we just be happy.*

I showed the campaign to Jishan's note that night, on the shelf in the tunnel, wrapped in a tea towel. I do not know why. I think I wanted the note to tell me something, the way I used to sit in the courtyard and wait for the abbot to tell me something by not telling me. The note said what it had said since the night of the fire: *if the world imitates me, it walks into the demon's path.* I had read it a hundred times. I had never once read it as a description of a business plan. That night I did.

•

I have to put down the other thing that happened, the private thing, even though I did not see it and no one in the story saw it, because I have promised not to leave out the parts that make the enemy a person.

A cameraman on the launch shoot sold raw footage to a gossip account in the summer, and the gossip account posted two minutes of behind-the-scenes that were never meant to leave the room, and I watched it once, on the phone of a rider at the battery station, and I have never watched it again.

In the clip, the shoot is over. The lights are off. The drone men are packing. Tan Xiao is sitting alone on the edge of the stage where the drone shot was filmed, in his grey suit, with his phone face-down beside him, and he is not doing anything. That is all. He is not checking the numbers, not on a call, not performing, not weeping. He is sitting on the edge of a stage in an empty room, a young man who has everything, and his face is the face of a room after the guests have gone. For eleven seconds, nobody is looking at him. And then an assistant comes in and says something, and his whole body changes, the way a lamp changes when the switch is thrown — the eyes soften, the mouth finds its half-second, the shoulders come back — and he is Little Maitreya again. He is on. He is always on. The eleven seconds were the only eleven seconds in the whole shoot when he was not.

I do not know what he was thinking. I have no way to prove that the eleven seconds meant anything. A man can sit on a stage and stare at nothing for eleven seconds and it can mean he is tired. But I have carried enough noodles to enough doors to know the difference between a tired man and a man who has run out of a reason, and Tan Xiao, on the edge of that stage, with the lights off, had run out of a reason.

It did not make me forgive him. I want to say that clearly, because the book will get to the end and some reader will want me to have forgiven him, and I will not. It made me understand him, which is worse, because you cannot hate a thing you understand. You can only decide what to do about it.

•

The offer came in the ninth week of spring, and it came the way he did everything, which is to say publicly and with the timing of a professional.

It was a clip, two minutes, posted on the Foundation's account and cross-posted everywhere. He was sitting in a bright room with a plant in the corner, no tie, the light good. He said that the New Ji Gong Initiative had grown faster than anyone expected, and that the foundation wanted to honour the man whose story had started it all. He said that the foundation regretted that this man — "the rider who walks among us, who does not seek reward" — had not yet been given the recognition he deserved. He said the foundation was establishing a

fund in his name: the **Shancheng Compassion Award**, one million yuan annually, to be given to a citizen who helped others at personal cost. And he said that the foundation wanted to invite "our city's most famous rider" to become its **honorary compassion ambassador**, to sit on the award committee, to help choose the recipients, to "let the city thank him properly."

He never said my name. That was the genius of it. He said *the rider*, *our city's most famous rider*, *the man whose story started it all*, and everyone in the city knew who he meant, and because he never said my name, I could not sue him, and because he never said my name, refusing would look like arrogance, and because he offered a million yuan a year to strangers, refusing would look like spite. There was no version of the sentence *no* that the city would forgive. That was the point. He had built a door and covered it with flowers and asked me, in front of thirty million people, to walk through it.

The aunties watched it in the tunnel with the sound up. Zhang Niangniang dealt a tile and did not look at the screen. Liu Niangniang said, "Handsome." Wang Niangniang said, "He stills the rice on the fire before it boils, that one. He is not a fool." And then she looked at me, and asked the question that I would spend the rest of the book trying to answer.

"Xiao Li," she said. "What does he want?"

I looked at the small glowing screen, at the young man with the plant and the good light, and at the million yuan a year that would pay off my room and my debt and my mother's cigarettes for the rest of her life.

"To own the name," I said. "He already has the company. He wants the story."

"Then don't give it to him," Zhang Niangniang said, and put down her tile.

"I haven't decided yet."

"That," she said, "is how he gets it."

CHAPTER 3

The Hundredth Ji Gong

The copycat phenomenon had a season, the way everything in this city has a season, and the season was the spring of the year the trial was scheduled, and it began with a market.

I saw the first one on a Saturday, in the open-air market off the lower road, where the vendors sell vegetables and socks and cheap kitchen knives and the air smells of wet cardboard and frying oil. A man of about forty in a brown robe was standing over a woman whose crate of oranges had tipped, and he was picking the oranges up one by one and putting them back in the crate, and he was doing it slowly, and he was doing it with a camera on him. Two men with a phone on a gimbal stood at the edge of the frame. The woman was saying, in the flat voice of a person who has been made part of a video without being asked, "It's all right, it's all right, thank you, thank you." And the man in the robe picked up the last orange, and turned to the camera, and said, "Compassion is not a performance. It is a practice." And then he did it again, because the light was wrong.

I watched from behind a stall that sold plastic buckets. I was not on an order; it was my day off, or as close to a day off as a rider has, and I had come to the market to buy socks, three pairs for ten yuan. And I stood there with the socks in my hand and felt the thing I had started to feel every time I saw a copy, which is not anger and not jealousy but a kind of vertigo, the feeling of a man watching his own reflection walk into a room he is already standing in and do everything wrong.

The crowd was eating it. That is the thing to understand about the counterfeit economy. The crowd *knew*. Everyone in that market knew that the man in the robe was doing it for the camera, and everyone watched anyway, because the doing-for-the-camera and the doing were, in the market's arithmetic, the same act, and because a good deed performed on camera still leaves oranges in a crate. The woman got her oranges back. The man got his clip. The platform got

its engagement. There was no loser in the transaction that anyone could point to, and that is exactly what made it intolerable.

I did not confront him. I want to be honest about that, because there is a version of this book in which I walk up to the man in the robe and pull off his mask and the crowd applauds, and that version is a lie. I bought my socks. I went home. The clip got two million views by evening, and the caption called him "one of the city's Ji Gongs," and three days later the same account posted an advertisement for a "merit fan" — fifteen yuan, three for forty — and the man in the robe was in the advertisement, holding the fan, smiling.

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That was Lai San. I met him properly two weeks later, because I went looking for him, and that decision is the first one I regret in this book.

He operated out of a second-floor office above a phone-repair stall on the old commercial street, with a desk and a fake plant and a wall of certificates in red seals, and a sign on the door that said **济公法律援助 — Ji Gong Legal Aid: We Fight For You.** He was thirty-eight, with a belly and a gold chain and the cheerful hopeless face of a man who has never once been embarrassed in his life. He offered me tea. He offered me a job. He offered me, by the end of the conversation, a share of the franchise, because he did not recognize me, and because he recognized me, and because I have never been able to tell which it was.

"Let me ask you something," he said, when I told him I was a rider and not a customer. "You've seen the video. The original. The drunk in the alley. What did you think?"

"I thought he was trying to help a girl," I said.

"Correct. And did he profit?"

"No."

"Exactly." He poured the tea, badly. "And what did he get for his trouble? Two broken ribs, a suspension, a debt collector, and a fan. The man is a fool. A noble fool. I respect him. But a fool. You know what I get for helping a woman with her oranges? A million views and a fan contract. Who did more for the woman? Me. I put her oranges back and I made her the most famous orange-

seller in the district. The fool put his body between a girl and four men and got nothing. Which of us is the better Ji Gong?"

"You're not a Ji Gong," I said.

"I'm a franchise," he said, and smiled, and drank his tea, and did not spill a drop, which I somehow resented more than anything else he did.

His "legal aid" was what I suspected and worse. He took calls from creditors — small creditors, men like Ma-ge before Ma-ge was bought — and he "mediated" debts for a fee, and his men did the "mediation." He used the monk's face on his business cards and the four-character song in his hold music and the colour gold in every surface of the room. He told me he had never read a sutra and did not intend to. He told me the word *compassion* the way other men tell a joke they have told too often. And when I got up to leave, he said the sentence that I have turned over more than any other sentence of that spring.

"You know why it works?" he said. "Because the city doesn't want a hero. It wants a *service*. A hero makes you feel guilty. A service takes the guilt away. I am the guilt-taking-away business. And the fool in the alley is my supplier. He supplies the guilt. I take it away. That is the whole economy. You can be angry at me, but I am not the one who made the market."

I left without putting my cup down properly. I still think about that. I did not even thank him for the tea.

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Aguang came to me twice more before he died.

The first time was at the temple, on a Sunday, when he came to the courtyard with his cardboard fan and stood in front of the arhat hall, holding the fan the way you hold something at a shrine. He had come to be near the source, I think — not me, the *source*, the place where the story had begun, the hall of five hundred statues where a drunk had once woken up. He did not know that the drunk had been me. He did not know that he had asked me on the Trail and that I had lied to him, or he did know and had decided not to mind. He bowed to the arhats. He bowed to the abbot's jar. He put a packet of instant noodles in the donation box, because it was all he had, and the novice looked at him and did not know what to do, and accepted it.

I was sweeping. He saw me and came over, and this time he did not ask if I was him. He asked me whether I thought it was true, the old story, the one about the monk who broke every rule and healed people anyway. He asked it seriously, the way a young man asks a question he has already answered. I told him it was a story, that stories are how people carry things, and that carrying a thing is good if it does not break your back.

He said, "My sister says the same thing. She says I'm sweet and stupid. She's fifteen." He laughed. "But I think if nobody's the fool, then nothing ever changes. Somebody has to be the fool first."

I should have said something better than what I said. I said, "Be careful." He said he would. And then he asked me — because he was a boy of nineteen and I was a man in a rider's jacket and we were the same shape — whether I thought it was a mistake to keep the fan in his jacket. I said the fan was not a shield. I said the fan was a thing you hold. And he looked at me with the great, terrible, open face of someone who has decided to be kind and is asking only for permission, and he said, "I know. But it helps."

The second time was the night he died. I did not see him. I only learned where he was, afterward, from a boy with a radio.

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It was the first days of the third month. I was on the far side of the river, out in Nan'an, on a cash run to a hotpot restaurant that paid me to beat the bridge. It was a Thursday, and the night was warm for the first time that year, and the fog had lifted, and the city was out, and every street had its tables and its lights and its smoke and its noise.

At half past ten my radio, which was clipped to my shirt under the jacket, clicked twice. That was Yaoji's code for *come in.*

"Go ahead," I said.

"Are you sitting down," he said. His voice had the flatness it gets when he is reading something he does not want to read.

"No."

"There's a thing happening at the night market on the lower road. A man with a knife. Someone says it's a domestic. Someone says it's a debt. There's a kid in a yellow jacket there. He's got a fan."

I was already moving. I am setting it in the record that I was already moving, because it is the only part of what happened that I can defend. I had the scooter turned around before he finished the sentence and I went across the bridge without paying attention to the lights, which I have never done before or since, and I have run the arithmetic of that ride a thousand times and the arithmetic always comes out the same. The night market on the lower road was nine kilometers from where I stood, across the river and up the hill, and at that hour with the traffic it was a twenty-minute ride if the bridge was clear, and the bridge was not clear, and it took me twenty-six minutes.

Yaoji kept the channel open. That was against the protocol and he did it anyway. Somewhere around the fourteenth minute he said, "There's a video. Someone's streaming it. I'll turn it on. Don't watch it."

I did not watch it then. I watched it later, like everyone else, many times, and I am going to describe it plainly because I promised the reader the receipts. The clip is ninety-four seconds long. In the first eleven seconds, a man is holding a kitchen knife on a woman at a folding table outside a skewer stall, and the woman is crying, and the stall owner is backing away with his hands up. In the twelfth second, a young man in a yellow jacket walks into the frame from the left. He is holding a fan made of cardboard and packing tape. He raises it, the way you raise a thing at a shrine, and he says something that the audio does not catch. In the sixteenth second, the man with the knife turns. In the eighteenth second, the man with the knife moves, once, and the boy in the yellow jacket comes down hard against the corner of the skewer stall and then onto the ground. In the nineteenth second, the boy's hand opens and the fan comes apart and the cardboard blows off down the street, and it is on the ground in the foreground of the clip for the rest of the video, a little dark shape nobody steps on. In the twentieth second, the crowd starts. There are, by the count of the later report, between forty and eighty people in the alley and at the mouth of it. In the twenty-first second, the first phone goes up. In the forty-fourth second, someone says the word *ambulance*, and in the fifty-first second someone else finally calls

one. In the seventy-eighth second, the man with the knife runs. In the ninetieth second, the boy on the ground is alone in the middle of a ring of people, and one woman kneels down beside him, and the rest of the ring is still holding their phones up, because the algorithm had already decided, and the algorithm is faster than any of us.

The paramedics took eleven minutes. The boy was bleeding from a wound that a doctor later said would have been survivable with pressure applied in the first three minutes, and no one in the crowd applied pressure, because everyone assumed someone else was already doing it, and because a phone in your hand is the enemy of a hand on a wound. He died in the ambulance at 11:14 p.m., at the age of nineteen, six kilometers from the hospital that his mother had been born in.

I reached the alley at 11:06. The ambulance had already come. The skewer stall was closed. The ring was gone. There was a dark patch on the pavement and a folding stool on its side and, near the wall, in the drain, a piece of yellow cardboard with packing tape on it, which a woman with a broom was trying to sweep into the gutter. I knelt down and took it out of the drain before she could. It was the better half of the fan, the half with the handle, and the handle was wrapped in tape where a boy had held it, and the tape had gone dark with the water of the drain, and I put it in my jacket pocket and I sat down on the curb with it, and the fog came back up off the river and did what the fog does.

The city's feed had the video up for three days. On the first day it was the *coronavirus* of compassion; on the second day it was a *pengci* gone wrong; on the third day it was a policy question. On the fourth day it was gone, because something else happened somewhere else, and the news cycle in this city has a memory of about seventy-two hours, which is the most honest measure of a culture I have ever found.

The comment I remember best was on the third day. It said: *he died because a story taught him the fan was a shield.* It had four likes. The comment below it said: *what story. there's no story. there's just a guy.* It had forty thousand.

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They asked me for his name eleven days later, a woman with a clipboard and a form, in a small office with a poster about traffic safety. I told her I did not know it. I told her I had never learned it, though I had stood on a trail with him and he had told me the way to Nanjimen. She wrote *witness does not know victim* on the form, and asked me to sign it, and I signed it, and the signature went into a file, and the file went into a cabinet, and the cabinet would be opened in a courtroom in the autumn, and the not-knowing of a name would be read out by a man in a grey suit to prove something about the kind of man I am.

The boy's name was Aguang. His family name I learned from his sister, who found me through the rider network, and I am not going to put it in this book, because she asked me not to. He was nineteen. He had a phone background of a monk on a hoverboard, which is the counterfeit the market had made of me, and a sister of fifteen, and a debt he was paying down, and a favorite noodle order — pickled beans, extra chili, no egg — and a confidence that the world was the sort of place where a person with a fan could stand in front of a knife and be seen.

I did not go to the funeral. I want to say why, and then I am going to stop mentioning it, because the book is going to keep coming back to it whether I want it to or not. I did not go because I was afraid that the city would film me at the funeral, and that the clip would be captioned *the real Ji Gong mourns his imitator*, and that the boy's sister would have to live in a story about a man she had never met. So I did not go. Wang Niangniang went, with a condolence envelope and a bowl of the aunties' noodles, and she sat with the family for the whole vigil, and she reported back to the tunnel that the sister was dry-eyed and furious and had asked whether anyone from the temple was coming. And I sat in the tunnel with the piece of yellow cardboard in my pocket and the note on the shelf and the gourd of tea on the table, and I understood the second half of the couplet for the first time not as a warning I had been given, but as a bill I had already been charged.

If the world imitates me, it walks into the demon's path.

The world had imitated me. The world had walked into the demon's path. And the world was a nineteen-year-old boy with a cardboard fan, lying on the pavement of a night market, under a sky full of phones.

CHAPTER 4

The Collector's Arithmetic

Ma-ge's laundry had been running for eleven years and the machine had never once been empty, and I had come to believe what I had believed since the first time I borrowed from him, which is that the machine was not washing anything. It was the sound of Ma-ge thinking. You heard it on the stairs before you saw the man. You heard it through the wall of the little office with the sofa and the bank calendar and the safe that did not close flush. And when the machine stopped, which happened maybe twice a year, the silence was worse than the noise, because the silence meant Ma-ge had made a decision.

I went to see him in the fourth month, because the boy with the cardboard fan had been dead for three weeks and I had learned something from the newspaper that I wanted to ask him about, and because a man who has squared your debt as a display of mercy is still a man with a book.

The book was on the desk. He did not hide it from me anymore. It was the same school exercise book, the one with two hundred names in it and the little notes in the margin, and he had it open on the desk beside a bowl of oranges, and he was peeling an orange with his thumbnail the way he does, in one long strip, and he did not stand up when I came in.

"Sit," he said. "Eat."

I sat. I did not eat. On the wall behind him there was a new calendar, from the same bank, and beside it a photograph of a building I did not recognize, and I looked at the photograph for a while before I asked about it.

"That's the new one," he said. "The collection office. Yubei. Air conditioning. A reception desk. A young woman at the desk who says *good morning* to the debtors." He put a segment of orange in his mouth. "I have been in this business twenty-two years. When I started, we met people in tea shops. Now I have a reception desk and a young woman who says good morning. You know what that means?"

"It means the business is good."

"It means the business is *bought*." He said the word the way you say a word in a language you have learned to be careful with. "There is a company that has been buying the small operators. Not the men, the books. They buy the ledgers — the names, the amounts, the collateral, the notes about the wife and the mother and the scooter. They pay more than the book is worth, which means they are not buying the debt. They are buying the *people*." He held up the exercise book. "In February they came for my book. I said no. In March they came again. In April they stopped coming."

"That's good."

"It is not good." He ate another segment. "When a buyer stops coming, it means he has found a way to get the thing without paying for it. Or it means he has decided you are not worth buying, because you are worth *removing*." He looked at me with his soft eyes, and I realized that Ma-ge, who had never in his life raised his hand to me, who had broken my finger with another man's hand and given me two hundred yuan for the taxi, was afraid. "Xiao Li. I am going to tell you a thing, and then I am going to ask you for a thing, and I want you to understand that I have never asked you for anything before, which is true, which is the whole of our relationship."

"All right."

"The company is a shell of a shell of the company that your trial is about." He said it plainly, without drama, because drama is a thing men use when they do not have facts. "I do not know the whole shape. I know that the books they bought are feeding a system that is not a collection business. It is a *data* business. They want the names and the amounts and the addresses and the family details, and they want them in one place, and they want them searchable, and a collection agency is the cheapest way in the world to build a list of everyone in a city who is desperate. I do not know what they do with it. I know that one of the small men who sold, a man I drank with for ten years, is in the hospital with two broken legs and does not remember the stairs he fell down."

He pushed the bowl of oranges toward me. I took one, finally, because refusing had become a kind of aggression.

"Now the thing," he said. "I want you to take my name off my own book."

I did not understand him. He saw that, and for the first time that afternoon he looked impatient, because Ma-ge could forgive almost anything except being slow.

"Not the debtors," he said. "Me. If the company comes for the books, I want to be a name in somebody else's book before I am a name in theirs. I want to be *owed* something by a man the machine has already priced and passed on, so that when they ask who I am, the answer is complicated." He put the peel on the desk. "You are the only man in this city who cannot be bought. That is not a compliment. It is a fact, and I am going to use it. I want you to hold a marker on me. A small one. A favor. Something I cannot pay. That way I am yours, and not theirs."

"You want to be protected."

"I want to be *indebted*," he said, with dignity. "Protection is for people who are loved. Indebtedness is for people like me."

I sat in the little office above the laundry and looked at the man who had broken my finger and had once given me an orange in the fish-market lane and told me not to become public. He was right that I could not be bought. He was wrong that this made me free. And I agreed, because he was afraid, and because the machine was turning, and because I have never learned how to say no to a frightened man in a small office, even when the frightened man is the reason I cannot feel the tip of my left index finger.

That is how Ma-ge became, in the language of the aunties, "our collector." Wang Niangniang said it once, at the mahjong table, with a tile in her hand, and everybody laughed, and nobody laughed for long. He kept the book. He kept the machine running. He began — slowly, and with the terrible caution of a coward — to bring us things: a name here, a transfer there, a note about which shell paid which collector and when. He never told us the whole shape, because he never had the whole shape. But he gave us the edges of it, the way a man who is being consumed gives the edges of himself to the people who might pull him out, and the edges were enough to see that the thing that had bought the collection world was the thing whose son had put a plaque on the temple wall.

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The aunties were not surprised. That is the thing I have never been able to explain to people who have not lived in a city like this, and I am going to try, once, here, and then leave it.

The aunties knew the collection world the way a farmer knows weather. Zhang Niangniang, who ran the parlor in the converted air-raid shelter, had a memory of every man who had ever come to play mahjong and lost and paid in installments. Liu Niangniang, seventy-one, remembered every one of them by the *shape of their debt* — which loan office, which collector, which month, which excuse. She could tell you the name of the man who had lent money to the noodle-shop owner in 2011 and the name of the man who had bought that loan in 2014 and the name of the shell that had bought it in 2019, and she could tell you because she had listened, for fifty years, to people talking over tiles, and a mahjong parlor is a room where the truth is told because nobody believes anyone is listening.

That is the network. That is the whole network. Not cameras and codes and radios — though we had those, and Yaoji maintained them with a love that embarrassed everyone. The real network was three old women and a table and the discipline of memory, and it had existed before I was born, and it will exist when I am gone, because a city this old has always had rooms where the poor keep their own records, and no government and no company has ever managed to buy the whole of one.

"They bought my collector," I told them one night in the tunnel, when Mage's first edges had arrived and I had laid them out on the mahjong table like a losing hand.

Zhang Niangniang dealt a tile. "They bought the paper," she said. "They did not buy the mouth."

"He's a coward."

"Good," she said. "A brave man in a shell company gets promoted. A coward stays low and watches. What does the coward know?"

I looked at the tiles. Liu Niangniang, who never looked up from her hand, said: "The shells that bought the ledgers, they used a man from the district office to file the papers. His name is on the third page. I know his wife's cousin. His

wife's cousin owes money to the man who plays the erhu at the teahouse on the ridge."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Wang Niangniang got up to stir the pot, and said, "There. That is the whole of it. The company bought the paper. The paper has a man on it. The man has a wife. The wife has a cousin. The cousin has an erhu." She put the lid on the pot. "You will never beat the company. But you can always find the man on the third page."

That was the method, and it is unglamorous, and it is why the trial that autumn was not a legal thriller but a slow walking of a hundred small human threads to the same knot. Wei's company had bought the books. The books had men in them. The men had families and debts and erhu lessons and sisters who worked at hospitals and cousins who filed papers in district offices. And the network of three old women who remembered everything walked, thread by thread, from a name in a shell company to a person who could be found, and in the autumn, when the procurator opened her file and found it already annotated in a neat spiral-bound notebook that Yaoji's runners had compiled, she looked up and said, to no one in particular, "Who made this?"

"A few aunties," I said.

"Where are they?"

"One is playing mahjong in an air-raid shelter under the Mountain City Trail," I said. "The other two are with her."

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The truce broke in the fifth month, on a wet night, and it broke in a way that left a note.

Ma-ge did not come to the tunnel that night, which was the first sign, because he had begun to come on Tuesdays. Yaoji sent a runner to the laundry and the runner came back with the door open and the machine stopped and the office empty, and on the desk, where the school exercise book usually sat, there was a single sheet torn from a receipt pad with a sentence on it in a hand that was not Ma-ge's.

Tell the rider: the book is not a library.

They found Ma-ge the next morning in the gutter behind the fish market, four hundred meters from his own door, with a bag of oranges in one hand and two fractures in his face and no memory of the men who had done it. He had not been robbed. He had been left the oranges. He recovered, in the way that men like Ma-ge recover, which is to say he came back to work in three weeks with a face that had rearranged itself and a manner that was quieter by exactly one degree.

But he did not come to the tunnel again. He would not. And when I went to see him and asked him why, he gave me the only honest answer.

"Because I am a coward," he said, from behind the desk, where the exercise book was open once more. "You know that. I know that. I have made my peace with it. But you do not get to make a coward's book a brave man's library. If I come to your tunnel, I am one of you, and one of you is a thing I am not willing to be. So I will give you the pages, and you will leave me the oranges, and that is the whole of what I can afford."

He was right, and I hated him for being right, and I am still not sure which of those two facts is the one that matters. I took his pages. I left his oranges. And under the notes, in the margin of the third page, in his small careful hand, he had written a thing he never said out loud, which I only saw later, when the case file was already open.

The boy with the cardboard fan was not a fool. He was the only one of us who was not ashamed.

CHAPTER 5

The Summons

The summons came in the fifth month, on a Tuesday, in a white envelope with a red seal, delivered by hand to the tunnel because the tunnel has the only door in the neighbourhood that is always open.

I have been served with papers three times in my life. The first was a platform notice. The second was the form about Aguang, the one on which I signed that I did not know his name. The third was the summons, and it was the only one that came in an envelope that someone had taken the trouble to close properly.

It was an 证人出庭通知书 — a notice to appear and testify — from the First Intermediate People's Court, by way of the district procuratorate, requiring Li Xiuyuan, male, twenty-nine, of no fixed employer address that mattered, to appear on a date in the autumn and give evidence in the matter of the people against the Hongfa Group and thirty-nine named defendants and one dissolved estate. There were three pages. Page one was the notice. Page two was a list of rights and obligations, one of which said that a witness who gives false evidence shall bear legal responsibility, and one of which said that a witness may apply for protection, and one of which said that a witness should not discuss the case with the news media, and I read that last one three times, because the city had spent a year discussing the case and had not once consulted me.

Page three was a telephone number and a name. The name was Jiang Xue, deputy chief of the organized-crime division of the municipal procuratorate.

I called the number the next morning from the battery-swap station, because it was the only place on my route with a signal and no customers, and she answered on the second ring, as if she had been waiting with the phone in her hand, which, I would learn, she always was.

"Li Xiuyuan," she said. Not a question.

"Yes."

"This is Prosecutor Jiang. Can you come to the office this week? There are things I need to explain to you in person, because you will not believe them on a

phone, and because the things I am about to ask you to do will be difficult, and I do not want to have asked a difficult thing to a man I have never met."

That is the whole of her manner. She does not flatter and she does not warn and she does not pretend that a summons is an invitation. She tells you plainly what she is about to do to your life, and then she does it, and in the sixteen months I knew her I never once caught her in a lie, which I cannot say of any other official in this book, including myself.

I went that Thursday. The procuratorate was in a grey building on a street of grey buildings, and the security was a metal detector and a young officer who checked my ID against a printed list and looked at my yellow jacket for a moment too long. Jiang Xue was forty-one, small and straight, with short grey-flecked hair and reading glasses pushed up on her head and a desk that was the neatest object I have ever seen — three files squared to the edge, one pen, one cup of tea, one photograph turned face-down, which I will get to.

She did not offer me tea. She offered me the shape of the case, which was the only hospitality she knew.

"Forty-one defendants, including the estate," she said. "The estate is the dead man. When a defendant dies, the case against the person terminates, but the organization stands, and the co-defendants stand, and the assets stand. The dead man's signature is on the 回水沟 clearance file, the fire's materials came through a shell he controlled, the loan ledger is his, and his estate holds the temple plaque. We can prove the fire was set. We cannot prove who gave the order, because the man who gave the order is dead and the man who carried it out fell into a water pit and broke his back and has a voice like a door closing."

"Dao-ge."

"Dao-ge." She looked at me over the glasses she had not put on. "He is my witness. He is the only living man who can take the fire from *electrical fault* to *arson*, and he is in a long-term ward with a spinal injury, and somebody has been visiting him. Three visits in the last two months, none of them family, all of them signed in with different names and the same handwriting. I have a photograph of the man from the second visit. He works for a cultural foundation."

"Let me guess which."

"You do not need to guess. That is the problem." She squared a file that was already square. "The foundation that rebuilt the temple his company burned. The foundation whose campaign made your name into a brand. The foundation that offered you a million yuan a year to sit on an award committee and smile. It is not a criminal organization. That is the thing people do not understand. It is a *legitimate* organization that does legitimate things with money that came from a criminal one, and the law looks at it and sees a charity, because it is a charity. The law is not stupid. The law is *correct*. The law says: this is a foundation. And the foundation says: we funded a temple. And the temple says: thank you. And the man in the ward says nothing, because his voice is broken, and because the last man who visited him brought him a job."

I sat in the neat office and looked at the neat desk and understood what she was telling me, which she had told me in the first sentence and which I had not wanted to hear.

"You need me because I am the only one he will talk to."

"I need you because you are the only one he *asked* for." She took the glasses off her head and put them on, and for a moment she looked less like a prosecutor and more like a woman who had not slept. "He has refused to give a formal statement four times. He will not speak to the police. He will not speak to my investigator. He has said one thing to every person who has gone into that ward, and it is the same sentence every time, and it is your name. He says: *bring me the rider who owes the twenty-eight thousand.*"

The room was very quiet. Outside, in the corridor, someone's phone rang and was silenced. I thought about the ward, and the refrigerator question, and the fact that I had been carrying the answer for twenty years and had never once been asked for it, and that the only other man alive who had carried refrigerators up those stairs was now the keystone of a case that could either convict the dead man's company or be bought back by the dead man's son.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Two things." She held up one finger. "One: go and see him. Not as a witness. As the man he asked for. Find out what he wants, and whether there is anything left in him that wants to tell the truth." Second finger. "Two: testify. Yourself. In open court, under your own name, about the night of the fire, the

night of the tower, and the boy with the cardboard fan. The defence will call you a vigilante who caused the environment that killed a nineteen-year-old. They will read out the form you signed. They will read out your debt, and your suspensions, and the video of you wetting yourself in an alley, which they have. They have everything. They have the whole year. They have been building you for eleven months."

I looked at her. "And what do you have?"

"I have the truth," she said, "which is not worth as much as you think, and which is worth everything, and which is the only thing I have ever had." She took the photograph off her desk and turned it face-up. It was a young man of about twenty, in a school uniform, on a bridge over a river. "My brother," she said. "Eighteen. He went abroad in 2018 for a job with a good salary. He called home for four months and then he did not. The file on the people who took him is in the third drawer of that cabinet, and I have opened it every year for seven years, and every year it says the same thing at the bottom: *jurisdiction ends at the border.*" She put the photograph face-down again. "So no. I do not have a miracle. I have a case, and a voice that does not reach across the river, and a rider with a fan who talks to a crippled enforcer. That is the whole of my resources. Are you willing?"

I said yes before I had decided. That is the truth of it. I said yes in the neat office of a prosecutor I had known for eleven minutes, and I said it because she was the first official in my whole life to show me the photograph on her desk, and because the man in the ward had asked for me by the only name that was actually mine — not the saint's name, not the brand, but *the rider who owes the twenty-eight thousand* — and because a summons is a door, and I have never once been able to walk past a door that was held open.

•

I went to the temple before I went to the ward, because I did not know how to prepare for a broken man and I had learned, over a hard year, that the only preparation I have is a courtyard and a broom.

It was late afternoon and the light was falling the way it falls in June, slow and orange, and Jingchen was sweeping the far side and Chen Popo was in her chair

and the plaque was on the wall with the family name on it, and I got the broom from behind the door and swept the part that was already swept. And while I swept, Jiefeng came out of the accounts room with a ledger under his arm, and stood at the edge of the courtyard, and watched me the way he watches everything, which is with the arithmetic already done.

"They came about the plaque again," I said.

"They came about the plaque again." He did not pretend not to know what I meant. "The district office. The cultural bureau. A foundation liaison. They informed me that the temple's renewal is now a *case study* in a municipal program, and that the program's promotional film will feature the courtyard, and the abbot's niche, and the novice, and the congee, and that the closing shot will be the donor's son standing under the new roof with a bowl in his hands." He adjusted the ledger under his arm. "I told them the temple would not participate. They asked me to reconsider. I told them I would not reconsider. They asked me whether the temple understood the consequences. I told them the temple has burned down twice."

I stopped sweeping. "You said no."

"I did not say no," Jiefeng said. "I said the temple has burned down twice. It is not the same sentence." He looked at the plaque, and then at the niche with the abbot's jar, and then at me, and for the first time in the whole of our acquaintance there was something behind the arithmetic, something that I would not have called warmth if I had not seen it with my own eyes. "Jishan refused their money for years. I thought that was vanity. I thought the temple's poverty was a habit he could not break, and I thought a monk who refuses a roof is a monk who is enjoying the refusal. I have done the arithmetic on that belief for a year. The arithmetic does not close." He turned to go. "When the case is heard, I will testify. What I will say, I do not yet know. This is the first time in my life I have not known what I will say, and I find that I do not entirely hate it."

He went in. I swept the courtyard until the light was gone, and Chen Popo watched me from her chair, and I understood that the temple had just given me the only thing it had left to give, which was a witness of its own, and that I would

have to spend the autumn finding out whether the temple's arithmetic was a door or a wall.

•

I went to the ward on the Sunday. It was in the third district, at the end of a bus line, a low building the colour of weak tea with a garden of plastic chairs and a man who sold cigarettes at the gate. Dao-ge had a bed by the window, ground floor, with a view of a wall.

He was fifty-six. He had been a big man and he was still, in the way of his generation, *built* — the shoulders had not gone, the forearms had not gone — but the body under the blanket was a body that had been broken once at the bottom of a water pit and had healed wrong, and the neck brace and the catheter and the way he held his right hand, which did not entirely close, told me everything I needed to know about the arithmetic of falling seven floors. His voice was the worst of it. The doctors had said spinal injury and a ruined voice, and the truth was worse than the words: he spoke in a scrape, an old hinge, a handful of syllables at a time, and then he stopped and breathed, and you waited.

He looked at me for a long time before he spoke. I stood at the foot of the bed with the piece of yellow cardboard in my jacket pocket, because I did not know what else to bring, and I did not say anything, because the old porters on the river had taught me that a question is a claim on another person's pain.

"You came," he said.

"You asked."

"I asked twice." He closed his eyes and breathed. "The first time was in February. They told me you did not come."

"They told you wrong."

"I know." He opened his eyes. "I have had three visitors. A lawyer. A man from a foundation with a job for me. And a woman I did not call by name because she did not give me one." He watched me with the flat patient eyes of a man who had spent a life watching people before they saw him. "You are the only one who is not selling something. That is why I asked."

We sat. Outside the window, a wall, and above the wall, a square of sky the colour of weak tea, and a clothesline with two shirts. He did not tell me why he

had asked for me and I did not ask. He told me about the ward. He told me about the food, which was bad; the nurse, who was kind; the man in the next bed, who was dying and did not know it. He told me the price of the cigarettes at the gate. And then, in the scrape that was his voice, he asked the question he had been holding since the hospital, the one he had asked me in the final week of the year before, and that I had answered by saying *I don't know.*

"When your father carried his last refrigerator," Dao-ge said. "Did he call out for anyone."

I stood at the foot of the bed with the whole answer in my chest, the answer I had been carrying for twenty-three years, and I gave him the truth, which is the only thing he had ever asked of anyone.

"I don't know," I said. "I was six. Nobody ever told me. But I have carried enough things up enough stairs to know what a man does when the weight goes wrong. He calls out. Everybody calls out. And there were men on those stairs, coming up behind him and going down in front of him, and every one of them heard him, and every one of them kept climbing, because a refrigerator on a stair is a thing that kills the man who stops to help." I looked at the man who might have been there and might not, at the burned shoulder under the blanket, the one genuine good thing he had ever done and resented being reminded of. "So here is my answer, and it is the last answer I have. Somebody called out. I don't know if it was him. But somebody did, on some stair, in some year, and nobody came, and that is the part I am done being quiet about."

He did not look away. For a moment he was not a crippled enforcer in a ward; he was a young porter again, on the stairs at Chaotianmen, with a refrigerator on his back and the fog in the stairwell and the river somewhere below. Then he looked at the window, at the wall, at the square of weak-tea sky.

"When they ask me," he said, "what do I say."

"You say what happened," I said. "Not what you did. What happened. And then you let the city decide what it was."

He nodded, once, and closed his eyes, and I understood that he was not going to recant and not going to confess, and that he was going to walk into that courtroom in the autumn with a broken voice and tell a truth that would convict

him of nothing and cost him everything, and that this was the closest thing to a good act that the man who took the stairs had left in him.

At the door of the ward, he said one more thing. He did not open his eyes.

"The son came," he said. "He did not offer me money. He offered me a job at the temple. A groundskeeper. Light work. A room. He said his father would have wanted me to have it." He breathed. "I almost took it. That is the part you should put in your book. I almost took it, because it is a room, and because a room is a room."

I went out through the gate and past the man who sold cigarettes, and the bus came and took me back down the hill toward the river, and the city went on being the city, and somebody somewhere was lighting a candle in an app for a wall that was already gone.

CHAPTER 6

The Fan

By the sixth month the counterfeit fan had a supply chain.

I know this because a man tried to sell me one. It was at a stall under the overpass by the cordage market, where the vendors sell phone cases and lighters and the sort of knife that folds out of a belt buckle, and the man behind the table had a cardboard box of fans — palm-leaf, broken across the middle, mended with a strip of cloth, fifteen yuan, three for forty — and when I stopped to look at them he looked at my jacket and my face and did the thing that stallkeepers did that year, which was to shift from selling to *confiding*.

"You're a rider," he said. "You know him, right? The one in the video. You people all know each other." He picked up a fan and turned it in the light. "These are the good ones. Not the plastic. The real palm. The crack is real, look — they crack them with a hot iron, then they mend them. Six yuan to make. Fifteen to sell. The tourists love it. A Japanese lady bought nine."

I took the fan. It was a good copy. It was so good that for a moment I was not sure, and I turned it over in my hand and looked for the knot, the knot Huajiao ties on everything, and of course there was no knot, there was a machine-stitched mend and a printed leaf, and the whole thing weighed less than the truth.

"Where do they come from?"

"A factory in Guangdong. Same one as the robes. Same one as the gourds." He smiled with the particular pride of a man who has found the perfect way to be honest. "You know what's funny? The factory makes one product line: 'Ji Gong.' There's a big one and a small one and a children's one with a cute face. The big one is supposed to be the real monk. The small one is supposed to be the drunk. Nobody knows the difference. Nobody's ever seen either one of them."

I bought one. I do not know why. I paid fifteen yuan for a copy of a fan that had been made by a girl in a tunnel with a roll of scooter-tire wire, and I put it in my jacket next to the real one, and I carried both of them around for a week before I understood what I was doing, which was trying to find out whether the

real one was real because of the material or because of the knot. It is the kind of experiment a man runs in his chest when he does not want to think about the actual question, which was whether there was any difference left between me and the factory that was using my name.

I still have both fans. I am not going to tell the reader which one I keep in the drawer and which one I carry. That is the only mystery in this book that I have decided to keep, and I am keeping it for the reason the monk kept his: because the fog is a form of mercy, and because some things should stay a knot and not a fact.

•

Yingtao had been served too, and she had not told me for three weeks.

I found out from Yaoji, of course — the network finds out everything, and it found out from a runner who saw the envelope on her desk — and I went to the archive, which was a rented room above a print shop in Shapingba with a blackout curtain over the window and a wall of hard drives and a kettle that had been on for so long it had begun to grow a smell. She was at the desk with her back to the door and her gimbal on the shelf and a press card from a platform that had fired her in the spring, and she did not turn around when I came in.

"I know it's you," she said. "You walk like a man carrying a bowl."

"I walk like a man with bad ribs."

"Same thing." She turned. Her hair was pulled back with a pen and there were two days on her face. On the desk in front of her was the envelope: a **协助调查通知书**, a notice to assist investigation, from the court, by way of the procuratorate. She had been ordered to appear and to produce the archive. "It came three weeks ago. I didn't tell you because the last time I told you a thing you did the thing where you decide you're responsible for it, and I don't have the energy to watch you be responsible for something that is mine."

"Yingtao—"

"No." She said it flatly, the way she had learned to say it from the aunties. "Let me say it once, and then you can have the floor. The archive has four thousand, two hundred entries. Every one of them was sourced, logged, and hashed. Every victim's name is blocked. The file I ran on the anniversary has been

viewed twenty million times and not one person has been hurt by it, which is a thing I can say about almost no other archive in the history of this country. And the court is going to ask me one question, and the question is: *who made this?* And there are only two answers. Either I say *the archive*, which is not a person, and the archive is not admissible, and a year of work becomes a rumor with better handwriting. Or I say *me*, and I become a named journalist, and the name is the thing the defence needs, because a named journalist can be cross-examined, and a cross-examined journalist is content, and content is what killed Zhang Maliu."

She got up and put the kettle on, though it was already on.

"So that is the choice," she said. "The camera is the only institution in this story that cannot be bought. I have spent two years proving that. And now I have to decide whether to be *a person who holds a camera*, which the law can eat, or stay *nobody*, which the law can ignore. Those are the options, and I have been sitting here for three weeks, and I do not know which one is the one where the truth survives."

I sat down on the second chair, which had a box of hard drives on it. I moved the box to the floor. And I said the only thing I had, which was not advice, because I do not give advice, and which was not comfort, because I do not have comfort.

"When they asked me to be the ambassador," I said, "I thought about the million yuan. For about four seconds. And then I understood that the thing I would be selling was not my face. It was yours. Because the whole reason the archive works is that the city believes there is one thing in it that is not for sale, and if I took the money, the thing that is not for sale would be for sale, and every entry you ever logged would be worth less." I looked at the wall of hard drives. "You are going to have to be a person. The archive can only be incorruptible while there is a person behind it who is not corrupt. The moment there is no one behind it, it is just weather."

She did not answer for a long time. The kettle began, finally, to be loud, and she took it off the heat and did not pour. Then she sat down across from me and looked at me with the flat, evaluating, cameraman's look that I had spent a year learning to be afraid of.

"Then I want something," she said. "Not your face. I have given up on the face. I want the hands again, and I want the back of your head, and I want six minutes of you walking away down a street, in one take, no cutting, no music. Not for the archive. For me. Because I have four thousand entries and I do not have one picture of the man who made half of them possible, and when I am old I am going to want to know that I did not spend my twenties documenting someone I never once looked at."

I thought about it. I thought about the difference between being seen and being consumed, which is the only distinction I have ever offered this book, and about the fact that she had declined the documentary and the interview on my behalf and had never once asked me for anything I could not survive.

"All right," I said.

The archive received its subpoena the following week. She appeared. She said *I made it.* And the clip the platforms cut from her appearance — the clip that went everywhere, that the copycats reposted, that a foundation account used in a video about "the responsible use of citizen media" — was eleven seconds long and showed her saying those three words and then, on the cross, the pause, when the defence read out the date of Zhang Maliu's death and asked her whether the archive had been worth a man's life.

I watched that clip once, in the tunnel, with the aunties. Wang Niangniang turned the sound down before the question and would not let me turn it back up. "She is a person now," she said, and pushed the teapot across the table. "People are cross-examined. It is the price of the face."

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The other thing that happened in the sixth month was smaller, and I only put it in because the book is going to end in a fog and I want the reader to have the small true things before it does.

I walked the Trail on the Sunday and the tea seller at the top of the ridge — the one who had asked me, in the winter, *was it him?* — had a new kettle and a new stool, and she made me a cup I had not asked for and would not take my coin. I asked why. She said a customer had paid for a year of teas for "the man with the gourd," and had left the money in an envelope with no name, and she

had decided the man with the gourd was me, because I was the only one who carried a gourd, and if it was not me it was somebody else with a gourd, and somebody else with a gourd could use a free tea.

I drank the tea. The fog was high and light and the city was doing its morning and the Trail belonged to the people who make it work. And I understood, sitting there with the counterfeit fan in one pocket and the real fan in the other, that this is the only kind of goodness that cannot be counterfeited, because it has no brand, no camera, and no reward: *a stranger buys a year of tea for a man she is not sure exists.*

•

I met the hired one in the seventh week of the spring, and I am going to write about it now, because I promised in an earlier page that I would, and because it is not a funny story.

The New Ji Gong Initiative had an office on the fourth floor of a building in Yubei with a lobby of grey stone and a receptionist who offered me a bottle of water and a form. I had not come as a guest; I had come because a rider in the network had told me that the hired Ji Gong was going to be doing a segment at a welfare centre for the disabled, and because I had spent two years watching men wear my face and had never once stood in the same room as the man the foundation had paid to wear it.

The segment took ninety minutes. I watched the whole of it from the back of the hall, in my yellow jacket, with a paper cup of the free tea, and nobody stopped me, because nobody there knew my face; that was the thing about the counterfeit economy. It had been going so long, and there were so many versions, that the original had become indistinguishable from a fan. I sat in the back and watched a handsome man of twenty-seven in a clean white robe kneel on a floor and help an old woman with no legs into a wheelchair, and then do it again for the camera because the light was wrong, and then sit with a boy with a disability and talk to him for eleven minutes about a cartoon while the cameras were reset. And the thing I want to put down is that the eleven minutes with the boy were real. I could see it. The boy laughed and the man laughed and the crew waited and nobody filmed it because the lighting wasn't set, and the man did not stop

talking to the boy when the camera came back; he finished the sentence first. That is the whole of the counterfeit problem in one image. The fake was kind. The fake was *good at being kind*. And the goodness was real and the frame was manufactured and the two things were not in conflict, and that is what made it unbearable.

Afterward, he found me. That was the other thing. He came off the set and walked straight to the back of the hall and sat down in the chair beside me, still in the white robe, with the fan in his lap, and he said, in the flat good-city voice of a man who had been told everything about me by people whose job was to know, "You're him."

"I'm a rider."

"You're him." He was not hostile. He was not nervous. He had the calm of a man who had spent his whole adult life being looked at and had decided long ago that the looking was not about him. "I've been waiting for you to come. I thought you'd come sooner. Everyone in the office has a bet on the month."

I looked at him properly, for the first time. He was handsome in the way the market makes handsome: symmetrical, well-lit, and somehow finished, like a product photograph. And under the finish there was the thing I had seen on the edge of Tan Xiao's stage with the lights off, which is the face of a man who has run out of a reason.

"How long have you been doing this?" I said.

"Four years. I was a model before. Then a presenter. Then the agency called and said there was a character role, and the character was a saint, and there was a costume, and I said no, and they tripled it, and I said yes, and I have been a saint for four years." He turned the fan in his hands. "I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't swear on camera. I don't seduce anyone. I don't have a scandal. I have a spreadsheet, if you want to see it. Every good deed is logged. Three hundred and seventy-two last year. The foundation needs the numbers for the annual report, and I need the numbers for the bonus, and the numbers are real; I really did three hundred and seventy-two things. I helped three hundred and seventy-two people. And I do not know whether I did them because I am good or because the number is on the sheet."

"Does it matter?"

"That is the only question I have," he said, and for the first time his voice did something, "and you are the only person in this city who can answer it, because you are the only other person who has ever been paid in the same coin." He looked at me. "I have never once been hit. Do you understand? In four years of being a saint, I have never been hit, never been in danger, never been in a room where a man with a knife could reach me. The foundation will not let me. The rescues are staged with people who consent. The river is a shallow set. The old women are hired extras. And I do three hundred and seventy-two good deeds a year, and every one of them is *safe*, and every one of them is *true*, and I would like you to tell me whether a safe good deed is a good deed at all."

I looked at the fan in his hands, the clean white one with the machine-stitched crack, and at the hands, which were soft and well-kept and had never carried anything heavier than a phone, and at the door of the hall, where the disabled boy was being wheeled out by his mother, and the mother was not looking at us, because the mother did not know who either of us was.

"I'm not your monk," I said. "I'm not going to absolve you."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You asked me whether a safe good deed is a good deed. That's the same question." I put the paper cup down. "Do you do anything you don't log?"

He was quiet for a moment. And then he told me the thing that was, I think, the whole of him, and that I have carried since, and that is the reason this meeting is in the book.

"Yes," he said. "On Tuesdays. There's a woman in my building who has a bad back and I carry her groceries up to the sixth floor. I don't log it. I don't tell anyone. I don't know why I don't log it. I have tried to work out why, because the bonus spreadsheet would count it and my manager would put it in the annual report, and I have never once logged it, and I do not know whether I don't log it because it is the only real thing I do or because *not logging it* is itself a kind of performance for an audience of one, which is me." He looked at the floor. "That is what I am. I am a man carrying a woman's groceries up six flights and trying to decide if God is watching. And I am paid a salary, and I am very good at it, and I am going to be replaced, because the agency says a saint has a shelf life of about three years and my skin is starting to show the light. When I

age out I will be a forty-year-old former saint with a good face and a spreadsheet, and the market will hire a younger one, and the younger one will be kinder than me, because the market is always improving the product."

"Then stop."

"Stop what? The groceries? Or the logging?" He almost smiled. "You don't understand the machine. If I stop, they hire someone else, and the someone else has not spent four years thinking about it, and the someone else will log the groceries, and the woman on the sixth floor will still get her bags carried, and she will not care who carried them. The only person for whom the difference between me and the someone else matters is *me*, and I am the one person in the machine who does not count." He stood up and looked at the door, where the crew was waiting to move him to the next thing. "You think I am the counterfeit of you. I am not. I am the counterfeit of *everyone*. I am what the city makes when it decides to have one good man instead of thirty million small ones. And the city is going to keep making me, because the city is tired, and because I am easy, and because I do not cost anyone a real thing."

He walked back toward the crew. And at the door, because he could not help himself, or because it was the only gesture he had, he stopped and helped an old woman in a cleaner's uniform carry a mop bucket up the two steps to the corridor. He did not film it. He did not log it. And he did not know that I saw, and I did not tell him, and I have decided never to tell him, and that is the whole of what I owe the counterfeit: I kept his only unlogged deed secret, and I put it in a book, which is the largest audience of all.

The archive appeared in July. It named itself. And on the same day, an account with a very similar name — one character different, same font, same layout — posted its first video, which was a collage of the archive's most famous clips with dramatic music and a donation button. The copycat archive. Within a month it had more followers than the real one. That is the whole of the counterfeit economy in one sentence: the copy of the incorruptible thing is more popular than the incorruptible thing, because the copy is easier to love and takes your money.

CHAPTER 7

The Girl's Rules

Huajiao turned seventeen in the seventh month, and nobody died, and that was the most remarkable thing that had happened to her in seventeen years.

I am going to write this chapter the way she would want it written, which is to say without any of the words that adults use about children who have been through the fire — *resilient*, *extraordinary*, *wise beyond her years* — because every one of those words is a way of not looking at the actual girl. The actual girl, that summer, had a vocational class in electronic commerce that she attended two days out of five and openly despised, a part-time job sorting packages at a logistics point that she had taken because the aunties had told her a person should have a thing on a form, a room above the tunnel that Wang Niangniang had cleaned and put a curtain in, and a temper that could strip paint. She slept with a folding knife under the pillow, which nobody made her stop, because the aunties understood — and I was coming to understand — that taking the knife away would not make her safer. It would only make her alone.

She was trying. I want to be careful about that word, because *trying* is the word the city uses to be disappointed in people. What she was actually doing was harder than trying. She was *rehearsing* an ordinary life: getting up, going to the class, being bored, coming back, eating, sitting with the aunties, refusing to check whether the postcard had come, going to bed. She did it the way a person practices a form she does not yet believe in. And on the days it failed — and there were days — she would appear at the temple or the tunnel in the middle of the afternoon with her jaw set and help someone carry something, and nobody would ask, and after a few hours she would be gone again.

Her Rule One, in her notebook, was still the one she had written at the aunties' table in January: *if the person is walking in, you walk in too. Nothing else counts as the mission.* She had not changed it. She had begun, instead, to live inside it, and living inside a rule is harder than writing one, because a rule is clean and a life is not.

The test came in the seventh month, at the logistics point, and it came the way tests actually come, which is without warning and with a signature required.

There was a girl of about twenty at the sorting bench, a new hire, small, with a good face and a bad eye — the kind of eye that has been giving away information for years — and a man who was not an employee came to the door of the warehouse and asked for her by name. He was polite. That is the first thing she told me. He was *polite*. He said he was her uncle. The girl's hands had gone still on the packages and she had said, in a voice that was flat in the wrong way, that she did not have an uncle.

Huajiao was on the far bench with a stack of parcel tape and a scanner. And what I want to put down here is that she did not reach for the knife. The old Huajiao — the one who had killed a collector in an alley the winter before — would have had the knife out and the man on the ground and a story to tell. What she did was put the scanner down and walk over and stand between the man and the girl, and say, in dialect, in the flat voice of a person stating a fact: *She doesn't have an uncle. I'm her ride.* And then she stood there, and did not move, and did not look away, and let the man do the arithmetic of a girl of seventeen who did not flinch.

The man left. He came back twice more that week and was turned away both times by the shift manager because Huajiao had gone to the manager and told a story about a cousin with a mental-health problem, and because the manager, who was fat and tired and decent, did not want trouble. The third time, Huajiao was waiting at the gate, and the man looked at her for a long moment and then said, in a low voice, "Your mother taught you that."

She did not answer. She did not ask how he knew. She came to the tunnel that night and sat at the table and ate two bowls and said nothing, and at the end of the meal she took out the notebook and looked at it, and I saw her hand hover over the page, and I understood, with the particular dread of a man who is not the parent and can never be the parent, that she had not been afraid of the man. She had been afraid that she had *liked* it. The standing between, the flat voice, the flinchless arithmetic — that was her mother's language, and she had spoken it fluently, and for the first time in a year she had felt, for one second, like herself.

That is the thing about a child soldier that the stories never tell you. You cannot take the war out of them by giving them a bowl and a curtain. You can only give them a second language and wait, and hope the first one gets quieter, and understand that on the bad days the first one comes back, because the first one was welded in before there was any other.

I asked her, that night, whether she wanted me to do anything about the man. She said, "No." She said it too fast, and then she corrected herself, which is a thing she had learned to do and which I counted as progress. "Yes. One thing. Find out who he is. Not to hurt him. So I know who I am supposed to be."

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The other test of that summer was a name.

Zheng Man had been a captain in the narcotics unit in the nineteen-nineties, when He Xia was a young officer with a good record and a habit of taking things personally, and she had been He Xia's partner for four years before the case that ate her. She was fifty-two now and retired and living in a first-floor flat in Jiangbei with a balcony full of orchids and a husband who sold insurance and a way of not answering a question that was more precise than most people's answers. Yaoji found her the way he found everything, which is to say by asking forty people until one of them remembered.

Huajiao went to see her alone. I waited at the bottom of the stairwell, because she had told me to, and because I had learned that the rules were hers. She was up there for two hours. When she came down she was carrying a cardboard box — the archive of a woman who had kept every irrelevant thing for thirty years — and her face was the face of a person who has been given something and does not yet know what it is.

He Xia had been on a case in 2013 that involved a smuggling network that ran, in those years, out of the river port at Chaotianmen and over the border into the network that would become the funnel. She had gotten close enough to name three men. Two of them were dead. The third had a file that had been closed twice and reopened once and closed again, and there was a note in the margin of a 2014 incident report, in Zheng Man's own handwriting, that said the following: *HE XIA — deceased (car accident, single vehicle, no witnesses). Note:*

her phone was recovered from the scene. Note: the phone was dry. Note: it rained for six hours the day of the accident.

That is all. A note in a margin about a dry phone in a rainstorm. Zheng Man had written it, and then the case had closed, and then she had retired, and she had kept the report for twelve years, because — this is what she told Huajiao, in the two hours, in a flat voice, with the orchids on the balcony — it is the only document in the world that suggests the car accident might not have been a car accident, and she had never found a way to use it, because it was a note in a margin and not evidence, and because the machine that had closed the case was the machine she had worked for, and because she had a husband who sold insurance and a flat with orchids and she had decided, the way people decide, that she was not a woman who sacrificed those things.

Huajiao brought the copy home in the box. She did not open the box again for a week. And when she did, she came to the tunnel on a Sunday afternoon with the report in her hand and laid it on the mahjong table in front of the aunties and asked whether a dry phone in a rainstorm meant anything.

There was a long silence. Liu Niangniang looked at the paper for a while, and then she said the thing that made the whole of the mother's trail real, and the whole of it dangerous.

"It means," she said, "that somebody picked up the phone and put it back. Which means somebody was there. Which means it was not an accident. Which means your mother either died in a place where someone could pick the phone up, or she did not die at all, and someone needed the city to think she did." She pushed the paper back across the table. "But it does not tell you which. A dry phone is not a person. A margin is not a witness. You can spend your whole life on a dry phone, and the phone will never tell you what you want."

"I know," Huajiao said. She folded the report, very carefully, and put it in the notebook, with the postcards. "But now I have a place to look."

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The postcard came late that year. It had come in the first week of February, off schedule, in the winter of the year before. It had not come in the spring. It did not come on her birthday in July. It did not come in August. And then, in the

middle of the ninth month, on an ordinary Tuesday, a postcard arrived at the tunnel with a picture of a river on it and no message and a postmark from a country town two days' travel to the south, and Huajiao turned it over in her hand the way she always did, and then she turned it over again, which was new.

"It's a river," she said. "The last one was a mountain."

I looked at it. It was a river in fog, with a boat on it, and the boat was empty. And below the picture, in the space where a message would go, there was nothing at all, which was the way it had always been, except that this time there was a small mark in the corner, a dot that could have been an accident of printing or a mark someone had made on purpose with a pen that had run out of ink.

"What does that mean?" I said.

"I don't know." She put it in the notebook. "But the last one came before the trial, and this one came after the summons. Somebody knows what season we are in." She closed the notebook and put the rubber band around it. "That is the part I can't stand. It could be her. It could be someone who knew her. It could be the people in the other book, the ones with the jobs and the forms. It could be a woman in another province with a drawer of stamps and a private joke. And I will spend the whole of my life finding out, and either way I will still be the girl at the table with the notebook." She looked at me, and for a moment she was not seventeen and not a soldier and not a daughter; she was a person who had run out of a reason, which is the most dangerous thing a person can be. "Unless you help me."

"I'll help you," I said.

"I don't want help," she said. "I want a plan."

I did not have a plan. But I had a procurator who had a drawer of files that all said the same thing at the bottom, and a courier network that could put a question to forty people by nightfall, and a debt-collector who was not willing to be brave but was willing to be useful, and a girl of seventeen who had just written a rule three months earlier that was about walking in with somebody, and I thought that if there was a plan to be had, it would be made out of those things, and that the making of it was going to be the rest of this book.

CHAPTER 8

The First Blood

The first thing they took was not a person. It was a room.

The parlor in the converted air-raid shelter under the Mountain City Trail — the room where the aunties had kept the city's memory for thirty years, where Zhang Niangniang had dealt tiles through the fire and the trial and the funeral, where Liu Niangniang remembered every one of the dead man's men who had ever sat down to play — was closed in the eighth month by a **消防安全整改通知**, a notice requiring rectification of fire-safety conditions. The notice was correct. That is the thing I need the reader to understand. The shelter was a tunnel with one door and no second exit and a kitchen at the back and fifty people in it on a good night, and by the letter of the regulation it should have been closed twenty years earlier. The inspector who came was thorough and polite and did his job, and he taped a paper to the door with the district's red seal on it, and the room where the network met and ate and remembered went dark.

The network did not die. It moved into the back room of a barbershop two streets up, which had two doors, because Yaoji rented it within a day and had it licensed within a week, because Yaoji had spent a year learning how to put a thing on a form. But the shelter was the heart of it, and everyone knew that the heart had been stopped by a piece of paper, and nobody could prove that the inspector had been leaned on, because it did not look like leaning. It looked like a regulation. That is how the umbrella works. It does not break your door. It finds a rule that was always there, and it hands the rule to a man who is only doing his job.

Zhang Niangniang took the notice off the door herself, folded it into eighths, and put it in her pocket. She said, "Thirty years. The fire was next door and the fire was water. This, this one is paper." Then she went and bought two new sets of tiles and set them up on the barbershop table, and by the end of the week the

game was running again, because an auntie who stops dealing is an auntie who has agreed to die.

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The blood came three nights later, and it came through the door of the tunnel.

The tunnel had the only door in the neighbourhood that was always open, which was a thing the aunties said with pride and which I had never once thought of as a weakness until that night. It was a little after eleven. Huajiao was at the table with a bowl of noodles and the notebook, and Jingchen was asleep in the room behind the kitchen because he had missed the last bus back to the temple, and Wang Niangniang was still up, because Wang Niangniang was always up. I was on the far side of the room, mending the strap of the delivery box.

The man who came in was wearing a yellow rider's jacket, and carrying a bag, and he stopped two steps inside the door and looked around at the room the way a man looks when he has rehearsed a thing and the room is not the shape he rehearsed. He was about thirty, with a shaved head and a scar on his jaw and the still, flat face of a man who does not think too much about what he does. He asked, in the flat city accent of a man who has come from somewhere else, "Which one is the rider."

Nobody answered. Wang Niangniang did not look up from the stove. Huajiao did not look up from the notebook. I set the strap down slowly, because a fast movement when a man has a bag is a decision.

"You're the one," the man said, to me. "The drunk. You're the one on the video." He put the bag on the floor, and it was not a big bag, and he unzipped it. "Somebody's paying me to scare you. That's all this is. A scare. I don't want to —"

He did not finish, because Huajiao had come off the stool and across the room before he had the zip all the way open, and she did it in a way that I am not going to describe in detail, because she has asked me not to describe the things she does, and because the reader has waited a book and a half for the moment when the girl with the notebook becomes the girl in the alley. She put him down on the floor and the bag went over and a folding knife came out of it and

skittered across the tiles, and she put her knee on his wrist and her hand on his throat and looked down at him, and the whole room waited.

"Don't," I said.

She did not answer me. Her face was closed. The man on the floor was making the small animal noise of a person who has been surprised by how fast the world can change, and Huajiao looked at him the way she looked at the man at the warehouse gate, the way she looked at the whole world on the bad days — *flat, evaluating, her mother's look* — and I understood, with a cold clarity, that this was the test that mattered, that this was the room where the rewritten Rule One would either hold or not, because Rule One said *if the person is walking in, you walk in too,* and the man on the floor had walked in, and the rule did not actually cover what to do with him once he was down.

"Huajiao," I said.

"He has a knife," she said. "He came to the door. He said he was paid to scare you. Last year, a man was paid to scare me, and he broke my ribs, and nobody stopped him."

"I know."

"Then why are you telling me not to."

"Because it's the last thing he has," I said. "It's the only thing he has that we don't. If you do it, then we're the same, and the trial in the autumn will be a trial about the same thing, and I don't have a year to waste being the same." I knelt down on the tiles so that I was at her level, and I said the only thing I had, which was not a rule and not a lesson and not my mother's or my grandfather's or anyone's, but mine, and therefore the only kind of thing that had ever worked on her. "You wrote a rule about walking in. You wrote it in your own hand. If you kill this man on the floor, you don't break the rule. You just make it smaller. And I think you wrote it bigger than that on purpose."

For a long moment nothing happened. The stove ticked. The man on the floor bled a little from his nose onto the tile. And then Huajiao took her knee off his wrist and her hand off his throat and stood up and walked back across the room to her stool and sat down and picked up her chopsticks, and her hand was perfectly steady, and she did not look at any of us, and she said, "Someone should tie him up and call the police, and someone should look at that bag."

Wang Niangniang said, "There. Now we have a Thursday."

We tied him with parcel tape. The bag had a knife and a length of hose and a jar of something I will not describe, and the man on the floor told us, in the flat voice of a man confirming a delivery, that he had been hired through a gym in Yubei by a man he did not know and paid in cash, and that the job was to scare the rider and take a photograph. He did not know who had hired him and he did not care, and I believe him to this day, because that is the most modern fact in this whole book: you can hire a hand in this city without anyone ever learning a name.

The police came and took him. He got a warning and a short sentence for the knife, because he had not actually hurt anyone and because a man who is paid to scare is not worth the paperwork of a real charge, and the trial against the dead man's empire did not mention him once. But he had a scar and he had a gym and he had a man he did not know, and Yaoji put the man he did not know on a page, and the page went into the case file, and the case file went into the autumn, and that is how a network is built — not by catching the hand, but by catching the name of the man who paid the hand, and by never throwing the name away.

That night, after the police had gone and Huajiao had gone up to her room without saying good night, Wang Niangniang sat down across from me with a bowl of something and watched me eat it. And after a while she said, "She did not kill him."

"No."

"She could have."

"Yes."

"You know what changed between the alley two years ago and tonight?" She did not wait for me to answer. "Nobody gave her permission last time. Tonight, somebody was in the room who would be disappointed in her. That is the whole of parenting. That is all it is. Somebody in the room who is not afraid of her." She wiped the table. "You did well. Eat your noodles."

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The car came for me the next afternoon.

It was black and electric and stopped at the mouth of the tunnel without a sound, and the man who got out was young and in a suit and said, without any particular menace, that Mr. Tan would be grateful if Mr. Li would join him for tea. He did not say which Mr. Tan, because there was only one. He did not insist, because he did not need to, and because the whole city was watching and a refusal would have looked worse than the thing it refused.

I told the aunties where I was going. Wang Niangniang put a packet of nuts in my hand, because that is her answer to any journey. Zhang Niangniang said, "Don't sign anything." Huajiao said nothing, but she was at the mouth of the tunnel when the car pulled away, standing in the fog with her arms crossed, and I understood that if I was not back by dark she would come and get me, and that this was, in its way, the last rule in the book that she had not rewritten.

The Grand Buddha Tower stood at the tip of Jiangbeizui where the two rivers meet, eighty-eight floors of black glass with a golden crown, and the crown was the Buddha — twelve storeys of gilded hollow, the country's largest indoor Buddha, built so that it could be seen from the river at night. It had been the dead man's monument and it was now the son's. The mall at its base sold mindfulness journals and vegetarian dumplings and a brand of cold tea and a line of clothing made of hemp. The lobby smelled of white flowers and floor polish and money. Two young women at a desk said *welcome* in unison, and meant it, in the way that a mirror means your face.

They took me up to the thirty-first floor, to a room with a window that looked down the Yangtze, and Tan Xiao was there alone, at a table set for tea, in a shirt without a tie, and he stood up when I came in and smiled the smile he had been photographed making since he was a child.

"Li Xiuyuan," he said. "Thank you for coming. Sit down. The water is almost ready."

I sat down. The water was almost ready. He poured it himself, in the correct order, and set the cup in front of me, and did not speak again until I had taken a sip, which I did not do.

"You don't drink tea from strangers," he said.

"I drink tea from the aunties. You're not an auntie."

He laughed, and the laugh was real, which was the most frightening thing about him. “No. I’m not.” He sat down across from me and folded his hands on the table, and he looked at me with the clear, courteous, entirely unafraid eyes of a man who had already run the arithmetic. “I’m the man whose father burned down a temple and killed a monk to move a zoning line, and whose foundation rebuilt the temple, and whose factory made the fan you’re carrying in your pocket, and who offered you a million yuan on the internet after you refused to meet me. That’s the whole of it. I’m not going to pretend any of it isn’t true, because you already know it, and pretending would waste the one afternoon we have.”

“You know I’m going to testify.”

“I know.” He did not flinch. “You’re going to testify that the fire was arson, and that my father’s materials were the accelerant, and that I knew nothing, and that the company knew, because the company was my father. And I am going to sit two rows behind you in a good suit and listen to it, and I am going to be the son of the man on trial, and I am going to weep at the right moments, and I am not going to be convicted of anything, because I did not commit a crime, and because the man who did is dead, and because grief is not a crime, and because you cannot cross-examine a dead man.” He picked up his cup. “That is not a threat. That is the schedule.”

“Then why am I here.”

“Because there is one thing in the whole case that I cannot schedule, and it is you.” He set the cup down without drinking. “The law will do what the law does. But the city doesn’t care about the law. The city has decided that you are the truth and I am the fake, and it will hold that position for about a year, and then it will decide something else. And in the meantime, everything I build — the foundation, the temple, the wellness brands, the whole clean half — sits on the city’s willingness to believe that the son is a different man from the father. And the only person who can destroy that belief is the drunk who will not sign the form.” He looked at me, and for the first time there was something under the courtesy, something tired and hard and nearly honest. “So I am here to ask you what you want. Not the million. Not the committee. What do you actually

want, that I can give you, so that when you walk into that courtroom you walk in as a man with something to lose."

I looked at him for a long time. Down the window, the river did what the river does. And I gave him the truth, because it was the only thing I had and because I had learned, by then, that a truth given to a man like Tan Xiao is not a weapon; it is a *datum*, and he will file it, and years later he will use it, and that is the price of telling the truth to the powerful.

"I want the note," I said. "The abbot's note. It's in a tea towel on a shelf in a barbershop, because the shop it belonged to closed. I want a wall for it. That's all. I don't want your money and I don't want your platform and I don't want to sit next to your name on anything. I want a wall in a place where riders eat breakfast, so that the line about imitation hangs where the people it was written for can see it. And I want you to stop selling the fan."

He did not laugh. For a moment he looked at me as if I had handed him a painting he did not understand and suspected was a forgery.

"A wall," he said.

"A wall."

"I own a temple," he said. "I could give you the wall of the temple. The note could hang beside the plaque. It would be the most-seen piece of calligraphy in the city."

"No."

"Because it would be under your father's name."

"Because it would be under your father's name," I said. "And the note is about what happens to people who do what I do. Your father's name is what happens to people who do what *you* do. They are not the same wall."

He was quiet. And then he did what I have thought about more than anything else he ever did, which was to stand up and go to the window and look down the river for a while with his back to me, the way a man looks when he is deciding whether to be a person. And when he turned around, the courtesy was back, and the smile was back, and the eyes were gone.

"I can't stop selling the fan," he said. "It's not mine. The factory is in Guangdong and the trademark is granted and the licence is held by a company that licenses it to four other companies, and if I wanted to stop it — and I am not

saying I want to — I could not. That is the thing about the world you keep refusing to join. It doesn't have a head. You can't put your hands around its neck and shake it. It's a *market*, and the market is the biggest room in any city, and it does not have a door."

He came back to the table. And before he offered the hand, he did the thing I have thought about more than anything else he ever did. He reached across the table and took my right hand — the burned one — and turned it over, and looked at the scars the way a man looks at a document, and did not let go. His fingers were cool. He traced the length of the scar on the forearm with one thumb, slowly, the way a blind man reads.

"They said you cannot feel the tips of the index and the middle," he said. "Is that true?"

"It is true. That is not the same as yes."

He held the hand a moment longer than he needed to, and then he let it go and put out his own hand.

"So let me offer you something else. Not money. A *position*. On the award committee. Unpaid. Use your real name. Hold the foundation accountable from inside it. The city gets to see that I am the kind of man who sits down with the man who accuses him, and you get to keep being the drunk with the broom, and nobody has to be the villain. That is the whole offer. It is not a trick. It is the only thing I have that you might actually want, and it is the only thing that would let us both survive the autumn."

I looked at the hand. It was a clean hand, well-kept, the hand of a man who had never carried anything heavier than a phone. Thirty-one floors up, the two rivers met and did not mix, and the city lay below us in the last light, thirty million people who had learned not to look, and a girl in a tunnel mouth waiting for dark, and a note in a tea towel with no wall.

I did not take the hand. I want to record that. Part of me — the part that was tired, the part that had a debt and a mother in Guangdong and hands that could not feel the tips of two fingers — wanted to take it, because it was a door, and because the man on the other side of the door had offered me a way to be seen without being consumed, and because I am not a saint and never have been.

But I stood up instead, and put the cup down on the table, and left the tea untouched, and said the thing that I am going to have to spend the rest of this book paying for.

"You're wrong about one thing," I said. "You said you cannot cross-examine a dead man. But you can cross-examine a living one. And you're going to. Because I'm not the only witness, and the other one has a broken voice and a ward with a view of a wall, and when he tells the court what happened on the stairs and in the fire, you are going to have to sit two rows behind him and listen, and you are going to have to find a face to make while it happens. I want to see that face. That's what I want. That's the whole of what I want."

I turned and walked to the door. I did not have my back to him for more than four steps, but four steps is enough, and I have never been able to decide whether what I heard behind me was him moving or the water in the kettle or the city, but I know that when I looked back from the door, he had not moved, and his hand was still out over the empty table, extended to no one, in a room with a window full of river.

Then the lift came, and took me down through eighty-eight floors of gold and glass and good money, and at the bottom two young women said *goodbye* in unison, and meant it.

Huajiao was waiting at the mouth of the tunnel when the car dropped me. She had her arms crossed and her jaw set and she looked at my face for a long moment before she said anything.

"You didn't sign anything."

"No."

"You didn't take his hand."

"You were watching?"

"I was watching." She uncrossed her arms and started back down the slope toward the tunnel, and over her shoulder she said the only sentence of encouragement she offered me that whole year, and she said it the way she said everything, flatly, as a fact and not a kindness. "Good. Now he knows what you are. Now it gets worse."

PART TWO · 堂 · COURT

INTERLUDE 10

The Docket

Assembled from four documents in the public record and one that was not. The documents are reproduced as they were; nothing has been corrected. The names of the defendants are public. The name of the witness on page nine is not, and has been left blank in the original and left blank here.

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I. SUMMARY OF INDICTMENT

People's Procuratorate of the First District v. Hongfa Group Co., Ltd., et al.

Defendants: 1 dissolved corporate estate; 39 natural persons; 4 corporate entities. **Counts:** 11.

1. **Organization and leadership of a mafia-like criminal organization** (Hongfa Group and 6 subsidiaries; the estate of 谭鸿, deceased).
2. **Intentional injury** (7 counts; 4 victims; 1 fatality).
3. **Unlawful detention** (3 counts).
4. **Extortion** (14 counts; 22 victims).
5. **Fraud** (the campus-loan and "nude collateral" rackets; 311 identified victims, 9 confirmed deaths by suicide).
6. **Money laundering** (through 4 cultural and wellness entities, including the Foundation for Cultural Renewal).
7. **Arson** (Luohan Temple, the night of the 23rd of the 12th lunar month; 1 fatality).
8. **Infringement of citizens' personal information** (the consolidated debt ledger; an estimated 40,000 persons).

9. **Unlawful business operations** (the collection network).
10. **Affray** (2 counts).
11. **Obstruction of testimony** (added in the second supplementary investigation; 1 count; witness to be identified at trial).

Note on Defendant 1: The estate of the deceased founder is a defendant as a *legal person*, not as a natural person. The charges against the deceased natural person are terminated. **The case will proceed against the organization, the entities, and the surviving natural persons.**

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II. NOTICE OF SCHEDULING

First Intermediate People's Court of Chongqing Municipality.

The above matter will be heard in Courtroom 3 beginning at 09:00 on the 11th day of the 9th month. The proceedings are open to the public. The court will hear oral evidence, documentary evidence, and electronic evidence. Members of the public shall be seated by 08:40. Recording devices are not permitted except as authorised. The reading of the judgment will be scheduled separately.

The court reminds all parties that the proceedings are being recorded for the official record and that a summary will be published. The court reminds all witnesses that they shall testify truthfully and that they shall not discuss their evidence with any person other than the court.

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III. DEFENCE STRATEGY MEMORANDUM (LEAKED)

PRIVILEGED — PREPARED FOR COUNSEL — DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

Subject: Narrative imperatives, first hearing.

Four things the panel must believe before the autumn is over:

1. **The father did it.** Every count that can be attached to the dead man should be. A dead defendant cannot refute an allegation. Our client's grief is our strongest exhibit.
2. **The son knew nothing.** Keep the son off the stand until the end of the prosecution case. When he speaks, he must speak last, and he must be the only voice in the room that sounds like a person rather than a file.
3. **The heroes are not heroes.** The rider, the girl, the courier network, the archive, the informal mahjong intelligence operation — these are not citizens. They are an **unlicensed private enforcement apparatus** that operated in parallel to law enforcement, in secret, with funds and logistics, for more than a year. Their "help" produced: one death (the enforcer, undetermined), one maiming (the atrium crush), one vigilante fatality (the imitator, 19), and a public order incident (the night market). **We are not defending the father. We are defending the proposition that a city needs one system of order, not two.**
4. **The witness corridor.** [REDACTED] requires handling before he is called. He has refused all approaches. Recommend the *dignity* line, not the money line. The subject responds to a room of his own and a task. The son is the only acceptable messenger. **Authorisation requested.**

Addendum (handwritten): The drunk will be the prosecution's emotional centre of gravity. Do not attack him personally. Attack the **category**. Make the panel see him as a symptom, not a man. If they see him as a man, we lose.

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IV. POST FROM A FAN ACCOUNT

`@MountainCityNights · 2.1k likes`

> *trial starts tomorrow. i saw him on the trail this morning. he was walking with his gourd like nothing is happening. i wanted to say something to him, like good luck, or thank you, or i'm sorry about the kid. but i didn't. because what do you say to a man who is about to be put in a room and asked to prove he exists. i just walked past him and he nodded at me. that's all. he nodded. after everything, that's what he does.* ↳ `@A Netizen` *maybe he's just a guy* ↳ `@MountainCityNights` *yeah. maybe that's the whole thing. maybe the trail is the whole thing.*

— end of docket (partial). the trial will run for six weeks. the city will watch most of the first three days and almost none of the last three. the witness on page nine will be asked, eleven times, whether he understands the difference between a legend and a fact, and eleven times he will say the same four words, and by the end the panel will believe nine of them and the city will believe none.

CHAPTER 9

The Hall

The law is a room, and I had never been in one.

That is not true in the literal way, because a policeman had once breathalysed me on a curb and a clerk had once slid a form across a table and a woman with a clipboard had once written *witness does not know victim* in a small office with a traffic-safety poster. But I had never been in the room where the law *keeps* itself, and I did not know, until the morning of the eleventh of the ninth month, that the room would smell of floor polish and paper and that it would be so much smaller than the city had made it sound.

We queued outside from half past seven. The queue was not the gallows crowd I had half expected, and it was not a solemn line either; it was a queue of the sort this city produces for anything — a few relatives of the accused, a few relatives of the dead, students on a course requirement, two retired men who came for the free air conditioning, a woman selling roasted sweet potatoes from a cart at the gate, and a row of the professionally aggrieved, each of them carrying a plastic folder of their own paperwork, because everyone in this city has a folder and everyone believes their folder is the one that matters. A security guard checked my identity card against a printed list, and then looked at my yellow jacket and then at my face, and said, "You're a witness," in the tone of a man who has been told that morning that a witness is coming and has been told, without being told, which witness.

On the steps, before we went in, there were three of them. A man of about forty in a brown robe that was too clean, with a fan and a gourd, ladling free congee from a cart to the queue; a boy of nineteen with a cardboard fan, standing at the edge of the steps and watching the doors; and a woman with a banner that said *the people's justice* in characters that did not quite fit together. They were not doing anything wrong. That was the trouble. They were doing good, in the way the city had spent a year learning to do good, and they had come to the trial because the trial was where the story was, and the story was theirs as much as

mine, and I could not walk into that building without walking past my own reflection, ladling congee.

The corridor had a high ceiling and bad light and a notice board with three months of scheduling pinned to it. The gallery of Courtroom 3 had eleven rows of wooden benches on either side of a central aisle. It held about a hundred and twenty people and it was full, and the overflow watched on a screen in a side room, and everyone in both rooms held a phone, and the phones were held at the angle that people hold phones at a thing they intend to describe later.

I am going to describe the room in the order I saw it, because that is the only honest way to describe a room where the law is done, and because the law is, in the end, a set of objects arranged in a certain order.

At the front, on a raised platform behind a long bench, sat three judges. The presiding judge was a woman of about fifty-five with a salt-grey face and reading glasses on a chain, and there was nothing about her that invited you to guess at her — no photograph on the bench, no ornament, no movement — except one thing, which I noticed on the second day and never afterward doubted: when a witness was lying, she took her glasses off and cleaned them. That was the whole of her. I have seen her described, since, as a symbol of the rule of law, and I have come to think that the writer who wrote that had never watched her clean her glasses while a man in a good suit told her, with tears in his eyes, that he had loved his father.

In front of the bench, at a long table, sat the prosecution: Jiang Xue on the left, with a young colleague I never learned the name of, and a stack of files squared to the edge. On the other side, at a matching table, sat the defence: Lu Jingtang, sixty-three, in a grey suit and a tie the colour of good money, with three younger lawyers behind him and a screen angled toward his hand. Between the two tables and the bench was the floor where the evidence was given, and behind it, facing the gallery, was the dock.

The dock held thirty-nine people.

That is the number I want the reader to hold. Thirty-nine. They were arranged in four rows of chairs, the corporals and the lieutenants and the accountants and the men from the collection offices and the two lawyers for the dissolved entities, and the front row was the ones with the most serious counts,

and none of them looked like a criminal, because no one ever does. They looked like the men who stand at the back of a wedding photograph and are not sure they were invited. Two of them were crying. One was reading a paperback. One, an old man with a good watch, slept with his mouth open for most of the first morning, and I learned later that he had been a driver for the dead man for twenty-two years and had never once been told what he was driving.

And two rows behind the dock, in the first row of the gallery on the right side, in a black suit and a white shirt without a tie, sat Tan Xiao.

He was alone. That was the first thing. In a room full of relatives and lawyers and cameras, the son of the dead man sat by himself, with his hands folded on his knee, and his back straight, and his face composed into the expression of a young man bearing a great weight with dignity, which is the expression he had been practising his whole life and had by then perfected. The cameras found him in the first ten minutes and did not really let him go for six weeks. Every time a serious count was read out, the feed cut to the son's face. Every time a victim wept, the feed cut to the son's face. He was not a defendant. He was not a witness. He was, by the end, the only thing in the room that the city was actually watching, and that was the whole of his defence, and he had not yet said a word.

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The presiding judge opened the court at nine. She read the formalities and identified the parties, and the clerk read the indictment, and the reading took forty-seven minutes, and by the end of it the paperbacks in the dock were closed and the crying had stopped and the old driver had woken up, because the indictment is not a story, it is a list, and a list is worse than a story, because a story can be argued with and a list can only be counted.

I am not going to reproduce the list. The reader can find it in any newspaper of that autumn. What I am setting in the record is the moment the count of arson was read, and the moment the name of the temple was said, and the thing that happened in the room.

The clerk read: *Arson — Luohan Temple, the night of the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month. One fatality.*

And in the gallery, in the row in front of me, an old woman I did not know — not a relative, I found out later, but a woman who had swept the temple courtyard on Sundays for eleven years — made a sound. It was not a sob. It was the sound a person makes when they have been holding a thing in their chest for a year and the official language of the state has just said it out loud in a room, and the holding has become, at last, unnecessary. She put her hand over her mouth. And the camera, which was on the son, did not turn. And the feed, which was counting the engagement, did not care. And the judge, who had taken her glasses off, waited, and then read the next count.

That is the thing about a courtroom. It is the only room in this city where the truth is spoken *on the record*, and a record is a cold thing, and cold things preserve, and preserving is the closest the state ever comes to love.

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After the indictment, the procurator stood up and gave the opening of the case, and it was short, because Jiang Xue did not believe in long openings. She said that the prosecution would prove, over the following weeks, four things: that the Hongfa Group was an organization; that the organization committed the crimes on the list; that the crimes were committed to protect the organization's business, including its collection and lending businesses; and that the organization's clean face — the foundation, the temple, the wellness brands, the memorials — was not a separate thing but the *next stage* of the same business, the stage where the money that came from the loans went out again as charity so that it could come back as legitimacy. She said that the dead founder had understood this better than anyone, and that his understanding was the reason the organization had outlived him. And then she said a sentence I have not been able to stop thinking about since, and which I believe is the entire argument of this book.

"The defendant organization did not hide its crimes behind a good name," she said. "It hid its good name behind its crimes. It bought a temple with arson. It bought a memorial with a death. It bought compassion with the same money it used to buy silence. And the reason it could do this is not that the city is corrupt. The reason is that the city is *kind*. The city gives the benefit of the

doubt to grief. The defendants have been trading on that kindness for eleven years, and the prosecution asks this court to make them pay for it."

Then she sat down.

Lu Jingtang stood up and gave the defence opening, and he did not attack the dead man, and he did not defend him, and he was not even particularly cruel. He was something worse. He was *reasonable*. He said that grief was not a crime. He said that a son could not be tried for a father. He said that the organization's cultural and charitable activities were lawful on their face and that the state had licensed them and audited them and given them awards, and that if a lawful activity is a crime, then the crime is the state's. He said that the prosecution's case against the living defendants rested, in the end, on the evidence of a group of private citizens who had taken the law into their own hands: a drunk delivery rider, a fifteen-year-old girl, a courier with a radio, three elderly women, and an anonymous internet archive. And then he turned, very slightly, and looked at me in the gallery, for no more than a second, and said the sentence that set the whole tone of the autumn.

"The state has its witnesses," he said. "And the fugitives have theirs. The panel will want to ask itself, at the end, which of the two is the reason we are all in this room."

He sat down. The court adjourned for lunch. And in the corridor, in a crowd of people all holding phones and sweet potatoes and folders, a young man in a delivery jacket came up to me and asked, in a low voice, whether it was true, what the lawyer said, that we were the reason for all of it.

I looked at him. He was perhaps twenty, with a forehead still full of adolescent trouble, and he was not hostile, and he was not a plant, he was just a young man in a city of thirty million who had been told, by a man in a good suit, that the good people were the problem.

"No," I said. "But he said it well, and that's the trouble."

"Do you want me to film him saying it?" the boy asked. "My friends and I, we could post it. We could make it go viral. We could—"

"No," I said, and I realized I had said it too fast and too loud, because the whole corridor was looking at me, and because a circle of silence had formed around the yellow jacket, and because the city was always, always watching the

exact person who least wanted to be watched. “No. Don’t film it. Go home. Nothing’s happened yet.”

The boy looked disappointed, the way the whole city looked disappointed whenever I refused to be the story, and he went away with his phone in his hand. And I stood in the corridor of the law and understood that the trial had already done the thing the trial was designed to do, which was to turn us all into a *case*, and that before the autumn was over I would be asked to prove, in that room, in front of that woman with the glasses, that a man can help another man without becoming a criminal, and that I had no idea how to prove it, because I was not entirely sure it was true.

CHAPTER 10

The Survivors

Wen Xiaoyu testified on the second day, and she was twenty now, and she wore a grey blouse and her hair was short and she had learned, in the year and a half since I had last seen her, to hold herself like a person who has decided to be looked at and is not going to enjoy it.

I had not seen her since the day on the wall outside the clinic, when she had told me not to say I was helping her. She did not look at me when she came in. She was led to the witness stand by the bailiff and she identified herself and she answered Jiang Xue's questions in a low, level, unhurried voice, and she did what the survivors of this city almost never get to do, which is to tell their own story in their own order, without a camera cutting to the reaction of the man who hurt them.

She told the court about the loan: forty thousand yuan for her father's medical bill, taken in her name because her father's credit was gone, from a company that advertised on the wall of the library. She told the court about the photographs. I am not going to describe the photographs, because she asked that they never be described, and because the court itself, when the files came up, dealt with them through a numbered list and a redaction, which is the only dignity the law knows how to give. She said, in her own words and not in the language of a complaint: "They asked me for pictures of myself as security, and I sent them, because I was nineteen and because my father was dying, and I thought the pictures were a private thing between me and a company. They were not private. They were a product. The company bought them and sold them and used them to make me do what it wanted."

Then she told the court about the deletion.

Huajiao had done it in the year of the tower, in front of her, in a back room, on a screen. She had deleted the files, one by one, while Wen Xiaoyu watched. And Wen Xiaoyu described that, in the witness stand, in the grey blouse, in a voice that did not break, and she described it as the only thing in the whole affair

that had felt like justice, and she said that no court could have done it, because a court is a place where the evidence is preserved and never destroyed, and that the destruction of those pictures was the only destruction in the whole of her life that she had ever wanted. The panel sat very still. Lu Jingtang, on the defence side, made a note.

The cross-examination was not the butchery I had feared. It was worse in a quieter way. Lu Jingtang was courteous. He established that the loan contract was lawful on its face, that the debt was real, that the borrower had signed, that the family had not reported the conduct for eleven months, and that the young woman's testimony about the collection methods was, by her own admission, based on what she had been told by others as well as what she had seen. And then he asked her the question that the whole defence had been built to ask, and he asked it gently, which was the point.

"Miss Wen," he said. "You are aware that a young man eighteen months ago was killed while imitating the man in the yellow jacket, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And you are aware that the man in the yellow jacket was, at the time, a private citizen with no authority, no training, and no accountability?"

"He helped me."

"I did not ask whether he helped you. I asked whether you were aware that he had no authority."

"He helped me," she said again. "I don't know what authority is. I was nineteen. Nobody with authority ever helped me. A drunk with a fan helped me. If that's the problem, then the problem is not him."

The judge told her, kindly, that she should answer the question asked. She answered the question asked. And when she stepped down, she walked past our row without looking at me, and I understood that she had spent a year and a half building the small wall that let her walk past me, and that the wall was hers, and that I was not allowed to knock on it.

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The dead were read out on the third day.

Nine students. I am not going to write their names, because their families are entitled to a life that is not a list, but the court did read them, and each name took about four seconds, and the reading of nine names took thirty-six seconds, and in thirty-six seconds the room learned the shape of the thing that the company had done, which was not that it had extorted a girl, but that it had built a machine for finding the girls, and the machine had worked, and the machine had killed nine of them, and the machine had been described in the company's own documents as *risk management for the collateral portfolio.*

A woman testified after the names. She was the mother of the sixth. She did not cry, in the way that people who have no more crying left do not cry, and she said one thing that the whole room understood and the defence did not know what to do with: "She was not a weak girl. She was a strong girl, and the strong ones are the ones the machine chooses, because a weak one gives up on the money and a strong one tries to pay it back." Then she sat down, and the judge took off her glasses and cleaned them, and the room was quiet for a while.

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Later that same day, after the mother, they read the father of one of the nine.

He was fifty-six and he was a long-haul driver and he had a cough and a pair of reading glasses he put on to look at the documents and took off to look at the panel. His daughter had been the fourth of the nine, and she had been studying accounting, and she had taken a loan of twenty-two thousand yuan for a teacher-certification course that turned out not to exist, and she had paid the interest for eleven months and had, in the end, done what a strong girl does, which is the same thing the mother on the third day had said and which the court had not known what to do with. He did not cry. He told the court about her in the order a driver tells a route: where she was born, what she was good at, which bus she took to school, the name of the teacher she liked, the way she used to call him when his truck was out of the province, the last message she sent him, which was a photograph of a bowl of noodles and the words *eat on time.* And then he did the thing that only a father can do in a courtroom, which is to say the sentence the whole case was actually about, and to say it without any of the words the lawyers had taught everyone to use.

"I do not want the money," he said. "I want somebody to write down that she was not a fool. The defendants' lawyer is going to say she borrowed from a company that had a license and signed a contract. That is true. She signed. She was nineteen. She was a *child*, and she signed a paper with a company with a license, and a license is just a paper that says the paper is allowed." He put his glasses on and looked at them and took them off again. "Write down that she was not a fool. Write down that she was a strong girl who was chosen by a machine for being strong. That is all. I have the rest."

The court wrote it down. That is what I have to give the law. The court wrote it down, in the record, in the official language, and the record is a receipt, and a receipt is not justice and it is not nothing.

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And in the corridor that same afternoon, I found the boy who had sold the footage.

I do not know why I am putting this in. It is not a big thing and it does not belong to the plot, and the boy is not a villain. He was twenty-two, a rider in the network, and in the first year, on the night of the tower, he had been one of the boys who filmed the atrium, and in the year after, when the trial was announced and the platforms came looking for the raw feed, he had been one of the boys offered money for the footage, and he had been the one who took it. I had known it for a year. It had been in the accounting of the year before, in the line I wrote about the trial being scheduled and the boys being offered money and one of them taking it, and I had not thought about him much since, because I did not blame him, because two thousand yuan is two thousand yuan and a rider does not eat on principle, and because the only reason I had not sold anything was that no one had ever offered me a price I could use without becoming a different man.

He was in the corridor with a helmet under his arm and a bottle of water, and he saw me and stopped, and I watched the whole of it cross his face — the wish to walk on, the knowledge that he could not, the decision to be a person — and then he said, in the flat voice of a man who has rehearsed a sentence in a corridor for a year:

"I sold it. The clip. I sold it to the foundation's people and they used it in a documentary that made the son look like a witness, and I have watched that documentary and I have wanted to die about it, and I am telling you because you are the only person who gets to know and because I do not want to be a man whose secret is kept for him."

"How much?"

"Two thousand and eight hundred." He said it like a confession and then, a second later, like an apology: "I bought a battery and a coat and I sent the rest home."

"Do you still have the original?"

"No. I gave them the card. I am not a professional. I gave them the card." He looked at me. "Are you going to tell the aunties?"

"No," I said, and I did not say it to be kind. I said it because it was the truth. "You sold a card for two thousand eight. The foundation sold your card for a whole city. Telling the aunties would be like fining a man for spilling a cup while the river floods."

He did not laugh. He looked at the floor and said what was the actual crime of it, and then he put his helmet on and went down the stairs into the afternoon.

"It is not the money," he said. "It is that they used me to make the son look like a man who was in the room. I was the one who was in the room. I filmed it. He was in a glass box thirty floors up and he made my film the evidence that he was there."

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The temple testified on the fourth day. That is the wrong way to say it, but it is the true way, because what the prosecution needed from the temple was not a person but a fact, and the fact had a name, and the name was Jiefeng.

He came in his grey robe and his cloth shoes, and he did not bow to the panel (you do not bow to a panel in a courtroom) and he did not look at Tan Xiao (though he knew exactly where Tan Xiao was sitting), and he answered Jiang Xue's questions in his careful, arithmetic, finance-monk voice. Yes, the temple had received a donation of two million yuan from the Foundation for Cultural Renewal. Yes, the donation had funded the rebuild. Yes, the foundation's name

was on the merit stele in the east courtyard. Yes, he had negotiated the donation himself. Yes, he had known at the time that the foundation's ultimate controlling entity was the Hongfa Group, whose founder's estate was a defendant in this very proceeding. Yes, he had known that the fire which destroyed the temple was alleged to have been set with materials arranged through an entity connected to that group. And yes, he had accepted the money anyway.

Lu Jingtang cross-examined him for eleven minutes. He did not attack the temple. He did not need to. He drew out, gently and courteously, that the donation had been public, audited, lawful, and blessed by the district cultural bureau; that the temple had been left by the fire without a roof and without funds; that the insurance had paid a fraction and refused the rest; that the state itself had given the foundation a *charitable registration* and a *tax deduction*; and that the monk had done the only thing a man could do who wanted a temple to remain open for the poor. And then he asked the question he had been waiting to ask.

"Venerable Jiefeng," he said. "If the money had come from the dead man's own hand, in cash, in the dark, would you have taken it?"

There was a pause. Jiefeng looked at the defence counsel with the flat, unreachable patience of a man who had spent his life doing arithmetic in a room full of people who did not want to hear the number.

"No," he said.

"And why did you take it from the foundation?"

"Because the foundation was *legal*," Jiefeng said. "That is not a defence. It is an accusation. A man alone in the dark can be refused. A foundation with a license cannot. The law made a thing that was easier to accept than the man, and I accepted the thing, and the temple has a roof, and the arhat hall has four hundred and thirty-nine statues in it, and the fifty-seven that are missing are missing because the roof burned, and I chose the statues over the principle, and here I am, doing the arithmetic for you, in a courtroom, because the arithmetic is the only thing I have left." He paused. "I am not asking to be forgiven. Monks are not forgiven. We are only recorded."

He did not look at Tan Xiao. But every other person in the room did. And in the first row of the gallery on the right side, in the black suit and the white shirt

without a tie, the son of the dead man sat up very straight and let the camera find his face, and made, for the camera, the expression of a young man hearing the truth about his father for the first time, which was a lie, and a good one.

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Before the prosecution rested, the court read a statement into the record, and it was the smallest thing in the whole trial and the one I have never been able to put down.

It came from a woman of seventy-nine who had not been able to travel to the city, and it had been taken down by a paralegal in the front room of her flat, and it was about a wooden box. Her name was not read. The statement said:

For thirty years I have gone to the temple on the first and the fifteenth of the lunar month, and I have burned incense for my husband at the little table to the left of the third arhat. I was not there the night of the fire. I do not know how it started, and I do not know who is to blame, and I do not want to say anything about the men in the dock. I want to say that on the little table to the left of the third arhat there was a wooden box, and in the box there were three photographs of my husband and one of my son, who died in 1998, and a lock of my son's hair folded in a red paper, and the paper had my handwriting on it, and the handwriting said his birthday. The fire took the box. The temple has offered me a new box, and the board has been kind, and I have thanked them. I do not want a new box. I want the court to know that the company did not burn a building. The company burned the box. A building can be rebuilt by the company that burned it. The box cannot be rebuilt by anyone, because the photographs were the only copies, and my son's hair was the only hair.

The clerk read it in the flat voice clerks use for statements, and when it was done the woman with the salt-grey face took off her glasses and cleaned them, and the room was quiet, and the camera on the tripod went on filming, and I sat in the wooden bench and understood the thing I have been trying to say for two books, which is that the size of a crime is not the size of the building. It is the size of the box. The company had burned an eight-hundred-year-old hall and killed a monk and damaged sixty-one statues and mended two hundred and fourteen with a grey paste that everybody could see. And what the law could not weigh,

and the panel could not file, and no valuation could recover was a lock of a dead boy's hair in a red paper with a birthday on it in an old woman's hand.

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They read one more statement after that, from a monk, and then the temple's fact was done.

The monk was twenty-six and he had been in the bell tower on the night of the fire, and he had come down the fire escape and stood in the lane in his nightclothes with the other three, and he had watched the east cloister burn with his hands inside his sleeves, because that is what you do with your hands when there is nothing else to do with them. His statement was seven lines long. It said that the bell was the only thing that came out whole, that the arhat hall had stood, that four hundred and thirty-nine of the five hundred were in their rows, that sixty-one were in the ground, and that he had spent the following year remending two hundred and fourteen of the survivors with a grey paste and his own hands. And it said the sentence that the prosecution did not need and the defence could not use, and that I have kept:

I was not afraid during the fire. I was afraid afterward, when I understood that the statues are not the temple and the temple is not the statues, and that what was lost was what had made us stop in the first place, which is a wooden box on a table that a woman had been tending for thirty years. The fire cannot be repaired and I mend the statues anyway, because a monk mends what he can reach, and I could not reach the box.

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The prosecution's case after four days was this: the loans were proven, the extortion was proven, the organization was nearly proven, and the fire was nowhere.

That was the arithmetic, and I got it from Jiang Xue herself, in a stairwell, on the fifth morning, when she came out to smoke a cigarette she did not smoke and I was there because there was nowhere else to stand. She told me the loans would convict the corporals and the accountants and maybe two lieutenants. She told me the organization would survive the conviction, because an organization that has been folded into a foundation is not a defendant; it is a *program.* And she

told me that the arson count, which was the only count that mattered to the city and the only count that could reach the dead man's name and therefore the living son's reputation, rested on a single issue.

"Electrical fault," she said. "That is the fire report. That is the insurance annex. That is what the state has on paper. And on the other side of that paper is one man in a ward with a broken back and a voice like a door, and a bag of foam-rubber restoration materials that went through a shell, and a receipt that our aunties found in the back of a noodle shop ledger that closed in the spring." She looked at me. "If he testifies, the fire is arson. If he does not, the fire is an unfortunate accident caused by old wiring, and the dead man's son goes home with a clean name and a temple and a foundation and the whole of the city's pity."

"He'll testify," I said.

"He asked for you," she said. "He asked for you twice. That does not mean he will testify. It means he wants something, and the only thing I cannot give him is whatever it is." She put the unlit cigarette away. "You asked me what I have. I told you the truth. Now I am asking you. What does he want?"

I thought about the ward with the view of a wall and the man in the next bed who was dying and did not know it and the cigarettes at the gate, and about the offer of a room at the temple and the son who had come to give it, and about a question about a refrigerator that had been asked of the only two men alive who had carried one up those stairs.

"He wants to be forgiven," I said. "And he knows he cannot be. So he wants to be *recorded*. He wants somebody to write down what he did and what was done to him and let the city decide. He spent his whole life being one of the men who keep climbing, and he wants, once, before the body finishes failing, to be one of the men who *stops and looks.*"

Jiang Xue looked at me for a moment. It was the first time in the whole case that she had looked at me as a person and not a witness, and it lasted about four seconds, and then it was gone.

"Then go and tell him the camera is on," she said. "And tell him it does not turn off."

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I went to the ward that evening, and the ward was empty.

Not empty. There was a man in it, in some bed, somewhere. But Dao-ge's bed by the window was stripped to the mattress, and the window was open, and on the little table where his cigarettes and his water jug had been there was a single orange, and the nurse at the desk said he had been discharged that afternoon, and that a car had come for him, and that the car was black and electric and made no sound. She said he had signed his own discharge papers, which he had the right to do. She said he had left the orange for the man in the next bed, because it was the last one, and because the man in the next bed did not know he was dying, and *somebody should tell him before he runs out of time to be told.*

I stood at the empty bed with the orange and the open window and the square of weak-tea sky, and I understood that Tan Xiao had not waited for the courtroom, and that the hand he had extended across the tea table had not been extended to me at all. It had been extended to the whole world, and the world had taken it, one man at a time, beginning with the man who had asked for me by the only name that was mine.

CHAPTER 11

The Groundskeeper

I went to the river steps the next evening, because the man I needed had not been to the tunnel in a month and because I did not know where else to put the fear.

Uncle Tuo was where he always was, on his square of cardboard with his back to the railing and his feet on the next step down, and the phone on his knee was playing the old series again, the 1985 one, and on the small blurred screen a man in a ragged hat was walking through a town that did not want him. The old man had a paper cup of something and a plastic bag of cold peanuts, and he looked at me the way he looked at me whenever I came, which is to say not at all.

"Sit," he said. "You look like a man whose horse has run."

I sat. I did not drink — I had not drunk for a year and a half — but I had brought him a pouch of gaoliang from the corner shop, because the old men on the steps had a rule that a man who sits down brings something, and I had learned that a sober man can buy liquor for other people without it being a crack in anything, which was a thing I had had to learn slowly and in front of witnesses.

He took the pouch and did not open it. He put it in the pocket of his coat, next to the last one, and I understood that he had been saving them, and that the saving was a thing I did not get to ask about.

"Dao-ge is gone from the ward," I said. "The son came and gave him a room at the temple. He's the groundskeeper now. He's going to sit in that courtyard in a wheelchair and water the plants for the man who burned it."

Uncle Tuo watched the small screen. The monk on it did something disreputable and the town laughed.

"Your father," Uncle Tuo said, "used to put his gourd on the third step of the last flight."

I did not say anything. I had not asked, and he had not answered, because he never answered, and this was the first time in twenty years that he had begun a sentence with *your father* in front of me.

"Always the third step," he said. "You come up the stairs from the river at Chaotianmen, there's the flight with the bad turn, and at the top of the bad turn there's a step that sticks out, and he'd put the gourd there before he made the turn. A man who carries a refrigerator up a stair cannot hold a gourd and a refrigerator and turn a corner at the same time. So he'd set it down. He'd set it on the thirtieth step, and then he'd make the turn, and then he'd come back for it after he'd put the load down. He told me once it was so there'd be something to come back to." He took a peanut. "That is the whole of what I know about your father. He was a man who came back for his tea. That is not a small thing. Most of us did not come back for anything."

The water went by. A barge came up empty and rode high.

"Was Dao-ge on those stairs," I said.

"Everybody was on those stairs." He spat into the water. "Every man in this city between the years of 1985 and 2005 was on those stairs, or he was not eating. You want me to say I saw him the day. I did not see him the day. I did not see your father the day either. What I know is this. Your father laughed like a woman, high, and nobody expected it from a man that size, and he sang that fool song while he carried, which is bad luck, and which he did not care about. And there was a young man on the stairs then, a hard one, a good carrier, who had a burn on his shoulder from a kitchen fire he went into for a child, and who never once let anyone thank him for it, and who later went away from the porters and came back wearing a watch." He looked at me, and his eyes were the eyes of a man who had buried a wife and two sons and had decided long ago that the truth was a thing you gave in pieces, because whole truths kill. "You want me to give you the name of the man who was on the stairs the day your father died. I do not have it. I have a shape, and the shape has a shoulder. That is all. And even if I had the name, it would not help you, because the man who was on the stairs the day your father died is not the man you are fighting now. That man is a wheelchair and a voice like a door. The man you are fighting now is the one who bought him a room."

I sat with him until the light went. And when I got up, he said one more thing, without looking at me, in the flat voice he used for the sort of sentence that is also a blessing.

"Come back for your tea," he said. "That is all anybody has to do."

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The temple had changed by the ninth month, and the change was a wheelchair.

I saw it from the gate: a man with a broken back sitting in a chair under the east cloister, beside a green plastic watering can, with a row of potted plants at his feet that the rebuild had put in and that nobody had been watering. He was watering them. That was the thing. He was doing the job. He held the can with the hand that did not entirely close, and he tipped it, three seconds per pot, and moved the chair a little with the other hand, and did it again. He did not look up when I came into the courtyard, and I stood at the edge of the stone and watched him for a while, because I did not know how to begin.

Jingchen came out of the kitchen with a tray and stopped when he saw me. He was seventeen now, and he had grown, and he had a way of looking at the groundskeeper that I had not seen in him before, which was the way a young monk looks at a thing that the temple has decided to accept and he has not.

"He came yesterday," Jingchen said, quietly. "The board voted. Venerable Jiefeng voted with the majority. The room belonged to the temple. It is a lawful employment. It is *light work,* which is what his doctor said he could do." He shifted the tray. "He asked for the room by the east cloister. The one that looks at the arhat hall. He sits there and waters the plants and does not speak to anyone, and when the visitors come he turns the chair a little so they cannot photograph him, and when they are gone he turns it back."

"Does he eat?"

"He eats. He eats what Wang Niangniang sends. She sends it every day with a runner, because she says a man cannot be expected to eat temple food and also be at the temple." Jingchen looked at me. "She told me to tell you that the noodles are not a comment. She said you would understand."

I understood. Wang Niangniang had decided that the enemy's groundskeeper was a hungry man in a wheelchair, and that feeding him did not mean forgiving him, and that those were two different columns and she kept them separately, the

way she kept everything. It was the most honest arithmetic in the whole of that autumn, and I did not manage to match it for another three months.

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I learned the rest of him from the aunties, because the aunties knew everything, and because Liu Niangniang, who remembered every one of the dead man's men who had ever come to play, had known Dao-ge for twenty years.

She told me on the night before I went to the temple, over the tiles, in the flat voice of a woman reading a ledger that lived only in her head. He had first come to the shelter parlor in the late nineties, when it was still a mahjong room and not yet a network, and he had come with two other porters, and he had lost badly and paid in small notes over three months and never once made a scene, and after that he had come back for ten years, always on a Tuesday, always alone, always sitting with his back to the wall. He was quiet. He was generous with the tea money and never generous with information. And he was, Liu Niangniang said, the only one of the dead man's men who had ever been kind to the temple's cat, which sounds like nothing and is not nothing, because a man shows the whole of himself to a cat, and the cat had trusted him, and the cat was a poor judge of nothing.

And then she told me the other column, which I had never known, and which the trial would never hear.

In 1996, before the collectors and before the foundation, when he was a porter and a young man and a man with a shoulder that would later carry a scar, there was a fire in a kitchen in the old market district. It was a gas fire, and it went up fast, and there was a child in the back room — a girl of about four, the daughter of the noodle-shop family — and the men outside did what men do, which is to shout and to argue about who should go in, and the man who went in was the quiet porter with his back to the wall. He went in through the kitchen, which was already burning, and he came out through the back with the child under his arm, and he put the child on the ground and walked away before the family could thank him, and the burn across his shoulder was from the doorframe, and it was the burn the collector world would later use to say that

even a hard man has a soft place, which is the exact kind of thing that makes a hard man hard.

"He came to the parlor that night," Liu Niangniang said, "because he did not know where else to go. He had a burned shoulder and he was shaking and he did not want to be seen shaking, so he sat with his back to the wall and played tiles with three old women and did not say one word about the fire, and I heard about the fire three days later from the noodle family, and when I asked him why he had not told us he said, 'What would I say. I did a thing. You do not get to keep a thing by saying it.'" She put down a tile. "That is the man in the wheelchair. He carried a child out of a fire for nothing, and he ordered a fire in a temple for a car, and the fire he ordered killed a monk, and the child he carried out is a woman of thirty now who does not know his name. Those are the two columns. The whole of him is on one side or the other and neither side balances, and that is why I feed him."

"You feed him because neither side balances?"

"I feed him because a man who has one good thing and one bad thing is a *man*," she said. "It is the men who have only the good thing that frighten me. I have met them. They are in the newspapers."

Wang Niangniang, at the stove, said the thing that was the actual arithmetic. "I do not feed him because of the child and I do not feed him because of the temple. I feed him because he is in a wheelchair in a courtyard and the day is cold, and because a bowl of noodles is a bowl of noodles, and because the noodles are the one column I can keep that does not need to be balanced by anything. He eats. That is my whole book. The rest is for the court."

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I walked across the courtyard and stood beside the last pot. Dao-ge did not stop watering. When he had finished the row he set the can down on the flags and looked up at me with the flat patient eyes of a man who had spent a life watching people before they saw him, and he did not apologize, and he did not pretend, and he said the thing he had clearly rehearsed in the wheelchair under the arhats.

"I am going to tell you what I told the son," he said. "Then you can go."

"Go ahead."

"The son came to the ward and offered me the room. Not money. A room, a job, and a name on the temple's book. He did not ask me for anything. That is the truth. He did not once ask me to change my testimony. He said his father had done a great deal of harm and that he was trying to build a thing his father could not have built, and that a man with a broken back should not die in a ward with a view of a wall." He paused and breathed. "And I took it, because it is a room. And because I am fifty-six and I have nowhere else to go and no one else came."

"I came."

"You came once." He looked at the plants. "You came once, and you asked me to testify, and you told me the camera does not turn off. The son came three times and asked me to live. What was I supposed to do with that? A man who has spent his life hurting people does not get a second chance from the man he hurt. He gets a second chance from whoever offers one, and it is usually the wrong person, and he takes it anyway, because it is the only one there is." He put his good hand on the wheel. "I am not asking you to understand. I am telling you the schedule."

"And the testimony?"

"I will testify." He said it without heat, the way you say a fact about the weather. "That is the part you have to decide whether to believe. The son knows I will testify. The son's lawyer knows I will testify. There is nothing in the room that I have not told them I will say. I will say the order came from the chairman's office. I will say the materials were delivered on my instruction. I will say the fire was set, and that I arranged it, and that the man who gave the order is dead and cannot be asked why." He looked up at me, and for a moment the flatness cracked, and there was something under it that I had seen only once before, in a ward, when he asked me about my father's refrigerator. "They have built me a room in the courtyard of the building I burned, and they know I will stand in the court and say I burned it, and they have built the room anyway, and that is the whole of their cleverness. They are not trying to stop the truth. They are trying to *surround* it. They want the city to see a man in a wheelchair, in a temple, with a job and a room and a bowl of noodles from the aunties, saying *I*

burned it, and then to see the son, standing beside him, forgiving him. That is the picture. The picture is worth more than the verdict."

He picked up the watering can again. It was empty. He set it down.

"I will say what happened," he said. "And they will make of it a kindness. And there is nothing either of us can do about that, except decide what we are going to do with the rest of our lives while it happens."

I stood there for a long moment. The arhats looked down from the hall with their painted eyes, five hundred of them, four hundred and thirty-nine in place and sixty-one in the ground and two hundred and fourteen mended with a grey paste that everybody could see. And in the middle of the courtyard, under the new green roof, a man who had carried refrigerators up the same stairs as my father tipped an empty can over a row of pots and pretended there was water in it.

"You didn't answer my question," I said. "On the stairs. The day my father died. You asked me if he called out. I never asked you if you were there."

He was quiet for a while. Then he said, in the scrape that was his voice, the only sentence in the whole of our two-year acquaintance that I believe he ever said without measuring it first.

"I don't know if I was there," he said. "That is the truth. I have gone back to that stair a thousand times and I do not know if the day was the day. I carried a hundred refrigerators up a hundred stairs and a man died on one of them, and I have never been able to find the one in my memory that has his face on it. It could be that I was not there. It could be that I was there and did nothing, and the nothing has eaten the memory. A man can lose a day. A man cannot lose the *shape* of himself." He set the can down. "That is my testimony. That is the whole of it. Make of it what you want."

Jingchen came and took the tray away. And I walked out through the temple gate into the street where the city was going to work, and the fog was coming up off both rivers, and the trial's second week was beginning in the morning, and somewhere behind me, in the courtyard of the building he had burned, a broken man in a wheelchair was being fed noodles by a woman who had decided that feeding the enemy was not the same as forgiving him, which was, I was beginning to understand, the only kind of justice that this city has ever actually produced.

CHAPTER 12

The Stairs

They brought him in on the second Monday, and the whole room turned to watch, and the turning was the point.

There were three court police and a nurse and a folding ramp that a bailiff carried in ahead of them, and there was a whispered negotiation at the door about where the chair could go and whether it would obstruct the aisle to the dock, and in the end they put him on the floor between the two tables, facing the bench, with the microphone adjusted down and the water jug moved to a stool at his good hand. The thirty-nine defendants in the dock sat up. The gallery leaned forward. And in the first row on the right side, in the black suit and the white shirt without a tie, Tan Xiao folded his hands and looked at the man he had given a room, and prepared to be seen forgiving him.

Dao-ge did not look at Tan Xiao. That was the first thing I noticed, and I noticed it because I had spent two years in rooms where the powerful and the powerless each had their assigned line of sight, and Dao-ge had learned his, and his was the middle distance, where the bench was.

Jiang Xue began with the fire, because that was the count that mattered and because she did not believe in warming up.

"On the night of the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, in the year before last, did you arrange for the delivery of foam-rubber restoration materials to the east cloister of Luohan Temple?"

"Yes."

"Who instructed you to arrange it?"

"The chairman's office."

"Who in the chairman's office?"

"The chairman." He paused and breathed, which the court had been told to expect, and the panel waited with the patience of people who had been told to expect it. "He did not write it down. He said it in a car. He said the zoning for

the tower would not pass while the temple board kept refusing, and he said old wiring in a temple is a tragedy that everyone understands."

"And you carried out the instruction?"

"I carried out the instruction."

"And the result was the death of one person, the abbot, and the destruction of the east cloister and the arhat hall damage and the congee pot and the room with the drawer in it, is that correct?"

"That is correct." He looked at the bench. "I have not slept a whole night since. I am not saying that for the record. I am saying it because it is the only thing left in me that is still true about that night. I arranged a fire in a temple because a man in a car told me to, and because I had spent my whole life arranging things for men in cars, and I did not ask him why, and I did not ask him whether there would be anyone in the building, and there was an old woman and there was an abbot, and the abbot went back into the fire for one more person and did not come out. I have been told he went back for a person who did not exist, because the count was already complete. I do not know if that is true. It is what I have been told. I put it in the record anyway."

The presiding judge wrote something down. The gallery was very quiet. Somewhere behind me a phone buzzed and was fumbled off, and in the side room the overflow watched the same silence on a screen, and I thought, with the flat clarity the trial had been teaching me all autumn: *this is the only place in the city where a man can say a true thing and have it written down in letters that will outlive him.*

Then Jiang Xue took him to the honeypot, and to the night market, and to the boy named Zhang Maliu.

She did it carefully, because the prosecution knew that the honeypot was where the defence wanted to live, and that the honeypot was the place where the organization's crimes and the vigilante's story had touched and made a martyr. She established the mechanics: the bait, the child thief, the men at the end of the lane, the honest pursuer as the mark. She established that the operation had been Dao-ge's. And then she asked the question that had been sitting in the whole city since Halloween two years ago, and that the family of Zhang Maliu had never once been told the answer to.

"Who killed Zhang Maliu?"

"The men in the lane."

"On whose instruction?"

"Mine."

"Why?"

There was a pause. Dao-ge looked at the bench, and then, for the first time, he looked at me. It was not a long look. It was the look a man gives a thing he has been carrying that belongs to someone else.

"Because a man followed a bag-snatcher into our alley, and a man following a bag-snatcher into our alley is a man who has decided to be a good man, and a good man in our alley draws attention to our alley." He breathed. "He was not supposed to die. That is not a defence. He was supposed to be frightened. The instruction was to frighten him. He had a knife on him — not our knife; his own, a kitchen knife, because he was a cook and he carried a kitchen knife folded in his belt, and when the men took him he pulled it, and it went badly. That is what happened. He was a cook with a kitchen knife who believed that if he saw a wrong he should run at it alone, and the story that taught him that was the story of the man in the yellow jacket, and the man in the yellow jacket did not teach it, and the city taught it, and the city will not be in the dock for it." He paused. "I am in the dock for it. I accept that. But I want the record to say the thing plainly, because I have heard it said the other way for two years. He did not die because of the drunk. He died because of the *machine*. We used him. We used a good man as equipment. And the equipment broke."

Jiang Xue let that sit for exactly as long as the judge allowed, and then she moved, because a good prosecutor does not let a moment become a sermon.

"One more line of questioning," she said. "It concerns the stairs. The stairs at Chaotianmen."

The room changed. I do not know how to describe it except to say that a courtroom is a room of attention, and attention can be turned like a face, and every person in that room who had grown up in this city — which was most of the room — had carried something up a stair, or had a father or a mother or a grandfather who had, and the word *stairs* did a thing to the room that no legal argument in six weeks managed to do.

"You were a porter," Jiang Xue said. "A *bangbang*. For how long?"

"Eleven years."

"You carried refrigerators, among other things."

"Yes."

"Among the porters who worked the Chaotianmen stairs in those years was a man named Li Changjiang. Do you know the name?"

A pause. The room held. In the gallery, somewhere behind me, I was aware of my own body the way you are aware of your own breathing.

"I know the name," Dao-ge said.

"Li Changjiang died on those stairs in 2003, under a refrigerator. Were you working the stairs that day?"

The pause this time was longer than the doctor had told the court to expect. The presiding judge looked up. Dao-ge closed his eyes and opened them.

"I have asked myself that question for twenty-three years," he said. "A hundred loads up a hundred stairs, and not one of them has his face on it. I said this to the rider in the ward and I will say it here, on the record: I do not know whether I was on that stair. It could be that I was not there. It could be that I was there and did nothing, and the nothing has eaten the memory. Either way, the court should have it. That is my testimony. Make of it what you want."

Jiang Xue looked at him for a moment. And then she did what I have come to believe was the bravest single act of the whole trial: she did not try to turn his uncertainty into a confession. She did not need it. She had the fire, and the fire was the count that mattered, and she let the stairs be the stairs.

"Thank you," she said. "The witness is yours," and sat down.

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Lu Jingtang cross-examined Dao-ge for fifty minutes, and he did not raise his voice once, and he did not call him a liar, and he did not have to.

He established, in the courteous, arithmetic, unstoppable voice of a man who had never lost a syndicate trial, the following facts. That the witness had confessed to arson, a confession which had not been made to the police in six months of opportunity, and which had been made only after the witness had received, from the defendant's family, a room, a job, and a regular delivery of

noodles from a group of elderly women connected to the prosecution's other witnesses. That the witness could not confirm that the order had come from the chairman, because the chairman was dead. That the witness's memory was, by his own admission, unreliable on the most material day of the case. That the witness had spent the morning, before his testimony, in the courtyard of the very building he claimed to have burned, being given the congee of the temple he claimed to have destroyed. And that — this was the line that made the gallery murmur — the witness had accepted the care of the defendant's son, and was, at the moment of his testimony, living in a room provided by the family of the accused.

"Mr. Dao," Lu Jingtang said. "You have been given a room by the family of the man you accuse. Is that correct?"

"It is correct."

"And you have, this morning, been fed by the temple that accuses this family?"

"I have been fed."

"So the court is to understand that you are testifying against the man who has housed you, fed you, and given you a job, in a room you would lose if he were convicted?"

Dao-ge looked at him for a long moment. And then he did what no one had managed to do in the whole of the trial: he laughed. It was a raw, broken, terrible sound, a door dragging on a floor.

"That is correct," he said. "That is the whole of it. I am the only witness in this room who is testifying against the man who feeds me, and I am doing it because the man who feeds me is *good at feeding*, and I have spent my whole life being fed, and I have decided, at fifty-six, with a broken back, to say one true thing in a room with the cameras on and see what the city does with it." He looked at the bench. "If that does not acquit the son, it should at least not flatter him. That is all I have."

He was wheeled out at noon. And in the corridor, as the gallery emptied and the cameras went to lunch and the sweet-potato cart did its best business of the week, I stood against the wall with my hands in my pockets and understood that the man who had killed my father, if he had killed my father, which I would

never know, had just walked — been wheeled — into a courtroom and told the truth about himself, and that the truth had been, in the arithmetic of the law, worth nothing. That is the thing no one tells you about a trial. The confession is not the conviction. The confession is a fact, and a fact is a stone, and the law is a river, and the river decides where the stone ends up.

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Tan Xiao came to him in the courtyard that evening.

I know this because I was there. I had gone to the temple after the adjournment, because Wang Niangniang's runner was going with the noodles and I had decided, in the three months since Wang Niangniang had made her two columns, that I could carry a bowl of noodles to a man in a wheelchair without it meaning anything but that he had to eat. I was standing at the gate when the black electric car stopped in the lane, and Tan Xiao got out alone, without the assistant and without the camera, and went into the courtyard, and sat down on the low wall beside the groundskeeper's room, and did not speak for a while.

The old man in the wheelchair had his back to him. The arhat hall was dark. The night came down the way it comes down in this city, which is to say the fog came up and the streetlights became stains and the towers vanished and the low world stayed.

"You testified well," Tan Xiao said. "The part about the equipment. That was true."

"It was true."

"You will lose the room if I am convicted."

"I will lose the room." Dao-ge did not turn. "I will lose the room if I am convicted, and I will lose it if I am acquitted and your foundation finds a more grateful groundskeeper. That is how rooms work. I have always known how rooms work. That is the whole of my life." He picked up the watering can, the empty one, and set it down again. "You should go. The city will see the car."

"It does not matter if the city sees the car," Tan Xiao said. "The city has already seen the room. The room is the picture, and the picture is done." He stood up. And then he said what I have thought about more than any other

sentence of the autumn, which I did not understand until much later, and which I now believe was the only true thing he ever said to anyone. “Thank you, Mr. Dao. You have made my father’s redemption possible. I did not think it was possible. I thought he had spent it all. But a man who is forgiven by the man who burned the temple is forgiven, and now the city can forgive him, and when the city forgives the father, it will forgive the son, and I will be able to build the thing I actually want to build.” He paused. “You see the mechanism. I am telling you the mechanism. I do not know why. Perhaps because you are the only person I have met in a year who has told me a thing that was not useful to him.”

He walked back to the car. Dao-ge sat in the dark with the empty can. And I stood at the gate with a bowl of noodles that had gone cold, and I did not go in, because I had just understood the whole shape of the autumn, and the shape was this: the truth had been told in the courtroom, and the truth had been *used*, and the man who used it had done so by giving the truth-teller a room, and there was no version of the next six weeks in which the room did not win.

CHAPTER 13

The Drunk on the Stand

I testified on the nineteenth day, and the night before, Wang Niangniang made me noodles that I could not eat, and Huajiao sat across the table from me with the notebook closed and her jaw set, and did not say anything for a long time.

"You're going to tell the truth," she said at last.

"Yes."

"All of it."

"All of what they ask."

"They'll ask about the vault." She looked at me directly. "If you tell them about the vault, they'll know a group of private citizens broke into a private building and stole a private archive. That's a crime. That's several crimes. The prosecution will have to deal with it, and the defence will use it, and the whole thing we did will be standing in the same room as the thing they did, and you know what the room does with that. It makes two columns into one column."

"I know."

"Then don't tell them."

"I have to."

"Why."

I thought about it. The noodles were going cold. Outside, the fog was coming up and the barbershop sign was clicking off and on, and the city was doing what it did, which is to say continuing.

"Because the thing that makes us different from them is not that we didn't break a law," I said. "It's that we don't get to *decide* which true things to tell. If I go into that room and tell the truth about the fire and lie about the vault, then I'm running a story, and the whole reason the archive is worth anything is that it isn't a story. I spent two years being turned into a story. I'm not going to do it to myself in the one room where the record is kept."

She looked at me for a long time. And then she did the thing she did when she had decided a thing and did not want me to see the deciding, which was to pick up her chopsticks and eat.

"Then tell it," she said. "But don't be brave about it. Brave is what they're selling."

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The witness stand was a chair in the middle of the floor, and the room was the same room, and I do not know how to describe what it is to stand in a chair in the middle of a room and have every person in it look at you, except to say that it is the opposite of being invisible, and that I had spent thirty years being invisible and one year being seen and three months being *famously* seen, and that none of it had prepared me for the chair. The chair is different. The chair is a place where you cannot be a symbol, because a symbol does not have to answer questions.

I was sworn. I said the words. I said my name, which the clerk read out in full, *Li Xiuyuan*, and which the room heard for the first time after a year of calling me 山城济公, and there was a small sound in the gallery when the name was said, the sound a room makes when a thing it has been imagining turns out to have a name and the name is ordinary.

Jiang Xue began with the alley, because she believed in order, and she took me through the first winter: the girl, the four men, the bow, the singing, the fall. She asked me why I had intervened. I said I was drunk. She asked me whether I had decided to help or whether the drink had decided. I said the drink had decided, and that I had been trying to decide ever since which of those was worse. She asked me about the second time, the yard, the singing again, the girl walking out. She asked me about the girl's name. I said Wen Xiaoyu. She asked me whether the girl had asked me to help. I said the girl had asked me not to say I had helped, and that I had agreed, and that it was the only promise in the whole affair that I had kept.

Then the cableway: the boy, the car, the four minutes over the water, the crowd of people with their noodles and their children. Then the fire: what I saw, what I did, the smoke, the abbot, the sound of a man laughing in a stairwell,

which I put in the record because the record was the only place it could live. Then the tower: the atrium, the ledgers, the fall, the water pit, the boy on the floor of the kitchens, the girl with the powder, the girl with the gut wound.

And then the boy. Aguang. The cardboard fan. The night market. The nine-plus seconds of video. The eleven minutes of ambulance. The drain. The half-fan with the tape on the handle, which I took out of my jacket pocket and held up, and which the clerk logged as an exhibit, which meant that a boy's cardboard fan became, for the rest of legal time, *Prosecution Exhibit 147*, and would be kept in a box in a room under this city after everyone in this courtroom was dead.

Jiang Xue asked the question she had told me in the stairwell that she would ask, and she asked it flatly, because she had told me that the only way to ask it was flatly.

"Do you consider yourself responsible for the death of the young man known as Aguang?"

"Yes."

"Why."

"Because I had a name he could imitate, and I did not stop him from imitating it, and because the story the city told about me was a story in which a fan could stop a knife, and he believed the story, and I let him." I looked at the bench, at the woman with the salt-grey face, and I said the rest of it plainly. "I did not do it with a knife. I did it with a story. And I do not get to say the story was the city's and not mine, because the story had my face on it."

She sat down. The room was quiet. The camera on the tripod was a small black eye and the red light was on.

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Lu Jingtang cross-examined me for two hours and eleven minutes, and he was the best I have ever seen at anything, and I want to describe him accurately, because it would be easy to make him a villain and he was not. He was a machine for finding the seam in a person, and the seam in me was not my drinking and not my debt and not the wetting myself in an alley. The seam in me was what the whole city shared, which is the belief that the people who help are the ones who get taken.

He began with the money. He established that I had owed ¥28,000 to a collection business; that the debt had been "squared" by a man connected to the collection world; that I was, in the language of the file, a *client* of the very industry I was testifying against. He asked whether I understood that a man who cannot pay his debts does not get to decide what justice is. I said I understood that a man who cannot pay his debts is exactly the man who knows what justice is, because he has been on the wrong end of it. He wrote that down. He was not writing it down to use; he was writing it down so that the court would see him write it down.

He played the alley clip. Not the good part — not the singing, not the bow. He played the eleven seconds at the end, the part where I lean against the wall behind the vegetable market, the part the platform's clip had always cut. He played it once, at normal speed, and then he played it again at half speed, and the room watched a grown man in a yellow jacket stand in a wet trouser leg in the cold, and a young woman in the second row of the gallery covered her mouth and looked away, and the man beside her did not look away at all, and I understood that in a courtroom a humiliation is an argument, and that he was making it.

"Mr. Li," he said. "Do you consider yourself a suitable person to decide who in this city should be helped?"

"I never decided anything," I said. "I fell down in front of four men and a girl walked out. Everything since then has been people deciding about me."

"But you kept doing it."

"Yes."

"You carried a fan. You told the court you carried a fan as a *prop* — a thing to make men laugh. But you also used it, did you not, in the temple, to strike a man?"

"I used it to break a lamp."

"You used a piece of palm leaf to break a lamp in a fire, and the lamp fell on a man, and that man was later found to have a fractured collarbone."

"He was holding a woman by the hair."

"I did not ask why. I asked whether you struck a man with a fan."

"I struck a lamp with a fan."

The room's attention tightened. He was good. He moved the objects of the world around until the objects themselves became the argument, and the argument was that a drunk with a fan was the same kind of thing as an organization with a foundation — both of them used whatever they had.

And then he came at me from a direction I had not expected, and he did it with the courtesy that was his whole manner.

"You have been called a hero, Mr. Li. In this room, by the press, by the city. Do you accept the word?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because a hero is what a city calls a person so that it does not have to help," I said. "A hero is a story told about one man so that thirty million people can go home. I know, because the story got told about me, and while it was being told, a boy made himself a cardboard fan and walked into a knife, and a woman died in a crowd crush at a golden mall, and a cook was killed in an alley because a story taught him that a good man runs at it alone. I am not a hero. I am the face on the product. The product is the problem."

Lu Jingtang smiled very slightly. That was the mistake. He had been waiting for me to say something like that, because it was the answer that hurt the prosecution, and he had arranged the room to produce it, and now he used it.

"A face on the product," he repeated. "So you agree that the phenomenon of the so-called Ji Gong has caused harm."

"Yes."

"And that the harm was caused by a private individual acting without authority, in parallel to the state, for a period of more than a year, with a network of private citizens and private funds and private communications?"

"Yes."

"And that this network broke into a building and removed evidence that is now before this court?"

The room went very still. Behind me, somewhere, I could feel Jiang Xue not moving. I could feel the whole prosecution table not moving. And I understood that this was the moment the book had been building to, the moment where I

had to choose between the two true things, and that the choosing was my whole life in one chair.

"The archive was taken from a converted air-raid shelter under the Mountain City Trail," I said. "It was taken at night. The door was opened with a key that a member of our group had copied from a maintenance worker, and the files were copied to three drives, and the original was left in place. That is what we did. It was a crime. I am not going to dress it up." I paused. "The files contained the names and the photographs and the family details of about forty thousand people who had borrowed money they could not repay, and the records of the men who lent it to them, and the transfers that ran the money up into the company, and the fire receipts, and the signature. I do not know what the law calls what we did. I know what I call it. I call it the only reason anyone in this room has any of those facts. And I know that if I had asked permission, the files would still be in the ground, because the building has a lawful owner and the lawful owner does not open his door."

The judge took her glasses off and cleaned them. Lu Jingtang let the silence run for three seconds, which is an eternity in a courtroom, and then said, in the tone of a man closing a box, "Thank you. I have no further questions."

Jiang Xue did not re-examine. She had told me in the stairwell that she would not, if it went the way she feared, because a good prosecutor does not reopen a wound. She sat at her squared files and looked at me with an expression I could not read, and I understood that I had done the thing she had asked me not to do without asking me, and that she would have done it herself, and that neither of those facts canceled the other.

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I stepped down at four o'clock, and the court adjourned, and I walked out through the corridor into the ordinary evening, and the city was there, and it was full of the clip.

Someone had cut it before I reached the street. By the time I got to the battery-swap station the clip was everywhere: *the drunk admits he is not a hero.* In the clip, the platforms had taken my answer — *the face on the product, the product is the problem* — and set it under a caption, and the caption was 山顶上

的清醒人 or *fallen saint* or one of the four or five ways the city had of saying the same slogan. The comments said *humble*, and *real*, and *this is why we love him*. A hotpot restaurant in Yuzhong put the quote on a banner by the door within nine days. A running shoe brand used a still of me in the chair in an advertisement I was never paid for and could never have sued over, because the ad did not use my name.

And in the tunnel, when I came in, the aunties had the clip on the phone on the table, and they had watched it, and Liu Niangniang said, "You did well." Zhang Niangniang said nothing and dealt a tile. And Huajiao, who had been sitting in the corner with the notebook, looked at me and said the only thing anyone said that night that was not a compliment and not a comfort.

"You gave them the weapons," she said. "You told the truth and you gave them the weapons, and the weapons are us. That's the thing about a courtroom. It doesn't matter what you say. It matters which column they put it in." She closed the notebook. "The son is testifying tomorrow. He'll get the last word. He always does."

CHAPTER 14

The Heir Testifies

They saved the son for the end of the defence case, because that is what the memo said, and because a good lawyer knows that the last voice in a room is the one the panel carries out with it like a smell.

He walked to the chair without hurrying. That was the first thing. A guilty man hurries or drags; Tan Xiao did neither; he crossed the floor of the court at the pace of a man going to a podium he had been invited to, and he sat down and arranged his hands and looked at the bench and waited to be asked, and the whole room adjusted itself around him the way water adjusts around a stone.

Lu Jingtang's examination was gentle and short and perfectly shaped. He took the son through the childhood: the father who was away, the father who was generous on camera and absent at the table, the boarding school, the year abroad. He took him through the company: what the son had actually been responsible for (the brand, the foundation, the wellness lines, the campaigns), and what he had not (the lending, the collections, the smuggling, the fire). He took him to the discovery — the moment, the son said, when he found out what the family business actually was. He described it without notes. He described standing in a hotel ballroom in another city, at an event, and receiving a message from a person he did not name, and reading it, and going out onto a balcony, and not being able to go back in. He described calling his father and asking him one question, and the father's answer, and the answer was: *The world does not run on clean hands, A-Xiao. It runs on who is willing to get their hands dirty so that other people can keep theirs clean.* He described hanging up. He described not speaking to his father for four months. And when he got to the part about the fire — the temple, the abbot, the arhats — he stopped for a moment and looked at the floor, and then he looked up and said the sentence the defence had built the whole day around.

"I did not know my father ordered it. I want the court to hear me say that I did not know, and I want to say the other thing too, which is that I should have

known, because I knew enough by then to have asked, and I did not ask, because asking would have cost me the thing I love, which is the company, which is the city, which is *this place*, which I have spent my whole life trying to be worthy of." He looked at the bench. "I am not here to defend my father. I cannot. He is beyond defence. I am here to be honest about myself, because honesty is the only thing I have left that he did not sell."

The panel heard him. There is no other way to say it. The woman with the salt-grey face did not take her glasses off. The two assessors on either side of her looked at him the way you look at a young man who is doing the thing you have always hoped a young man in his position would do. And in the gallery, the relatives of the dead, who had spent three weeks listening to corporals and accountants and a driver with a good watch, heard a son say the word *father* and mean it, and some of them — not all, but some — softened, because that is what people do when a story finally has a person in it they can feel.

Then Lu Jingtang, without changing his tone, asked the question that turned the testimony from a confession into a coronation.

"Mr. Tan. In this courtroom there are people who acted outside the law because they believed the law had failed them. A rider. A girl. Three elderly women. An internet archive. You have heard their evidence. Do you blame them?"

Tan Xiao turned in the chair and looked at the gallery. He looked at me. He looked at me for a long moment, in a room with the cameras on, and I understood that this was the thing he had been building toward since the tea table on the thirty-first floor, and that everything — the room for Dao-ge, the noodles, the plaque, the eleven unguarded seconds on the edge of a stage — had been rehearsed for this one sentence.

"No," he said quietly. "I don't blame them. I *thank* them. The rider did what my father's company should have made it unnecessary for anyone to do. The girl saved lives that my family's business endangered. The archive preserved a truth my family spent eleven years erasing. If I had been braver, I would have been them. And I was not, and they were, and if the cost of their courage is that they broke some rules, then I will pay whatever the court requires, and I will ask the court to show them the mercy that my family never showed anyone." He paused.

"I have already given the temple back to the temple. The plaque with my family's name is coming down this week. I have asked the foundation to fund an independent inquiry into every loan, every collection, and every fire in my father's companies, with no involvement by me, and to publish everything it finds, including anything that indicts me. That is not a defence. That is a debt. The debt is mine because the name is mine. I intend to spend the rest of my life paying it."

He stopped. The room did not move. And Lu Jingtang said, "Thank you, Mr. Tan," and sat down, and it was the best argument I have ever seen in a room where arguments are a trade.

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Jiang Xue cross-examined him for forty minutes, and she was good, and he was better, and it was like watching a woman try to catch a river.

She established that he had held a senior role in the foundation that laundered money. He said he had not known. She established that the foundation had moved funds at his instruction. He said he had made lawful payments for lawful cultural work and had been deceived about the source, and that he had since cooperated with the prosecution's forensic accountants and would continue to. She established that he had, on the night his father died, stood in a VIP box and filmed the death and posted a sentence to four million people. He said that he had been in shock, that he did not remember making the decision, that he had been under the care of a doctor for six months afterward, and that he would not defend the video, only grieve it. She read out the sentence — *don't believe any of it. Ji Gong is fake. My father's fake too. So I'll be a little more fake* — and she asked him what he had meant.

He was quiet for a moment. And then he gave the answer that I have never been able to decide whether I believe, and that I am going to put in this book exactly as he gave it.

"I meant that I had understood, that night, that my whole life was a performance, and that I did not know how to stop performing, and that the only honest thing a performer can do is admit the performance and keep going, because the alternative is to stand still on a stage in front of two thousand people

and show them a man with nothing inside him." He looked at Jiang Xue. "You are asking me to say I am a fraud. I am saying that everyone is, and the difference between my father and me is not that I am honest. It is that I am *trying*, and that trying is the only thing a person can actually prove."

Jiang Xue looked at him for a long time. And then she did the only thing she could do, which was to ask him the question that had no flattering answer.

"Mr. Tan. If the court finds your family's foundation liable and orders the restitution the prosecution has requested, the foundation's assets will be seized. The temple rebuild, the wellness brands, the cultural programs — all of it. Is that what you want?"

And Tan Xiao, looking at her with his hands folded and his eyes clear and the cameras on his face, said the sentence that ran on every second screen in the city by nightfall.

"I do not want the foundation to survive," he said. "I want *the city* to survive. If the foundation must die so that the city can see a family tell the truth, then let it die. I have already kept only the part of it that does no harm."

It was, I understood later, a lie with a true number in it. He had kept the part that did no harm. He had also kept the part that did the *branding*, which is the part that does the harm that cannot be prosecuted, and the part he had offered to let die was the part that had already been stripped and folded and written off. But the room did not know that, and the city did not know that, and a room and a city are the same animal: they believe what they are shown, and they are shown what they will believe.

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He stepped down and the court adjourned, and the city took him up as if it had been waiting its whole life to hold him.

By evening he was the *good son*. By the next morning he was the *reformed heir*. By the end of the week there were ninety-second clips of him with piano music and a slowed shot of him at the temple, and a hotline for people who had been harmed by the family's lending, run by the foundation, which was still called the foundation, because he had not dissolved it; he had only announced that it should die. The comments under the clips said *this is what accountability*

looks like, and *the father should have been the son*, and *the rider should take the hand next time*. And somewhere in the machinery, a copycat account in a different province reposted the clip with a new caption: **小弥勒道歉了** — *Little Maitreya has apologized* — and the caption below that was **那我们是不是也该原谅济公了** — *then shouldn't we forgive Ji Gong too?*

I read that one twice. I was sitting in the tunnel with the aunties, and the aunties had the clips on the phone, and Liu Niangniang said, "He is very good." Wang Niangniang said, "He is better than his father." And Zhang Niangniang put down a tile and looked at me with the flat eyes of a woman who had watched four generations of men say beautiful things in a tunnel and had never once been moved by any of them.

"He did not lie," she said. "Not once. Not about a single fact. That is the whole trick. A man who tells the truth and means the opposite of it is the hardest thing in the world to catch, because you cannot catch a man for a tone. He is going to be the mayor of this city in ten years, Xiao Li. You watch. And the saddest part is, he will probably be a better mayor than most." She picked up another tile. "Pong."

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That night I walked the Trail, because the aunties' deal did not pause for trials, and it was the only hour of the day that belonged to nobody. The fog was down and the city was a low world of lights, and I passed the tea seller's cart, closed, and the shoe stall, closed, and the place where the old man with the gourd had stood in the winter, empty.

And I understood, walking, that the thing I had been afraid of since the beginning of the book had already happened, and that it had happened in a courtroom, in a chair, with the cameras on, and that no one had done anything wrong, and that no one was going to be punished, and that the son had said the truth and meant the opposite of it and the city had chosen him, because the city prefers a beautiful story about a man who is trying to a true story about a machine that does not care.

The only thing missing from the picture was Aguang, and a cardboard fan, and a drain by a skewer stall, and a nineteen-year-old who had believed that the fan was a shield.

I walked the Trail to the end and walked it back. And when I got to the bottom, at the turn above the old church, there was a boy waiting for me in a delivery jacket — not Aguang; a different boy, older, thinner, with a phone in his hand and a face I did not know — and he looked at my gourd and my fan and my yellow jacket and said, without any preamble, in the flat voice of a man delivering a message:

"The man at the warehouse. The one who came to the sorting point. He wants to talk to the girl." He jerked his head toward the river. "Tonight. He says he knows where her mother is."

CHAPTER 15

The Interruption

Huajiao was already on her feet when I came through the door of the tunnel, because the boy in the delivery jacket had been faster than me, or because she had been waiting for a message like this her whole life and had spent the last three years with one shoe on.

"Where," she said.

I told her what the boy had said. She took the notebook out of her bag and put it on the table and opened it and looked at the three postcards — the birthday one, the off-schedule one from February, the river one from the ninth month — and then she closed it and put the rubber band around it and put it back in her bag, and she did all of it in about nine seconds, and her hands did not shake.

"It could be a trap," I said.

"Everything is a trap." She pulled on her jacket. "That's not a reason to stay home. That's a reason to bring the powder."

"You're not bringing the powder."

"Then you're not coming."

Wang Niangniang, who had been listening from the stove, came over and put a hand flat on the table, which was her way of making the room wait. She looked at Huajiao for a long moment. Then she said, "Eat first," and put a bowl in front of her, and Huajiao sat down and ate, because Wang Niangniang had, over a year and a half, built the only authority in the city that Huajiao obeyed without negotiating. She ate the whole bowl. Then Wang Niangniang said, "If you don't come back by eleven, I will call the officer, and the officer will call the procurator, and the procurator will call the police, and the police will find you, and you will be furious, and I will not care." And Huajiao said, "Fine," and we went out into the fog.

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The man from the warehouse was waiting in a teahouse on the river at the foot of the old town, the kind of teahouse that in the daytime sells tea to tourists and at night sells tea to men who do not want to be found. The room was long and low and lit by three bulbs, and there were four tables in the back that did not have tablecloths, and at one of them sat the man with the shaved head and the jaw scar and the flat city accent, and beside him, in a padded jacket, a small nervous man of about forty-five with the face of a person who has spent his life in the spaces between things.

I knew the second man. Not his name — I would learn that later, that he was called Old K and that he had run cargo across the border for fifteen years and had a mother in a home and a daughter in a school he could not afford — but I knew his *kind*, which is a thing you learn carrying food through a city, the kind of man who stands in a doorway and looks both ways before he recognizes you.

The man with the scar did not stand up. He pushed two cups across the table, which were already poured, which was the first thing wrong, because a man who wants to talk to you does not pour the tea before you sit.

"The girl," he said, looking at Huajiao. "You're the girl. The one who asked about the officer."

"That's right."

"I said I'd find you. I've been looking for you for a while." He drank his tea. "I used to work for the man who bought your mother's file. Not the dead one. The one after. The one that's still open." He watched her. "You're not going to ask me if I'm lying."

"Would you answer?"

"No." He almost smiled. "That's good. You're a professional." He set his cup down. "Your mother was not killed in a car accident. She was moved. There was a car accident, and there was a body, and the body was identified, and the body was not her, and the man who arranged the identification was paid with a transfer that I made, on an account I no longer have, and I know the name on the other end of the transfer, and I know where the name lives."

The teahouse was very quiet. Somewhere in the back, a man was arguing with a waiter about the price of a room. Huajiao did not move. I did not move. The small man, Old K, looked at the table.

"That's what I know," the scarred man said. "Now here's what it costs. There is a man in the case, a man who is going to testify, a man with a broken back. In two weeks the court will ask him about the fire, and he will say what he is going to say. You have access to him. You have access to the tunnel, and the tunnel has access to the temple, and the temple has access to the man." He looked at Huajiao. "I want you to make sure he does not remember a van."

"What van?"

"The van that delivered the materials. It came on the Tuesday, not the Thursday, and it came from a different company than the one in the file, and the company is connected to a man whose name I do not want in this trial. If the witness remembers the paperwork correctly, the arson count attaches to my client. If he remembers the *van* — the Tuesday, the second company — the count attaches elsewhere, and my client is a victim of circumstance." He drank. "I don't need him to lie. I need him to be *confused*. A man with a brain injury is very easy to help into confusion. You just visit him. You just bring him the wrong document. You just remind him, helpfully, of a detail that is almost right. He will do the rest."

There it was. I had heard the thing the whole autumn had been teaching me to expect, and I had heard it in a teahouse on the river, from a man whose job was not violence but *arrangement* — the same job as the man in the wheelchair, the same job as the man in the money-laundering foundation, the same job as the man who had bought the collection ledgers. The machine does not need to kill you. It needs to help you remember the wrong thing.

Huajiao looked at him for a long time. And then she asked the only question that mattered, and she asked it in the flat voice of a girl who had learned to ask questions from a woman who had asked one question too many.

"Where is the transfer name."

"Across the border," the scarred man said. "In a compound a day's travel from the ferry, on the road that the trucks take." He said the name of a border town. He said a name. Then he said, "I'll give you the name after the witness is confused. Not before. You understand. I'm not a charitable institution, and I'm not a monster. I'm a man with a client."

"Then you get nothing tonight," Huajiao said, and stood up, and picked up the cup of tea she had not drunk, and set it down again in the exact centre of the table, which I would later learn was a thing her mother had taught her — *never leave a door the way you found it; a room remembers* — and walked out through the low room, past the man arguing about the room, into the fog.

I followed her. Outside, the river was black and the fog was thick and the teahouse sign buzzed above the door, and we walked about a hundred meters along the embankment before she stopped and put her hand on the railing and did not look at me.

"Did you hear him," she said.

"I heard him."

"He wants me to hurt the witness to get my mother."

"Yes."

"He thinks I'll do it." She gripped the railing. "He looked at me and he thought: that's the girl, the girl whose mother trained her, that's the girl who killed a man in an alley when she was fifteen, she'll do it for her mother. He wasn't even careful about it. He said it to my face."

"Because he's not afraid of you."

"Because he's *right* to not be afraid of me," she said, and then she did something I had only seen her do once, at a table in a tunnel, months earlier, and it was not crying, not exactly; it was the sound a person makes when they are holding a thing so tightly that the holding has become the whole of them. "The worst part is I understood the trade. I understood it in about four seconds. That's who he was talking to. I'm not the girl at the table with the notebook. I'm the girl who does the arithmetic. I heard 'here is your mother' and 'here is the price' and I did the sum before I even decided not to pay it. That's the thing she put in me. She put a *sum* in me, and I can't get it out."

I stood beside her at the railing and looked at the black water, because I did not have an answer, and because the only answer I had was one I had learned from a monk who was dead, and it was not a sum. It was: *you can put the instrument down.* But the instrument was her mother, and you cannot put your mother down.

And then, in the fog, up the embankment, a light moved — two lights, the headlights of a car moving slowly along the road that ran above the river, and then stopping. The car was black and the engine was silent and the doors did not open. And we stood at the railing in the dark with the river in front of us and the car behind us, and Huajiao looked at the lights for a long moment, and then she took the notebook out of her bag and opened it and tore out a page — the page with the three postcards — and folded it, and put it in her pocket, and handed me the notebook.

"Hold this," she said. "If it goes bad, get to the aunties. Don't be brave. That's what I'm supposed to say to you, isn't it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to walk home," she said. "Past the car. Slowly. Because if they're watching, I want them to see that I'm not afraid of them, and if they're not watching, I want to have walked home the whole way like a person who has somewhere to be." She began to walk. Then she stopped and said, over her shoulder, the only thing she said about her mother that whole night, and said it in the flat voice she used for facts she had decided to live with. "Either way, I'm not going to the border. Not for him. I'll go on my own, when I can pay my own way. That's the first rule I ever wrote that wasn't hers. I'm not trading anybody's memory for it."

We walked back up the hill past the black car, and the car did not move, and nobody got out, and the fog took us both, and behind us the lights stayed on the road above the river, patient, waiting to see what a girl of seventeen would do.

CHAPTER 16

The Bought Man

The defence's expert took the stand on the twenty-fourth day, and he was not bought in the way that a man is bought in a film.

He was bought in the way that men are actually bought in this city, which is to say that he was a professor of fire science at a university, and he had published, and he was careful, and he had been retained, at a fee that would be printed in the judgment and that he would have called reasonable, by a law firm that was paid by a company that was owned by a foundation that was the last clean skin of the dead man's money. He did not lie. That is what I want the reader to understand. He got up in the chair and he did not say a single statement that could be proven false, and he did the most damaging work of the entire defence case.

He said that the fire-service report identified the seat of the fire as the east cloister's electrical riser. He said that the foam-rubber materials stored in the cloister were, on the balance of the photographs, consistent with restoration materials common to temple refurbishment at the time. He said that the presence of accelerant was not confirmed by any test in the record. He said that old buildings in Chongqing have old wiring, and that old wiring, in the presence of construction dust and stored materials, produces fires. He said that the insurance annex — the one thing the prosecution had not put before the panel, because the prosecution had a witness who could prove the fire directly — was a document prepared for a different purpose and could not bear the weight the prosecution placed on it. He said the arithmetic of the evidence pointed to a *probable accidental origin*, and he said it with the calm of a man who had spent thirty years telling courts that what people *believe* and what documents *prove* are two different countries.

Jiang Xue cross-examined him for eleven minutes. She did not break him, because there was nothing to break. He had not lied. He had simply chosen which of the true things to say, and he had said them in the order that produced

the conclusion his client wanted, which is not perjury, and which is the whole of how the machine works. When she asked him how much he was paid, he told her. When she asked him whether he had been retained by the same firm in eleven previous cases, he told her. When she asked him whether he had ever testified for the prosecution, he said yes, twice, and gave the dates, and the dates were real, and they made him look independent, which was also the point.

The arson count, which had rested on a broken-back man in a wheelchair and a confession no camera had caught and a receipt from a noodle shop, began to tremble.

I watched Jiang Xue sit down. I watched her hands square a file that was already square. And I understood that the professor had done to the truth exactly what he had been paid to do, which was not to destroy it but to *dilute* it, until a panel of three people at the end of a six-week trial could look at the fire and say, honestly, that it might have been an accident, and the law would have to agree with them, because the law is not permitted to know what a thing was. The law is only permitted to know what can be shown.

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They called Tian Tian the next morning, and I want to write about her carefully, because she is the person in this book I most often get wrong when I tell it to people, and I have come to believe that getting her wrong is the whole problem.

Tian Tian was thirty, and she had been the plain-jacket officer at the edge of the light in the lot behind the hospital on the first night of the whole affair, the one who had asked my name and whether I wanted an ambulance, the first professional habit I had ever respected in a police officer. She had flipped in the year of the tower, because the evidence had become undeniable and because the price had become bearable, and she had carried the drawer for eleven days and put it on a desk on the first of January, and she had been, for the whole of the prosecution's case, the one honest cop, the one institutional body in this entire city that had done the right thing at the wrong time.

And she had a nine-year-old daughter with a costly medical condition, and the family's debts had been quietly bought by one of the dead man's shells in the year before the trial.

Lu Jingtang did not make a speech about it. He did not accuse her of corruption. He did the thing that only a great lawyer can do, which is to put the facts in a row and let the room do the accusing.

The facts, in a row, were these. The officer had been in debt. The debt had been bought by an affiliate of the family the officer was now testifying against. The officer had, after the debt was bought, become a source for the investigation. The officer had not disclosed the purchase to her superiors until eleven months after it had occurred. The officer continued to have a daughter whose treatment was expensive, and the daughter continued to be treated.

"Officer Tian," Lu Jingtang said. "You are aware that your daughter's medical debt was purchased by an affiliate of the family I represent."

"I am aware."

"When did you become aware?"

"Eleven months after the purchase."

"And you did not report it."

"I reported it when I understood what it was. Before that, I believed it was a paperwork transfer. I was wrong."

"You were wrong for eleven months."

"I was wrong for eleven months." She said it without heat, and she looked at the bench, and she did not look at him. "I am a single mother with a sick child and a debt my salary could not pay, and a company bought the debt for reasons I did not ask about, and I did not ask because I was afraid of the answer, and because asking would have cost me the one thing I was holding together." She paused. "And then I asked anyway, because a girl came into my office with a file, and because the file was true, and because I had spent eleven years being a good officer and eleven months being a coward, and I decided I would rather be a good officer with a bought debt than a coward with a paid one. Both of those things are true. The bought debt is true and the testimony is true. You do not get to have one without the other, and neither do I."

Lu Jingtang asked her, courteously, whether she understood that a witness with an undisclosed financial connection to a defendant was not reliable. She said she understood. He asked her whether she had been rewarded for her cooperation. She said she had not. He asked her whether she had been promised anything. She said she had been promised nothing and given nothing and that the prosecution had, in fact, moved her to a unit with fewer opportunities after she insisted on testifying, because the institution did not reward honesty; the institution *tolerated* it. And then Lu Jingtang asked the question he asks every honest witness, and she gave the answer honest witnesses always give, and it sounded, in the room, exactly like the answer a liar would give.

"Officer Tian. Is it possible that you have persuaded yourself that your testimony is true because it is the only way to make your cooperation worth something?"

She looked at him for a long moment. And then she said the sentence I have put on the wall of my own life.

"Everything I have done for the last two years could be described as me making my cooperation worth something. That is what a person does with a mistake. They pay for it. I am paying for mine in this chair." She looked at the bench. "I do not know how to prove to you that I am telling the truth. If there were a way to prove it, this trial would not need to exist. All I can tell you is that I am the one witness in this case who has *nothing to gain* — because if the court believes me, my debt stays bought, and my daughter stays sick, and my career stays in the unit they moved me to. If the court does not believe me, nothing changes. So I am not here for the outcome. I am here because it happened, and because someone has to say it in the room."

The judge cleaned her glasses. Lu Jingtang said, "Thank you, Officer." And in the gallery, the city's feed cut, as it always cut, to the face of the son of the dead man, who was watching the honest cop with an expression of grave and generous sympathy, as if he had never in his life paid for anything.

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Ma-ge testified in the afternoon, and his testimony was eleven minutes long and small and human and, in the end, worth almost nothing.

He was there because Yaoji's pages had put him on the prosecution's list, and because a coward who has been given a way to be useful will use it, and because the defence had subpoenaed him anyway, so there was no version of hiding. He came in a clean jacket with his hands in his pockets and he stood in the chair and he answered Jiang Xue's questions in the voice of a man who had spent his whole life talking to people about money and had never once been asked to talk about it in a room with a camera.

He said he had run collection for twenty years. He said he had kept a ledger. He said the ledger had been bought by a company, and the company was a shell, and the shell was connected to the foundation. He said he had not known at the time what the shell was; he had known only that the price was good and that refusing the price was bad for a man's knees. He said the system worked because the poor borrow from the poor, and the poor who lend sell the book to the poor who collect, and the book always flows upward, and the top of the river is a company that does not know the names at the bottom of it, and does not need to, and *that is the design.*

Then Lu Jingtang stood up and cross-examined him, and he did not attack the ledger. He asked Ma-ge about his own conduct: how many people he had collected from, how many fingers, how many doors. And Ma-ge, the coward, the man who had broken my finger with another man's hand and given me two hundred yuan for the taxi, stood in the chair and looked at the room and did the one thing I had never expected of him, and which I have come, in the years since, to understand as the only kind of bravery available to a man who has spent his life being afraid.

"I collected from hundreds of people," he said. "I broke a man's finger. I made a man sign over a scooter. I sat in a kitchen while a woman cried and I ate her oranges. I am not here to be forgiven. I am here because I have been a coward for twenty years and because a boy with a cardboard fan died in a night market and because a temple burned and because the only person in this whole city who ever treated me like a person was a drunk who owed me twenty-eight thousand yuan and never once said I was evil." He looked at the bench. "Everything I have said about the ledger is true. I have no reason to lie. A man like me lies to save his knees, and my knees are already gone."

He stepped down. Nobody in the gallery moved. And I sat in the wooden bench and thought about the fact that the machine had produced, over six weeks, exactly three human beings willing to say a true thing about themselves in a room with a camera — a broken enforcer, a compromised cop, and a cowardly collector — and that the machine had used every one of them to prove that the good people were the problem, and that none of them would be remembered.

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That evening Jiang Xue caught me in the stairwell and told me the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was that the arson would probably not convict, and that the organization would convict the corporals and the shells and maybe two lieutenants, and that the son would walk out of the courtroom with a clean name and a foundation and the city's whole heart.

"So it's over," I said.

"It is not over." She lit the cigarette she did not smoke and put it out almost at once. "The verdict is one thing. The record is another. In eleven years, when the appeal has been heard and the shells have been restructured and the son is a philanthropist with a statue, there will still be a file in a cabinet with a broken enforcer's testimony in it, and a receipt for foam-rubber materials, and a coward's ledger, and a cop who paid for her mistake, and a boy's cardboard fan in a box. The file is a door. It does not open for us. It opens for whoever comes next."

"That's a small thing," I said.

"It is the only thing I have ever had," she said, and went back up the stairs to square her files, and left me in the stairwell with the cigarette smell and the truth that a door which does not open for you is still, in the long arithmetic of a city, a door.

CHAPTER 17

The Mob

The Society had a name by then, and a charter, and a membership of about four hundred, and it had been born out of a spreadsheet about the monk and had grown, in less than a year, into the thing the couplet had warned about.

They called themselves the 山城济公互助会 — the Mountain City Ji Gong Mutual Aid Society — and their charter, which I read in full once, was a good charter. It said that members would help the elderly cross the city's stairs; that they would mediate debts between neighbours before the collectors came; that they would escort women home at night; that they would never carry weapons; that they would report crimes to the police; that they would *never imitate the fall of the founder*, which was their phrase for the drunk act, and which was, by then, the only part of the founder they had any interest in avoiding. The charter's first principle was a line from the couplet's first half: *the Buddha stays in the heart.* The charter's last principle, added later, was a line the founder had never said: *help is not a performance.* They meant it. That is the thing I need the reader to hold. Four hundred people in a city of thirty million, most of them sincere, most of them lonely, most of them poor, had built a mutual-aid network out of a drunk's accident, and for the first year it did real good, and the good did not make it safe, because a good movement with a bad aim is more dangerous than a bad man with a knife.

The aim changed after the trial.

I cannot prove who aimed it. I have my beliefs. What I can prove is the sequence. The son testified and was believed. The fire expert testified and the arson count began to tremble. The city's feed, which had spent a year in love with the drunk, began to spend, in the way that feeds do, its equal and opposite week: *the vigilantes were the problem*, *the fan caused the boy's death*, *the drunk should have let the law handle it*, *where was the drunk when the temple burned*. And into that week came the Society, and into the Society came a man named Lai San.

Lai San had been in the franchise business since the spring. He had a warehouse office, a merchandise line, a blessing livestream, and a "legal aid" service that helped creditors find debtors. And when the trial turned the city's mood, he did the thing that a franchise does when the market shifts: he rebranded. The "legal aid" closed. The merchandise went quiet. And the Society's four hundred sincere members, who had been a mutual-aid network, found themselves with a new leadership, a new slogan — **守住我们的巷子**, *hold our alleys* — and a new activity: the **citizens' mediation**. They would go, in groups, to the offices of the collection companies, and they would stand outside with banners, and they would ask the collectors to come out and mediate their debts, and the collectors would stay inside and call the police, and the police would come and tell the group to disperse, and the group would disperse, and the next week they would go to another office, and the videos would go out, and the videos did numbers.

For three weeks nothing happened. And then, on a Thursday in the tenth month, at a collection office in Yubei with a reception desk and a young woman who said *good morning* to the debtors, the mediation did not disperse.

I was not there. Huajiao was not there. Yaoji monitored it, because Yaoji monitored everything, and he called me at eight in the evening and said, in the flat voice he used when he was reading something he did not want to read, "Put on the radio. It's at the office. There's a crowd. Someone had a knife."

The clip, when it came out, was four minutes and forty seconds long, and it was shot from the window of a building across the street. In the first minute, about sixty people with banners stand outside the office. In the second minute, the office door opens and a man comes out — not a collector, a security guard, an old man of about sixty in a grey uniform with a radio on his chest — and he stands in the doorway and says something the audio does not catch, and the crowd moves toward him, and he puts his hands up. In the third minute, someone in the crowd — I still do not know who; the identity was never established; the file says only *a member of the crowd* — pushes the guard, and the guard falls against the door frame and hits his head, and the crowd, which had a charter, and which had a first principle about the heart, and which had never once intended to hurt the old man in the grey uniform, surges forward; and in

the fourth minute, the old man is on the ground and the crowd is around him and someone is calling an ambulance and someone else is filming and the guard does not get up.

He had a wife and a daughter in a vocational school and a bad knee. He had taken the security job at sixty-one because his pension was not enough and the office was air-conditioned. He died in the hospital eleven days later, of a head injury he got on the ground, in a doorway, in a surge, at a mediation he had not been part of and had not been told was coming.

The Society's leadership, within a day, had a statement. The statement said that the Society was a peaceful organization, that the incident was the fault of an unaffiliated individual, that the Society mourned the guard, that the Society would cooperate with the investigation, and that the real violence in this city was the collection industry. The statement was true. Every clause was true. And beneath it, in the comments, in their thousands, the city did the thing the city does, which is to find a face for a tragedy that has no face, and the face it found was mine.

This is what the drunk started.

He made the fan and the fan made the crowd.

Where was the drunk while the old man was dying.

He was in a courtroom being honest. That's what he does. He's honest while other people pay.

And then, in the middle of it, the Society put up a post about Aguang.

They used his sister. That is the part I cannot forgive, and I do not know who to be unforgiving toward, because it was not one person; it was a mechanism. Someone in the Society's media team had found the sister's account, the one she had made to say *RIP* 阿光. *he tried to help. he was nineteen*, and they had made a memorial video out of it — the boy's cardboard fan, the night market, the eighty phones, the founder's silence — and the video's title was **谁杀了阿光** , *who killed Aguang*, and the video's answer, which it never said out loud, was: the man in the yellow jacket. Not with a knife. With a story. And the story had been the Society's, and the Society did not see the contradiction, because a movement never sees the contradiction; the movement sees only the wound.

The sister — Amei, fifteen, the girl with the concrete life and the favorite noodle order for a dead brother — did not give them permission. I know this because Yingtao found out, and because Yingtao went to her, and because the girl told Yingtao that the Society's people had come to her school gate and put a phone in her hand and asked her to say her brother's name, and she had said it, because she was fifteen and they were adults and they said it would help, and then the video had gone everywhere, and now her brother was a martyr with a hashtag, and she could not get him back.

That was the week the archive was attacked.

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It happened on a Saturday, at the print shop in Shapingba, and it happened in the way the city does a thing it intends to be deniable, which is to say it happened with four people and no weapons and no words.

Yingtao was at the desk with the window blacked out and the kettle on and the wall of hard drives behind her. Four people came up the stair in the afternoon — two men and two women, in ordinary clothes, in their twenties, with the flat cheerful faces of people who had spent the day in a group chat. They did not say anything. They walked into the room and began taking things off the wall. They took the drives, one by one, and put them in a bag. They took the monitor and the keyboard. One of the women picked up the gimbal, looked at it, and put it back, and then took it. And when Yingtao stood up and said, "That is evidence in a trial," the woman looked at her with what Yingtao described to me later as the worst face she had ever seen, which was not a cruel face but an *unbearably certain* face, the face of a person who believes they are doing the right thing, and said:

"You are not the archive. The archive is the city. You are the woman who kept it from the city."

Then they went down the stair. They did not touch Yingtao. They did not have to. They took the drives, which held four thousand entries, the spine of a year and a half of work, and the four hundred aunties and riders and witnesses and bystanders who had trusted the archive, and they walked out into the city with it in two plastic bags, and the police were called and came, and the

statement was taken, and the drive recovery was attempted, and everything that could be restored was restored, and everything that could not was gone, and I have never known how much was gone, because Yingtao never told me, because Yingtao stopped telling anyone anything for a while after that, which was the most frightening thing that happened to her in the whole of the two years, and which I have not yet forgiven the city for.

She did not cry. That is what I remember. She stood in the stripped room with the kettle boiling and the blacked-out window and the wall where the drives had been, and she looked at the shapes the dust had left on the plaster, and she said one sentence, and then she did not speak for three days.

"The camera is the only institution that cannot be bought," she said. "I forgot that it can be *stolen*."

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I found Lai San that night, at the warehouse office, and I want to write this next part carefully, because in the version of the story the city tells, I go there and I beat him, and in the version the Society tells, I go there and I threaten him, and neither happened.

I went there with Huajiao, because she refused to let me go alone, and because she had, by then, a specific and terrifying skill at reading whether a man was going to be violent, and she said on the way, "He's not the aim. He's a channel. If you hit him, the channel becomes a martyr." We stood in the loading bay and we waited for him to come out, and when he did, in a good jacket and a gold chain, he looked at me and did not pretend not to know why I was there. He had, I noticed, a copy of the fan in his own hand — the good copy, the Guangdong one, mended with the machine stitch.

"I didn't send them," he said. "Before you say it. The Society has a media team and a discipline committee and about four hundred people who believe things, and I am not the head of it. I am the *business*. I sell the robes and I run the blessing streams and I pay for the banners, and the people who took your friend's drives are not my employees, they are volunteers. You cannot fire a volunteer. You cannot even find one to fire." He spread his hands. "I am sorry about the drives. That is real. I am not a total fool. The archive was the only clean thing in this city

and it existed because of the man in the yellow jacket, and if the man in the yellow jacket had taken my franchise offer in the spring, none of this would have happened, because I would have owned it, and I would have protected it, because I protect my assets."

"You'd have monetized it."

"I'd have monetized it, and it would still exist, which is more than you can say for it tonight." He looked at me with the cheerful hopeless face. "You keep thinking there is a villain. There is no villain. There is a market, and the market moved, and the movement moved with it, and the drives went with the movement, and tomorrow the whole city will forget the drives because something else will happen. That is what you never understood, in the whole of your year. You keep looking for the man behind the curtain. There is no curtain. There is a *weather system*, and it rains on whoever is standing outside."

He got into a car and drove away, and Huajiao and I stood in the loading bay, and she looked at the copy of the fan in his hand — the one he had taken with him, the one he kept, the one he had as a *product* — and she said, quietly, to no one, "He's not wrong. That's the worst part."

That was the seventeenth week of the trial. The guard died eleven days after the surge, which put his death in the eighteenth week, three days before the closing arguments. And on the morning of the closing arguments, the city, which had been holding the guard's death and Aguang's video and the drunk's honesty and the son's tears all in the same hand, went to the polls of its own attention and decided, by a margin I could measure only in the disappearance of my own face from the platforms, that it had seen enough, and that it was time for the law to do what the law does.

I did not know then that the law would do it. I only knew that the fog had come down, and that the aunties had stopped putting the clips on the phone, and that in the stripped room above the print shop a woman was standing in front of a wall of dust-shapes where a year and a half had been, and that somewhere in the city a fifteen-year-old girl had a dead brother and a hashtag she had not asked for and a favorite noodle order that nobody was going to make.

CHAPTER 18

The Recess

The court recessed for eleven days before the closing arguments, and the city did what a city does with eleven days, which is to go back to work.

I went back to delivering noodles. That is not a metaphor. I put on the yellow jacket and I took the orders and I climbed the stairs and I stood in the doorways with the bags, and the customers looked at me the way customers had always looked at me, which is to say they looked at the food first and the person second, and the person second only long enough to be sure the food was right. It was the most restful thing that happened to me that whole autumn. A man who has spent six weeks being a symbol finds an enormous peace in being a delivery.

The aunties had moved the table to the back room of the barbershop, and the barber had put a sign in the window that said, in the plain way of a man who did not want any part of it, 茶座, *tea seats*, which meant that the room was not a mahjong parlor, which meant it was legal, which meant the game and the memory and the network and the noodles all continued under a barber's sign, and everyone pretended not to notice that the sign was a lie, which is a thing this city does well.

And on the second night of the recess, Wang Niangniang did what she had been meaning to do since the spring, which was to take Jishan's note out of the tea towel and put it up.

The note had come to the tunnel in the spring, wrapped in a tea towel, from the wife of the noodle-shop owner, when the shop closed and became a phone-accessory store. It had sat on the shelf behind the mahjong table for eight months, because nobody could agree on a wall. It was a single sheet of temple paper, in the abbot's hand, with the full couplet on it and the second line underlined twice, and it was the last thing of Jishan's that anyone in the network had, apart from the brass jar in the niche and the congee recipe in the account book and the way he used to say *Xiao Li* and *sha wawa* in the same breath.

Wang Niangniang unwrapped it and looked at the back wall of the barbershop for a while.

"That wall is where a mirror goes," said the barber, from his chair, without turning around.

"Then the mirror goes somewhere else," Wang Niangniang said. "This is a tea room. A tea room should have a sentence on the wall."

She nailed it up with two thin nails, at eye height, where the riders could read it when they stood at the counter for their tea. And when it was up she stepped back and looked at it, and Liu Niangniang came and looked at it, and Zhang Niangniang came with a tile still in her hand and looked at it, and none of them said anything for a moment, because none of them read classical couplets easily, and because the note was in the abbot's small clean hand and the abbot was dead.

Jingchen was there, because Jingchen had come with the congee pot, the way he did, because the tunnel had become the extension of the temple and the temple had become the extension of the tunnel and nobody could remember which had started it. He was seventeen, and he read the couplet without moving his lips, and then he read the underlined part twice.

"Read it out," Wang Niangniang said. "The whole thing. So the wall hears it before it dries."

And Jingchen, who was seventeen and knew the couplet the way a young monk knows a thing he has said a hundred times and has not yet had to live, read it out in the flat careful voice of a boy who has been asked to do a small task in front of his elders.

"Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart." He paused. "If the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path."

The barbershop was quiet. Outside, the fog and the traffic and the man selling roasted corn at the corner.

"That second half," Wang Niangniang said. "What does it mean. Plainly."

"It means," Jingchen said, and then he stopped, because he was seventeen and because he had been taught that a monk does not explain a thing he has not lived. And then he said it anyway, because Wang Niangniang had asked, and because a boy who had watched a temple burn and a crowd surge and a movement grow out of a drunk's fall, and who had ladled congee for a year to a line of people that

got longer every month, had lived enough to risk it. "It means the man who wrote it knew that people would copy the outside. The drinking. The falling. The fan. And he knew that if they copied the outside without the inside, it would kill them. So he put the warning in the second half, and the warning is not for the followers. The warning is for the man. It means: *if they imitate you, you are responsible for what they do.* It means the monk who is worth imitating is the one who knows that nobody can imitate him, and who therefore stops trying to be imitated, and who puts the fan down."

He stopped. Nobody said anything. Liu Niangniang, who had been listening with her head on one side, said, "Then the note on the wall is telling the man with the fan to take it off."

"No," Jingchen said. "The note on the wall is telling the man with the fan that the fan is not his. It is the city's. It has always been the city's. He only made the mistake of picking it up in a temple and thinking it was handed to him." He looked at the note for a moment. "The abbot knew. That is why he underlined it twice and never explained it. He was waiting for the man to get to the second line on his own. And the man got there on the wall, and it was too late, because by then the city had already copied him a hundred times."

I stood at the counter with a cup of tea I had not drunk and listened to a seventeen-year-old novice do in four sentences what two years of the city's cameras and courts and movements had not been able to do, which was to say the truth out loud in a room with no feed and no engagement and no money in it. And I did not thank him, because thanking him would have made it a lesson, and it was not a lesson; it was a reading of a wall.

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There is one more thing about that night, and it belongs to the aunties, and I am putting it in because the network that saved half the evidence in this book was not a network of riders; it was three women and a table.

Liu Niangniang was seventy-two that autumn, and she had been keeping the memory of the dead man's men for half a century, and she spent the recess reading her own memory to Yaoji, who wrote it down. That is the whole of what they did in the eleven weeks. Yaoji would go to the tea room with a notebook and

sit across from an old woman and say a name, and the old woman would say what she remembered, and Yaoji would write it, and when the notebook was full they would start another. By the end of the recess there were four notebooks. They were not evidence; they were not admissible; the procurator had said, gently, that hearsay is hearsay. They were a *record*, and the aunties had spent their whole lives believing that a record is the only thing this city has ever made that outlasts the men who make it.

I sat in on one of those afternoons, and I want to put down the story she told, because it is the whole of the network and the whole of the city and it has no villain in it at all.

The name was a collector's name, a man who had worked for the dead man's lending arm in the two thousands, and who had, over nine years, collected from, by his own ledger, about six hundred people, and had done it the way collectors do it, which is not mostly with violence; it is mostly with patience and a chair and an orange. And in the year before he died — he died in 2016, of a heart attack, in his own bed, at fifty-one — he had begun to come to the parlor on Tuesdays and lose money on purpose. Liu Niangniang said she noticed on the fourth Tuesday, because a man who loses on purpose loses in a pattern, and she asked him why. And he had told her, over the tiles, in the flat voice of a man who had decided to say a true thing to somebody who would not use it against him: that he had a daughter, and that the daughter had, at the age of nineteen, borrowed from a lender, and that the lender had sent a collector, and that the collector had done to his daughter exactly what he had done to six hundred people, and that the daughter had never told him who the collector was, and that he had understood, sitting across the table from his own child, that he had spent nine years being what happened to other men's daughters, and that he did not know how to stop being that thing, and so he came to the parlor and lost money to old women because it was the only place left where he could be a man who lost.

"Did he stop?" I asked.

"He died eight months later," Liu Niangniang said. "A heart. Men like that do not stop. They die. But he sat at my table for eight months and he never raised his voice and he paid his losses in small notes, and I have his name in my head

with a note beside it that says *the one who understood*." She dealt a tile. "That is what the procurator could not use and what the notebooks are for. Six hundred people he hurt, and one daughter, and eight months of losing on purpose. You tell me the column. I am an old woman in a tea room. I do not balance columns. I keep *names*, and beside the names I keep what the man did with the last of himself, and then I let the city read it, or not read it, whichever it chooses. That is my whole religion. It is written down. It is here. Somebody can find it."

What no one said that afternoon, and what everyone at the table knew, was that Liu Niangniang had begun to forget. It had started in the summer, small: a name that would not come, a date she had to think about, a story she told twice in one week with the second telling slightly different from the first. The aunties had not said anything, because aunties do not say anything, but Yaoji had started recording her earlier, and the recording was the reason for the notebooks — not for the trial, and not for the procurator, but because a woman who had spent fifty years keeping the record of the poor was beginning to lose the record, and the record was about to be lost with her, and the four notebooks were the whole of what a group of frightened people could do about it.

Wang Niangniang, at the stove, said what was the actual arithmetic. "She has kept the memory of six hundred men. The city kept none of them. When she forgets the last name, the last name is gone, and no one will know it was ever here, and the men who lent the money will have won the only war they were ever fighting, which is the war against being *remembered*." She put the lid on the pot. "So we write it down. It is not justice. It is *storage*. Do not confuse the two, and do not let the court confuse them either."

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That was the night I bought the pouch.

I want to put this down exactly, because the months that followed are going to be about what happened to it, and because I have spent a long time deciding how to tell it without making it a story that flatters me or a story that flatters the drink. So here it is, plainly, in the order it happened.

I left the barbershop at about ten. I had not bought a pouch of gaoliang in a year and a half. I had walked past the cardboard box by the door of the corner

shop every day for a year and a half, and the shopkeeper had stopped looking up when I came in for noodles, and the box had become a piece of the city's furniture, like the wet cardboard and the phone cases and the man selling roast corn. And that night, walking up the hill from the barbershop, I stopped at the shop and I bought one pouch, and I put it in the front pocket of my jacket, next to the phone and the half-fan from the drain.

I did not drink it. I want that down. I did not open it. I did not even take it out of the pocket. I bought it and I carried it home and I put it on the shelf in the room with the wall, in the front, where I could see it, and I sat on the bed and looked at it for a long time, and then I went to sleep with it on the shelf, and in the morning it was still there, and I left it there and went to work.

The reader will want to know why I bought it. I have four answers and I do not know which of them is true. The first is that the trial had ended, in the way that trials end, not with a verdict but with a recess, and the recess had taken what I had been holding — the case, the testimony, the room — and put it down, and when a man puts down a weight he has been carrying for six months he swings. The second is that I had listened to a boy of seventeen say *the fan is not yours*, and the fan was the only thing I had that was not the city's, and I had the particular fear of a man who has been told that the last thing he owns is not his. The third is that the guard had died, and Aguang was dead, and the drives were gone, and the son was going to walk out of the courthouse with the city's whole heart, and somewhere under all of it was the old arithmetic that had started all of it, which was: *I am the sort of man things happen to.* And the fourth answer is the one I do not like to write, which is that I wanted it. The disease wanted it, and the disease does not need a reason, and a man who has been sober for a year and a half can still hear the box by the door like a dog hears rain.

I did not drink it. But I bought it. And I am putting it in the book because the count is not a lie, and because the relapse does not begin in the night that you drink. It begins in the night that you buy.

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I walked the Trail on the last morning of the recess, and at the top, at the turn where the boy with the cardboard fan had stood in the spring, there was a man in a wheelchair, sitting in the fog, looking at the city.

Dao-ge had gotten someone to wheel him up the ridge — one of the riders, likely, because the riders helped him more than anyone, and because a man in a wheelchair on a slope is a challenge this city takes personally. He was parked at the railing at the top of the Eighteen Stairs, with a blanket over his legs, and he had a cigarette in the hand that did not entirely close, and he was not smoking it. He was watching the fog move down the hill.

I did not have the pouch with me. I had left it on the shelf, where it had sat for the whole of the last night and the whole of the morning, unopened, and I want to note that leaving it was not a decision; it was the habit of a year and a half, and the habit was stronger than the want that morning, and I do not know on which of the other mornings it would have been. I sat down on the low wall beside the wheelchair, at a distance, the way you sit beside a man at a bus stop.

"Big week," Dao-ge said.

"Big week."

"Closing arguments." He turned the cigarette, not lighting it. "The procurator will say what she always says and the lawyer will say what he always says and the panel will go away for a while and come back and read a document. And the document will have my name in it, and the boy's name, and your name, and the name of a man who has been dead since I fell. And after the thing is read, the city will clap, and then the city will go and eat hotpot, and the guard will still be dead, and the fire will still have happened, and I will still be in a wheelchair in a courtyard that the company rebuilt." He looked at the fog. "It is not nothing. I want to be fair. It is not nothing. The file exists. The procurator told me the file is a door. I have spent my whole life in rooms without doors. A door is a very great thing to a man who has never had one."

We sat. The fog moved. Below us, the river was doing what it had done since before there was a city on its banks, and the breakfast women went past with their steam carts, and a rider went past with his box, and the low world kept its weather.

"I did not know your father," Dao-ge said at last. "I want to say that plainly, before the end. I do not know if I was on the stair. I have looked for his face in my memory and there is no face there, and I have decided, in the last few weeks, that the not-knowing is its own kind of answer." He looked at me. "But I know the stairs. I know what a man does on the stairs. He does not call out for the city, because the city cannot hear him. He calls out for one person. He calls out for the person he thinks is behind him. That is all a man has, on the stairs. The person behind him." He put the unlit cigarette in his mouth. "Mine was a man named Yong. He was two stairs behind me for eleven years. I do not know where he is. I do not know if he is alive. But when I fell, in the water pit, the last thing I thought was his name, because he was the person I thought was behind me." He looked out at the fog. "If your father called out, it was not for the city. It was for somebody. Somebody who was behind him. And whoever it was, they heard. And they did not come. That is the whole of what I can tell you. It is not a comfort. It is a fact."

I looked at the man in the wheelchair, at the shoulder with the burn scar under the blanket, at the hand that did not close, at the cigarette he had not lit, and I understood that the trial had done for me the one thing no conversation in my life had done, which was to put a name on what was behind my father, and that the name was *somebody*, and that *somebody* was the whole city, and that the whole city was every man who kept climbing.

"Come back for your tea," I said.

He looked at me. And then he did the thing I had seen him do exactly twice — the raw, broken, terrible laugh, a door dragging on a floor. "That's that old fool on the river steps," he said. "He says that to everyone."

"He says it to the ones he thinks will live."

He did not answer. He put the cigarette back in his pocket, and we sat on the ridge above the old town in the fog, two men from the same stairs, one in a jacket and one in a wheelchair, and neither of us said anything, and the city went on being the city. And at some point a rider came up the Trail to take him back down, because the riders had adopted him the way the aunties had adopted the girl, and I watched the chair go down the slope through the white, and I understood that the noose was not around any of our necks; the noose was

around the neck of the *story*, and that the trial's verdict would either tighten it or cut it, and that either way the man in the chair and the girl with the notebook and the woman in the stripped room and the cousin with the radio and the aunties with the tiles would still be here in the fog, doing the only thing this city has ever known how to do, which is to carry the weight and come back for the tea.

The closing arguments were in eight days.

That night, in the room with the wall, I looked at the unopened pouch on the shelf for a long time. And I understood that what I had been telling myself for a year and a half — that the tea was the answer, that the count was the answer, that a gourd of tea and a route at dawn were the whole of my sobriety — was a story, and that stories are what this whole book is about, and that a story can hold a man for a year and a half and then break in a single week, and that the week was coming.

I did not know, then, what was going to happen in the next eight days. If I had known, I would have put the pouch in the drain. I did not put it in the drain. I left it on the shelf, in the front, where I could see it, and I turned off the light, and the city did the same.

PART THREE · 渊 · ABYSS

INTERLUDE 21

The Edge

Assembled from five documents. The first three were retrieved by the procurator's office and entered into a file that has never been closed. The fourth was kept by a family in a district west of the city, in a plastic sleeve, with a photograph in it. The fifth is one line long. Nothing here has been corrected.

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I. RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

[image: a young man at a desk, headset, smiling. stock.]

> **诚聘** | *OVERSEAS CUSTOMER SERVICE No experience required. No language requirement. Monthly salary ¥15,000–30,000 + commission. Airfare paid. Accommodation provided. Settle in immediately. Location: Southeast Asia. Company: registered. Contract: written. Apply via WeChat. Scan below.*
> *"Last month our colleague Wang sent home ¥28,000 to his mother in Gansu. He is twenty-two."*

[note, in a margin, in a clerk's hand: the "Wang" testimonial is used in at least 60 ads by 11 different agencies.]

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II. CHAT LOG (EXCERPT)

[the young person's messages are marked X.]

> *R: hi, are you the one who asked about the job on the board? X: yeah. is it real R: very real :) it's a big company. i can send you the license if you want. where are you now? X: guizhou. i finished school in june. my dad is sick R: i understand. many of our staff came for family reasons. the first month is a training period, then you choose a department. customer service is easiest X: do i need a passport R: yes, just send me a photo of your ID and i will handle the rest. you don't need to pay anything. we cover everything. when can you travel? X: i need to think R: of course. take your time. but the March batch closes on the 20th. after that the next one is June. i'll keep a place for you X: ok R: :) can you send me a clear photo? i need it for the ticket*

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III. MISSING-PERSON NOTICE

报案登记表 (Report Registration Form)

Name of missing person: [redacted] **Sex:** Male **Age:** 22 **Last contact with family:** 18th day of the 3rd month, 22:40 — WeChat voice message ("I'm on the bus, don't worry, I'll call when I arrive") **Last location known:** Nanning, then "the border" **Last funds sent home:** ¥3,000, from an account in another name **Date of departure from home:** 16th day of the 3rd month **Circumstances:** Left for an overseas customer-service job. Recruiter known only as "R." Family has been unable to contact since the 21st. **Photograph attached:** [yes — a young man in a school jacket, at a bus station, half-smiling] **Reported by:** father and mother **Note by officer:** *No jurisdiction beyond the border. Forwarded to provincial coordination. Advise family to await contact.*

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IV. FAMILY TIMELINE (PLASTIC SLEEVE, HANDWRITTEN)

> *Mar 16 — he left at dawn. I made him eggs. He said don't cry, ma. Mar 18 — voice message from the bus. Mar 21 — phone rings and*

> *stops. We call back. No answer. Mar 22 — a message from his account: "I'm fine, don't come looking, I'll send money." The typing is not his. Apr 2 — ¥3,000 arrives from an account we do not know. Apr 9 — we go to the police. Apr 30 — the police say wait. Jun — a man calls and says our son owes the company ¥180,000 for the trip. He says pay and he can come home. He says we should not tell the police. Jul — we pay what we have. ¥22,000. Nothing. Sep — my wife stops saying his name. Nov — I charge the old phone every night in case. Feb — I have stopped writing the dates. — (next line, a different pen, much later, one sentence:) He is still missing.*

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V. SILENCE

[the fifth document is a single line from the procurator's file, in the handwriting of Jiang Xue:]

> *The transfer that paid for the identification of Officer He Xia's body in 2014 came from an account that was closed in 2019. The account was opened in the name of a woman who does not exist. The only surviving link to the account is a border town, a bus timetable, and a photograph of a river. I have looked at the photograph for seven years. It does not get clearer.*

CHAPTER 19

The Edge of the Map

The closing arguments took a day and a half, and both of them were good, and neither of them was about the truth.

Jiang Xue spoke last, because the prosecution speaks last, and she did the thing she had done on the first morning: she was short. She said the loans were proven. She said the collections were proven. She said the organization was proven; that the shells were the organization; that the foundation was the organization; that the temple plaque, the merit stele, the memorial candles, the wellness brands, the charity award, the digital merit box and the virtual candle page were not separate things but *layers* of the same organization, laid down in the order of the dead man's own strategy, which was, she said, to make the money dirty at the bottom and the name clean at the top, so that a city could keep receiving the charity and never have to ask where the charity came from. She said the fire was arson, and that the fire was in the file, and that whether the court could see it was a question of the evidence the dead man had spent eleven years destroying. And then she said the sentence I have come to believe was the actual verdict, whatever the panel wrote in its judgment.

"Your honours," she said, "the defendant organization understood something about this city that the law has never understood. It understood that a good name is the cheapest thing in the world to manufacture and the most expensive thing in the world to lose. It manufactured one. And it will keep manufacturing one, long after this trial, because the machinery for manufacturing good names does not require a criminal organization. It requires only a market. And the market in this city is thirty million people who are tired, and who want to believe, and who will pay for the belief, and who will not read the fine print. The prosecution cannot put the market in the dock. We can only ask the court to put the *machine* in the dock, and to write down, in the record, what the machine did. That is all we can do. It is not enough. It has never been enough. But it is the only door we have."

Lu Jingtang spoke for two hours and confronted none of it. He did what he had done all autumn: he moved the objects of the world until the objects themselves became the argument. He said that grief was not a crime and that a son was not a father. He said that a foundation was a foundation and that a license was a license and that the state had audited and registered and awarded the very entities the prosecution now called a machine, and that if the state had been deceived, then the state's own eyes were the problem and not the defendant's heart. He said that the prosecution's case against the living defendants rested on the evidence of private citizens who had broken into a building, stolen a vault, run an unlicensed intelligence network, and caused the death of a security guard at a "mediation" that the same culture of vigilantism had inspired. And then he said the thing that I think the panel actually carried away, because it was true in a way that had nothing to do with the law.

"Your honours," he said, "the prosecution asks you to believe that the good people did the bad things for the right reasons, and the bad people did the good things for the wrong ones. That is a very comfortable division. It is the division the rider in the yellow jacket has been selling to this city for two years, and the city has been buying it, because the city loves a man who can be good without being responsible. But a city cannot run on that. A city runs on *one system of order*. The law is imperfect. The law is slow. The law is, sometimes, bought. But the law is the only system that can be written down, and audited, and appealed, and pointed to, and taught to a child. Everything else is a story. And a story is not a system. A story is a weather."

He sat down.

The panel retired at four in the afternoon on the twenty-sixth day. The judge said that the reading of the judgment would be scheduled separately and that the parties should hold themselves available. And the room emptied, and the cameras went to the corridor, and the city, which had watched the first three days and almost none of the last three, went home to its dinner and did not think about the case again for a week.

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I did not go home that night. I went to the print shop in Shapingba and up the stair to the stripped room, because Yingtao had not answered her phone for six days.

She was there. That was the first thing. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall where the drives had been, and the kettle was cold, and the gaffer tape was still on the window, and she had a laptop open on her knees with a document on it that I did not read. She looked up when I came in and she did not say anything, and I had spent two years learning that the way to a person like Yingtao is not through the door but through the silence, so I sat down on the floor across from her with my back against the opposite wall and I did not say anything either, and we sat like that for a long time.

After a while she said, without preamble, "I have three thousand and forty-one entries left. That's what the recovery got back. The rest is gone. I know what was in the gaps, mostly. I know the shape of what was in the gaps." She closed the laptop. "I have spent a week doing the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is this. The archive existed to be the one thing that could not be bought and could not be forgotten. And it turns out it could be *entered* and *carried out in two plastic bags*, and that everything I did for a year and a half can be undone in eleven minutes by four people with a flat certainty and no weapons." She looked at me. "So I have to decide what the archive is now. And I think I have decided. That is why I called you. I am going to *give it away*."

"Give it away to who?"

"To the city. To whoever wants it. Upload the whole thing, every entry, to twenty mirror accounts, on a schedule, over a year, so that taking it down from one place does not matter, because it is in a hundred places, and none of the places is *me*." She said it flatly, the way she decided things. "Anonymity made it weightless in court and I fixed that by naming myself. Naming myself made it a target and I cannot fix that by naming myself again. So I am going to make it *weather*. You cannot steal the rain."

I looked at her. The gaffer tape made the room dark. Somewhere below, the print shop made its machines-noise, and the city made its city-noise, and the woman across from me had spent her whole life afraid of being forgotten and

had just decided to erase the only name she had built, which was the opposite of forgetting and which I did not have a word for.

"Will it work?" I said.

"No." She almost smiled. "But it will be *true*, which is the only thing I have ever known how to be. And the truth is not a weapon, and it is not a wall, and it is not a weather. I heard a lawyer say that in a closing argument. He said a story is a weather and a system is a wall. He was wrong. A story is *rain*. It falls on everyone and it cannot be stopped and it ruins the wedding and it saves the crop, and the only choice you get is whether you carry an umbrella." She stood up and went to the kettle and turned it on. "That is what the archive becomes. Rain. I have already started."

That was the night the archive became rain. It is still raining. If you are reading this years from now, and you are looking for a record of the things the dead man's companies did to the people of this city, you will find it, because it is in a hundred places and none of them is a woman named Qin Ying, who made it, and who told me once, in a convenience store at midnight, that the only proof a life existed is that someone filmed it.

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While the panel was away, I went to the procuratorate one more time, because Jiang Xue had sent a message that said only *come alone and bring the girl*, and I had learned that when a prosecutor says *bring the girl* she means something that a room full of people cannot hear.

We met in the same neat office, with the same three squared files and the same photograph face-down on the desk, and she did not offer us tea; she offered us the file. She had the drawer open before we sat down, and she took out the folder and laid it flat, and it was thicker than the trial's, which is a thing I want the reader to hold. The organized-crime case — forty-one defendants, eleven counts, nine dead students, one dead cook, one dead guard, one burned temple — had been six weeks of testimony. The funnel folder was four inches thick and had never been to court and would never go to court, and it was what the whole empire had actually been for.

She took us through it in forty minutes, and I am going to put down what she showed us in the order she showed it, because it was the only honest accounting of the whole two years that anyone ever gave me.

There were the advertisements. She had sixty-one of them, from eleven agencies, collected over three years: the same smiling stock photograph, the same salary band, the same *no experience required*, the same QR code. Two of the sixty-one named the same fictional employees and the same made-up testimonials. There were the chat logs, taken from phones that had been recovered on the near side of the border when a child was intercepted at the last bus station in the country. There were the wire transfers: small ones, three thousand yuan, five thousand, from accounts in other names, to families in the districts, which the recruiters sent home to build the parents' trust. There were the missing-person forms, and this is the part I have to write carefully. She had three hundred and forty of them. Three hundred and forty, from the provinces, from the districts, from the towns. Three hundred and forty families who had walked into a police station with a photograph in a plastic sleeve and asked the state to find a person who was no longer inside the state's borders. And at the bottom of every one of the three hundred and forty files there was the same line, and she read it aloud, one line, and then she closed the folder and put her hand flat on it, as if the folder were a wound.

"*Jurisdiction ends at the border.*"

"What happens to them?" Huajiao said. Her voice was very level. She had the notebook out and she was not writing in it.

"Some of them come back," Jiang Xue said. "When a compound is raided, or when a family pays, or when a worker escapes and reaches a bridge and a Thai soldier buys him a bus ticket. The ones who come back are the lucky ones, and I want to tell you what *lucky* means, because the city has a picture of it that is not true. Lucky means a young man or woman who has lost a year of their life, who may have been forced to defraud people they have never met, who may now be a defendant in a fraud case in another province, who owes the family the money the family paid to try to get them back, and who comes home to a village or a district where everyone knows where they went and something of what they did." She picked up the photograph on her desk and looked at it and set it down

again. “Lucky does not mean the funnel missed them. Lucky means it missed them *this time*.”

“And the rest?”

“The rest are in the forms.” She tapped the folder. “Three hundred and forty. The number grows. It was three hundred and eighteen when I opened the folder and it is three hundred and forty now, and that is only the ones whose families filed, and most families do not file, because they are afraid, or ashamed, or because the recruiters told them not to, or because they are in the districts and the district station told them to wait.” She looked at Huajiao. “I know who you are. I know what the girl in the notebook is looking for. I am not going to tell you what I think about it, because you did not ask and because it would not help you. I am going to tell you the *arithmetic*. Your mother’s case is in the middle of that folder. It is page two hundred and six. And the arithmetic of page two hundred and six is the arithmetic of all three hundred and forty: I can keep the page, and the page is not a door, because the page ends at a river that I am not allowed to cross. If you go over that river looking for the page, you will become a page. That is the whole of what I know.”

“You have a brother,” Huajiao said.

Jiang Xue did not move. That was the thing about her; she had built a whole career on not moving.

“I have a brother,” she said. “He is in the folder too. He has been in the folder for seven years, and the folder has opened once, and the opening produced a photograph of a river and a bus timetable and a woman who does not exist. And I am still here, and I am still the person who keeps the folder, and I am not a person who crosses the river. That is not virtue. It is the shape of my life now. The law is the only tool I have ever had, and the law stops at the border, and when the only tool you have stops at the border you either become a person who crosses rivers or a person who files. I am a person who files. Your mother would have crossed the river. That is why she is a page and I am a prosecutor.”

The room was quiet for a while. Outside, the corridor made its corridor noises, and somebody wheeled a cart, and a phone rang and stopped.

“Then there is nothing,” Huajiao said.

"There is one thing," Jiang Xue said. "The funnel is offshore but the *recruitment* is here. The ads are posted here. The agencies are registered here. The first bus, the first guide, the first ticket, the first SIM card — all of it is on this side of the river, and all of it is within my reach, and it is the only part of the machine I can actually touch. I cannot save the ones who are across. I can sometimes stop the ones who are about to go. That is what I have spent seven years learning, and it is not enough, and it is the whole of what I have."

And that was what took root between the three of us in that neat office. Not the folder, and not the three hundred and forty forms, and not the river. The *near side*. The bus station in this city, the recruitment board in the school, the man with the shoulder bag at the edge of the map who is still on this side of the river and can still be stopped. The network had radios and riders and three old women who remembered everything. The procurator had a file and a badge and a jurisdiction that covered exactly the ground where the crime began. And Huajiao had a rule she had written herself, and a mother in the folder, and a reason to know how a bus station works.

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The call came on the third morning of the waiting, from Wen Xiaoyang, who was twenty-three now and a lieutenant in the rider network, and who had been the boy on the cableway in the first winter of the whole affair.

"Brother Li," he said. "There's a girl gone."

The girl was Xiaomei, twenty, from the logistics point, the one Huajiao had stood between and the man at the warehouse gate. She had not come to work for four days, and her mother had gone to the point and cried, and the shift manager had said she had quit, and her friend had said she had not quit, and the last thing anyone had of hers was a photograph on a recruitment board in a bus station: *overseas customer service, no experience needed, salary 15,000 to 30,000, airfare paid.*

I stood in the barbershop with the phone in my hand and the note on the wall behind me and the aunties at the table, and I felt the thing I had felt in the spring when the boy with the cardboard fan had asked me if I was him, which is the feeling of a door opening in a wall you were sure you had already mapped.

"Put it on the board," I said. "All of it. The name, the photo, the ad, the bus station, the day. And call Yaoji. And call the procurator." I paused. "And call Old K."

That was the beginning of the edge of the map. I did not know, then, that the edge of the map was where the rest of it was waiting, and that it had two faces, and that one of them had my father's stairs in it and the other had a girl's mother, and that a man can only walk toward one of them at a time.

CHAPTER 20

The Mother's Trail

We went south on the night bus, because Old K said the morning bus was watched, and Old K was right, and Old K charged us four hundred yuan and a promise that we would not use his name in any file.

The aunties did not try to stop us. That was the surprise. I had expected Wang Niangniang to forbid it and Zhang Niangniang to deal a tile and let the tile decide, and instead the three of them sat the girl down at the table on the evening before we left and did the thing that aunties do when a woman they have adopted is going somewhere they cannot follow, which is to feed her and to give her things she does not need. Wang Niangniang gave her a thermos of congee. Liu Niangniang gave her a folded paper with the names of four people in the south, three of whom were dead. Zhang Niangniang gave her two hundred yuan in small notes and said, "If the bus is late, do not stand in the station. A girl standing alone in a station is the whole of the market." And Huajiao took all of it, the congee and the paper and the money, and did not once say that she had been raised to survive worse, because she had learned, in a year and a half, that accepting an auntie's gift is the price of being loved.

The bus was a sleeper. I do not recommend a sleeper bus to anyone who has cracked ribs, and I do not recommend it to anyone who has a girl of seventeen beside them who has not slept in a vehicle since she was five. We lay in the long dark with the curtains drawn and the engine under us and the country going by the window in strips of orange light, and Huajiao did not sleep for the first four hours, and then she slept with her head against the window and her hand on the notebook in her bag, and I did not move for the rest of the ride, because there is a kind of sleeping that is also a trust, and I had learned by then not to trade it for a better position.

We changed buses at dawn in a city I will not name, and then again at noon in a smaller city I will not name, and by evening we were in a town on the river, six hours from the border, where the buildings were three storeys and the streets

were wide and the air smelled of fried food and diesel and something sweeter underneath, and where every second shop sold phone cards and every third shop sold suitcases.

Old K met us at the station. He had a car, which surprised me, and the car was old and clean, and he drove us to a guesthouse behind the bus station, the kind of guesthouse that has a courtyard and a steel door and a woman at a desk who does not ask questions because the price of the room includes not asking. He told us what the town was, on the drive, in the flat voice of a man describing the weather.

"This is a station town," he said. "Everything here is a station. The buses come in from the north with people who are leaving, and the buses go out to the south with people who are being taken, and in between there is a whole street of shops that sell the leaving: SIM cards, luggage, phone chargers, passport photos, a coat that looks like the coat in the ad, a bank app on your phone. The recruiters are not here. The recruiters are *north*. Here is the last town where the kid can still turn around. After here there is only the road, and the road has a river, and the river has a crossing, and after the crossing there is the compound, and the compound has no name." He turned the wheel. "I do not take people across. I never have. I take people *back*, sometimes, when I can, when they are north of the river and they have money. That is my whole business. I am a bus that goes backward."

Huajiao asked him the only question that mattered.

"And my mother?"

"Your mother is not in the road," Old K said. "Your mother is in the *paperwork*. The name on the transfer was not a road name. It was a *town* name. Somebody in this town paid for your mother's death certificate in 2014, and somebody in this town has been buying a postcard and a stamp every year since, and those are two different kinds of person, and I do not know which one is which." He parked. "The name is the woman who runs the card shop by the bridge. That is all I know. I have never met her. I have bought a postcard from her. That is the whole of my information, and I gave it to you because you paid me, and because I have a daughter in a school I cannot afford, and because the

girl in the back seat has the same look as the kids I take back, and I do not like the look, and that is the most honest thing I will say today."

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We went to the bus station before dawn, because that is when the buses leave, and because that is when you can see what the town is for.

At five in the morning the station was already a city. There were eleven buses in the yard, and nine of them were going south. The shops along the fence were open, because they never closed: a phone-card shop with a handwritten sign, a luggage shop with suitcases stacked in a pyramid, a shop that sold only phone chargers and power banks and the small padlocks the compounds take off you, a shop that sold SIM cards by the handful and would register one in your name or not, a shop that sold a coat in the colour of the coat in the advertisements. There was a stall selling noodles and a stall selling congee and a stall selling the local dumplings, and the women who worked the stalls served the same customers they had served for twenty years, and they did not look at the kids and the kids did not look at them, and the whole thing had the flat, efficient, terrible calm of an airport, which is what it was. It was an airport for hope. It flew one route.

Old K stood with us at the edge of the yard and told us what we were seeing, in the voice of a man who had watched it for fifteen years and had stopped being angry about it because anger is a thing that has to be re-bought every morning.

"Look at the shoes," he said. "The kids who are going have new shoes. Somebody at home bought them new shoes for the trip. That is how you know who is going and who is coming back. The ones coming back are in the old shoes, if they have shoes, and they are not in the yard; they come in through the side gate, and I am the side gate, sometimes." He drank his tea. "I have brought back eleven people in fifteen years. Eleven out of a number I stopped counting. Two were girls. One of them asked me to take her to a noodle shop before I took her home, because she wanted to remember what it tasted like before she remembered what she had to tell her mother, and we sat in a shop two streets from here and she ate two bowls and did not say a word, and then she went home, and I have never seen her again, and she is the reason I still do it. Not

because I am good. Because I have one *account* that closes and a thousand that do not, and a man needs one account that closes."

There was a woman at the breakfast stall who knew Old K, and when she saw us she came over and looked at Huajiao for a long moment, and then she asked, not unkindly, "Leaving or coming?"

"Looking," Huajiao said.

"Everybody's looking," the woman said, and went back to the griddle. That was all. But I watched her for the rest of the morning, because a person at a station stall sees every one of them, and I wanted to know whether she counted. She did not count out loud. But every time a bus pulled out she looked up, once, and looked back down, and I understood that the looking up was the counting, and that she had been doing it for thirty years, and that if you asked her she would say she did not count either, because if she counted she would have to stop making dumplings.

Old K told us, over the course of that day, how the funnel worked, and I am going to put it down here because the reader has followed this book through a trial and a movement and a fire, and the funnel is the thing the whole of it was standing on, and the funnel is the thing the law could not touch.

"The recruiters are not here," he said. "I told you. They are *north* — in the cities, in the schools, on the boards by the factories, on the phones. They are a man on the other end of a messaging app with a good face and a good story. The person he hands the kid to is *here*, and the person here is called a guide, and the guide is a man with a shoulder bag who bought the kid a ticket and knows the kid's name and buys the kid a bowl of noodles at this station and promises to sit with them on the bus. The kid trusts the guide. That is the guide's whole job. To be trusted. To be the one familiar face at the edge of the map. The guide takes the kid onto the bus; the bus crosses the river; on the far side the guide hands the kid to another guide. That is all. Nobody at this station has a gun. Nobody at this station raises a voice. It is the politest crime in the world, and it sells itself, and it is *legal*, most of it, until the river, because on this side of the river the kid is still a passenger and you cannot arrest a man for being polite to a passenger."

"And my mother?" Huajiao said.

"Your mother is not a passenger," Old K said. "I told you that too. Your mother is *paper*. I do not know what kind of paper. Somebody in this town signed something in 2014 that made a body into a mother, and I have spent fifteen years around the paper and I have never once been able to read it. I can read the buses. I cannot read the paper. That is the difference between the road and the office, and the office is where your mother is, and I do not go to the office."

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The card shop by the bridge was a shop the width of a corridor, with a rack of postcards outside and a counter inside and a curtain at the back that led to where the woman lived.

She was about sixty, with grey hair cut short and a face that had been handsome and was now simply *strong*, the face of a woman who has decided not to be surprised by anything because surprise is a luxury she has not been able to afford for a long time. She was drinking tea at the counter. She looked at us when we came in the way a shopkeeper looks at customers, and then she looked at Huajiao's face, and the look lasted about half a second too long, and then it was gone.

The postcards on the rack were the standard ones: the bridge, the river, the karst hills, the Guanyin temple, a mountain in fog, a boat on the water. There was a mountain and there was a river. I stood in front of the rack for a moment and looked at them, and Huajiao took out the notebook and opened it to the folded page and put the three postcards on the counter, one by one, the mountain from the first year, the mountain from the spring, the river from the autumn, and she did not say anything.

The woman looked at the three postcards for a long time. Then she picked up the river one, and turned it over, and looked at the blank back, and set it down.

"I sell these," she said. "I sell about forty a week. The mountain is the most popular. Everyone who comes through here buys the mountain and sends it home to their mother, so their mother can see the place they are going, even though the place they are going is not the picture. The picture is where they *are*.

The place they are going does not have a picture." She looked at Huajiao. "You are asking me if I sent them. I did not send them. I do not know who sent them. That is the truth. If I tell you the truth and you do not believe me, then I have nothing else to give you, and you can go, and I will not be sorry, because I have been asked harder questions by worse people than a girl with a notebook."

"Then who sent them," Huajiao said.

The woman's face did the thing again — the half-second too long — and then she said, in a voice that had gone quieter, "There was a woman who used to come to the shop. Years ago. Before the river. She bought the mountain cards, four or five at a time, and she paid in cash, and she never wrote them here. She took them away. She had a child in the north, she said, and she did not want the child to have her address, and she did not want the child to have her name, and she did not want the child to have the *certainty*, because certainty makes people stop growing." She picked up her tea. "I do not know her name. I knew her the way you know a customer. She came, and then she did not come, and then, a few years ago, a young woman bought a card that was the same as the card she used to buy, and paid in cash, and took it away, and did not write it here, and that has happened four or five times, and I do not know who that young woman was, and I do not know if it was the same customer or the same child or a stranger with the same taste in postcards."

The shop was very small. Outside, the bridge, and beyond the bridge, the road, and beyond the road, the country that had no name in the picture.

"Was she here," Huajiao said. Her voice did the thing that it did only once or twice a year, which was to become very small. "The woman. Did you ever see her, after the river."

The shopkeeper looked at her for a long moment. And then she said the sentence that I believe, to this day, was the truth, and which was also, to this day, not an answer.

"I saw a woman who looked like the pictures in the papers," she said. "I saw her at the market, buying fish. I saw her from behind. I did not speak to her. I do not know if it was her. A woman from behind is every woman." She set down her tea. "That is the whole of what I have. The mountain cards go in batches. The cash has no name. The market is on Tuesdays. If you go to the market on a

Tuesday, you will see a hundred women who could be her, and you will come back and you will tell yourself that one of them was, or that none of them was, and either way you will have the same life." She looked at Huajiao. "I am sorry. I am not sorry in the way you want. I am sorry in the way the town is sorry, which is the way of a person who has watched a great many people go south and has decided, a long time ago, to sell them postcards and not to decide whether they are alive."

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We walked back across the bridge in the dark, and Huajiao did not speak, and I did not speak, and the river under the bridge was the colour of the sky and smelled of diesel and mud and something older that I have never been able to name.

At the guesthouse, before she went to her room, she stopped and looked at the folded page in her hand, and then she did the thing that I have come to believe was the bravest single act of the whole of that winter, which was not to go to the market on Tuesday.

"There's a girl missing," she said. "Xiaomei. She's in a room somewhere south of that river, or she's in a bus, or she's already across. And I have one week before the panel, and you have a room with a bottle on the shelf, and the woman in the shop gave me exactly what my mother used to give me, which is a mountain and a river and no name, and if I go to the market on Tuesday I will spend the rest of my life looking at the backs of women." She folded the page very small and put it in the notebook. "We came to find my mother and we found a *plausibility*. That's all we found. A woman from behind is every woman. I could build a whole life on that sentence and it would kill me." She looked at me. "So this is the rule. I'm going to find the girl. And if I ever find out about my mother, it will be because I found her on the way to somebody else, and not because I went looking for her and called every shape a face."

She went in. I stood in the courtyard of the guesthouse with the steel door and the woman at the desk who did not ask questions, and I understood that Huajiao had, in one evening, become the person the whole book had been

waiting for her to become — a person with a rule she had chosen — and that the rule was going to cost her, and that the cost was already beginning.

I did not sleep that night. I lay in a room with a bare bulb and a hard bed and a window that looked at the wall of the next building, and I thought about the pouch on the shelf in the room with the wall, three hundred kilometers behind me, and I thought about the river outside, and I thought about the shopkeeper saying *a woman from behind is every woman*, and I did not know, yet, that the next night I would drink.

CHAPTER 21

The Bottle

We spent the next day on the edge of the map, and the edge of the map is not a place. It is a *timing*.

It is the eleven minutes before a bus leaves, when the kids are standing in the yard with their bags and their new coats and their phones, and the recruiters are not there because the recruiters do not get on the bus, and the "guides" are there, and a guide is a man of about thirty with a shoulder bag and a friendly face who says *this way, this way, the tickets are inside*, and the kids follow him because he is the only person in the whole town who has used their name. It is the desk at the guesthouse where a girl checks in alone with a suitcase and pays for two nights and then does not stay the second. It is the noodle shop across from the station where the girls eat their last breakfast, and the woman who runs the noodle shop says, when you ask, in a flat voice, "I do not count them. I do not count them because if I counted them I would have to stop making noodles."

We found Xiaomei on the edge of the map, but only in the way you find a thing at the edge of a map, which is a *smudge*.

Old K did the work. He knew the guides, or knew the men who knew the guides, and by the afternoon he had a thing for us: a guesthouse register with a name that was not Xiaomei's but was written in the same rounded schoolgirl hand on the same line as a room number, and a bus ticket stub for the southbound that left at 06:40 on the third day after she vanished, and a photograph from a station camera of a girl in a grey jacket getting onto the bus behind a man with a shoulder bag. The girl in the photograph was not identifiable. The man with the shoulder bag was, by the third guide Old K asked, named as a man called 阿彪 — A-Biao — who was twenty-nine and had a motorbike and a mother who sold vegetables in the market, and who was, according to everyone, "a good kid, just doing a job."

We took the photograph to A-Biao's mother in the market on the Tuesday. That is the only reason I went to the market, and I want the record to say that

Huajiao did not go to look at the backs of women; she went to look at a vegetable seller, and she asked her a question about her son, and the vegetable seller put down the cabbage she was weighing and looked at the photograph for a long time and then said, in a voice that had gone very quiet, "He is a good boy. He sends money. He does not tell me what he does." And then she said the sentence that was the whole of the edge of the map: "If you find him, tell him his mother has his school photo on the wall, and tell him the man in the photo would not do this."

We did not find A-Biao. He was gone the next morning. And Xiaomei was across the river, in a place with no name, in a compound with no door, and the procurator's file would say, at the bottom, what it always said: *jurisdiction ends at the border.* That is the edge of the map. It is not the end of the country. It is the end of the *responsibility*, and the two are the same line, and it is drawn by men in offices who have never stood in the yard at 06:30 and watched a girl in a grey jacket get on a bus and not come back.

I called Xiaomei's mother that night from the guesthouse courtyard. Wen Xiaoyang had given me the number. I did not have anything to tell her that was not the same smudge Old K had given me, and I told her anyway, because I had learned from the aunties that a smudge told to a mother is better than a silence told to a mother, and she listened to the whole of it and then she said one thing, and then she hung up.

"She quit the vocational class last month," she said. "She told me she was going to make money for my medicine. I told her not to. She said, *Ma, everybody goes. The ads are everywhere.* And I said, *the ads are not everywhere, the ads are on the bus station wall, and the bus station is a place you can choose not to go.* And she said, *Ma, I have seen the ads my whole life. I did not know until this year that I was allowed to choose.*" A pause. "That is what took her. Not the money. The *choice*. Somebody told her she could choose the south, and nobody ever told her she could choose anything else."

She hung up. I stood in the courtyard with the steel door and the woman at the desk who did not ask questions, and the truth settled on me the way the fog settles on a city, which is to say everywhere and all at once.

The whole of it had been *choice*. The boy with the cardboard fan had chosen the fan. The Society had chosen the alleys. The son had chosen the foundation. Xiaomei had chosen the south. And what they had all chosen was what I had made, which is not a hero and not a machine and not a movement. It is a *shape*. It is the shape of a person who believes that a better life is one bus away, and that belief is the engine of the entire century, and the only difference between the bus to the south and the bus into the alley is what the bus is selling.

And I had become, without ever intending it, the *poster*. I was the proof, for a whole city, that one small person could step out of place and be seen. And a person who has seen the proof will sell everything for the chance to be seen, including herself, including her name, including the crossing of a river in the dark.

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I bought the bottle from a shop on the corner by the bridge, at about nine o'clock, from a woman who did not look up from her phone, and I took it back to the guesthouse room and shut the door and sat down on the edge of the hard bed.

It was the local baijiu. Not the three-yuan pouch. A real bottle, 52 degrees, in a red-and-gold box, the kind of bottle a man buys for a funeral or a wedding or a negotiation. I had bought it because it was the only kind the shop sold and because I had not bought a bottle in a year and a half and did not know the prices of bottles anymore. I put it on the little table by the bed and looked at it for a long time. Outside, the town made the sound of a town: the buses, the fried food, the diesel, somebody laughing, somebody dragging a suitcase over the tiles.

I do not know how long I looked at it. Long enough for the outside to go quiet.

My phone rang at about eleven. I looked at it. It was Yaoji. I looked at it for four rings and then I silenced it and put it face-down on the table and poured the first glass, and I want the record to say that I knew exactly what I was doing. A man does not silence a call from the man who keeps him alive by accident. He silences it because the call is the world, and the bottle is the only place the world cannot reach him, and he has chosen the bottle, and the choosing is not a

mistake. It is the disease, doing what the disease does, which is to make the next single minute survivable at the cost of every minute after it.

And then I did what I have been leading up to since the spring, and I want to write it plainly, without the language of falling, because the language of falling is the drink's language and I will not give it that.

I opened the bottle. I drank. It was hot and sweet in the way I remembered and had spent a year and a half forgetting, and it went down and sat in my chest and did the thing it had always done, which was to make the room smaller and the self larger and the night survivable. I drank until the room was very small and I was very large and the night was survivable. I drank until the man in the mirror was a man I recognized. I drank until I could not have told you the count, or the day, or the name of the girl in the photograph, or the sentence the shopkeeper had said about the back of a woman. I drank until the whole of the year and a half of sobriety had stopped being a story and become a *hiatus*, which is the word the disease uses when it wants you back.

And in the corner of the room, in the chair by the curtain, there was a man.

I am going to describe him exactly and then I am going to leave him alone. He was old and his robe was ragged and his hat was ragged and his feet were bare on the tiles, and his fan was broken and mended with wire, and he was laughing, quietly, at something a long way off, some joke that had been going on for a thousand years. He looked at me the way a man looks at a drunk in a doorway, which is without cruelty and without pity, and he did not get up, and he did not tell me to stop. He only laughed. And whether that meant *I told you* or *it does not matter* or *the laugh is the whole of it and the words were never mine to give*, I do not know, and I have decided, over the years, that I do not need to know. I was drinking a bottle of baijiu in a guesthouse room three hundred kilometers from home and I had been sober for a year and a half and I was hallucinating an image from a temple I had not believed in, and there is no version of that night in which the man in the chair was real, and there is also no version in which he was *nothing*, and the two things are not in conflict, and anyone who tells you they are in conflict has never been alone in a room with a bottle and a story.

He was gone when I woke up.

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The morning was December of the body.

I woke at about ten with the light on my face and the bottle on its side on the floor and the room smelling of the drink and of me, and I lay there for a long time with the specific arithmetic of the hungover, which is not remorse and not despair but the small, patient, terrible accounting of a body that has been poisoned by the person who lives in it. My hands shook. My mouth tasted of iron. There was a cut on my lip I did not remember getting. My heart was going too fast and too flat. I looked at the bottle and I looked at the ceiling and I did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was not *how could you*. The arithmetic was *day one*. That was all. The count was not broken; it was *reset*, the way a clock is reset, and the number at the end of it was not six hundred and some but one, and I had not been a man with a number for a year and a half and now I was a man with a number again, and the number was one.

I got up. I am setting in the record that I got up. I did not stay in the bed and I did not drink the rest and I did not, that morning, do any of the things that the disease wanted; I poured the rest of the bottle down the sink of the guesthouse bathroom, which was a thing that cost me something I cannot describe, and I washed my face and I put on the same shirt and I went out into the town and I found a noodle shop and I ate a bowl of noodles, slowly, because I did not trust my hands, and I paid, and I walked to the bus station, and I bought two tickets north.

Huajiao was already at the station. She had been there since seven. She looked at me from across the yard and she did not say anything, and then she stood up and picked up her bag and walked over and stood in front of me and looked at my eyes for about four seconds, which was enough, and I understood that she knew. She had known the moment I came into the yard. She was seventeen and she had spent her whole childhood learning to read men's faces for the moment a promise became a lie, and she read my face the way she read a room before a fight, and she did not flinch. That was the worst part. She did not flinch and she did not lecture and she did not, for a moment, become the adult and make me the child. She simply stood there and read the arithmetic off my face and then she said the only thing she said about it for the next four months.

"How many days."

"One."

She nodded. She picked up her bag. And then she told me the thing that made the number heavy.

"Yaoji called you last night," she said. "At eleven. There was a girl at this station. A rider in the north had given the network a tip. The girl was in the yard with her shoes and a ticket and a school bag. Yaoji called you four times, because you were four hundred meters away and you were the only one of us in this town."

I said nothing.

"By the time I got here, because I did not know where you were, because you had stopped answering at nine, the bus had gone. She crossed this morning. She is in the folder now. The folder is one page thicker because you were drinking." She looked at me and did not soften. "That is the number. Not the count. The count is yours. The girl was not."

She picked up her bag. And then she said, quietly, without looking at me, the sentence that did the thing no amount of the aunties' kindness could do, which was to make the number small enough to carry.

"One is a number," she said. "It is not a character. Get on the bus."

We got on the bus. That autumn she did not show me the notebook again. She kept it in her bag and took it out only when I was not looking, and when I asked her a question about the case she answered in the flat voice she used for strangers, and she did not sit beside me. That was the cost, and it was worse than the count. The count was mine. The notebook was hers, and she took it back, and she did not give it to me again until the winter, and when she gave it to me it was because she needed me to hold it while she did something else. That is what a relapse costs a man who has been carried by a girl: not the year and a half. The seat. It took eleven hours to go north. She slept with her head against the window and her hand on the notebook, and I did not sleep at all, and somewhere in the middle of the night the bus crossed the river, and I looked at the dark water through the glass and thought about the girl in the grey jacket and the woman in the shop and the man in the chair in the corner, and I understood, with the clarity that comes only on the second day, that the edge of the map was not out there in the compound with no name. It was in the room with the wall,

on the shelf, in the front, where I had left a pouch in the spring and had looked at it every night and had told myself that looking was the same as not drinking.

It is not the same. That is the whole of the chapter. It is not the same, and no one can tell you so, and you will learn it the way I learned it, which is one night, alone, in a town on the edge of the map, with a bottle in a red-and-gold box and a girl asleep on a bus.

I have not drunk since. That is the truth. I am writing this some time later and the number is no longer one, and I am not going to tell you the number, because the number is not the point; two people know it, and one of them is a seventeen-year-old girl who did not flinch, and that is enough. But I will tell you what I learned, and it is the only thing I learned in the whole of that autumn that I would stake my life on.

The tea was never the answer. The tea was a *ration*. The answer is not a drink and not a count and not a wall. The answer is a person who sees you at the bus station in the morning and reads the arithmetic off your face and says *get on the bus*, and then does not mention it again, and sits beside you for eleven hours, and holds the notebook, and does not let you be the story.

CHAPTER 22

The Copycat King

By the eleventh month, Lai San had a festival.

It was called the 山城济公文化节 — the Mountain City Ji Gong Cultural Festival — and it ran for three days on the riverside plaza below the tower, and it had a stage and a lighting rig and a drone show and a vegetarian food street and a "merit walk" and a "blessing of the waters" and a charity gala, and the title sponsor was the Foundation for Cultural Renewal, whose logo was on every banner, and the organizing company was Lai San's, and the attendance, over three days, was estimated by the organizers at two hundred thousand people and by the police at eighty thousand and by the aunties, who had watched the whole thing on a phone at the tea-room table, at *too many, and every one of them alone.*

I went on the second day, because I had to see it, and because Huajiao said I had to see it, in the flat voice she used when she was making me do a thing for my own good, and because a man who has spent two years being a symbol should look, once, at what the symbol has become.

It was worse than I had imagined and better than I had feared and entirely, exactly, what I should have expected. There was a merchandise row: fans, gourds, robes, prayer beads, stickers, tote bags, a "merit candle" in a glass jar with a small electric flame, a children's brand of "Little Ji Gong" clothing. There was a food street: congee (free), noodles (¥12), a "Ji Gong burger" (¥18), a "Buddha bowl" (¥32), a stall selling "healing tea" that was, I am fairly sure, oolong with sugar. There was a "compassion wall" where children wrote wishes on cards and hung them, and a "good-deed photo booth" where you could pose helping an old woman cross a painted street, and a donation box in the shape of a lotus that took cash and cards and phone payments and printed a receipt with a QR code that led to the foundation's page. And on the stage, between acts, a succession of men in robes — some of them real monks from real temples, some of them Lai San's employees — said things about the heart and the city and the importance

of helping, and the crowd, which was enormous and ordinary and mostly poor, listened and clapped and filmed and ate.

I walked the whole of it with a paper bowl of congee in my hand and did not eat it. I have tried many times to describe what I felt and I have never managed it, and I think the reason is that the feeling was not one feeling. It was the feeling of a man watching his own face on a banner and knowing that the face was not his and also knowing that the face had been made out of him and that he had not been asked. It was the feeling of a man recognizing, in a crowd of eighty thousand, about eleven people who were doing it *sincerely* — the woman who ran the congee stall and had run it for two temples for thirty years; the old man who had come with his own fan and was walking the perimeter and bowing to no one; the child who had written *I want my grandmother to walk again* on a card and hung it, and had not been given a camera to do it for. And it was the feeling of a man understanding that the eleven sincere people were the reason the whole thing worked, because the machine needed them the way a fire needs oxygen, and that they were not victims and not accomplices and not fools, and that there was no word in the language for what they were.

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I spent the middle of the day at the congee stall, because the congee stall was the only honest thing at the festival and I wanted to stand near it.

The woman who ran it was fifty-eight and her name was Auntie Xiu, and she had served congee at the temples of this city for twenty-nine years, through three rebuilds and one fire, and she did not know or care that she was at a branded festival. She had been hired by the organizers for four hundred yuan and all the congee she could serve, and she had accepted because four hundred yuan is four hundred yuan and because she had a grandson with a heart condition, and I did not learn that last part from her; I learned it from the woman beside her, who told me while Auntie Xiu was at the pot and could not hear. Auntie Xiu served every person in the line the same oversized ladle, and when the organizers came at noon and asked her to slow down because the free congee was running the merchandise numbers, she said, in the flat voice of a woman who had been doing this since before any of them were born, "The rice is cooked. The people are here.

I am not slowing down." And she did not slow down, and the organizers did not push it, because even in a counterfeit economy there is one thing you cannot stage, and it is a woman who has been making congee for twenty-nine years and has decided how much rice each stranger gets.

She is the reason I kept going back to the festival. Not for the myth. For the ladle. There is a whole religion in that ladle and it is not on any banner, and it was the only thing at the festival that the foundation could not license and the Society could not franchise and the feeds could not cut for a clip, because it took four seconds and had no reaction shot in it.

I met the old man with his own fan at the compassion wall, where the children hang their wishes on cards. He was about eighty and he had a real palm-leaf fan, cracked and mended with fishing line by his own hand, and he was not part of the festival; he was a retired stevedore who walked the river every day and had come to watch the crowd, the way old men in this city watch any crowd, which is to say with the deep unresolvable amusement of a man who has seen the water rise and fall for eighty years and does not expect anything new. He did not know who I was. That was the luxury of him. He looked at my gourd and my fan and my jacket and did not connect the three, because he had never watched the clips and did not own a phone, and when I asked him what he thought of the festival he said, "I think the dumplings are expensive and the congee is free, which is the same as every year of my life." And then he told me about the flood of 1981, which I had heard from Uncle Tuo and had never heard from anyone else, and his version was better, because Uncle Tuo's version had him carrying a table on his head and this man's version had the table floating away and Uncle Tuo swimming after it, and I have never been able to decide which of them was lying, and I have decided that both of them were telling the truth they had chosen, which is how this city remembers anything.

The children's wishes were the hardest. I read the wall twice. There were about four hundred cards, hung on strings in the shape of a heart, and most of them were the ordinary wishes of the ordinary poor: *I want my grandmother to walk again. I want my mother to stop crying. I want to pass the exam. I want my father to come home from Guangdong.* And then, among them, in a child's hand, one card that said: *I want to be the man in the yellow jacket.* And below it, anoth-

er, in a different hand, that said: *I want to be the man who helps him.* I stood in front of those two cards for a long time. I did not take them. I did not tell anyone. I have thought about them for years, and what I think is this: the first card is the whole problem of this book, and the second card is the whole solution, and the tragedy is that no one at the festival could tell the difference, because the foundation had printed both kinds of card and the string they hung on was in the shape of a heart, and the heart was sponsored.

By afternoon the crowd was sixty thousand and the merchandise row had sold out of the children's brand and the drone crew was setting up on the embankment, and I walked the perimeter the way I walk the Trail, looking for the seam, because a crowd that size is a body and a body has seams, and I found the seams and I did not find the danger, because the danger was not in the crowd. The danger was in the eleven people who walked off the rope line after dark, and I have already told the reader about the one who did not come back.

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And then, at dusk, on the second night, the thing happened that I had been afraid of since the spring.

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The "merit walk" was a procession along the river rocks. The route went along the exposed shallows below the plaza, a stretch the river leaves bare in winter, and the point of it — the organizers' point — was that walking the shallows was a hardship offering, a small pilgrimage, a way for ordinary people to do a difficult good thing in a line with strangers. It was supervised by volunteers with flashlights and a rope line. It was, by the standards of a city that builds footbridges over gorges, entirely safe.

And a boy of about twenty, at the tail of the procession, decided to do it *properly*.

I did not see him go. That is the first thing. I was forty meters away, at the top of the embankment, with the congee that I was not eating, and the fog was coming up off the water the way it had come up off the water in every scene of this book, and somewhere below me a boy in a robe that was not a robe stepped

off the rope line and onto a rock he did not know, because the story had taught him that a man with a fan could walk into the water and come out clean.

The water at the shallows was not shallow. It was the edge of a river that had drowned my father's city for a thousand years. He went in at the turn, where the current takes a man's legs, and the volunteers' flashlights swung and someone shouted, and the crowd — which was a crowd, with all the rules of a crowd — did what crowds do, which is to stop and film. And by the time I got down the embankment and into the water, the boy was already gone, and I was a man in a yellow jacket standing in the river in the dark with the fog around my chest and a hundred phone lights on the bank, and I did not find him. The river took eleven minutes to give him back. The rescue boats came. The police came. The organizers, to their credit, had had boats on station, because they had known, as every organizer knows, that a crowd and a river are a pair.

The boy's name was 阿俊, A-Jun. He was twenty. He was a student. He had, on his phone, a photograph of the founder's fan and a screensaver of the founder's face, and he had come to the festival from a city two hours away, and he had, according to his roommate, spent the whole term talking about how he was going to "do something real." His mother was a cleaner. His father sold insurance. They came to the festival the next morning and stood on the embankment where he had gone in, and the organizers gave them a hotel room and a wreath and a donation, and the foundation sent a representative, and the cameras came, and by the afternoon the boy was on every platform in the province, and the number under the video was climbing.

I have watched that number climb. I watched it because I could not look away, and because I needed to know what the city would do with a boy who drowned imitating a man, and the city did what it always does, which is to make the boy *mean* something. The first day, he was a martyr of compassion. The second day, he was a cautionary tale about the dangers of unregulated folk religion. The third day, he was a hashtag. By the fourth day, he was gone, and the festival had announced its attendance figures, and the merchandise had sold out, and Lai San's company had signed a three-year contract with the district, and the foundation had pledged to build an aquatic-safety training center in the boy's

name, which was the most useful and least honest thing anyone did in the eleven days.

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I found Lai San at the stage on the last night, in the golden hour, before the drone show.

He was alone, in a good coat, with a cup of the healing tea, watching the technician test the lights. He had gotten richer in the two months since the warehouse bay, and he had gotten, in the same period, quieter; the gold chain was gone, the jacket was better, and there was a thing behind his eyes that had not been there in the spring, which I recognized because I had seen it in the mirror, and which is the specific expression of a man who has discovered that he is not the head of the thing he built.

"You came," he said, without looking at me.

"I came."

"Good. You should see it. It's better than the alley. It's better than the cable car. It's a *city*." He gestured at the plaza with his cup. "Eighty thousand people came to do good deeds for three days because a drunk fell down in a lane. The temples sold the congee. The district got the tourism. The foundation got the tax deduction. The kids got a weekend. And one boy died, and I will carry that to my grave, and the reason I will carry it to my grave is not that I do not care. It is that I do not know what I could have done differently, because the walk had a rope and the rope had volunteers and the boy stepped off the rope, and a rope is a rule, and a rule is not a wall."

"You sold him the fan."

"No." He said it without heat. "You sold him the fan. I *retailed* it. There is a difference, and the difference is the last two years, and you have never once been willing to look at it." He turned and looked at me for the first time, and the satisfaction was there, and under the satisfaction was the tiredness, and under the tiredness was the thing I had seen on the edge of Tan Xiao's stage, which is a man who has run out of a reason. "Let me tell you what I have become, because I think you deserve to hear it and because there is no one else in this city who would understand. I am the *operations* of a myth. The myth is yours. The myth

was always yours. I am the man who puts the myth in boxes and ships it. And I am very good at it, and I am very rich, and I am going to get richer, and I am never going to be able to stand on a stage and say a true thing, because a true thing would end the business, and the business is now bigger than me, and if I stopped, someone else would pick it up by morning." He drank his tea. "You wanted a saint. I gave the city a saint. The saint is a product. The product works. And the only person in this whole city who thinks that is wrong is the man who accidentally made the product, and the man who accidentally made the product is standing in front of me with a free bowl of congee that he has not eaten."

I did not have an answer. I had a boat, and a river, and a boy's screen saver, and eleven days of numbers, and no answer. And that, I think, was the last moment in the whole of that year in which I still believed that the thing could be stopped by a person saying the right sentence to another person. After that night, I stopped believing it. The festival went on. The drone show spelled 心 — *heart* — in the sky over the river, and the crowd filmed it, and the number went up, and a boy who had wanted to do something real became, for eleven days, a metric.

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I went home the next morning and I did not sleep, and at about seven, as I was leaving for the Trail, there was a girl at the mouth of the tunnel with a plastic bag, and it was Amei, fifteen, Aguang's sister, and she had come to give me something.

She had grown, in the way that children in this city grow, which is not much and too fast. She held the bag out and said, "My brother had these. I didn't know they were his until the Society came. Then I knew. I don't want them in the house."

I opened the bag. It had a cardboard fan in it — a second one, a spare, the same as the one that had gone into the drain, made out of a piece of a dumpling box and packing tape, with the ribs drawn on in marker and the crack drawn on too. And it had a printout, a screenshot, of a video the boy had saved: the clip of me, in the alley, in the first winter, bowing to four men. He had watched it, evidently, many times; the file was named with a date and a heart. And it had a

photograph, a real one, printed at a shop, of the two of them — Amei and Aguang — at a night market, eating skewers, laughing, with his arm around her. He had written something on the back in pen, and the writing was the rounded schoolboy hand I had seen on the guesthouse register at the edge of the map, and it said: 妹，等哥把钱还完，带你去坐长江索道。 — *Little sister, when I finish paying off the money, I'll take you on the Yangtze cableway.*

I stood at the mouth of the tunnel with the bag in my hand, and Amei looked at me with her brother's eyes and said, in a voice that was already the voice of a person who had stopped expecting adults to do anything:

"The Society wanted to put him on a flag. The man from the fan shop wanted to put him on a t-shirt. The foundation wanted to put him in a training center. Everybody wants a piece of him. I just want my brother." She turned to go. Then she stopped. "He saved my life once. Not like in the videos. Our father left and he dropped out and he worked, and he kept the lights on, and nobody filmed it, and there's no video. That's the whole of him. That's the thing they don't want. It's boring. It doesn't make a good video." She looked back at me. "Don't let them do it to you. You're the only one they can't buy. That's the only thing I know about you, and I know it from him."

She walked off into the morning. I went to the temple and swept the courtyard, because it was the only thing in the city that still asked nothing of me but my arm and did not put my face on a banner, and Chen Popo watched me from her chair, and the arhats looked down with their mended faces, and on the far side of the courtyard a man in a wheelchair watered a row of empty pots with an empty can.

CHAPTER 23

The Furnace

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The interception that worked came in the fourth week of the eleventh month, three weeks after the one that did not, and it worked, and it changed nothing, and that is why it belongs in this chapter.

A rider in the network had a cousin who worked the ticket window at the long-distance station in Chenjiagang, and the cousin had a rule, which was that she would not sell a southbound ticket to anyone under eighteen who came alone with new shoes and no luggage, and that she would instead call a number she had been given. The number was Yaoji's. Yaoji called the procurator, and the procurator called a colleague who called the station manager, because the law could not stop a citizen from buying a ticket but a station manager could decline the sale, and nobody in the whole chain of it could explain afterward which of them had actually done the stopping.

The girl was sixteen. She came to the window on a Tuesday morning with three hundred yuan and a screenshot and a destination two days south, and she had new shoes and no luggage and a school bag with her ID in it, and she was going to be a customer-service representative, and she was going to send money home for her mother's kidney. That was the whole of her plan. It was the same plan as Xiaomei's and the same plan as A-Jun's and the same plan as three hundred and forty missing persons. She was not stupid and she was not desperate; she was *hopeful*, which is a harder thing to argue with, because you cannot tell a hopeful child that the hope was sold to her, because the hope is real and the only thing she has.

Huajiao did the talking. That is the part I want to put down. Yaoji had said *let me send the woman from the station*, and the procurator had said *send a professional*, and Huajiao had said *she is sixteen and I am eighteen and she will not listen to a professional*, and she was right. She sat down on the bench with the girl and did not tell her the ads were lies and did not tell her the river was a trap and

did not take out the notebook. She took out her own phone and showed the girl two photographs: one of a room with four bunk beds and a plastic curtain and a poster of the cartoon monk on the hoverboard on the wall, and one of a girl of twenty in a hospital bed in the west of the province, with her mother sitting beside her, and neither of the photographs had a caption and neither of them needed one. She said, "I am not going to tell you not to go. You can go. You are sixteen. But I have been to the last station before the river, and I am telling you that the man who is going to meet you is called a guide, and the guide is not the recruiter, the guide is the person who is kind to you at the bus, and the kind one is the one who takes your ID. If you go, keep your ID. That is all I am going to say. Keep your ID and if you cannot keep it, count the doors and the windows on the bus and remember the licence plate, and if the phone stops working that is not your fault, and if you ever get to a bridge, go to the bridge."

The girl listened. She did not cry and she did not argue. She sat on the bench for a long time and looked at the two photographs, and then she stood up and went to the window and did not buy the ticket, and the rider's cousin gave her a bowl of noodles and called her mother, and the mother came on a scooter and took her home, and that was the whole of the win.

And here is the thing that makes the win nothing, and I am putting it in because the whole book has been about this. The recruiter's number was still on her phone. The agency was still registered. The ad was still on the school board and the bus station wall and the app. The guide whose job it was to meet her would meet another girl the next morning, and that girl would not have a station-window cousin and a rider network and a girl of eighteen who knew how to sit on a bench, and the funnel would take her the way it takes three hundred and forty, and the procurator's folder would get one page thicker, and the page would end, as every page in that folder ended, at a river that none of us were allowed to cross.

We saved one that week. I want to put the number down plainly, because the city will make a clip out of it if I do not, and the clip would say *the network saved a girl*, and the true sentence is smaller and colder and is the only one I can defend: *the network taught one girl, for one morning, to count the doors on the bus.* The rest was the market, and the market did not even notice, and the guide was

at the station the next morning, and I know that because Yaoji had someone watch, and Yaoji wrote it in the notebook, and the notebook is in the tea room, and the page is there, and a page is not a door.

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Huajiao found A-Biao the way she found everything, which is to say she found the thing next to the thing, because a person who has spent their childhood being trained to notice what is behind a man notices the *behind* first.

She did not find him through the police and she did not find him through Old K. She found him through his mother.

She went back to the market and stood at the vegetable stall for three days in a row, buying a cabbage and a handful of ginger and asking nothing, and on the third day the woman who had raised A-Biao looked at her and said, "You are the one from the river town," and Huajiao said yes, and the woman said, "He has a *room* here. He keeps a room. He told me it is for when he comes home. He does not come home." And she gave Huajiao an address in the old district, a street of rented rooms behind a car-repair yard, and she gave it the way a mother gives a thing she has decided to stop protecting, which is with her whole face and no words at all.

The address led to a labor-dispatch dormitory: a three-storey brick building with a yard full of engine parts, a kitchen, a dormitory on the second floor, and a boiler room in the basement, because the dormitory had been a factory office and the factory had left and the boiler had stayed. It was not a prison. That is the thing I need the reader to understand. It was a *hostel*. It had beds and a kitchen and a registration book and a man at the door who was not a guard, only a man who was paid to sit at the door. Inside it, on the night we went, there were four young women and two young men who were "waiting for placement," and one of them was Xiaomei, and none of them were locked in, and every one of them believed, with the terrible specific hope of the young and the poor, that they were two days from a job that would send money home.

By then I had stopped waiting for other people to decide. The failed interception — the girl I had let onto the bus with my silence — had done to me what the bottle had not: it had made me want to act, and the wanting was new in

me, and I did not examine it, because examining it would have slowed it down. So when the address came, I told Yaoji the thing that was mine to decide. "When we have her, we do not wait for a warrant," I said. "The warrant is a page. The girl is a girl. We go the night we find them."

That decision was mine. I want the record to say it, because everything that happened in the dormitory happened because of it, and I am not going to let the fire be nobody's fault.

Huajiao did not tell me she was going. She told Yaoji, and Yaoji told me, because Yaoji had made a promise to me a year earlier that he would always tell me when she went somewhere alone, and he had kept the promise for a year and hated every minute of it and kept it anyway. I got the message at eight in the evening, and I was at the car-repair yard by nine, and the crew was already there: Yaoji in the van two streets away with the radio; Wen Xiaoyang and two riders at the mouth of the alley; and Huajiao at the gate of the yard in a dark jacket, waiting, because she had known I would come and had decided not to argue.

The plan was not a plan. It was three lines. *Walk the girls out through the yard. Do not touch the man at the door unless he touches you. If it goes bad, get to the street and call the procurator.*

We went in through the yard.

The man at the door was watching his phone, and Huajiao walked past him fast and low and said something to him in dialect that I did not catch, and whatever she said made him look up, and by the time he looked up Wen Xiaoyang and the riders were blocking the yard and I was walking up the stairs, and the man at the door made the calculation that a man like him makes in a situation like that, which is *there are more of them than there are of me and none of them have a gun*, and he did not move.

The dormitory was on the second floor. The girls were in the back room. I want to describe the room accurately, because I have heard it described wrongly, by people who were not there, as a cage. It was not a cage. It was a room with four bunk beds and a window with a plastic curtain and a plastic basin and a poster of a cartoon monk on the wall — a "Little Ji Gong" poster, the children's brand, the hoverboard one — and on the beds there were four young women, of whom two were asleep and one was crying quietly and one was sitting up with

her phone, and they were not tied and not gagged and not, by any measure the law uses, detained. They were *waiting*. The law does not have a count for waiting. That is the whole skill of the machine: it does not have to hold you. It only has to make you wait in a room with a poster of a monk.

Xiaomei was the one with the phone. She looked at me in the doorway and she did not know me, because I had never met her; I was a man in a yellow jacket who had come up the stairs of a dormitory at night, and her whole body went tight the way a body goes tight when it has been taught, in four days, that a man in the doorway is a negotiation. I said her name. She did not move. And then Huajiao was behind me, small and still, and she said, "Xiaomei. The logistics point. The warehouse man. I was the one at the gate." And something in Xiaomei's face let go, and she stood up, and she said, in a small flat voice, "I don't have my bag."

"Your bag doesn't matter," Huajiao said. "You matter. There's a van two streets away. Come on."

And that is when A-Biao came up the stairs behind us, with a man I had not seen, and the night became the thing the night became.

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I am not going to describe the fight in detail. There were four of them in the end, and three of us, and it was not a martial-arts thing; it was a stairwell thing, ugly and close and over in about ninety seconds, and the men were not professionals and we were not professionals, and what decided it was Yaoji's radio and the two riders in the yard and the fact that a stairwell in a city is a *known quantity* to four delivery riders and an unknown one to four men who spend their days on buses. A-Biao went down on the landing and Wen Xiaoyang put the other one against the wall, and Huajiao got the girls moving, and for about eleven seconds it was going to be over.

And then the boiler room went up.

I do not know how. The police report would later say an electrical fault in the aging boiler, which is the same phrase the city had used for the temple, and a man at the door with a lighter and a heap of cardboard in a basement, which is the same mechanism that burned the east cloister, and I have never been able to

decide which, and I have decided that the not-deciding is the honest place to stand, because the same city that burned a temple with foam rubber can burn a dormitory with cardboard, and neither of those facts cancels the other. What I know is that we were on the second floor and the smoke came up the stairwell and the lights went out, and the building, which had one door and no second exit and a kitchen at the back, became a room full of people who could not breathe.

What happened next is the part I have told the least, because it is the part that does not make anybody look good, and I am going to tell it because the book has taught me that the parts that do not make anybody look good are the only parts that are true.

The girls ran for the stairs. That is what people do. A person does not stand in a smoke-filled room and reason; a person goes for the door they came in. And the door they came in was the door the smoke was coming up. Huajiao, coming up the last of the stairs with the last of the girls, met the first of them at the turn, and there was a compression at the turn, and in the compression, in the dark, Wen Xiaoyang — who had been at the top of the stairs — got pushed and went down, and his jacket caught on the boiler-room door that was open at the bottom, and the sleeve of his jacket went up with the flame.

I heard him. That is the sound I will carry. A man whose jacket is burning makes a sound that is not a scream and not a word; it is the sound a person makes when they have discovered that the world contains pain of a kind they did not agree to. Huajiao heard it too, and she did the thing that I have come to believe was the whole of the rewritten rule, the rule about walking in. She stopped. She was at the top of the stairs with two girls in front of her and a burning man below her and the door behind her and the fire under the floor, and the arithmetic of the old rules said *the mission first, the mission is the girls, the man in the stairwell is a cost*. And she stopped. And she turned around. And she went down into the smoke for a man who was not her mother and not her mission and not part of any file, because he had walked in, and the rule said: *if the person is walking in, you walk in too.*

I was on the landing above. I went down after her. We got Wen Xiaoyang out between us — he was conscious and he was screaming and then he was not

screaming and that was worse — and we got the last two girls out through the kitchen, which had a back window onto the car-repair yard, and the riders took the window out with a scooter and a length of pipe, and the whole thing took about four minutes that I have not been able to reconstruct in order in all the years since.

The fire did not kill anyone. That is the fact I hold on to. Six people went to the hospital: four girls, one man at the door, and Wen Xiaoyang, whose left arm and the left side of his neck took the burns, third degree, and who would carry, for the rest of his life, a scar in the shape of a jacket collar and a hand he could not fully open.

A-Biao did not make it out the front. He went down and the fire came up, and the police later found him in the boiler room, where he had evidently gone to try to put it out, or to get something out, or to hide; the report did not say. He was twenty-nine. He had a mother who sold vegetables in a market and a school photo on her wall, and I am putting that in the book because she asked me to, on the day I went to see her, which I did, alone, without a camera, and she did not blame me and she did not forgive me, and she said only, "Tell them he was two people. Tell them the man in the photo is real. Tell them the other one was real too." I have tried to do that. This is me doing it.

Huajiao did not sleep for two days after the fire. On the second night she had a seizure — her first in more than a year, the seizure the doctors had said might come back with stress, the thing that had been in her since the first killing, in an alley, a year and a half before — and Wang Niangniang found her on the floor of the room above the tunnel and held her head and did not call anyone, because calling anyone would have put a hospital and a form and a file between the girl and the only person who could hold her. She came out of it about four in the morning. And in the grey light, on the floor, with the auntie's hand flat on her back, she said the thing that was, I think, the end of the first half of her life and the beginning of the second.

"I did not kill him," she said. "I had him on the landing. I had the knife in my hand and I did not use it. I don't know if that was the rule or if it was the fear. The rule says walk in. It doesn't say what to do with the man on the stairs. I could have killed him in the stairwell and I would have been right, by the old

rules, by everything my mother wrote. And I did not. And he burned anyway. And I don't know if I saved anything or if I just stood there and watched a man become a fact." She was quiet for a long time. "I want to know whether it counts. Whether not killing him *counts* for anything, when he died anyway."

Wang Niangniang did not answer. Wang Niangniang was not a woman who answered questions like that. She sat on the floor with her hand on the girl's back until the light came up, and then she got up and made congee, and the entire answer she gave was the congee. It was enough. It was, I have come to believe, the only answer there is, and it is the same answer the abbot gave a drunk in a temple courtyard, once, the winter before, which is: *eat, and then sweep, and the meaning will have to wait until you have eaten and swept.*

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The fire at the labor-dispatch dormitory made the news for four days, which was three days longer than the boy in the river.

The coverage was about the fire, and about the visas and the routes and the "rescue of four young women," and about the foundation's pledge to fund a "safe migration information center," and about the arrest of two men, and then it was about something else. The procurator's office opened a file on the funnel and closed it within the month, for the same reason it had always closed: *jurisdiction ends at the border*. Jiang Xue put the dormitory file in the drawer with her brother's file, and the drawer got heavier by one folder, which is a thing a drawer can carry and a person cannot.

Wen Xiaoyang was in the hospital for six weeks. I went every day for the first two weeks, and then every other day, and then once a week, because he asked me to stop coming so often, and because his sister had come back from her rebuild and was sitting with him and did not need me in the room. He never once blamed me. That is the thing about the people in this book who get hurt: they never once blame the person the reader expects them to blame, because they have all, each of them, been in the city long enough to know that a burn is a burn and the person who lights the match is only the last link in a chain that starts somewhere no one can point to.

The last thing I will put in this chapter is the poster. When the police cleared the dormitory, they took the things down from the walls and put them in an evidence room, and among the things was the "Little Ji Gong" poster from the girls' room — the children's brand, the hoverboard, the cartoon monk with the clean robe and the fan. The police photographed it and logged it and put it in a box. And in the photograph in the file, you can see, in the corner of the poster, at the bottom where the brand mark goes, the small printed logo of the foundation, which had licensed the character, and which had, on a stage by the river three weeks earlier, sponsored the festival where a boy drowned because a story had taught him that the water would hold him.

That is the furnace. It is not a metaphor. It is a room, and it had a poster on the wall, and the poster was of me.

CHAPTER 24

The Bargain

The waiting period between the closings and the judgment was eleven weeks, because the panel had other cases and because a syndicate trial is not a television show, whatever the second screens had decided, and in those eleven weeks the whole city did what a city does at the end of a season of litigation, which is to *settle*.

The settlements were not about the law. That is the thing I want to put at the top. Not one of the settlements in the autumn was a legal settlement; they were all *life settlements*, made by people who had understood that the verdict, whatever it was, would not change the shape of the floor they stood on, and who were trying to get better floor before the lights went out.

Before the settlements, I am going to set down what the network actually did in those eleven weeks, because the trial was the loud thing and the network was the quiet thing, and the quiet thing is the only thing that survived.

It ran out of the back room of the barbershop and out of Yaoji's office and out of forty telephones. The riders carried two things now instead of one: the food, and the small errands of the poor that no platform has a button for. A woman in Jiulongpo needed a document fetched from a district office; a runner fetched it. A man in Shapingba needed someone to sit with his mother while he went to the hearing; a retired auntie sat with her. A vendor whose stall had been taken needed a witness; Liu Niangniang, who remembered everything, was the witness. None of it was heroic and none of it was filmed and all of it ran on the same arithmetic the aunties had run for thirty years, which is that a city is a *body* and a body has to circulate, and if the buses and the offices and the loans will not circulate the small things, then the small things must be carried by hand.

Yaoji kept the dispatch. He had eleven riders by then and a whiteboard with coloured magnets and a rule that no runner carried anything illegal and no runner carried a knife. The whiteboard looked like a child's game and was the most disciplined thing I have ever seen, because every magnet was a person and

every person had a name and a need and a time, and Yaoji moved them the way a heart moves blood, and he did it with a bad side and a bad sleep and a radio on his belt, and he did not once, in the whole of the eleven weeks, lose a person.

I want to give one example, because the reader has followed me through trials and fires and festivals and deserves to see what the ordinary work was. In the eighth of the eleven weeks, a woman came to the barbershop. She was about forty and she sold socks from a mat on the lower road, and a collection company had seized her stock over a debt that was not hers — it was her brother's, and the brother had put her name on the paper — and she had four hundred yuan in socks gone and a mat with nothing on it and a child to feed. She did not want us to confront anyone. She had learned, from the whole year of the trial, that confronting anyone was how people got hurt. She wanted someone to go to the office and *ask*, politely, for the stock, and to find out whether the debt could be moved back to the brother's name where it belonged.

Yaoji put it on the whiteboard. A rider in the network happened to know the office — the Yubei one, the one with the reception desk and the young woman who said good morning — and the woman who said good morning turned out to be a woman who had once bought socks from this seller's mat, and remembered her. I am not making that up. This city is that size. The socks came back the next week, on the mat, in the right order, because the collection office's young woman had a memory and a mother who had raised her to return what was not hers, and because the debt was genuinely the brother's and the paperwork was genuinely wrong, and because a polite request from a person who is not afraid and not angry is the deadliest thing in any institution in this country.

That is the network. Not the radios and the codes and the vault. A rider who happened to know an office and a woman who happened to have bought socks. It is unphotogenic. It cannot be made into a clip. There is no villain in it and no hero and no cost worth itemizing, and it is the only thing in this whole book that I would describe as *good*, and it is the thing nobody will ever make a documentary about, because a documentary needs a face and the face of the socks is a woman on a mat who does not want to be filmed.

And there was a man we turned away. I am putting him in because a network that only ever helps is a clip, and the network was not a clip. He came in the

ninth week, a man of about sixty with a photograph in a plastic sleeve, and his daughter had been gone four months, and he had the same recruiting ad and the same bus timetable and the same silence, and he asked us to find her. The aunties looked at the photograph for a long time. And then Zhang Niangniang said the thing I have not been able to forget.

"We cannot," she said. "The trial is open. Every one of us is in a file. If we go over the river now, we put the whole table in the file, and then there is no table, and there is no one to help the next father."

The man said, "Then who helps me." And nobody answered, because there is no answer, and he took his photograph and went out, and I did not follow him, and the aunties dealt the next hand, and none of us looked at each other for a while. That is the compromise. We were good, and we were good *up to the point where being good cost the table*, and past that point we were arithmetic, and I have never been able to decide whether the arithmetic was courage or cowardice, and I have decided that the not-deciding is the honest place to stand.

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Ma-ge settled first. He came to the tea room in the twelfth month with a plastic bag of oranges and the exercise book, and he sat down and peeled one and said, "I am going to tell you what I want and then I am going to leave, because I do not want to be here long. I want a *page*. One page, in the file, with my name on it, saying that I cooperated. Not for the police. For the *men*. The men above the men need to know that Ma-ge gave the procurator a ledger, because a coward who has given the procurator a ledger is a coward who is *under the state's eye*, and the state's eye is the only umbrella I can afford." He ate the orange. "In exchange, I will give you the last thing I have. The name of the man who bought my book, and the name of the man above him, and the account the money went through. It is the last page of the last book I own. When I give it to you, I am nothing but a man with a laundry machine, and that is all I will ever be, and I have decided that I would rather be that than a man who is useful to the men above the men."

He gave it to us. He rolled the orange peel into a ball and left it on the table beside the exercise book, and he got up and went out through the barbershop with the sign that said *tea seats*, and I never saw him again in the whole of that

year, and I have kept the exercise book, and it is on the shelf in the room with the wall, next to the pouch that is no longer there.

Tian Tian settled differently, because a cop cannot settle. She came to the tea room once, in plain clothes, off duty, and sat with the aunties for a while and did not eat, and then she told us the thing she had come to tell. The department had moved her to a desk, which was the reward for honesty, and her daughter needed a treatment that cost more than the desk paid, and the treatment had, that month, been paid for by an anonymous donation through a fund administered by the hospital, and the fund was legitimate, and the donation was real, and the donor was anonymous, and she had spent a week trying to find out who it was, and she had found out, and it was a shell of a shell of the foundation. "So the son is paying for my daughter," she said, flatly. "He does not say so. He does not expect anything. He does not have to expect anything. He has given me a debt that I cannot repay and cannot refuse, because refusing would cost my daughter, and now every time I look at her I will see a gap in the ledger." She looked at Wang Niangniang, who had put a bowl in front of her. "I came to tell you so that someone would know. That is all a person can do with a thing like this. Tell someone who will not use it."

Jiefeng settled last, and his settlement was the one that mattered.

The temple's east cloister had been rebuilt, and the arhat hall had four hundred and thirty-nine statues in place, and sixty-one were still in the ground, and two hundred and fourteen still had the grey paste on their faces, and the temple had no money and a congee line that grew every month and a donor plaque with the family's name on it that he had promised to take down and had not yet taken down. And in the twelfth week of the waiting, the foundation's liaison came to the temple with an offer, and the offer was this: the foundation would fund the restoration of all sixty-one missing arhats, and would endow the congee kitchen for ten years in the abbot's name, and would retire the plaque and replace it with a plaque bearing only the temple's name. And in exchange the temple board would sign a letter supporting the foundation's "independent inquiry" — the inquiry the son had announced at the trial — and would allow the inquiry to list the temple among its "partner institutions."

I heard the offer from Jingchen, who heard it from the meeting, and read the rest of it later, in the filings the trust was required to publish; and then I went to Jiefeng in the accounts room and asked him the question straight.

"Are you going to sign?"

Jiefeng was at the ledger with his back to the window, in the grey robe, and he did not look up for a moment, and then he did, and he had a piece of grey paste on his thumb, because he had been out with the workmen who were re-mending the mends.

"Do you know how many bowls of congee we served last month?" he said. "One thousand and forty. A year ago it was four hundred. The line gets longer because the city is getting poorer, and the city is getting poorer because the collection practices of the companies in that trial moved money out of the bottom and into the top, and the top is now a foundation, and the foundation is offering to pay for the congee. If I refuse, the statues stay in the ground and the congee stays at one thousand and forty bowls and the temple stays a rebuilt shell with a donor's name on the wall. If I sign, the statues come back and the congee goes to two thousand bowls and the donor's name comes down." He set the paste down. "You are going to tell me that I am doing institution arithmetic. I am. You are going to tell me that the abbot would have refused. He would have. The abbot refused the money for years, and the temple burned, and he died going back into it for a person who did not exist, and his ashes are in a jar behind a wall with a photograph and no inscription because the board could not agree on a sentence." He looked at me with the flat arithmetic eyes. "I have spent three years learning the difference between the abbot and me. The difference is not that he was holier. The difference is that he could afford to say no, because he had no plan for the year after, and I have a plan for the year after, and the plan is congee. The statues are the statues. The abbot is dead. I can feed two thousand people a week, and I am going to feed two thousand people a week, and when I stand in front of the wheel of judgment I will say: I gave them a roof and I gave them rice, and the man who paid for it was a man I could not stop, and I took his money because the money is not the man, and the congee is the congee."

"That's what your father said," I said. "The chairman. In the car. *Old wiring in a temple is a tragedy everyone understands.*"

Jiefeng did not flinch. He had stopped flinching a long time ago.

"No," he said. "That is what *you* said, when you took the room for the man who burned the temple, and when you took the congee from the hand that fed the man who burned it, and when you walked the Trail that the aunties gave you while the son built his foundation around you and you called it sobriety. The man who can afford to refuse is a man with no one to feed. The abbot was that man. You are not. I am not. The city is not. There is no clean money in a city of thirty million, and the only question is what you buy with the dirty kind, and I am going to buy statues and congee, and you can put it in your book."

He signed. The sixty-one statues came out of the ground and were re-made and set in their rows, and the congee line went to two thousand bowls, and the donor's plaque came down and a new plaque went up with only the temple's name, and the foundation's inquiry listed the temple among its partner institutions, and the son's name appeared in the same sentence as the abbot's, in a document that was published and filed and, in eleven years, will be the only document most people ever read about that temple.

That was the bargain Tan Xiao won. He did not win it in the courtroom, and he did not win it with money, and he did not win it by lying. He won it by being *patient*, and by offering a man who wanted to feed people the only thing that mattered to him, and by understanding, better than any of us, that the way to own a memory is not to buy the memory. It is to buy the *bowl* the memory is served in. And the last sentence of the bargain belongs to the abbot, who was not there to say it, and who would have said it without raising his voice, and who had, in fact, said it once, in a courtyard, to a drunk, once, in a courtyard, and I had not understood it until that December.

He had said: *The difference is who it belongs to. The fall belongs to the crowd. The help belongs to the girl.*

CHAPTER 25

The Heir's Gambit

Tan Xiao made his move in the first week of the new year, and it was the best move I have ever seen a man make, and I am going to write it out in full, because if this book has a villain and if the villain is worth the reader's time, then the villain's move is the thing the reader should have to sit with.

He gave away the tower.

Not all of it. He gave away the part that could not be defended and kept the part that could. He announced, at a press conference held in the atrium of the Grand Buddha Tower, with the golden Buddha behind him and the cameras in a semicircle and the aunties watching on the phone at the tea-room table, that the tower's commercial floors — the mall, the hotel, the offices, the "mindfulness" wings — would be transferred to a newly formed municipal cultural trust, on terms that would leave the family with a minority stake and no operational control. He announced that the foundation would dissolve and be replaced by a new entity with an independent board, a published annual audit, and no family seat. He announced that he would personally fund, for ten years, the aquatic-safety training center in the name of the boy who drowned at his festival, and a legal-aid clinic for the victims of the companies his father had built, and a scholarship for the children of the men and women whose lives the companies had ruined. He announced that he would not stand for any office, accept any title, or lend his name to any public project for five years. And then he did the thing that made the whole press conference untouchable, which was to apologize *without excusing*, in a single sentence that the platforms would play for a decade.

"I am not the victim of my father," he said. "I am the *beneficiary* of my father, and I am going to spend the rest of my life converting the benefit into a repayment. I do not ask the city to forgive me. I ask the city to *watch me*, because watching is the only audit that works."

The city watched him. It watched him for the whole of the press conference, and then it watched the ninety-second clip, and then it watched the slowed clip

with the piano, and then it did the thing that a city does at the end of a long story, which is to *decide*, and what it decided was that the son was the good man the father had not been, and that the healing had begun, and that the dark thing had been resolved. The comment sections filled with the word 格局 — *vision*, *magnanimity* — which is the highest compliment this city pays and the cheapest coin it owns. A woman on a morning television program said, with genuine tears, that she had not expected to feel hope from a story that began with a fire, and the anchor agreed, and they moved on to the weather.

I sat in the tea room and watched the whole of it on the aunties' phone, and I did the arithmetic out loud, because the aunties deserved to hear it and because someone in the city had to say the number.

"He gave away the mall," I said. "He kept the brand. The mall was the thing the trial could touch. The brand was the thing the trial could not. He gave away the tower and kept the *name*, and the name is now the name on the toothbrushes and the cold tea and the cartoon monk and the aquatic-safety center and the legal-aid clinic, and it is now a *clean* name, because he cleaned it himself, with the whole city watching, and the cleaning is the best advertising the name has ever had." I put the phone down. "He is not the next generation of criminal. He is the next generation of *compassion*. And compassion is the best business model in this country, because it has no competitor and no ceiling and it never has to say the name of the thing it is compensating for."

Liu Niangniang said, "He is very good." Wang Niangniang said nothing and put the kettle on. And Zhang Niangniang, who had watched four generations of men say beautiful things in tunnels and had never once been moved, put down a tile and said the sentence I have carried ever since.

"He is the whole city," she said. "He is what the city would be if the city had a face. That is why the city loves him. He is the *mirror*, Xiao Li. You are the *shard*. Nobody builds an empire on a shard. That is the difference between the two of you, and it is not a difference you can beat him in, and it is not a difference you should want to." She picked up her hand. "You should want to be the shard. The shard is the only part that cuts."

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The verdict was scheduled for the end of the first month.

In the weeks before it, the city did what the city did: it moved on. The festival was cleaned up, the banners were taken down, the donation boxes were collected, and the platforms went back to the ordinary seasons of a city's attention — a restaurant opening, a celebrity marriage, a flood in a neighboring province, a new bridge. The Society stopped the mediations and went back to helping old women cross the stairs, and the members who had taken the drives from the print shop were never found, and the drives were never recovered, and Yingtao's rain was uploaded in twenty mirrors over twelve months and is still falling somewhere, and nobody in a position of power has ever mentioned it.

Xiaomei went home to her mother in the west, and her mother took her to a hospital, and she is a person I will not describe further, because she is a real girl and not a character, and because the only thing I owe her is the silence she asked for. Wen Xiaoyang came out of the hospital with a scar collar and a hand that did not fully close, and he took a desk job with Yaoji's company, and he and his sister rebuilt the years their father had spent in Guangdong, in the slow, unphotogenic, lunch-by-lunch way that I had described to their father in the tunnel the year before, and which is the only forgiveness that ever actually happens in this city.

And A-Jun, the boy in the river, stayed dead. That is the fact that the documentary the son funded did not put in its final cut, because the final cut of the documentary was about healing, and there is no healing in a river, and the boy's mother had asked that his name not be used anymore, and the foundation had agreed, respectfully, and the agreement was reported as a kindness. He had a screen saver of my face. He was twenty. He had wanted to do something real. And the last I will say of him is this: on the fourth day, when the hashtag died and the city moved on, his mother posted one thing on her own account, and it was not a quote and not a photograph and not a call to action. It said: 今天我买了鱼。他说他喜欢吃鱼。我一个人吃完了。 — *Today I bought fish. He said he liked fish. I ate it alone.* And there were eleven likes.

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The night before the judgment, I could not sleep, and I walked the Trail at two in the morning, which was against the aunties' rule, because the rule was

dawn and because a man with a route is a man with a route, not a man with an insomnia.

The city was quiet the way a city is never quiet, which is to say there was still the traffic and still the fried-food smell and still the hum of the generation that runs under everything, but the low world was empty and the fog was down and the towers were gone, and I walked the ridge above the old town with my gourd on my belt and the two fans in my jacket, the real one with the knot and the cardboard half from the drain, and I thought about the verdict that would be read in the morning, and I did the arithmetic for the last time, and the arithmetic was this.

The trial would convict some corporals and some shells and perhaps one lieutenant. It would dissolve some entities and fine some accounts and return some money to some people. It would not convict the son, because the son had committed no prosecutable crime, and it would not convict the dead man, because the dead man was dead, and it would not heal the fire, and it would not return the sixty-one arhats except through the foundation's money, and it would not bring back the guard or the cook or the imitator or the boy in the river, and it would not answer the one question the city had actually asked, which was *why*.

And I understood, walking, that the verdict would not be the ending, because there is no ending, because the machine that had burned the temple and made the product and drowned the boy and bought the room was not a machine that a verdict could switch off. It was a *market*. It was the shape of a city that had learned to turn every true thing into a product and every product into a feeling and every feeling into a sale, and the only thing I had ever had that the market could not process was the fact that I had refused to sign the form.

I stopped at the turn above the old church, where the boy with the cardboard fan had stood in the spring, and I stood there for a while in the fog, and somewhere below me the river did what the river does, and somewhere above me the towers waited for the sun to burn the fog off, and I did not see anyone, and I did not raise my gourd to anyone, and the city did not stop.

I was sober. The count was small. That was the whole of the arithmetic that mattered, and it was the only thing in the whole of the year that I had actually chosen.

And then, in the fog, up ahead, at the top of the next flight of steps, there was nothing. I stood there for a long moment and looked at the empty stone and listened to the river and waited for the thing the city had taught me to wait for, and the thing did not come. A man crossed a bridge somewhere below me and did not see me. The fog was just fog. I did not call out, and I did not tell a single person, and I have told no one until this page that on the last night before the judgment I stood on the Trail and looked for a sign and got the empty low world instead, and that the not-getting was, for once, the whole of what I needed.

The judgment was in the morning. I walked down the hill and went to bed, and slept, for the first time in a week, and the city kept its options open.

CHAPTER 26

The Night Before

Before I walked the Trail at two in the morning and found it empty, we had gathered, the whole of us, in the back room of the barbershop with the sign that said *tea seats*, because Wang Niangniang had decided that a family does not go into a judgment scattered.

She cooked. That was the whole of the ceremony: she cooked, and the aunties dealt tiles that nobody was playing for money, and Jingchen brought the congee pot from the temple because the temple's congee was now the temple's congee and the aunties' congee was theirs, and the two pots sat at the ends of the table like two dynasties, and in the middle there were noodles and tripe and a fish and a bowl of pickled beans and the last of the winter's cured pork, and there were eleven people in the room and one empty chair, which was the chair the abbot had never sat in, and which the aunties had begun leaving empty about a year earlier and had never explained.

Yaoji was there, with the radio on his belt, because Yaoji never took the radio off. Huajiao was there, in the corner, with the notebook. Wen Xiaoyang came, with the scar collar under his shirt and the hand that did not fully close resting on the table, and his sister Wen Xiaoyu came with him, and the two of them sat together and did not talk much and ate, and it was the first time the four of us — the girl from the wall in the first winter, her brother from the cableway, the cousin with the radio, and me — had sat at one table since the whole thing had begun. And Dao-ge came. That was the surprise. Wang Niangniang had sent a runner to the temple with a bowl and an invitation, and the runner had come back saying the groundskeeper could not leave the courtyard, and Wang Niangniang had said, "Then we will bring the courtyard," and she had sent the bowl and a chair and told the runner to tell him that a chair at a table is not a room and does not obligate him to anything, and he had come, in his wheelchair, pushed by a novice, and he sat at the end of the table with the fish near his elbow and did not say anything for the first hour.

I did not say anything either, for a while. I sat and ate and watched the room. And I understood, watching, that this was what the entire year had been about, and that no verdict could touch it, and that it was made of the cheapest materials in the city — noodles, a kettle, a table, an empty chair, three old women who had kept the same room for thirty years — and that a man could spend his whole life building a tower and never once have this, and that the man in the tower knew it, and that was, in the end, the whole of the difference between Tan Xiao and me.

The talk at the table, that night, was not about the trial. That is the part of a found family a courtroom cannot put in a file: they do not talk about the case. They talked about the fish, and the price of the fish, and a cousin of Liu Niangniang's who had married a man from Fuling, and the fact that Jingchen had been asked to officiate a wedding and had gotten two of the old words wrong the first time and had practiced them in the mirror for a week, and the fact that Wen Xiaoyang had been told he could not ride a scooter again for a year, and the fact that Huajiao had, that month, passed an exam at the vocational school — passed it, first try, with a mark of eighty-one, in a subject called Introduction to E-Commerce, which she despised and had studied anyway — and the fact was announced to the table by Wang Niangniang in the tone of a woman announcing a treaty, and Huajiao went red and stared at her bowl and did not, for the rest of the evening, look at anyone, and the aunties did not make her.

That is what the room was for. That is what the whole network was for, underneath the radios and the codes and the files. It was a room where a girl could pass an exam that she despised and be celebrated for it, and where a man in a wheelchair who had burned a temple could eat a fish and be left alone, and where a coward's ledger and a boy's cardboard fan and a woman's archive could be, for one night, the ordinary furniture of a family.

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Yingtao came late.

She had been three months in the rain — uploading, mirroring, distributing, sleeping at odd hours in the stripped room above the print shop — and when she came up the stairs of the barbershop she looked thinner than I had ever seen her and younger, somehow, the way a person looks when they have finally put down

a thing they have been carrying so long that the putting down takes the age off them and leaves the childhood underneath. She had a gimbal in a bag and a hard drive in her hand, and she put both under the table and sat down and ate two bowls without speaking, and the aunties fed her the way water works around a stone.

After the table broke up — after the old aunties had dealt the last hand, after Wen Xiaoyang and his sister had gone, after Dao-ge had been wheeled down the slope by the novice, after Jingchen had carried the congee pot back to the temple — Yingtao and I were the only ones left. And because she had been silent for three months, and because I had been carrying a small, specific guilt about her, and because the night before a judgment is a night for the things that cannot be said across a table with aunties, I did the thing I had never quite dared to do, which was to ask her the question I had owed her since the sixth month.

"Are we all right?"

She looked at me for a while. "That's the first time you've asked me anything," she said. "In two years. You ask the aunties things. You ask the girl things. You've never asked me a thing. You only ever *give* me things — the hands, the back of the head, the six minutes, the yes at the archive. You've given me every piece of you except the piece that asks." She picked up her bowl and did not eat from it. "I've been angry about it for about a year. I am not angry tonight, because tonight I figured out why."

"Why?"

"Because I asked you for the face, and you wouldn't give it, and I thought it was because you didn't trust me. But it wasn't that. It was that if I had the face, then the archive would have a face, and the face would be a product, and what I actually love is the one man in this city who will not sell the product. So I don't want the face. I want the *man*, and the man is the thing that keeps refusing, and you are never going to refuse me, because I'm inside the wall." She set the bowl down. "So we're all right. We are the most all-right two people in this city, and we are all-right in a way that cannot go anywhere, because every direction is a directory. Do you understand? There is no version of us that isn't the archive. The woman who films and the man who refuses to be filmed are not a couple. They are a *structure*."

I understood. That is the most honest thing I can put in this chapter. I understood exactly what she meant, and it was the same thing I had known since the convenience store, a year and a half before, and neither of us said the word that would have made it sad. We got up and went out and walked, because neither of us wanted to go home, and somewhere past midnight we ended up at a hotpot place near the bus station that was open for the taxi drivers, the kind of place with plastic stools and a gas ring on the table and a pot with nine squares, and we sat down at three in the morning with a pot between us and ordered too much food, because a person who has been in the rain for three months deserves too much food, and we talked about the dead.

Somewhere in the second hour she turned on me, and it came out of the night and the rain and the three months, and it was not about the drives and it was entirely about the drives.

"You know what I have never forgiven you for," she said. "You told me to keep it anonymous. And then you told the aunties where it was, because you tell the aunties everything, and four people walked up a stair in the daytime with two plastic bags, and a year and a half of my life went out the door, and where were you. You were sweeping a courtyard."

"That's not fair."

"No," she said. "It isn't." And then she said the thing we had both been not-saying since the winter. "And the clip. The alley clip. I edited it. I named you. And a boy with a cardboard fan watched it and made himself a fan."

The hotpot boiled between us. I could have said the kind thing. I have said the kind thing in every bad moment of this book, and the kind thing is a way of not being in the room. So I said the true thing instead, and the true thing was cruel.

"You're not sorry about the clip," I said. "You're sorry that it worked. You're sorry that the thing that made you is the thing that killed him, and you would run it again, because if you hadn't run it, you would be nobody, and being nobody is the one thing you cannot stand."

She did not flinch. She had been trained to read a face before a fight, and she read mine, and she took it, and she set it down between us like a bowl she did not intend to pick up again. And then she did not leave. That was the thing about

Yingtao. Anybody else would have left. She stayed, and finished her tea, and did not apologize either, and I did not move, and I did not apologize, because an apology would have been another way of not being in the room.

We talked about the abbot, and I told her what I had never told anyone, which was the sound of him laughing in the smoke; and she told me what she had never told anyone, which was the last message Zhang Maliu sent her before the alley, which was a photograph of a bowl of noodles with the caption *this is the one you should film*, and which she had never been able to look at since. We talked about their names, and the fact that the city had turned all of them into a list, and the fact that the list was the only thing the city could do with a person, and the fact that the list was, in the end, better than nothing. We did not talk about the trial. We did not talk about the son. We did not talk about the market or the movement or the drives in the plastic bags. We talked about a monk and a cook, and we ate until about five, and somewhere in the middle of it she put her head down on her folded arms on the table and fell asleep, in the way that people fall asleep when they have been holding a thing for three months and have finally, for one night, put it down.

I did not move. I sat on a plastic stool in a hotpot place near the bus station at five in the morning with a woman asleep on my table and the last of the fire under the pot and the taxi drivers coming and going, and I did not move for four hours, because she had asked me for one thing in two years and it was not the face, and it was not the hands, and it was not the six minutes. It was this. It was the not moving. And I have never been in a room in my life where what I had to do was so small and so much, and I did it, and the city kept its hours, and when she woke up at nine she said "I fell asleep," and I said "You did," and she said "Why didn't you wake me," and I said "You were tired," and she looked at me for a long moment and then she did not say anything, and we walked out into the morning and went to the courthouse.

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My mother called at seven, while I was still in the tea room washing the bowls.

I had not spoken to her on the telephone in two years. She had sent the messages — the weather, the food, the photograph requests, the *what are you doing with your life* — and I had answered perhaps three of them, and the last time she had called I had watched it ring and had not picked it up, and the watching had become a wall, and the wall had become a habit, and the habit was what lay between us, and what lay between us was not anger, which would have been easier. It was the shape of a life.

I answered.

"Xiuyuan." She said my name the way she always said it, with the second syllable falling, and there was a television on in the background, and someone, a man, saying something about the weather. "I saw the phone. The trial. I saw you in the chair." A pause. "You look thin."

"I'm eating."

"You're not eating. I know when you're not eating." Another pause, and the television, and the city of Guangdong behind her in a room I had never seen. "It's the last day tomorrow?"

"Today. The judgment is this morning."

Another pause. And then, in the flat voice of a woman who had left a son in a mountain city and had kept the leaving in a drawer for nineteen years, she said what was the closest she had ever come to an apology, and it was not an apology, and I took it.

"I did not know how to raise you after your father," she said. "I still don't. I sent money. I thought money was the answer. And then you were a man and I was a woman in Guangdong, and money was the only language we had, and I have spent nineteen years not knowing what the other language is." The television. "Are you—" and then she stopped, because she had almost asked the real question, the one with no good answer, the one she had been asking me with her silence for nineteen years, and she caught it, and she did not ask it, and she said instead, "Is the food there all right."

"It's all right."

"Then eat it." A pause. "Call me after."

"I'll call you after."

She hung up. I stood in the back room of the barbershop with the bowls in the sink and the note on the wall behind me — the full couplet, the second line underlined twice — and I did not cry, and I did not grieve, and I did not do any of the things the city's stories say a man does when his mother calls. I washed the bowls. And I understood that the wall between us had not come down, and that we had put one brick on the other side of it, and that this is what the two of us had, and that it was more than we had had the day before, and that a brick is a brick.

Then Huajiao came down, and she had the two fans in her hand — the real one with the knot, the wire fraying at the spine, and the Guangdong counterfeit that I had been carrying in the other pocket since the spring — and she held them both up, one in each hand, like a scale, and looked at me.

"One fan," she said.

"One fan."

She took the counterfeit and she did not throw it away, because she is not a person who throws things away; she walked it down the street to the corner shop and she put it in the cardboard box by the door, with the pouches, so that some kid could buy it for fifteen yuan and be a hero for an afternoon, and it would be a copy, and it would be fine. And she brought the real one back and she sat down on the stool and took a length of scooter-tire wire out of her bag and re-mended the fraying spine, the fourth mend in its life, and she did it in about four minutes without looking up.

When she was done she handed it to me, and she said the thing she said to me at the turn of the year, in the tunnel, when the fan was new and the wire was new and the whole of the legend was still in front of us.

"你的一半是疯的，我给你补了。" — *Half of you is mad. I patched it.*

I took the fan. I put it in the inside pocket. And then I asked her the question I had been carrying since the edge of the map, and she answered it the way she answered everything, flatly, as a fact and not a fear.

"Are you going to the border?"

"Someday," she said. "Not for him. Not for the postcards. For me. When I can pay my own way, and when the person I go with is somebody I chose, and not a man in a stairwell and not a sum in a notebook." She stood up. "But not

tomorrow. Tomorrow is the judgment. Tomorrow you sit in the chair and they read the judgment, and whatever they read, it will be the end of the case and not the end of anything else. And then the day after, the spring comes, and you walk the Trail, and I go to the class, and the aunties deal, and the world does the world." She picked up her bag. "Come on. It's time."

We went out into the morning of the judgment. The fog was down, the real fog, the kind that eats the towers and leaves the low world, and the city was going to work, and the riders were out, and the tea seller was at the top of the Trail with her cart, and the man in the yellow jacket was one of thirty million.

PART FOUR · 秤 · SCALES

INTERLUDE 30

The Feeds

A curated list of the city's first-week coverage of the judgment. Ten entries. No two agree on what happened, what it meant, or who was on trial. Reproduced as found. The list was compiled by an account that no longer exists.

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1. `@CityNewsLive` · 4.1M views · edited official summary > The First Intermediate Court today delivered judgment in the Hongfa Group case. The organization was convicted of the charges of organizing a mafia-like criminal organization, fraud, extortion, and unlawful business operations. The dissolved estate was held liable in the civil aspect. Sentences ranged from three years to life. The court found insufficient evidence to establish the arson count beyond reasonable doubt and acquitted the relevant defendants on that charge. The judgment may be appealed.

2. `@AuntieZhangDaily` · 900k views · 40 seconds · vertical > [An elderly woman, filmed at a courthouse gate, speaking into the camera while a younger woman holds a phone.] *What did they say? I don't understand what they said. I heard the fire and I heard acquitted and I don't know which one is the thing. Somebody tell me if the temple is avenged. Nobody tells the old people anything.* > ↳ `@A Netizen` the temple is not avenged. > ↳ `@A Netizen` nothing is avenged. that's not what courts do. > ↳ `@AuntieZhangDaily` then what are they for.

3. `@LegalXiaoWu` · 1.2M views · analysis · 6 min > The fascinating thing here is not the verdict. It is the *architecture*. The estate was held liable, which means the dead man's name is on the fire forever, in the civil register. But the natural persons charged with the arson were acquitted, which means no living person goes to prison for the fire. This is not a loophole. This is *how organizations are designed to die*: the name takes the crime, the people take the severance.

4. `@ShanchengPositiveEnergy` · 2.8M views · 12 seconds · slowed clip of the courthouse steps, piano > 一个城市的良心终于落地了。*A city's*

conscience finally lands. > ↳ @A Netizen whose conscience > ↳ @Account the city's > ↳ @A Netizen the city doesn't have one. it has weather.

5. @FogWalks_Archive (mirror account, unverified) · 3,000 views · no caption · one photograph > [A courthouse corridor, empty, at dawn. A chair. A gourd on the chair. Nothing else. No text. 4 likes.] > ↳ @A Netizen is this the archive > ↳ @A Netizen the archive is in a hundred places. this is one of them.

6. @XiaoMaitreya_Official · 11M views · the son's statement > [Tan Xiao, in a charcoal suit, no tie, at a plain desk, looking directly into the lens for the first 40 seconds without speaking. Then:] *Today the law did its work, and I will do mine. I will not appeal. I will not comment on the findings. I will only say this: the name that did these things is my name, and I am going to spend the rest of my life making it mean something else. If you see me fail, tell me. I will not delete the comment.* > ↳ @A Netizen 格局 > ↳ @A Netizen this man is the future of this city > ↳ @A Netizen his father burned a temple > ↳ @A Netizen his father did. he didn't. that's the whole point. > ↳ @A Netizen is it

7. @NightMarketUncle · 260k views · 22 seconds · phone on a counter > [A noodle-stall counter, late. The vendor, an old man, is not looking at the camera. Off-screen a customer asks him what he thinks about the verdict. He does not stop working.] *I think a boy died at my stall. I think the man who made the fan that the boy copied is a better man than me. I think the son is building a hospital. I think I have to sell noodles. Pick one. They all fit.* [He slides the bowl across.] *Next.*

8. @JusticeWatchCN · 780k views · thread · 9 posts > Post 4: The verdict does not mention the security guard who died at the "mediation." Post 5: The verdict does not mention the imitator who was killed at the night market. Post 7: The verdict does not mention the boy who drowned at the foundation-sponsored festival. Post 9: *A court tries a case. A city tries a decade. The judgment is a document. The decade is still going.* > ↳ @A Netizen this is the only thread worth reading > ↳ @A Netizen "the decade is still going" is going to live in my head

9. @MountainCityNights · 40k views · 8 seconds · Trail at dawn > [Fog. A ridge. An old stone step. A pair of shoes, black, new, placed neatly at the edge of

the frame, as if someone had left them. No person. No caption. 2.1k comments, almost all of them a single character or a single word.]

↳ @A Netizen whose shoes ↳ @A Netizen they're not his. he still has his. ↳ @A Netizen how do you know ↳ @A Netizen nobody ever knows. that's the whole city.

10. @Anonymous · 7 views · a text post > i was in the courtroom. i am not going to say which day or which case or who i am. i am going to say one thing. when they read the acquittal on the fire, the man in the wheelchair did not move. and the man in the yellow jacket did not move either. and the son, who was not on trial, cried. and i thought: the father got the fire in the register and the son got the tears and the monk got nothing and the cook got nothing and the guard got nothing and the boy got nothing. and that is what a verdict is. it is a receipt. it says what was paid. it does not say what was owed.

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— end of list. the compiled dataset was taken down on the ninth day. it was re-uploaded, in pieces, in eleven other places, and is still falling. of the ten entries, three are gone entirely. the shoe post has eleven million views. the tenth post, with seven views, is the one that the archive kept.

CHAPTER 27

The Verdict

The judgment took three hours and ten minutes to read, and the reading of a judgment is the only public act in this city that is longer and duller and more serious than a funeral.

I am not going to reproduce it. The reader can find it. What I am going to put down is the room, and the three things that happened in it, and the one thing that did not.

The room was full. It had been full for six weeks, but on the morning of the judgment it was full in a different way, because the city had woken up, on the last day, and decided that it wanted to see the ending. The gallery had the relatives and the students and the two retired men who came for the air conditioning, and it had, by then, a row of the city's new professionals of grief — the legal commentators and the grief influencers and the men and women who had built whole accounts on the trial — and it had the aunties, all three of them, in their good jackets, in the second row, because Wang Niangniang had decided that the family would be in the room when the sentence was read, and the family was the three of them and the girl and the cousin and me, and we took up a row and a half, and the bailiff looked at the yellow jacket and let us through.

Tan Xiao sat in his usual place, first row on the right, alone, in black. He had not missed a day in six weeks. The feeds had made a whole genre out of it — *the son who came every day* — and he had, to his credit, come every day, and had listened to every count and every cross-examination and every mother, and had wept at the right times and not at the wrong ones. He had, in the arithmetic of the second screens, earned the room.

The panel came in at nine. The woman with the salt-grey face sat down and put on her reading glasses and began, and she read for three hours and ten minutes in a flat unhurried voice, and the room listened the way a city listens to a long weather report, which is to say it listened to the numbers and drifted through the words.

The organization was convicted. That was the first thing, and it was the thing the prosecution had needed. The Hongfa Group and six subsidiaries were held to be a mafia-like criminal organization; the money-laundering was established; the collection racket was established; the loan fraud was established, and within it the nine deaths, of which the court said the evidence was sufficient to find that the organization's conduct was a substantial cause. Eleven corporals and two lieutenants were given fixed terms. One lieutenant got fifteen years. The accountant got six. The driver with the watch got three and would serve eighteen months and be released. The entities were fined into a figure that the state would try to collect for a decade and would not fully collect, and the assets were ordered recovered, and the foundation was named in the recovery order as a conduit, and the trust structure the son had announced in the new year was ordered unwound, which — and I want the reader to hold this — was exactly what the son had announced, and which therefore cost him nothing, and which the feeds reported as *the court acknowledging the son's good faith*.

The fire was the second thing, and it was the thing that did not happen.

The court found insufficient evidence to establish the arson beyond reasonable doubt. The fire-service report stood; the insurance annex stood; the professor's dilution stood; the foam-rubber receipt was found *consistent with* restoration materials, which is a phrase the law uses when it means *we cannot say*; and Dao-ge's testimony, given from a wheelchair in a room provided by the accused family, was found to be *sincere but not sufficient*, which is a phrase I have never been able to shake, because it was true and because it was the whole of what the law could do with a man who told the truth about a fire that had killed his own soul. The natural persons charged with arson were acquitted. The estate of 谭鸿 was held liable in the civil aspect. The dead man's name went into the register as the name of a man whose company caused a fire, and the living man's name stayed clean, and that is the difference between a register and a reputation, and the son understood it better than anyone in the room.

The trafficking funnel was the third thing, and it was not mentioned. It was not a count. It had never been a count. The dormitory fire, the girls, A-Biao, the road, the river, the compound with no name — none of it was in the judgment, because none of it was in the jurisdiction. Jiang Xue had told me the truth in a

stairwell in the autumn: the file is a door, and this door does not open in this room.

And the one thing that did not happen, the thing I had been waiting for and did not get and will never get, was an answer to the question. No one in that room ever said *why*. The court said *what* and *who* and *how much*, and the panel said *sufficient* and *insufficient*, and the lawyers said *respectfully* and *the court finds*, and not one sentence in three hours and ten minutes explained why a man with everything had burned a temple to move a zoning line, or why a city had spent two years loving a drunk and then bought a product of him, or why a boy of nineteen had walked into a knife with a cardboard fan. The law is a machine for converting questions into findings. It answered every question it could file. It left the question, which is the one the city had actually asked, in the room, where it has stayed ever since.

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When the reading ended, the room did the thing rooms do at the end of a long proceeding: it exhaled, and it reached for its phones.

The relatives of the convicted wept or did not weep. The corporals in the dock were led out one by one, and one of them — a thin man of about forty who had run the Yubei collection office, the one with the reception desk and the young woman who said good morning — turned at the door of the dock and looked back at the gallery, and found, I think, no one, and went out. The old driver with the watch went out with his hands in his pockets. The judge closed her file and took off her glasses and cleaned them, for the last time, and stood, and the court rose, and the whole of it was over, and the city, which had watched the first three days and almost none of the last three, went out into the corridor and began to tell itself what it had just seen.

I did not go out. I sat in the wooden bench with the aunties and the girl and the cousin and did not move, because I had learned in six weeks that the moment a room empties is the moment a verdict becomes a story, and I did not want to be in the corridor when the story was made. I looked across the emptying gallery at the first row on the right, and Tan Xiao was still sitting, alone, in his black, and he was crying, and the cameras had found him, and the crying was real. I want to

put that down. It was real. He was crying for his father, or for himself, or for the boy in the river, or for the whole of it; I do not know. And the tears went into the feeds, and the feeds made them into the ending, and by the evening the ending was: *a family pays its debt, a son weeps, a city heals.*

And in the second row, in their good jackets, three old women sat with their hands in their laps. And the oldest, who had watched four generations of men say beautiful things in a tunnel and had never once been moved, leaned over to me and said, in the flat voice of a woman reading the final tile, the sentence that was the whole of my verdict.

"The dead man took the fire," she said. "The living man took the tears. The cook took a grave and the guard took a grave and the boy took a river. And you took the fan." She straightened her jacket. "That is not justice and it is not injustice. It is the *settlement*. In this city, when the rich and the poor are in a room, the room always settles. The poor get the graves and the rich get the story, and the story is worth more, and that is the whole of the law, and it has always been the whole of the law, and it will be the whole of the law after we are dead." She stood up. "Come. The fish is waiting. We do not let a judgment keep us from the fish."

We went out through the corridor into the ordinary day. And in the ordinary day, in the crowd at the courthouse gate, there was a young man in a yellow jacket holding a cardboard fan, and there was an old woman selling roasted sweet potatoes, and there was a delivery rider waiting at the lights with a bag of noodles, and the city went on being the city, exactly as it had been before the fire, and I understood that this is the thing the verdict proves: that a city does not change because a court says a word, and that the only change a court can make is to a *file*, and a file is a stone, and a stone outlasts the city's memory, and the city in eleven years will not remember the name of the boy who drowned in the river.

CHAPTER 28

The Escape

Tan Xiao did not appeal, because he had nothing to appeal; he had not been convicted of anything. He did not need to. The verdict had done for him the thing no acquittal ever does, which is to *close* a story, and by closing it, to free him from it. The dead man's name carried the fire in the register. The living man carried the tears in the feeds. And the city, having been given a beginning, a middle, and an end, went back to its life, and the son went on with his.

He went on with it very well. Within a month he had dissolved the foundation, as promised, and the trust, as ordered, and he had opened the two promised institutions — the aquatic-safety center in the drowned boy's name and the legal-aid clinic for the companies' victims — and both of them were real, and both of them worked, and both of them saved lives, and I have never been able to make the arithmetic of those two facts come out the way I want it to. A man can be a product and a benefactor. A city can be healed and cheated in the same building. The center taught a thousand children to swim. The clinic won back two hundred thousand yuan for families who had been bled by shells that were, in the end, the man's own family's shells. And every child who learned to swim learned in a pool with a plaque, and every family who got their money got it from a lawyer paid by the man who had bought the debt, and the repayment and the theft were the same hand, and the hand was clean.

I saw him once more. That is all I am going to write about the escape, because the escape is not a scene; it is a *state*, and a state does not have a scene. But I saw him once more, and I have to put it down, because it is the last thing he said to me and because I have carried it for years like a stone in a pocket.

It was in the spring, at the temple, on the morning they put up the new plaque. The plaque was plain: only the temple's name, no donor, the way Jiefeng had promised. And Tan Xiao came, without cameras, without an assistant, in a grey coat, and stood in the courtyard in front of the arhat hall, and looked at the five hundred statues, four hundred and thirty-nine old and sixty-one new and

two hundred and fourteen mended with the grey paste, and he stood there for a long time with his hands behind his back, and then he saw me across the courtyard with the broom, and he came over.

That was the first time we had stood within three meters of each other since the tea table on the thirty-first floor. He looked at my hands — the burns, the crooked finger, the fan — and he looked at my face, and he did not do the camera smile. He had, that morning, the face of the boy on the edge of the stage with the lights off, the only face of his I had ever believed.

"I read your testimony," he said. "The part about the boy with the cardboard fan. The part about the story. It was the best thing said in that room."

"Thank you."

"It was not a compliment. It was an *inventory*." He looked at the arhats. "You and I are the only two people in this city who understand exactly what happened, and we understand it from opposite ends. You know what it is to be the source. I know what it is to be the *brand*. And the brand always wins, because the source costs the source and the brand pays everyone. You gave them a face and they charged for it. I gave them a face and I *kept the receipts*. That is the entire difference between us. It is not morality. It is *inventory*."

I did not say anything, because there was nothing to say that was not a line from a speech, and because the abbot had taught me that a question is a claim on another person's pain, and because I was, at that point, tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

He went on. He said the thing I have carried since.

"You know what I did with the boy's drowning?" he said. "The training center. Everyone thinks it was a penance. It was not. It was the *best thing that happened to my brand all year*. A river, a child, a foundation — and by the time the water was still, the foundation was the hero of the story. I did not make the boy drown. I did not want him to drown. And when he drowned, I *used* him, and I used him so well that his mother has a swimming pool with his name on it and the city has a lesson and I have a clean name, and the only person who lost anything is the boy." He looked at me directly, and there was no performance in it, and that was the worst thing. "That is the mechanism. You wanted to know the mechanism. I have been running it since I was ten years old and I did not

choose it and I cannot stop it, and the reason I cannot stop it is not that I am evil. It is that every time I stop, someone else picks it up, and the someone else is worse, because the someone else has not read the file. So I keep running it, and I run it *better*, and the city is safer and the pools are cleaner and the debt is a little more repaid, and it is all built on a boy who liked fish." He turned to go. "Tell the girl with the camera she can film me. I will not sue. I have decided that the only honest thing a performer can do is let them film the performance and call it by its name."

He walked out through the gate. And at the door he stopped, and did not turn around, and said the last sentence he ever said to me, which is the most honest and most disturbing thing I have ever heard a person say about themselves, and which I have put at the end of this chapter because I do not know where else it belongs.

"你们看，我什么都告诉你们了。你们还是爱我。这才是真的。" — *Look. I told you everything. And you still love me. That's the real thing.*

Then he was gone, and the courtyard had only the arhats in it, and the note on the wall of a barbershop two streets away said what it had always said, and I stood there with the broom and understood that the escape had not been his escape from the law. It had been his escape from *us*. He had looked at the whole city, and he had told the whole city the truth, and the city had loved him anyway, and in that moment he had stopped being a person we could reach, because a person who is loved despite being known is free in the way that water is free, and you cannot indict the water.

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But the ledger of the judgment was a longer thing than the story of the son, and it is the ledger I have to open now. The judgment's material aftermath was smaller than the judgment and longer than the city's attention, which is the usual ratio.

The fines were entered at a figure that the state would spend a decade trying to collect. By the first spring, the recovered assets stood at about eleven percent of the ordered recovery; the rest had been moved, years earlier, into structures that the recovery order named but could not reach, and the reach was a matter of

jurisdictions that ended, as everything in this book ended, at a border. The victims' compensation fund paid out a first tranche to about four hundred people, at a rate of about nine hundred yuan each, which is not nothing and is not a life. The students' families received a line in a register. The fire received a line in a civil file. The guard's family received a line and a small sum and a wreath from a company that had never met him. And the son, who had given away the mall and kept the name, pledged privately — through a foundation that was now a trust, through a lawyer who was now a trustee — to top up the compensation fund to a hundred percent over five years, on the condition that no recipient be identified publicly and no recipient be required to thank anyone. He did not announce it. The feeds did not find it for a year. When they did, they made a small, generous, ten-second clip about it, and the clip was correct, and every number in it was true, and I have never been able to make the clip and the ledger come out even.

Several defendants appealed. The appeals took two more years and reduced two sentences and upheld the rest. The organization was not dissolved in the way the word suggests; it was *unwound*, like a rope that is not cut but picked apart strand by strand, and the strands went into other ropes, and some of the other ropes were the trust and some of them were lawful and some of them are still being pulled. That is the thing about a judgment. It does not end a machine. It *renames* it, and then it files the name, and the file is kept, and a file does not care who opens it.

The district office issued a rectification notice. The collection companies that had been bought were re-registered under new names and new officers, and the new officers were, as far as the register was concerned, entirely unconnected to the old ones, which was true, if by *unconnected* you mean *there is no document*. The campus-loan business went quiet and then moved, the way water moves, into a different product: the short-video tip jar, the wellness subscription, the charity membership, the thing that takes twenty yuan a month from a hundred thousand people and gives back a feeling. The funnel went on funnelling, out of jurisdiction. The arson stayed, in the register, the liability of a dead man who could not be punished and a company that had been renamed and an insurance annex that had been filed and would not be reopened, and the truth of it lived in

a recording a dead enforcer had made for a woman with a camera, and the recording fell as rain, and the rain did not un-write the register, because a register is a stone and rain is rain.

That is the material aftermath. It is not a resolution and it is not a defeat. It is a *receipt*, and a receipt tells you what was paid and never what was owed, and the only person in the whole of this book who ever understood that from the beginning was the abbot, who said, in a courtyard, to a drunk, once, in a courtyard, that the help belongs to the girl and the fall belongs to the crowd.

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Jiang Xue resigned six months after the judgment. She did not resign in protest and she did not resign in shame; she resigned the way a person puts down a tool they have finished using. She had gotten the organization convicted and the register written and the door made, and she had not gotten the funnel or her brother, and she told me, on the last day I saw her, that the file was still in the drawer and would be opened by someone else, and that she hoped it would be someone with more years than she had left. She asked me, as she left, whether I had ever gone to the market on the back of a woman. I said yes, once. She said, "Then we are the same, you and I. We both have a file with a photograph in it." She walked out and did not look back, and I have not seen her since, and I have decided that she is the most honest official I have ever met, because she never once told me a thing that was not in the file.

The last of the trial's own is this: the file closed. The register was written. The son was free. And in the drawer of a procurator's office, under a photograph of a young man on a bridge, there is a folder about a border town and a river town and a woman who does not exist, and it will outlast all of us, and it is the only thing in this whole book that is entirely and permanently on the side of the truth.

CHAPTER 29

The Reckoning

I am going to itemize the rest of the year the way the platform taught me, which is by cost and not by meaning, because the meaning is what the city puts on top and the cost is what is actually there.

Item one. One cousin, male, twenty-four, with an internal injury that was permanent before the trial and is permanent after it, and a courier company that survived on the strength of a radio and a talent for forms, and a habit of holding his side when he stands up too quickly, and a plan to move into medical samples that he explained to me one night with the particular seriousness of a man who has decided that the point of the rest of his life is to prove he is not only the one who gets hurt. The company was named 幺鸡跑腿 and it started with two people and a radio and it had, by the spring, eleven riders and a shared office and a whiteboard with coloured magnets on it, and it did not have the thing the aunties had, which was a room with no form, and it did not want it. That is the difference between the old network and the new infrastructure, and it is the right difference, and it cost the old network something to admit it.

Item two. One archive, anonymous, composed of three thousand and forty-one recovered entries and a great many more that were taken in plastic bags and never recovered, now uploaded to twenty-three mirrors and falling at intervals across the whole of the internet, under no name, in no jurisdiction, with the victim names blocked and the fire receipts intact, and a woman who no longer sleeps in a room with a blacked-out window because there is no window to black out; she was, for a year and a half, a person who could be entered and carried out; she is, now, weather. I do not know if that is a victory or a death. I have decided that the deciding is hers and that the rest of us should stop asking.

Item three. Three aunties, female, sixty-eight, seventy-two, and sixty-three, in a back room behind a barber's sign that says *tea seats*, with two thousand bowls of congee a month from a temple that was rebuilt by the money of the man who burned it, and a mahjong table that has not been shut down since the trial, and a

girl they adopted without ceremony and therefore for real, and a folding chair by the wall with a piece of temple paper nailed above it — the full couplet, the second line underlined twice — and the note is read, by the runners, about four hundred times a year, in fifteen seconds each, which is the only distribution system this entire book has ever actually trusted.

Item four. One rider, male, thirty, with two hands that cannot feel the tips of the left index and middle fingers, a crooked finger that is crooked in a new place, a burn scar the length of a finger on the right forearm, a face that the city had by then mostly stopped watching, a public record that says *witness for the prosecution*, a public record that does not say *hero* because the defence did not need it, and a private record — the one that matters — that says the number is small and the number is climbing and the gourd on the belt holds tea. He is not the founder of anything. He did not take the hand. He did not sign the form. He is the one thing in the whole of the counterfeit economy that was never made into a product by its owner, and the price of that is that he is also the one thing that cannot be *shared*, and he will be alone with it for the rest of his life, and he has made his peace with the loneliness and has not made his peace with the price.

Item five. One fan, palm-leaf, broken on purpose, mended with scooter-tire wire four times, the fourth mend done in a back room the morning of the judgment by a girl of seventeen who took the counterfeit out of his other pocket and put it in a cardboard box by a shop door so that some kid could buy it for fifteen yuan and be a hero for an afternoon. The fan in his jacket has a knot on the handle that only one person ties. It is the only original object in this book. The counterfeit has been in a box on a counter for the whole of the spring, and the shopkeeper has sold eleven of them, and none of the eleven buyers has ever asked whether the crack is real. That is the market. It is not a tragedy. It is a *retail channel*.

Item six. One girl, female, seventeen, alive, with a gut wound scar from the winter before and a seizure that came back and a vocational exam passed at eighty-one and a notebook with a rewritten Rule One and a plan, of her own, unpaid-for, to go to the border someday with a person she has chosen. She is the most competent fighter in this book and the most damaged person in it and she does not want to be either; she wants to be a person with an ordinary birthday,

and she is closer to it than she was, and she is not there, and she is going to have to fight for it for the rest of her life, and the hope of all of this is that she wrote the first rule herself.

Item seven. One mother, female, fifty-one, in Guangdong, still waiting, still sending the weather, still not asking the real question; one son who walked past a brick in the wall and did not knock, because a brick is a brick; and one call, answered, after two years, that ended with *eat it*, and which I have put on the ledger as a gain, because a person who has been graded all their life is allowed to grade a small thing as a gain.

Item eight. One boy with a cardboard fan, dead in a night market at nineteen, and one boy dead in a river at twenty, and one security guard dead on a doorstep at sixty-one, and one cook dead in an alley at thirty-four, and nine students dead in their own rooms, and one enforcer who is dying slowly in a wheelchair, and one monk who went back into a fire for a person who did not exist. None of them is avenged. An avenging is not a thing this city does. What this city does is *record*, and the record is a door, and the door opens in eleven years, and by then every person reading this will have to decide for themselves whether a door nobody opened is the same as a wall.

Item nine. One son, male, twenty-seven, with the clean half of an empire, a national platform, a pool with a dead boy's name on it, a genuine habit of weeping at the right times, and eleven unguarded seconds on the edge of a stage with the lights off, which I have decided were the only eleven seconds of the whole year that were not a performance, and which are, therefore, the only piece of evidence against him, and which no court will ever admit, and which I have been carrying in my pocket like a stone since the spring. He is not the villain of what comes next. He is the *market*, and the market is where the story goes from here, and I am not the one who will stop it.

Item ten. One bottle. There is always a bottle at the bottom of the manifest; a delivery is not honest if it hides the thing the courier knows is in the box. It was a 52-degree baijiu in a red-and-gold box, bought by me, in a guesthouse room, three hundred kilometers from home, and drunk by me, one night, in the autumn, while a girl of seventeen slept in the next room and a river town slept outside. The count went back to one. The count is not one now. The count is a

number I am not going to write, and the bottle is not on the shelf and the bottle is not the story, and I am going to say the true thing about the bottle one more time and then I will stop saying it: *the tea was never the cure.* The tea was a ration. The cure is a person who reads your face at a bus station in the morning and says *get on the bus* and then does not mention it, and I have one of those, and her name is in item six, and she is seventeen, and she is going to the border someday, and I am going with her whether she asks me or not.

That is the manifest. That is the second year. It does not balance. A manifest is not supposed to balance; a manifest is supposed to be *signed*, and the courier is still standing, and the goods are delivered, and the last item, the one with no number, is this: the city did not get better. It got *loud*. And somewhere in the loudness, a man in a yellow jacket walked a ridge at dawn with a gourd of tea and a fan in his pocket, and nobody needed him, and that, in the whole of the second year, was the best news he ever received.

CHAPTER 30

The Demon's Path

By the fourth month of the second year, the Society called it 济公日 — Ji Gong Day — and it was not a festival, and that was the whole of the danger.

A festival has a stage and a stage has an edge and an edge is a place where a crowd can be held. Ji Gong Day had no stage. It had a *call*: on the first Sunday of the fourth month, in every district of the city, the members of the Society would walk their own neighbourhoods in small groups, with fans and gourd flasks and the four-character song, and they would "keep the alleys" — help the elderly, report the crimes, mediate the debts, walk the women home. There was no organizing company and no title sponsor and no merchandise row, or there was all of those things and they were not the point; the point was that four hundred members had become four thousand, and four thousand had become something the Society could no longer count, and the something had a phone in every hand and a fan in every pocket and the best intentions in the city.

I heard about it three days before, from Yaoji, who had heard about it from a rider, who had heard about it from the group chats. And I did the only thing I could do, which was to spend the three days doing what the city's institutions did, which was to *warn* — I posted one thing, on the only account I had ever allowed myself, which had eleven thousand followers and had never posted anything, and what I posted was four words, in dialect, and the four words were: 别学我，求你们。 — *Do not imitate me. I am asking you.*

It got four hundred shares and eleven comments. One of the comments said *humble*. One of them said *he's gatekeeping*. Most of them did not appear, because the algorithm does not distribute a thing that asks people not to do a thing. And on the Sunday morning, the city had its day.

I am not going to describe that day in order, because I did not experience the whole of it; I experienced *three corners of it*, and the corners are what I have. What I know from the record, afterward, is that across the municipality there were between three and four thousand self-organized groups of "Ji Gong"

volunteers, and that they intervened in, by the count of the district offices, more than two hundred disputes, and that most of the interventions were fine — were good, were useful, were the ordinary kindness of neighbours with a fan and a phone — and that three of them ended badly, and that one of the three ended in a death that was not a stranger's death to me.

The first corner I went to was in Shapingba, at about ten in the morning. A squad of six — five men and a woman, in their twenties and thirties, in yellow armbands — had surrounded a man at a bus stop because the man had, they believed, taken a phone. They were right; he had taken a phone; and the whole of the squad had their phones up, and the man, who was about fifty and thin and visibly unwell, was on the ground, and the woman who had lost the phone was standing to one side saying, over and over, *it's all right, it's all right, just give it back*. Nobody had called the police, because the squad had decided that the police were too slow and the phone was the proof and the fan was the authority. And what I did — the only useful thing I did all day — was walk into the middle of them and pick the man up off the ground and hand the phone to the woman and then stand there, in my yellow jacket, with my own fan in my pocket and my own face on the fan-the-squad was carrying, and say, in dialect, the sentence that I would say about eleven times that day: *He gave it back. Stop filming. Go home.*

They went home. The man went to a clinic. The woman got her phone. And I stood at the bus stop after they had gone and understood that I had just done what the whole day was made of: I had intervened, and it had worked, and it had worked because of the fan, and the fan was the problem, and I could not tell the squad to put down the fan without putting down my own.

The second corner was in Yuzhong, at noon, a debt mediation on a stairwell, and it was also fine, and I do not remember it, and I am putting it in only to show the reader the shape of the day: a thing that was fine, a thing that was fine, a thing that was fine, and then the one that was not.

The third corner was in Jiulongpo, at about three in the afternoon, and it was a death.

The woman's name was A-Fang. She was forty. She cleaned offices, and she had a son of eleven, and she lived on the third floor of a walk-up above a hardware shop, and she had a husband who drank, and for a year the neighbours

had known and had done what neighbours in this city do, which is to hear the shouting and turn the television up. On Ji Gong Day, a Society squad in the next building heard the shouting, and instead of turning the television up they went up the stairs and knocked on the door. That was the moment. That was the exact moment, and I have thought about it more than any other moment of the year, because there is no villain in it. Six people heard a woman being hurt and did what the city had spent two years teaching them a hero would do, which is to walk in.

The husband opened the door with a knife. The squad had no training and no plan and no authority; they had a fan and a gourd and a phone and the four-character song. And what they did, when the door opened and the knife came out, was to do the thing that a phone does to a person: they backed into the corridor and they *filmed*, because a knife in a doorway is the most-watched thing in the world, and because the whole of the year had taught them that the hero's job is to stand in the frame and the crowd's job is to hold the frame steady. And in the eleven seconds that the squad held the corridor and the frame, A-Fang went out the window of the third floor, whether she jumped or fell or was pushed I cannot tell you and neither could the court, and the son of eleven was in the room, and the husband went out after her, and the squad, six of them, stood in the corridor with their phones up and the fan in the hand of the woman at the front, and the woman at the front was crying and saying *I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do*, and she was twenty-three years old.

I reached Jiulongpo at four. The ambulances had come and gone. The hardware shop had closed. There was a crowd at the mouth of the alley and a police line and a woman's shoe on the pavement by the wall, and a boy of eleven sitting on the step of the hardware shop with a coat over his shoulders and the eyes of a person who has just learned what the world does. And I stood at the edge of the police line with my yellow jacket and my real fan in my pocket and the counterfeit fan on the banner of the feeds, and I did what the whole book had been building to, which was to understand, all at once and without any way to ununderstand it, the second line of the couplet, not as a warning in a temple and not as a bill in a night market and not as a business plan in a boardroom, but as a *woman on the pavement*.

If the world imitates me, it walks straight into the demon's path.

The world had imitated me. The world had walked in. And the world had stood in a corridor with a fan and a phone and the best intentions in this city, and a woman had gone out a window, and the only difference between the squad in the corridor and the crowd in the alley in the first winter was that the squad had believed they were me.

I did not post that night. I did not speak. I sat on the step of the hardware shop two meters from the boy of eleven, because the police would not let me nearer, and I did not say anything to him, because there is nothing to say to a boy on a step, and at some point his grandmother came and took him, and at some point the crowd went home, and at some point the shoe was gone from the pavement and the alley was the alley again.

And the thing I decided that night, sitting on the step, was the only decision of the whole of the two books that I have never once regretted, and I am going to write it in the plainest sentence I have.

I decided to stop.

Not the helping. I could never stop the helping; the helping was not the costume, the helping was *me*. I decided to stop the *fan*. I decided that from that night there would be no more singing in alleys and no more bowing to men and no more staggering as a technique and no more playing the fool in the street for a crowd, because the crowd had learned the trick, and the trick was killing people, and a trick that kills people is not a trick anymore; it is a *disease*, and I was the carrier, and the only thing a carrier can do is stop being a vector.

It did not matter, in the end. That is the thing I have to put down too. The fan was already out of my hands. It had been out of my hands since the spring, when the Guangdong factory started making it for fifteen yuan, and since the summer, when the foundation licensed the character, and since the verdict, when the city decided that the dark thing had been resolved. I could stop carrying the fan, and the fans would go on being carried, and the Society would go on keeping the alleys, and the market would go on making the product, because the product does not need the founder. The founder is the *prototype*. The market is the *factory*. And a man who has been turned into a prototype cannot un-invent himself by putting a fan in a drawer; he can only watch the factory run.

I stopped carrying the fan in the street that night. I want that on the record. It is a small thing, and the reader has a right to know that it is small, and it is the only thing left in this whole story that I ever got to choose.

CHAPTER 31

The Man Who Took the Stairs

Dao-ge asked to go to the stairs in the fifth month, on a Tuesday, in the room of the groundskeeper, and he asked me, and I took him, and I am going to write the day the way it happened and not the way the city would make it.

He was failing. That is the medical fact and there is no point dressing it. The spinal injury had begun, that spring, to do the thing spinal injuries do, which is to reach upward; his hands were worse and his breathing was worse and the doctors had moved him to the temple's groundskeeper room because a long-term ward with a view of a wall was no longer a place where he could be kept, and the aunties had taken over the food, and the novice had taken over the medicine schedule, and the temple had taken over the room, and the whole thing had been arranged without anyone ever saying the word *dying*, because this city does not say that word about a man who is still eating.

He asked for the stairs on a Tuesday morning, in the scrape that was his voice, and he asked in the way a man asks for a thing he has decided to ask for and will not negotiate: "Chaotianmen. The flight with the bad turn. The thirtieth step. I want to see it before I can't see it."

I did not ask him why. I called Yaoji, and Yaoji called a van, and I called Uncle Tuo, because there is only one man left in this city who belongs on those steps, and by noon we had the three of us: a man in a wheelchair, an old porter with no teeth on top and strong opinions about which noodle shop had betrayed the city, and me, in a yellow jacket, with a gourd of tea on my belt and no fan in my pocket, because I had stopped carrying it in the street.

The stairs at Chaotianmen are not the stairs of the stories. That is the first thing to set in the record. The famous stairs are the Eighteen Stairs in the old town, which the city rebuilt for the tourists; the stairs where my father carried refrigerators are a different flight, on the river side, an industrial flight of a hundred and eleven concrete steps that goes down from a road to a dock, and it has a bad turn about two-thirds of the way, where the flight jogs sideways and the

top step sticks out, and it was built for the days when the port was working and everything that came off the river came up on a pole and a rope. It does not have a plaque. It has a handrail on one side and a rusted drain and a view of the water and a smell of diesel and mud and something older that I have never been able to name.

Yaoji parked at the top. And then we did the thing that the whole day was, which is that two men and a wheelchair had to get down a hundred and eleven steps to a dock, and there is no ramp and no lift and no plan for that, and we did it the way the city does everything, which is by hand: Uncle Tuo took the front of the chair and I took the back, and we went down step by step sideways, one of us on each side, and a wheelchair is not a light thing and the ramps of the world are not built for the stairs of Chaotianmen, and it took us twenty-five minutes and by the end my arms were shaking and Uncle Tuo was breathing like a bellows and none of the three of us said a word, because the whole of the descent was the thing Dao-ge had come to do, and we were doing it with him.

At the bad turn, we stopped. There was the jog and the step that sticks out. Dao-ge looked at it for a long time. And then he said the thing I had been carrying since the ward, the thing I had asked for and never gotten, and he said it as a fact, not a confession.

"I am not going to tell you whether I was here," he said. "I could tell you a story and you would believe it, either way, because a man in a wheelchair on the stairs where his whole life happened can say anything and the city will write it down. So I am going to tell you the truth instead, which is that I do not know, and I have decided that the *not-knowing* is what I am. I am the man who took the stairs and cannot find the day." He put his hand — the one that did not close — on the rail. "But I can tell you the stairs. I can tell you how it is when the fog comes up off the water at six in the morning and the steps are wet and the pole is cold and the rope is cold and the refrigerator is a hundred and eighty jin and the man below you is named Yong and the man above you is whatever name the day's rotation gave you. I can tell you that the fourth step from the turn is the one that holds water, and that a man learns which steps hold water the way he learns a face. I can tell you that the smell at the bottom, in August, is the smell of a city's whole throat. And I can tell you the thing you actually came for, which is

that a man on these stairs does not die alone. He dies with a load on his back and a man above him and a man below him, and the men above and below hear everything, and they do not stop, and they do not stop because stopping kills all three of them, and there is no version of this city in which a man on the stairs turns around. That is not cruelty. That is the *stair*. The stair does not permit the turning. The stair is the thing that decides, and the stair decided a long time ago, and every one of us who ever put a pole on his shoulder signed the same paper."

Uncle Tuo, who had not spoken the whole descent, said one thing, in his voice like a door.

"The stair permits lots of things," he said. "I saw a man turn around once. 1989. He turned around and he put his load down and he went down past the man below him and took half the load, and the two of them came up together, and the man lived, and the man who turned around is not remembered, because a porter who turns around is not in the song." He looked at the water. "I am telling this because there was a day when I did not turn around. I have carried a load past a man who called out. I do not know the year and I do not know the man and I do not know if it was your father. I know it was *somebody*. And I have kept it in the same place you keep your bottle, and I have taken it out at night for fifty years, and I am telling you now, at the bottom of the stairs, so that the two of you can put it down between you and leave it here."

There is a thing that happens at the bottom of a hundred and eleven stairs in the fog, and I am not going to make it a poem. The three of us sat there, a man in a wheelchair and two men who had carried things, and we did not forgive each other and we did not confess to each other and we did not say the word *father* out loud, because none of us had the right to say that word to the others. We sat on the concrete at the foot of the stairs and looked at the water and Uncle Tuo opened a pouch of gaoliang and passed it and I passed it back, and Dao-ge took one mouthful and coughed and said, "That's the stuff," and we watched the barge come up empty and ride high, and that was the whole of the ceremony, and it lasted about forty minutes.

Dao-ge died two weeks later, in the groundskeeper's room, in the night, with the medicine schedule on the wall and the arhat hall on the other side of the courtyard and the note on a barber's wall two streets away. The doctors called it

the injury reaching the lungs. Wang Niangniang had fed him the night before. Jingchen read the names of the five hundred, which is not a real rite but is the rite this temple made for him, and then he said the couplet. And I do not know — I will never know — whether the man who was on the stairs the day my father died was on the stairs the day my father died. I have decided that the not-knowing is the *point*, and that the point is not a verdict, and that a man is not the worst thing he might have done, he is the whole of the stairs: the load and the call and the not-turning and the turning and the two weeks of talking about water in the fourth step from the turn.

He is buried in the ground behind the temple, near where the abbot's ashes are, under a small stone with his own name on it and nothing else. The board voted. Jiefeng voted with the majority. The note on the wall of the barbershop says the line about the demon's path, and the line is above a table where riders eat breakfast, and nobody has ever connected, in all the times the note has been read aloud, the man who burned the temple and the man who watered the pots in the courtyard of the temple he burned, and I have come to believe that the not-connecting is the only absolution that man ever received, and that it was enough.

CHAPTER 32

The Return

The mother's story does not obey the calendar, so I am going to tell it the way it happened, which is out of order. The birthday postcard did not come.

That had never happened. In the whole of Huajiao's remembered life, the card had come once a year, near her birthday, in a hand she could not name and with a postmark she could not place, and then, in the second winter, off schedule, once, and then again in the autumn of the trial, a river instead of a mountain. And then the birthday came, in the seventh month, and the birthday passed, and there was no card. And the eighth month passed, and the ninth, and there was no card, and the girl who had spent twelve years reading a mountain and a river and no message did what a person does when a thing that has always happened stops happening: she went quiet.

She did not go quiet in the way she used to, which was the knife-quiet, the flat-quiet, the quiet of a soldier. She went quiet in the way a person goes quiet when they are holding two possibilities and both of them have teeth. Either her mother was dead, and the cards had been sent by someone who was now also gone, or the sender had stopped, which meant the sender had a reason to stop, which meant the sender had *chosen* to stop, and a mother who chooses to stop is a worse thing to carry than a mother who is dead, because a dead mother is a fact and a stopping mother is a question.

She kept going to the class. That is what I want to record, because it is the whole of her. She kept going to the class she despised, and she kept passing, and she kept the notebook in her bag and the knife under the pillow and the rule in her own hand, and she did not once go to the border, and she did not once say she was not going. She just went quiet, and did her work, and ate at the aunties' table, and at night I could hear her, from the room above the tunnel, doing the thing she did when the arithmetic got too loud, which was to walk the floor.

And then, in the eleventh month, a year after the trial had ended, the call came.

It came on the tea room's landline, which almost nobody used, and which the aunties kept because Wang Niangniang did not trust a mobile to be answered by the right person. It was a Tuesday, in the afternoon, and Huajiao was at the table with the notebook, and the phone rang, and Zhang Niangniang answered it, and listened, and then held it out to the girl without a word.

I was in the room. I want to put that down, because the whole of what I know about that call is what I saw, and what I saw was this: Huajiao took the phone and said "Wei," and then she did not speak for about eleven seconds, and her face did not change, and her hand did not shake, and she listened. And then she said, in the voice she used for the class and the forms and the world, "Who is this." And then she listened again. And then she said, "Say that again." And then she listened, and the listening went on for about forty seconds, and in the middle of it her eyes found the note on the wall — the couplet, the second half underlined — and stayed there. And then she said, quietly, in dialect, one word, which was "妈" — *Ma* — and the line went dead.

She held the phone for a moment. Then she put it down on the table, very carefully, the way you put down a thing that has just become fragile. And she sat down and opened the notebook and looked at the first page, where the rule was, and did not write anything, and did not look at me, and did not cry, and after a while she said, in the flat voice that was the only voice she had for the things that mattered:

"It was a woman. She said my name — my real name, the one on the school card, the one nobody uses. She said she had something to tell me but she had to be sure it was me, and she asked me a question about the teahouse. The one my mother took me to when I was small. She asked me what colour the stools were." She looked at the table. "The stools were blue. Only my mother and I know the stools were blue, because there were three of them and one of them had a crack and I sat on the cracked one because I liked it and she sat on the solid one so I wouldn't fall. She asked me the colour of the stools and I said blue and she said my name and then she said *don't come looking, live your life*, and then she hung up." She put her hand flat on the notebook. "Or it was someone who knows. Or it was a test. Or it was a scam. Or it was a woman in a room somewhere with a

script and a reason. I have spent one year deciding, and I still cannot decide, and I have decided that the deciding is the whole of it and that I will never get a *fact*."

I did not tell her it was her mother. I did not tell her it was not. That is the only kindness I know how to give, and it is the same kindness the fog gives, and I have come to believe it is the only honest thing a person can offer another person about the unprovable. I said what I actually believed, which was what the whole book had been teaching me.

"You'll go," I said. "When you're ready. Not because of the call. Because of the stools."

She looked up at me. And for the first time since the fire, since the edge of the map, since the quiet, she almost smiled.

"Two stools," she said. "One solid and one cracked. And the solid one is the one I should be sitting on now, at a table with people, and the cracked one is the one I keep choosing because it's the one that has my shape in it." She closed the notebook. "I am going to keep choosing the cracked one for a while. That is not a tragedy. That is what a person with a rule does. But I am going to choose it *on purpose*, and I am going to go to the border when I am the one paying, and I am going to go with somebody I chose, and if I find nothing I am going to come back and eat the noodles, and if I find something I am going to do the same. That is what I decided while the phone was in my hand."

She got up and went to the stove and put the kettle on, because that is what this city does with a thing that cannot be resolved, and the aunties, who had said nothing through the whole of it, went back to their tiles, and Wang Niangniang put a bowl in front of the girl without being asked, and the room did the thing the room did, which is to keep going.

The postcard came the following week, late, with a river on it and no message, and the postmark was from the same town as the call, or a town near it, or a town on the same river, and Huajiao read it and put it in the notebook with the others and put the rubber band around the notebook and said, to the table, the sentence that closed the mother-thread for now and left the rest to whatever came next.

"She is alive, or she is not, and I have decided to stop needing to know before I decide how to live. That is the rule. Rule Two, in my own hand. *I will not trade the living for the missing.*"

Wang Niangniang said, "There." Zhang Niangniang dealt. And Liu Niangniang, who remembered everything and had said nothing all afternoon, put down a tile and said, in the voice of a woman closing a ledger, "Blue stools. I would have asked about the stools too. Write it down, girl. The stools are the only evidence in this city that ever actually worked."

CHAPTER 33

The Confession

Dao-ge had recorded a statement before he died, and I did not know until afterward, because Yingtao had done it in the way she did everything, which is quietly and completely and without asking anyone. (I am setting this down here, though it happened in the fifth month, because the enforcer's story and the mother's story are the same story told from opposite ends.)

She had gone to the groundskeeper's room in the fourth month with a small recorder and a chair, and she had asked him nothing and let him talk, and he had talked for four hours over two days, in the scrape that was his voice, and she had kept the whole of it. It was not a court statement and it was not a deathbed scene; it was a man in a wheelchair in a courtyard describing his life, and within it, in the third hour, without any prompting, he described the fire: the meeting in the car, the phrase about old wiring, the delivery of the foam materials on the Tuesday rather than the Thursday, the second company, the man whose name he gave, the fact that he had known about the zoning line and the temple's refusal and the chairman's patience. And he described the stairs, and he described the not-knowing, and he described the fact that he had never been asked to give a *full* account by anyone except a girl with a recorder, because the court had asked him only the questions the court could file, and a witness is not permitted to say more than he is asked.

Yingtao published it in the fifth month, a week after he died, as part of the rain.

It fell on the city for eleven days. I am going to describe the falling accurately, because the falling is the point. The recording was uploaded to the archive's mirrors, and to twenty-three other places, and it was clipped and captioned and reposted and slowed and set to music. A podcast used an excerpt. A legal commentator did a twenty-minute analysis of the chain of custody problems. A foundation account — not Tan Xiao's; a different one — posted the first four minutes with a caption about "the importance of verified information." The

traffic peaked on the third day at about nine million listens and then, on the fourth day, a national holiday began, and by the seventh day the recording was as well known as any true thing in this country is ever known, which is to say it was known to the people who already knew it and it was a rumor to everyone else.

Nothing happened. I need to write that sentence plainly. Nothing happened. The procurator's office issued a statement that the judgment was final and that the recording, while it would be preserved, could not retroactively reopen a case in which the relevant persons had been acquitted and the relevant defendant was dead. The foundation issued a statement that it "welcomed all efforts to establish the truth" and that it had "no further comment." A member of the city's people's congress was asked about it on a livestream and said, with a straight face, that "the law has spoken and we should respect the law," which was true, and which was the whole of what the law could do with a recording that confirmed what the law had found not proven. The foam receipt was real. The Tuesday was real. The name was real. And the register had already been written, and a register is not a *draft*; it is a *stone*, and stones do not reopen.

I listened to the whole of it once, alone, in the room with the wall, at two in the morning, with the phone on the bed beside me and the city outside. And the thing that undid me was not the fire. It was the third hour, the part about the stairs, the part Yingtao had not clipped, where the old enforcer, in the scrape that was his voice, described the fourth step from the turn — the one that holds water — and the smell at the bottom in August, and the man named Yong, and the fact that a man on the stairs does not turn around, and the fact that he had spent fifty years in the same city as the rider in the yellow jacket and had never once been asked, by anyone, what it was like to carry a refrigerator.

At the end of the recording, Yingtao asks him, off-mic, whether there is anything he wants to say that is not for the record. And there is a long pause. And then he says, in the scrape, the last thing on the tape:

"No. I only wanted it written down. That is all a person wants. Not to be forgiven. To be *written down*."

I turned the phone off. And in the morning I went to the temple, and Jiefeng was in the courtyard by the niche with the brass jar, and he had heard the recording too, because everyone had, and he was standing in front of the wall

with the abbot's photograph and the orange and the no-inscription, and he had a chisel in his hand. And he did the thing that was the only confession Jiefeng ever made, and he made it without turning around.

"I did not sign for the congee," he said. "I told you I signed for the congee. I signed because I wanted the temple to *matter* again. I wanted the hall full. I wanted the name of the abbot's temple to be a name that a district official would say out loud. And the foundation offered me that, and I took it, and I dressed the taking in the language of feeding people, because I am a monk and monks are not supposed to want to matter, and I wanted to matter, and the wanting is the thing I am going to have to answer for." He set the chisel against the stone. "And when I heard the recording, I understood that I have spent three years being angry at the man who burned this place and taking the money of the man who ordered it, and calling the taking *arithmetic*, and that the arithmetic was never the point. The point was that I wanted the wall to have a name on it." He started to cut. "So I am putting his name on it. His name, and nothing else, and no sentence, because the board could not agree on a sentence and because the abbot would have refused one. And the wall will have the name of the man who went back into the fire. And that is the whole of the confession. It took me three years and a recorded enforcer and a wall."

He cut the name into the stone. It took him the rest of the morning. And when it was done, the niche had a name under the photograph, and the name was the abbot's, and there was no inscription, and no donor, and no foundation, and no son. Jingchen put an orange in front of it. Chen Popo, who was eighty-six and deaf and had been in that temple since before the Republic, came and touched the characters with two fingers and went back to her chair. And that was the only reckoning in the whole of the year that ended with something actually changed in the world, and it changed a *wall*, and I have come to believe that a wall is the exact correct size of the only thing a person can actually fix.

CHAPTER 34

The Tea

The rain fell for the whole of that summer, and by the end of it the archive had stopped being a place and had become a fact, and the fact was in fifty places, and in most of them it was indexed not by its name but by the four characters the city had given me, which meant that the truth was filed under a myth. Yingtao had stopped minding what the truth was filed under. A rain is not filed. A rain falls.

She came on a Sunday, in the good light, with the gimbal and one lens and no assistant and no lights, and the aunties had cleared the table and put out the good bowls and retreated to the barber's chair, and Chen Popo had been brought from the temple and installed in the corner with her feet on a stool, because she refused to miss it, and Huajiao sat on the edge of the table with the notebook closed, and Jingchen brought the congee pot because Jingchen brought the congee pot to everything, and the whole of the family was in the room for a video that would have no face in it.

That was the joke of the afternoon, and it was not a joke. The shot was my hands and the back of my head. Six minutes. One take. No music and no caption except the date. And the room, which had spent two years learning to distrust a camera and to love the woman who held it, sat and watched the woman hold it, and watched the man on the stool be filmed from the back, and the entire thing was about as dramatic as watching a man eat congee, which was the point, which was the whole of what we had agreed she was allowed to have.

She did not direct me. That was the other thing, and I have come to believe it is the most important small fact in this book. She put the camera on the tripod behind my left shoulder, at the height of a person sitting across a table, and she pressed record, and she let it run, and she did not say *look here* or *lift your hand* or *smile* or *think of the boy*. The only thing she said, about four minutes in, was a question, and she asked it in the flat voice of a person who had been thinking about it for a year.

"Do you want to say anything? For the record. Not for the clip. For the *file*."

I thought about it for a minute, on camera, with my back to the lens and my hands on the table and the gourd beside them. And then I said the thing I actually thought, which is not a thing I would have said to a person's face, and which I said because the back of my head is the place where I can say true things.

"Yes," I said. "I want the file to say that I do not know whether any of it was necessary. I want it to say that I do not know whether the good I did outweighs the boy who died and the guard who died and the woman who went out the window, and that I have stopped pretending the arithmetic comes out, because the arithmetic does not come out, and the market wants it to come out, and the city wants it to come out, and the son has made it come out, and I am the only person in the whole of it who is willing to say: *the ledger does not balance, and a person is not a ledger.* That is all. Put that at the end. Under the hands."

She put it at the end. She did not monetize it. She did not run it on the anniversary, or on a holiday, or on a day when the traffic was good. She uploaded it once, to the rain, with the date, and it fell, and it is still falling, and it has maybe forty thousand views in a country of a billion and four, and it is the only piece of footage of me that I have ever been able to watch without wanting to become someone else, because in it I am not a hero and not a fool and not a brand. I am a man with his back to a camera and a gourd of tea on a table, saying that the arithmetic does not come out.

After she turned the camera off, she did the thing she had done once before, a year and a half before, on the day she first smelled the gourd. She reached across the table and picked it up and unscrewed the cap and held it under her nose. And then she screwed the cap back on and set it down and looked at me, and this time she asked the question she had not asked before.

"How long?"

I told her. It was a number. It was not one and it was not the number it would have been if I had not drunk in the guesthouse room, and she knew both of those things, and she did not flinch, and she did not console, and she did not make it a lesson. She simply nodded, once, the way she nodded at a thing that was true in the good direction, and said, "Good," and picked up her bag and her gimbal and went out into the summer.

And I sat in the back room of the barbershop with the aunties and the girl and the novice and the old deaf caretaker, and I drank the tea, and the tea tasted of the gourd and the gourd tasted of the eleven years, and I drank it anyway.

That was the summer of the second year. There was no festival and no trial and no march and no fire. The city was hot and wet and full of the smell of the river, and the riders went out at six, and the tea seller on the Trail had a new umbrella, and the Society went back to helping old women cross the stairs, and the platforms found a new scandal in another province, and for one season, in the middle of a city of thirty million, a man who had been a myth for three years got to be a man who delivered noodles and walked a ridge at dawn and drank tea from a gourd and did not once put on a costume.

It could not last. But I want it in the record that it lasted one summer, and that the summer was *ordinary*, and that the ordinary was the thing the whole of the two years had been fighting to reach without ever once saying so.

CHAPTER 35

The Wall

I am going to write one more ordinary chapter, because the ordinary is the actual subject of this book, and because the reader who has come this far has earned a season in which nothing is a symbol.

In the summer of the second year, I helped a man up a flight of stairs, and nobody filmed it, and it did not become a story, and it is the only thing in the whole of the two years that I am going to put on my own wall.

It was a Tuesday, in the heat, on a stair off the Mountain City Trail that I had walked a hundred times. The man was about seventy and he had a bad knee and a bag of groceries, and he stood at the bottom of the flight and looked up, and I happened to be coming down, and I stopped. And because I had spent three years learning the difference between help and performance, I did the exact minimum: I took the bag, and then I did not take his arm, because a man of seventy with a bad knee does not want to be taken; I walked beside him, one stair at a time, at his pace, with my hand on the rail on the other side, and I did not say anything, and when we got to the top I gave him the bag and went on down. He said thank you. I said nothing. There was no camera. There was a woman at the tea cart at the top of the Trail who saw it and did not film it, because she had seen me walk past her cart every week for three years and had decided, in the way of a woman who sells tea, that the man with the gourd was not a story but a customer.

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Before I get to the two small things, I have to put down the letters, because they are the only correspondence in this whole book that I would describe as sacred.

Zhang Maliu's daughter had been eleven when her father was killed in the honeypot alley. She was thirteen now, and she wrote to the temple once a month, and the letters were addressed, in a child's careful hand, to *the monk who fed the drunk*, which was the only name she had for the man who had once paid for her

father's grave and who had been an abbot and had gone back into a fire. The letters were read by Jingchen, who answered every one of them, and the answers were the only writing in this entire city that the market has never been able to touch, because nobody had told the girl what her father had become to the feeds, and because the feeds had never found the temple's mailbox.

I read three of Jingchen's answers, with his permission, and I am going to put down what they were, because they are better than anything in this book and I want the reader to have them.

He did not tell her that her father was a martyr. He did not tell her that her father had been foolish or brave or right or wrong. He told her which vegetables were cheapest that month. He told her that a black dog had had puppies behind the east cloister and that one of them had been given to the tea seller and was called, by the tea seller, by the name of a general. He told her that congee is better if you put the salt in at the end. He told her that her father's grave was swept in the seventh month by the aunties and that the aunties had stood there for a while and had said nothing, because saying nothing was the ceremony. And in one of the letters he wrote the sentence that I have kept, and that I am putting in this book so that it outlives all of us:

Your father was a cook and a man who saw a wrong and ran at it, and the world will tell you two stories about him — that he was a hero, or that he was a fool — and both of them are ways of not having known him. I did not know him. I fed a drunk once, and the drunk is the reason your father is a story, and I am not going to lie to you about that. Here is the only true thing I have, and you may keep it or throw it away. He ran at the wrong because he could not stand not to. That is not a hero and it is not a fool. It is a cook*. There are not many of them, and they are the reason the rest of us can eat. Sweep the stone. Put the salt in at the end. If you are ever in this part of the city, the gate is open and the congee is free, and no one will ask you to be the daughter of anything.*

She came, that autumn, and ate at the temple, and Jingchen said four words to her — *sit down, it is hot* — and then left her alone, and she sat in the courtyard for an hour and looked at the five hundred arhats with their mended faces, and then she went home. And no camera filmed any of it. And that is the only thing in this book that the machine could not process, which is a girl eating congee at a

temple where her father's name is not on any wall, because the wall is not for that, and because the aunties had a rule that you do not put a paid-for grave on a building.

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Two other things happened that summer, and they are small, and I am putting them in because a manifest that leaves out the small things is a lie.

The first was that I found the wedding invitation.

It had been in the drawer in the room with the wall for four years, under the spare chargers and the two clean shirts in their plastic sleeve, a lavender envelope, good paper, the sort of paper a person buys when they want the invitation to outlive the marriage. It was from Tingting, who had been my girlfriend when I was twenty-three and who was married now in Chengdu, and I had kept it because it was the only piece of good paper in my whole life that had my name on it, and because the ache of a thing that did not happen is more portable than the ache of a thing that did. I took it out on a Sunday and sat on the edge of the bed and looked at it for a while, and I did not open it — I had never opened it; I had kept it sealed for four years, which is a very precise kind of cowardice — and I put it back in the drawer and closed the drawer.

I did not call. I am not going to dress that up. I did not call because a man who has spent four years being a public story does not call a married woman in another city to tell her that he kept her envelope, because the story would eat the call, and because the only way to keep a thing from the market is to keep it in a drawer. That is what I have to say about Tingting. She was kind to me when I was nobody, and she is somewhere in Chengdu with a life, and the envelope is in the drawer, and both of those things are true at the same time, and that is the most honest thing about love that this book contains.

The second was that Ma-ge was still running the laundry.

I passed the shop in the heat of the afternoon, on a delivery, and the machine was going, and Ma-ge was at the desk with a ledger open, and he did not see me. I did not go in. But I stood across the lane for a minute and watched him, and he was not peeling an orange; he was doing the books of an actual laundry, because after the trial he had folded the collection business into a shell that the

procurator could not reach and had kept the laundry, and the laundry was real, and the machine was washing actual clothes, and the sign above the door said the same thing it had said for twenty years. He had given me the last page of the last book and gone quiet, and he was a small man in a small shop doing small accounts, and he will never be charged and he will never be forgiven and he will never be more than this, and I have come to believe that this is the exact fate he chose on the night he decided he would rather be an ordinary coward than a useful one. I owe him twenty-eight thousand yuan that I no longer owe, and he goes on not collecting it, and that is our relationship, and there is no receipt.

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I went to the pool once.

That was the third thing, and I did not intend to go, and I am not entirely sure why I went, except that a man who has spent four years carrying the names of the people who copied him should probably look at the one thing the copier's death actually built.

The aquatic-safety training center was a low building with good light and a twenty-five-meter pool, and there were about forty children in it on a Saturday morning, in the free class, which was for the children of the neighbourhood and the children of the districts, and the instructors were patient and the water was clean and all of it was exactly as good as it had been advertised. On the wall by the entrance there was a plaque, and the plaque had the boy's name on it, and under the name it said, in the flat language of plaques, *so that no one else is lost to the water.* And on the bench by the changing rooms, hanging from a hook, there was a child's towel with a little cartoon of the monk on the hoverboard on it, because the brand was everywhere by then, and one of the children had brought it from home, and it was just a towel, and its being just a towel was the thing I could not get past.

I stood at the rail of the pool and watched a six-year-old learn to float on her back, with an instructor's hand under her head, and she was laughing, and her mother was filming on a phone, and behind the mother, on the wall, was the plaque with the dead boy's name. And I understood that this is what the whole of it was about, and that it is not a riddle and not a paradox and not a

contradiction: the pool is good. The plaque is honest. The boy is dead. The son is the reason for all three, and the son is not punished and will not be punished, and the next child who floats on her back will never know any of it, and that is the *point*. The good thing and the bad thing are the same act, delivered by the same hand, and the city has decided to keep the good thing and to forget the hand, and the ledger does not balance, and it is never going to balance, and a person is not a ledger.

I left before the class ended. At the gate there was a rack of the children's brand — caps and towels and water bottles — and a vending machine, and a bin, and I put my coin in the machine and did not buy anything, because I did not know what I wanted, and walked out into the heat.

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That is the wall I want to leave standing at the end. Not the barbershop wall with the couplet on it, though that wall stays; not the bright wall in the tower with the mascot on it; not the wall in the recess. The wall I want is a west wall of a stair off the Trail, in the heat, where a man with a bad knee and a bag of groceries stood for a minute and then went on, and where nobody put a plaque and nobody made a clip and nobody took the money. I have never told anyone about that man. I am telling the reader, and the reader is the only wall I have.

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The city, that summer, did not pause to notice any of it.

The note stayed on the barbershop wall, and the riders read it or did not read it, and about four hundred times a year someone asked what it said, and someone told them, in the time it takes to eat a bowl of noodles, and the telling was the whole distribution system. Zhang Niangniang's parlor never reopened the shelter, because the fire-safety notice had been correct, and the back room with the sign that said *tea seats* became the permanent home of the game and the memory and the noodles, and if you go looking for the network of three old women today, that is where it is, and there is no sign and no code and no radio, only a barber who sold his chair to a tea room and a table with a note above it. Liu Niangniang, who remembered everything, began, that summer, to forget small things, and the aunties noticed, and nobody said anything, and the

forgetting was, for the first time in fifty years, the only thing the table could not fix. Wang Niangniang fed the temple and the tunnel and the groundskeeper's grave and, once a week, the boy's sister, who came for noodles and did not call it anything.

Yaoji's company got the medical-samples contract in the autumn, which was the thing he had been working toward for two years, and he told me about it the way a man tells you a thing he has been waiting to be asked, and I asked, and we did not go for a drink, because I do not go for drinks, and we went instead for noodles at eleven at night, and he did not hold his side once the whole time, and that was the celebration.

Huajiao passed the second-year exam. She passed it at eighty-six, which was five better than the first, and she told the table in the flat voice of a person reporting a fact that did not belong to anyone, and Liu Niangniang, who was forgetting, remembered the mark, and said it out loud at the wrong moment and to the wrong person and did not notice, and the whole table noticed, and nobody corrected her, and Huajiao went red and stared at her bowl and later, in the room above the tunnel, did the thing she did when she was moved out of her own control, which was to punch the wall, once, quietly, and then sit down with the notebook and write the date at the top of a fresh page.

Wen Xiaoyu graduated, and got a job with a bank, of all things — a bank, the same kind of institution that had, one way or another, eaten her family — and she did the interviews in the year after the trial and she does not talk about the trial, and her father cooks for her on Sundays, and they are, in the slow, unphotogenic, year-of-lunches way, forgiving each other. Wen Xiaoyang's scar knot healed into the collar of every shirt he owned, and he learned to type with the hand that did not fully close, and he keeps a photograph of the two of them at a night market on the shelf of his desk at Yaoji's company, next to a cardboard fan that his sister does not know he has.

Chen Popo turned eighty-six that autumn, and did not die, and I want to put that down, because this book is about the difference between the people the city films and the people the city cannot see, and Chen Popo is the second kind. She was in that temple before the Republic and she was in it through the fire and she was in it when the roof came back, and she never said one word that anyone

could hear, and no camera has ever found her, and she has now outlived the man who burned the place and the man who ordered it and the man who rebuilt it and the man who wrote the note on the wall. She sits in her chair by the door in the morning sun and corrects nothing, because the new courtyard is too smooth to correct. A city needs one still point. This one is deaf and eighty-six and decided long ago that the world was too loud, and she is, by the arithmetic of everyone who knows her, the luckiest person in Chongqing.

Dao-ge's stone has the abbot's name on the wall beside it now, and the two of them are in the ground behind a temple that stands, and the foundation's pool with the drowned boy's name on it is open on weekends, and there is a children's brand of the monk on a hoverboard, and the counterfeit fan still sells for fifteen yuan and three for forty.

And I went on delivering noodles. And I went on walking the ridge at dawn. And the number went on climbing, slowly, in a body that did not announce it, and the gourd went on holding tea, and the fan stayed in my jacket with the knot on the handle, and in the autumn the city had its festival and the year turned, and a postcard came from a river town, and a man in a yellow jacket was one of thirty million.

That is the state of the wall at the end. It is not a resolution. It is a *wall*, and a wall is a thing that holds, and the only thing I have ever been able to fix is a wall.

CHAPTER 36

The Wire-Mended Fan

A year after the judgment, the new year's first congee morning was in the second month, on the eighth day, which is the day this city eats congee to remember that the year has begun, and the temple was fuller than it had been since the fire.

Jingchen ladled. He was eighteen now and he had taught himself the congee from the abbot's recipe in the account book and he had, by then, served it since the fire, and he had stopped getting the old words wrong. The line went out the gate and down the lane, and it was not a line of mourners and not a line of tourists; it was a line of the poor and the old and the ordinary, the men who swept the roads and the women who sold vegetables and the riders between orders and a woman with two children and a man with a bucket, and there were about three hundred of them, and there were forty bowls an hour, and the aunties were there, and the note was on the wall of the barbershop two streets away, and on the niche wall there was now the abbot's name and no inscription.

I swept the east courtyard, because that is what I do. And the whole of the family was somewhere in the temple: Huajiao at the end of the line with a bowl she had been given and a look on her face that I can only describe as *ordinary*, which is the highest word I know; Yaoji's van parked in the lane with the radio on the dash; Yingtao in the crowd with a camera that she had, for once, decided not to raise; Wen Xiaoyang with the scar under his collar, carrying two bowls for his sister. And I stood at the far side of the courtyard with the broom and watched the line and did the thing the abbot had taught me to do a long time ago, which is to let a room be a room and not make it mean anything.

At about nine o'clock, in the middle of the line, there was an old man.

He was hunched and small and he had a cloth cap and a coat with the elbows out, and he had a gourd on a string over his shoulder and he was holding a bowl he had brought from home, because the old people bring their own bowls. He was not in the line for long. He took his congee and he drank it standing in the courtyard, with his back to the arhat hall, and he looked at the five hundred

statues the way the old people look at them, which is the way you look at old neighbours. And then he put the bowl on the stack by the kitchen window and walked through the courtyard and out the gate, and he passed within about four meters of me, and he was just an old man from this city with a bowl and a gourd and a coat with the elbows out, and there are thirty million of him, and I did not follow him, and I did not call out, and I did not take a photograph, because I had learned in three years that the honest thing a man can do with an unprovable thing is to let it stay unprovable.

But I will put down the one detail, because the book is a record and a record does not get to leave out the detail just because it is deniable. He was carrying a fan. It was tucked into the string of the gourd, in the way a man carries a thing he uses and does not think about, and the fan was broken across the middle, and it was mended with wire, and the wire on the fan was bound tight and tied off at the handle, and from where I stood, four meters away, in the fog of a temple courtyard, I could not see the knot.

I could not see the knot. That is the whole of it. It was four meters and it was fog and it was a fan that any of the eleven thousand buyers of the counterfeit could have owned, or a fan that a girl of seventeen had made in a tunnel three streets away, or a fan that a fever made in a hall of statues, or a fan that was simply the city's, because the city had spent two years making fans, and because by that spring there was not a corner of this municipality where a broken palm-leaf fan mended with wire was not, in some sense, available.

The old man went out the gate. The fog took him in about eight steps. And I stood in the courtyard with the broom and I did not follow, and I have decided, over the years, that this is the entire discipline of the book: *do not follow the eight steps.* The city keeps its options open, and the fog is a form of mercy, and a man who spends his whole life walking into white rooms to prove what is in them will never once get to live in the low world.

I finished sweeping the courtyard, because a courtyard does not sweep itself.

Then I went to the barbershop, and the aunties were at the table, and Huajiao was there with the notebook, and the note was on the wall — the full couplet, the second line underlined twice, in the abbot's hand — and I sat down, and Wang Niangniang put a bowl in front of me, and Zhang Niangniang dealt,

and Liu Niangniang, who was forgetting, told a story about a monk she had once seen on a ridge during the flood of 1981, and the story was wrong in every detail and true in every way that mattered.

I ate. I drank the tea. And somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, a rider I did not know came in with a bag of noodles and asked the aunties what the sentence on the wall said, and Wang Niangniang, who had told it more than four hundred times, told it again, and the telling took fifteen seconds, and this is what she said.

"酒肉穿肠过，佛祖心中留。" She pointed to the second line with the back of her hand. "This half is the one the city kept. And this half is the one it forgot." She pointed at the underlines. "世人若学我，如同入魔道。 It means: if the world copies me, it walks into the demon's path. It means a man who is copied is responsible for the copies. It means the fan is not a shield. It means: *put the thing down before it kills somebody.*"

The rider said, "Which thing? The fan?"

Wang Niangniang picked up the teapot. "The *story*," she said. "The story is the thing. The fan is only the handle." She poured the tea. "Sit down. Eat. Then go and do something small that nobody films, and don't tell anyone, and don't make it mean anything. That is the whole religion of this city. It is on the wall. It has been on the wall for a year."

The rider sat down. And the aunties fed him, because that is what they do, and the afternoon went on, and the city went on being the city, and somewhere out in it a man in a yellow jacket with a gourd of tea and a wire-mended fan in his pocket was one of thirty million, and nobody needed him, and that — I am going to say it one more time, because it is the only conclusion I have and because I am not going to pretend to a better one — that was the best news he had ever received.

I am writing this now, in the room with the wall, with the exercise book on the shelf and the gourd on the table and a photograph on the shelf that was taken at a night market a long time ago of two children eating skewers, and the number is a number I am not going to write, and the tea is tea, and outside the fog is coming up off both rivers the way it does at the end of winter.

What comes next has a name I am not going to write here. I do not know what it will contain, except this much, which I can already see from the window: the funnel is still funnelling, and the son is still building, and the bottle is still on the other side of a door I have left visibly unlocked, and a girl of seventeen has a notebook with a rule she wrote herself and a mother who may or may not be alive and a road to the border that she intends to walk on her own terms, and I intend to walk it with her whether she asks me or not.

But that is still ahead of me. What I have is this: the city learned the second half of the couplet, and the man in the yellow jacket learned that the fan was never his, and a boy with a cardboard fan died for a story, and a woman went out a window because the story had learned to walk, and the son inherited the clean half of everything and the city's whole heart, and the aunties kept the wall, and the note said what it said, and the gourd held tea.

I have nothing else to put in the record. The manifest is signed. The goods are delivered. The courier is still standing, in a room with a wall, in the fog, in a city of thirty million people who have learned to look and are still learning, and the last thing I will say is the thing I say to no one, which is the only true thing I know about any of it.

I did not know whether the old man in the courtyard was the mad monk of the Southern Song, or a fever, or the fog, or the last of the old porters out for a walk, or a fellow who had heard the story and bought a fan and liked the joke, or my grandfather, or myself at seventy, or nobody at all.

Neither did he know about me. That is the beauty of it, and I am not going to explain the beauty, because the explaining is what kills it, and because the whole of it is the story of a man learning that the only true thing he can say about a myth is the thing he says to no one, at a table, with the tea going cold.

世人若学我，如同入魔道。

If the world should imitate me — it walks straight into the demon's path.

The second line is the one everyone forgets. It is also the one that is true.

Colophon

世人若学我，如同入魔道。

Shiren ruo xue wo, rutong ru mo dao.

If the world should imitate me — it walks straight into the demon's path. — the second line of the couplet attributed to Daoji, the mad monk of the Southern Song. The first line is the one everyone knows. This is the one they forget.

Daoji is the only saint in the Chinese pantheon whose own legend is a warning against following him. The couplet everyone half-remembers ends with the line everyone forgets: imitate me, and you walk into the demon's path. This novel takes that line literally. A city that has spent years retelling one man's kindness produces four hundred and eleven copies of him — a spreadsheet, a docket, a lawsuit — and has to decide which, if any, was the real thing.

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.

IF THE WORLD IMITATES ME · 40 sections · 97,227 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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