WHERE THE WATER WANTED TO GO

ZHEN AI

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67 chapters
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Contents

01 Jingshan, late January 2025 5

02 Jingshan, 28 January 2025 7

03 Yuhang, April 2014 9

04 Shenzhen, June 2014 11

05 Hangzhou, October 2014 13

06 Hangzhou, March 2015 14

07 Hangzhou, November 2015 15

08 Hangzhou, October 2015 16

09 Hangzhou, August 2015 17

10 Hangzhou, February 2016 18

11 Hangzhou, June 2016 19

12 Hangzhou, September 2016 21

13 Dajiangdong, May 2017 22

14 Beijing, July 2017 24

15 Hangzhou, December 2017 26

16 Frankfurt, September 2011 28

17 Hangzhou, October 2016 29

18 Hangzhou, May 2018 30

19 Hangzhou, 18 June 2018 32

20 Hangzhou, September 2018 34

21 Hangzhou, March 2019 36

22 Hangzhou, August 2019 37

23 Hangzhou, September 2019 39

24 Hangzhou, December 2019 41

25 Hangzhou, 18 January 2020 43

26 Hangzhou, 18 June 2020 45

27 Hangzhou, March 2021 46

28 Hangzhou, June 2021 48

29 Hangzhou, 18 June 2021 49

30 Hangzhou, 18 June 2022 50

31 Hangzhou, July 2022 51

32 Hangzhou, October 2022 52

33 Hangzhou, January 2023 54

34 Hangzhou, October 2023 56

35 Hangzhou, March 2024 59

36 Hangzhou, April 2024 61

37 Hangzhou, August 1998 64

38 Hangzhou, December 2011 67

39 Hangzhou, May 2024 69

40 Hangzhou, October 2024 71

41 Hangzhou, late October 2024 73

42 Hangzhou, November 2024 75

43 Hangzhou, March 2025 77

44 Jingshan, Qingming week 2025 79

45 Jingshan, May 2025 82

46 Jingshan, June 2025 83

47 Dajiangdong, October 2025 84

48 Hangzhou, March 2026 85

49 Jingshan, Qingming week 2026 87

50 Hangzhou, September 2026 88

51 Dajiangdong, September 2026 89

52 Ningbo, October 2026 90

53 Jingshan, October 2026 92

54 Jingshan, March 2027 94

55 Jingshan, Qingming week 2027 96

56 Xiaoshan, May 2027 98

57 Jingshan, July 2027 100

58 Hangzhou, August 2027 102

59 Jingshan, October 2027 104

60 Jingshan, November 2027 106

61 Hangzhou, January 2028 108

62 Jingshan, February 2028 109

63 Jingshan, Qingming week 2028 111

64 Jingshan, May 2028 113

65 Jingshan, June 2028 115

66 Jingshan, September 2028 117

67 Dajiangdong, October 2028 120

CHAPTER 1

Jingshan, late January 2025

The room is above the tea plot, two flights from the kitchen of a woman who does not ask questions. There is a bed, a desk the color of weak tea, a window that faces the ridge, and a hot plate. On the hot plate the kettle boils itself dry and clicks off, and I have learned to hear the click the way I used to hear a press at end of stroke.

I bought the paper in the town: ruled exercise books, the kind schoolchildren use, twenty-eight of them stacked on the counter by the register. The woman asked if I had a lot of writing to do. I said I didn't know. That was three weeks ago; the first four books are gone.

The method came back without my deciding on it. On the first page of each book: the place, the month, the year. Below that, the scene. Below the scene, the dates inside the dates — the ones that belong to documents, kept in their own column so that when the two accounts disagree, the document's account is visible as a document. I number the notebooks, though nobody will ever catalogue them. A man who spent twenty years signing inspection records does not stop because the records have stopped existing.

I write on paper because every machine I have ever trusted has been taken from me. The servers went with the seizure in the spring of 2024, the laptops went before that, and the phone in the drawer upstairs is a phone I answer only for the administrators, and then not often. Paper cannot be frozen. Paper has no account to garnish. My wife — my former wife — used to say I logged our life the way a shipping clerk logs freight. She was not wrong. I date everything. Dates are the only part of any of this I was ever sure of.

Everyone told me the water was too deep. I wrote it down each time, with the date. Ninety-two notebooks, and not one page of them is about my daughter.

I am not writing this to explain myself. Explanation is a genre I have watched this city manufacture by the shipload: the man who fails, retold as prologue. I have read enough of those to know the shape, and the shape is a lie even when

the facts are true. The facts here are ordinary. I was not cheated and I was not betrayed. I was wrong the way weather is wrong for a crop: late, or early, or in the wrong quantity. The dates will show it. The dates show what I did; they do not show that I meant anything by it, which is also true.

The woman downstairs is Auntie Shao. She keeps tea below my window and chickens below the tea, and she pays me in eggs for the times I fix her kitchen scale, which is often, because the scale is old and the spring in it has lost half its memory. She does not ask about the news. When my face is in the paper — it has been in the paper, once, in the spring of 2024 — she turns the page sideways and finds the crossword. She is the only person who treats me as a tenant.

So: the place, the month, the year, at the top of every page, the way a report should be written. If I cannot date a thing, I do not write it down. A scene you cannot place is a scene you do not understand, and I have had enough of those to last the rest of the account.

CHAPTER 2

Jingshan, 28 January 2025

New Year's Eve. The old woman invited me down for the televised gala — a duty invitation, the kind you extend to a tenant so the house is full at the turn of the year. Her television is thirteen inches and sits on a shelf of tea tins.

For a long stretch of the evening the program was what it always is: singers, skits, a stage too large for the feeling it is pretending to have. Then the dancers came out. They wore the floral sleeves of the northern yangge and they moved in a line, arms swinging, and they were not people. Sixteen machines, painted to look like people in the sleeves, dancing in step on the national broadcast on the night before the new year. The mechanics of it were visible if you looked: the slight delay from the end of the line, the footfalls too even to be balance, one sleeve dropped a heartbeat after its neighbor because a cable had lag. The audience in the studio did not seem to know at first. Then they did, and the sound they made was the sound of a country being told what year it is.

Auntie Shao asked if they were people. I said no. She said, the water on the tea, and reached past me to the hot plate.

I watched to the end with the eye I have never been able to turn off. Sixteen actuators is a synchronization problem before it is a dance: the choreography has to be solved in software, joint by joint, and somebody had solved it — the delay I could see from the end of the line was not failure, it was the honest cost of a master clock and sixteen bodies reading it at the speed of cabling. What I could not see anywhere in it was the thing my whole trade worships: compliance. The machines did not yield. They were rigid, and they were balanced, and the balance was held by the control system at the frequency of a held breath. Somewhere a stiffness engineer had specified joints that would not give a millimeter, and the millimeter had been taken up in code, and I thought: that is a design that survives until the code stops.

I could not have told you, that night, what my daughter had been doing in Shenzhen for five years or why she had come home the previous January. I knew

only that she was back in Hangzhou, and that Old Dai had seen her, and that he told me about it the way you report weather in a city you do not live in: lightly, and then a change of subject. The machines finished their dance. The program moved on to a choir. I went upstairs in the dark, past the kettle, and lay down with the date in my head, because that is the habit: whatever happens, get it onto the page while you can still say which night it was.

CHAPTER 3

Yuhang, April 2014

Twenty years I spent at the Tier-1 — the top tier of supplier, the tier that sells directly to the carmakers and is assumed by everyone downstream never to go missing.

I went in at twenty-two with an associate certificate and came out at forty-two with a badge, a box, and a set of tolerance tables that were not, strictly speaking, mine. The tables were the plant's accumulated judgment about how much deviation a part can carry before the whole assembly starts to talk back: journal hardness against needle runout, bore concentricity against preload, stack-ups four and five deep with the tolerances of 1987 still quoted in the margins. Everything I know about what a thing can stand, I learned copying those columns by hand.

The first page of my set is not in my hand. It has not been in my hand for twenty years. Whoever wrote it wrote in a small, exact script with the numbers squared off like a man who had learned to write in a shop where a misread digit costs a limb.

The part I gave my life to was the universal joint: cross and four yokes, the piece that lets two rigid shafts meet at an angle and keep turning against each other without breaking. A cardan joint does not solve the angle; it survives it. The output wobbles — you pair them in phase and the wobble cancels, or you live with a vibration the customers will feel in the seat. Working angles are fifteen, twenty degrees, and beyond that the thing eats itself. The slip yoke moves with the suspension, taking up the length change so nothing binds. A joint that is dying announces itself in noise before it announces itself in play — a dry ticking at idle that no grease will touch, a thousand kilometers of it before the play reaches your hands. It is an honest component. It admits the angle exists and does its work anyway.

I have thought since that I chose the part before I chose anything else. A man who spends his life making the joint that lets rigid things move against each other without learning how to be one of them.

I left in April. I had married Lu Wan in 1994, and our daughter had been born in the autumn of 1996 and was at school in Hangzhou, which is to say: I was leaving a life that had been arranged correctly and was failing anyway, in the way a casting fails — invisibly, from the inside, until the part cracks.

The company I had not yet named existed only as a business plan and a decision I had told four people about. Lu Wan was in supply-chain two buildings over and knew every toolmaker in the province by the sound of their presses; it was through her that I came to know a mold-maker in Ningbo named Yao, who measured the world in the same decimals I did, and it was Lu Wan who would later stand between me and the first money the way a good fixture stands between a part and a vibration it is not rated for. The gate clacked behind me the way gates do — not a sound with an opinion in it. In the box: my coffee cup, the tables, a jacket I never wore. Twenty years compress to what your arms can carry, which is a lesson in tolerance stacks of its own.

CHAPTER 4

Shenzhen, June 2014

The angel money was in its third city when the gaokao fell. My daughter sat the examination on the seventh and eighth of June; I know the dates because I wrote them on the back of an itinerary and looked at them forty times a day, the way you monitor a pressure you cannot get a gauge onto.

I was in a rented conference room off Shennan with a slide deck and a term sheet that kept getting longer on the other side of the table. The exam was over on the eighth, China time, before my evening sessions began. I called the apartment at midnight from the corridor outside the room, where the noise of the catering trolleys covered the sound of a man pretending to be somewhere else.

The roadshow city had its own weather: air conditioning at a temperature that kills paper, a lobby where every other table was also pitching a thing that did not exist yet, and a particular courtesy in the voice of the men who asked how the provincial subsidy would hold if the national one stepped back — a courtesy I heard then as small talk and can now hear as the first question anyone should have asked me. In three cities, twelve slides, and not one of them showed a customer.

The deck went at ten the next morning: the same twelve, each round of investors caring about a different one. The slide they liked was the tolerance slide — the table with the deviations in it, our stack-up against the incumbent's — because a slide with numbers on it looks like a company. The slide they should have cared about was the one I could not make interesting: who would buy the car, and when the first of them would be standing at a counter with money.

Lu Wan answered.

"How did she do?"

"It's over. Go to your meeting."

That is the whole report. I have turned it over eleven years and it has not gained a word. She did pass. She needed one line of it — the minimum the

province required — and she gave it the way she gave everything to do with the company, which was to take it off my desk without my noticing the weight had moved.

I went back in. The deck went fine. The money came in October.

CHAPTER 5

Hangzhou, October 2014

The round closed on a Thursday. Fourteen million yuan in the first tranche, then the rest against milestones I had written myself and would spend the next nine years failing to hit. Lu Wan had vouched for me the way the old supply chain vouches for anything: personally, by name, in a room, with her own credit standing behind the sentence. The first night the money landed I stayed in the office past nine and looked at the balance the way a man in a dry country looks at a reservoir: a number that was not a number, because it was not for spending on anything I wanted. It was water held behind a commitment.

Around us the money was getting looser by the quarter. The subsidy age ran on a simple arithmetic — a cash payment to the buyer of every qualifying vehicle, national and provincial, released against a place on the government's catalog — and for a few years that arithmetic made fools of forecasts. Two men I had trained went to EV startups that paid triple and gave out titles the way other firms gave out pens. I read their announcements the way you read a competitor's datasheet: without envy, and with a note in the margin about what their tolerance stacks would look like after two years of that.

That is the whole trick of other people's money. It rises.

CHAPTER 6

Hangzhou, March 2015

I registered the company on the eleventh of March. Buxi — *buxi* (不息): strive without rest. The name was meant as an instruction to myself and, I understand in retrospect, as a promise I was making to people who could not check it.

We took two rooms above a tool shop in the spring, with a window that faced a loading bay, and for the first months the company was a whiteboard, a leased coordinate measuring machine, and me doing the work of four functions because hiring slowly was the only kind of hiring I trusted.

Xu Heng arrived in June. She was the first hire I made without asking a supplier's opinion: a CFO out of a mid-sized manufacturer who had spent four years untangling someone else's collapsed fund and had the manner of someone reading a structural report on a building she was standing in. She opened the books on day one and did not close them for nine years. Her first act was to establish what she called the ring-fence — a second signature between the reservation money and everything else — and her second was to make me initial it, which I did the way a man initials a form that is not addressed to him.

Everyone called the money we raised *float*. I called it *xirang* (息壤): soil that grows as you spend it — the miracle dirt from the old flood story, the kind you can never stop pouring. The auditors had other words for it.

CHAPTER 7

Hangzhou, November 2015

The first parts came off the second jig in November, and I have kept the sheet they were measured on.

It is a single page of grid paper: eleven features, the nominal, the tolerance, the actual, in my own columns, and one row where the actual had wandered to the far edge of the band and stopped there — inside specification, outside my patience. I annotated it the way I annotate everything, with the date and a question: *who decided this was enough.* There was no one to ask. I was the who. That is what a founder is at the start — the entire quality system, wearing one chop.

The parts were beautiful, which means nothing. A universal joint does not care that it is beautiful; it cares that it survives the angle. I put the sheet in the first of the notebooks anyway, under a failure-mode heading, because the habit of pre-confessing a part's death before it has lived was older than the company — it was the plant's, the Tier-1's, the shop's — and it was the only inheritance I had carried out in the box that did not have somebody else's handwriting on its first page.

CHAPTER 8

Hangzhou, October 2015

Tan Zheng passed on us in the third week of October. He called to say it himself, which I remember as courtesy and now read as a man who likes to deliver verdicts in his own voice.

"Best body-in-white I've read in this country," he said, "attached to a man who burns through people. Pass."

I asked who he had talked to. He said my CFO and one of my structural engineers — that diligence was a conversation, not a document, and both of my people had told him the truth, which was why he was not going to negotiate. I said they were entitled to their opinions. He said he wasn't blaming anyone; he was describing a load-bearing wall that shouts.

I asked him, because I have never learned not to ask, what specifically the wall had said. He did not quote them, the way men like him do not quote sources; he gave me instead the shape: that in the last shop something had gone wrong on my watch and the people who had watched it go wrong were still afraid of me. I said that was one reading of it. He said it was the reading he had, and that a man is allowed only one reading of a founder at this stage, and his was used up.

I wrote his sentence down. I write down every sentence that is about me. It went into the first of the notebooks — an FMEA, a failure mode and effects analysis, the form on which a team pre-confesses its failures by severity, occurrence and detection before they have the decency to occur — under a heading that was not, at the time, an accusation against myself.

CHAPTER 9

Hangzhou, August 2015

Old Dai came to me from a company that had already failed once, which at the time I thought of as a drawback and now read as the only relevant qualification. His name was Dai Guoqiang; everyone including me called him Old Dai; he was older than the rest of the technical staff by several years and hired with the manner of a man auditing the building before accepting the office.

"Nine years," he said, at the end of the second interview, in answer to a question I had not asked aloud — how long he would stay. "Nine years is how long a platform takes. I've built three and watched two of them die. I'd like to watch one the whole way through."

He wanted the institutional memory to live in one place for once. That was his want, and he carried it the way other men carry a grudge: everywhere, on his back. He was right about the nine years. Neither of us guessed what the number would come to mean.

CHAPTER 10

Hangzhou, February 2016

In the second winter we built the list.

Every manufacturer carries one, though most write it down late: the qualified-supplier register, the roll of shops whose parts you will put your own name behind, each entry with its capability, its last audit, its failure history, and in the margin the thing the form has no column for — which man there actually answers the phone when a line goes down at two in the morning. Dai and I built ours shop by shop, driving out to tooling works and stamping plants and one gear house in a corridor of sheds that measured its spindles with the same micrometer I used to carry in a case.

We wrote it in duplicate, audited it ourselves, and argued about every name on it. The arguments were the education: Dai would read a shop's failure history the way I read a fatigue plot — not what it failed on, but how it failed — and twice he struck a name I would have kept because, he said, the way a shop owns its last mistake tells you what it will do to you at three in the morning. The second strike was the one I still think about: a plating house that had concealed a rework, brilliant on every measurable, and Dai, who had spent his career being lied to by measurable things, would not have it in the building. That register — the penmanship of it, the pages that grew then thinned — is the most valuable document my company ever produced, and I did not know it then, because I thought the value was in the cars.

CHAPTER 11

Hangzhou, June 2016

In the summer of 2016 money was the one substance in the province nobody was short of.

The subsidy age was at full flood. A buyer who chose an electric car received a payment from the state that arrived after the sale, against the catalog, and the catalog was a wall you could be on or off; half the industry was climbing it and nobody asked how the cars drove, only whether the paperwork had the right stamp. A competitor who had shipped nothing I would let leave my floor announced a financing round every four months, each one larger than the last, and hired our test engineers at numbers I could not match without becoming a company I would not recognize.

I did not raise that summer. We had what we needed, and I had a rule I was proud of: build the part first, then the story. My eighty people torqued bolts to figures I had personally signed off, and the plant smelled of cutting fluid, and out the window the money moved like weather in a country you can see but do not live in.

Old Dai said we were the only shop in the district counting backward from failure. I took it as a compliment. I did not think to ask what it would feel like to be right.

There was a lunch that summer with a supplier's salesman who could not understand why we audited plating thickness on a part his own engineers had stopped checking. He drew the market on a napkin — the catalog wall, the climbing, the names going up the wall like climbers on a rope somebody else was paying for — and he said, half-admiringly, boss Ruan, you are building a church in a casino. I said the casino would have to close eventually, and that when it did the churches would be the only buildings still standing. He said, sure, but who goes to church. We finished the tea. His shop is still in business, which is more than can be said for half the climbers on the napkin, and I have never been able

to decide whether surviving the casino by joining it is a form of engineering or a form of weather.

CHAPTER 12

Hangzhou, September 2016

Fang Qi's profile ran on a Saturday: two full pages, a photograph of me in the plant with my arms crossed like a man defying a measurement. She had spent three days asking questions no one had asked me in the industry, including one about a supplier failure in 2011 that I had hoped no one outside the trade remembered.

Her method I can describe now because I watched her work it: she let me talk until I was describing the tolerance stack, and while I talked she was watching my hands, and when the hands stopped moving she asked the question underneath the last one. The 2011 failure I had answered flatly — a supplier had shipped parts to certificate that did not match the metal, we had caught it at incoming, the lot died. What she wanted, and got, was not the story but the temperature of it: how long the argument inside the plant had lasted, and who had lost it. She wrote none of that. She wrote two pages of a careful man, because that was the piece she had come to file, and because the truth of a company in its third year is mostly a thing that has not happened yet.

She wrote me as the careful man. The piece was kind in the way a piece can only be kind when the reporter has decided, before the first question, that you deserve the benefit. A man leaves the safety of a big company at forty-two to build the part that would make the roads safer — that was the frame. It helped raise the round that built the plant. I have the money; I had the coverage; the frame was the first public version of the story I have spent this book failing to live down. Hangzhou likes a man who fails upward. In September 2016 I had not yet failed at all, and it already liked me for the shape of the failure I was going to have.

CHAPTER 13

Dajiangdong, May 2017

They cut the ribbon on a Tuesday. Deputy Director Qian did the cutting: a man of about my age, in a jacket too warm for the month, who shook my hand, looked at the ground, and said very little, because his job at a groundbreaking is arithmetic, not speeches. The district was there for the photograph — a delegation of nine, arranged by height without anyone appearing to arrange it. The bank was there for the photograph, and for the covenant it was about to attach to the money. My eighty people were there because the buses had brought them, and because for most of them the plant was the third job that had promised to stay.

After the photograph there was the ceremony of the first bucket, and Qian handed it to me rather than using his own, which I understood later to be the whole of the district's policy in one gesture: here, you dig; we will be at the ribbon. Someone had set out a table with the soil under a glass, the way museums keep a first brick. I put my hand on the bucket and thought about the grade of the fill, because that is where my hands go when a person is saying something to me I do not know how to answer.

The ground is the thing to understand. Dajiangdong is not land in the way a farmer means it. It is ground other people's walls made: thirty years of dike-building, campaign by campaign, pushing the tideline out into the bay until the maps had to be reissued. Every meter under my foot was won from the water by men with baskets, and the soil remembers it — it settles, it drains wrong, it holds salt in the low corners. We drove piles and we drove them again.

The bank's covenant came with it, naturally: quarterly tests against a build schedule, a debt-service ratio, and a clause requiring the district's own engineers to witness the ground works. The clause was boilerplate and I read it anyway, twice, because it was the first document I had ever signed that described the ground as a party to the contract. The district's engineers came once, in June, took photographs of the piling rigs, and left a signed sheet in my site office that I

kept with the founding papers: the state, on my site, confirming that the earth was as specified.

I built my walls on soil other people's walls made. I did not think of it as a sentence then. I thought of it as a foundation.

After the speeches the delegation was walked along the service road to see the first pile cap, which had been installed the week before for the photograph and stood in the mud like a small gray altar. The district's engineers explained the dynamic consolidation — the tampers, the fill depth, the settlement the ground would go through before it was fit to carry a press line's loads — and I listened the way I listen to any instrument's calibration report: for the number they were proud of and the number they were leaving out. The number they were proud of was the fill depth. The number they left out was the settlement schedule, which is the ground's way of saying later. Qian, walking back to the buses, said the thing I have kept as the district's whole philosophy in one clause: the soil here is patient; you have to be, too.

CHAPTER 14

Beijing, July 2017

The freeze was announced while I was in the capital, in a waiting room with eleven other applicants, all of us holding numbers and all of us pretending to read.

There were two gates in those days and they were not the same gate. One was the commission's approval to build a new-energy passenger project; the other was the ministry's access list, the catalog, without which a car is a sculpture. We had designed for both, filed for both, and broken ground in May on the faith that paperwork follows concrete. The announcement said that new project approvals were suspended pending revision of the rules. It did not say for how long. Documents like that never do; the duration is a favor you find out about afterward.

Eleven men in a waiting room, reading phones. Somebody's assistant came in, said a sentence to her boss, and the boss made a small sound with his tongue — the sound of a schedule being deleted. We sat there another hour out of politeness to the building. In the corridor afterward two applicants compared notes on which provincial teams had already been told to stop hiring; a third asked whether I had a second line of business I could run while the rules were revised. I said I made parts. He said, everyone's making something new now, and went back to his phone.

I flew home. The plant was three months into construction, the piles were paid for, and the gate had shut behind me while I was standing in it. That is the actual mechanics of a gate: it rarely closes on you dramatically. It closes in a document you were not in the room for, and then you find out when you bring your papers to the window. The announcement sat on my desk for a week before I understood that its silence about duration was the whole of its content. A rule that says pending has no pressure behind it and therefore no gradient; nothing moves, and everything that depends on movement stops where it stands.

For the rest of that summer I did what men in waiting rooms do, which is refile. Three supplemental submissions went out of the capital between July and October, each one a rearrangement of the same documents against rules that changed their margins while I was quoting them. The provincial team, who had cut the ribbon in May, began answering my calls with the cadence of people who have been told to be helpful and cannot say anything else. In September a clerk in the capital — I never saw her face, only the desk — pushed a folder back to me with one finger and said, not yet, the way you say not yet to a delivery that has no address. I kept the folder. The paper inside it is the last paper I have that was rejected for a reason nobody wrote down.

CHAPTER 15

Hangzhou, December 2017

The solution was a company that had never made a compliant car.

It had a name, a history of filings, a production qualification granted in better weather, and debts larger than anything on my own books by a factor of ten. It had been idle so long the ministry had listed it among the dormant; the announcement sat in the paper the way a notice of death sits in a paper, giving survivors until spring to claim what was theirs. What it had that we could not get any other way, now that the gate was shut, was the right to exist at all: a license, and a factory's worth of paperwork with a stamp on it.

The price was one yuan. The debts came with it. That is not a figure of speech — the transfer was structured so that the buyer assumed the liabilities in consideration of the nominal price, which is how these things are done when what is being sold is the door and what is being given away is the room.

I went to see it before I signed. The dormant plant sat south of the city behind a fence with the paint gone chalky, its stamping hall full of pallets the previous owner had never cleared, his office still pinned with a production schedule from a year nobody could name. The qualification papers were in a cabinet with the seal intact. A caretaker unlocked the building for us and stood in the doorway while I walked the floor, and when I knelt to look at the anchoring of a bridge crane he waited the way people wait for a man who has found what he came for.

I checked four things that afternoon and I want them listed, because they are the last four checks I made as a careful man: the crane's anchor bolts, torqued and rusted evenly, no telltale of a slip; the pit drainage, which still ran to the creek and did not stand; the paint booth's balances, dead but complete; and the electrical room's single-line diagram, pinned behind glass, matching the room it described. Four passes. It is the finest inspection I have conducted on anything I did not build, and every one of the four was a fact I could have written my name beside. What I did not inspect was the thing the transaction actually was, because

it was not a machine: it was a liability stack with a door attached, and liabilities do not have a torque spec.

Xu Heng read the agreement twice and did not say the word I was thinking. She asked me what we told the people on the site. I said we tell them the line is starting. She said, then we had better be right, and signed as witness.

I want the date to be in the file correctly, so: December 2017, one yuan, the debts assumed. Everyone called it a rescue. I understood it as the only honest transaction left — a man buying a lie so that the people who had staked their winters on him could keep their wages. The tool was never the crime. I could not have told you then what the crime was, because I did not believe I had committed one.

The license came through in the new year. The catalog entry lagged, and lagged, the way a status lags in a system nobody is in a hurry to update. We were alive. I have thought since that this was the last month in which anything I did could be called careful, and I am not sure I was not already careful in the way a man is careful of the wrong variable — checking the grade of a bolt on a structure he has forgotten to level.

On the last working day of that December I walked the dormant plant again, alone, in the dark of the afternoon, the caretaker having gone home with the keys I did not need because the gate had not been locked since we signed. The pallets of the previous owner's last failed run still stood where the forklift had left them, shrink-wrapped, the labels faded into a grammar nobody would ever decode. I put my hand on the wrap of the nearest pallet the way you touch a horse you are deciding whether to buy, and the metal underneath was cold and true and waiting, and I said, out loud, to the plant, the sentence I had been saying to people all year in a voice that had not once believed itself: we are going to make something here.

There were no customers yet. There were no depositors yet. There was a plant, a license that said we were real, and a balance sheet that had been telling the truth for the last time.

PART II — Nine Years

CHAPTER 16

Frankfurt, September 2011

The motor show ate the whole week. Our joint assemblies were on a stand in Hall 4, bolted to a display that spun slowly, and I spent my days explaining misalignment angles to men from purchasing departments while the time difference did its work behind me.

There is a particular loneliness to a trade stand: you say the same forty sentences until they leave your mouth pre-worn, and the interesting conversations happen in the ten minutes after the hall empties, with a buyer who stayed late because he actually has a program. I had two of those that week and both went well, and neither of them asked me about my family, and I remember the relief of that with shame now — that it felt like being understood.

On the seventeenth my daughter turned fifteen. I had it in my pocket — the date, the number, the whole shape of it — and I called the apartment from the stand at nine in the evening, between the hall closing and the dinner I had cancelled.

Lu Wan answered. "Did she —"

"She knows where you are."

That is all of it. Not a complaint; a fact, delivered the way you tell a man the loading dock is closed. I bought a scarf at the airport on the way home, in the terminal, from a shop that was already pulling its shutters. She was at school when I got in. The scarf was too young for her and she wore it anyway for one winter, which I have decided, over the fourteen years since, to remember as either forgiveness or evidence.

CHAPTER 17

Hangzhou, October 2016

My mother died on a Tuesday in October. The round I had been closing since August was scheduled to sign on the Thursday.

I want the date to be right, so: she died on the eighteenth; the signing was the twentieth; the burial was the twenty-fifth. I called Lu Wan from the fund's lobby after the principals had gone to dinner, still holding the pen.

"It's done," she said.

"The signing —"

"The burial is on the twenty-fifth."

My daughter chose the plot with her mother and stood at the front of a room I was not in. I sent flowers that were wrong for the season. I was built to be at signings. I was built and not tested.

The signing happened at four o'clock on the twentieth with a pen the fund kept on the table for the photograph, and the dinner afterward ran to toasts, and I made mine about milestones. On the twenty-fifth I was at a desk in the fund's city by seven, going over the funding agreement's schedules, because the schedules are where a deal lives or dies and the burial was at an hour that would have required me to be somewhere I was not. The flowers were at the front. My name was on the card. It is possible to be present in exactly one medium at a time, and I chose the wrong medium, and I chose it by default, which is how most of the entries in this book were made.

CHAPTER 18

Hangzhou, May 2018

Xu Heng put a memorandum on my desk eleven days before the intake opened, with a subject line written the way she wrote everything: as if the sentence itself would be audited.

> *MEMORANDUM To: Ruan Weimin, General Manager From: Xu Heng, Chief Financial Officer Date: 12 May 2018 Subject: Proposed pre-order deposit intake*
> *1. Fact. The proposed program collects five thousand yuan per reservation against a target of forty thousand reservations, payable before any validated production exists. The funds would sit in the operating structure alongside payroll.*
> *2. Assessment. Deposits are not revenue. They are trust with a repayment date. If the collection is commingled with the payroll account, every future payment to a supplier or a worker becomes a payment out of money we do not own.*
> *3. Recommendation. Ring-fence the intake in a separate account. Do not draw on it except against delivered units. If the business requires the float, say so in writing to me first, and I will find it a legal home.*

I agreed with every sentence of it. I filed it. Eleven days later we opened the intake anyway, because the line was built and the tooling deposits were due and the ring-fence she wanted would have left us paying the toolmakers in promises. The memorandum went into the steel drawer under the desk, and the drawer is the only reason you will ever read it.

I want to record what agreeing with a warning and ignoring it feels like from the inside, because the genre has it wrong: it does not feel like hypocrisy. It feels like timing. Every sentence of hers was true and every sentence of hers assumed a company with more months than we had, and I told myself that the difference

between her position and mine was not honesty but horizon — she was protecting the company as it was, I was holding it to the company it had to become. The horizon was real. What I did not know, and she did, is that you do not get to the horizon on money you have already spent twice.

CHAPTER 19

Hangzhou, 18 June 2018

The intake opened at nine in the morning. By noon the counter on the screen was past four figures and the phones were a solid tone. Five thousand yuan down, refundable under conditions, for a car that would exist in a year — the arithmetic of belief, filed by serial block: name, city, identity number, the last four digits of a card. Below the counter, in the size of type the lawyers had required, the risk line I had made the company print large: the vehicle does not yet exist; production is subject to conditions; the deposit is refundable on the terms published here. Everyone clicked it. Forty thousand people would click it, over the years the intake stayed open.

It is fashionable now to say the buyers were duped. They were not. Every one of them read the risk line, because I made the company print it large. What they bought was the thing I bought in 2014: a man who appeared to be careful, standing in front of a machine. One of them, on this first morning, was a widow in Xiaoshan putting down five thousand of her own money for a car that promised to make the roads safe. I did not know her name yet. I would learn it at a gate, five years later, from a screen held up in front of my face.

The day itself had the texture of a switch being thrown: the call floor we had built out of a partitioned office going solid by ten; the counter on the public page refreshed by hand at first, out of superstition, every administrator taking turns; the first refund request arriving at eleven-forty and stopping the room for a full minute before Xu Heng said, without looking up, that a refundable deposit that never refunds is not a deposit, process it. We processed it. That is a thing worth having on the record too: on day one, with two hundred million yuan of other people's winters still to come, we returned five thousand to a man who had changed his mind.

On the same morning we were hiring for the line build-out. The woman who sat down across from the table had eighteen years on other people's assembly lines, a printout of her work history with a fold down the middle, and hands that

she laid flat on the table while she answered, the way a typographer lays a proof. I have inspected lines my whole life; you learn hands the way you learn typefaces — which fingers hold, which wrists give, which two people in a shop are the ones who feel a burr before they see it. We hired her. Her name was Zhou Aifen.

CHAPTER 20

Hangzhou, September 2018

The first body-in-white came out of the joining fixture on a Thursday in September.

A body-in-white is the car before it decides to be a car: the stamped panels welded into one geometry, unpainted, unglazed, no seats, no wire — only the structure, silver under the lights, holding the tolerances the drawing asked for or not. We wheeled it under the inspection lamps and the whole line crew stood around it the way people stand around a sleeping animal. The gaps measured inside the print at every station. The datums held. I ran my thumb down a door aperture where two stamped flanges met and felt for the step the way you feel for a seam in a table, and there was none, and I said, good, in a voice I did not recognize.

The photographers from the district came the next week. The picture ran in three places with the date under it. Somewhere in Shenzhen my daughter was beginning at a company that made actuators, and she is in none of my pictures, and she did not need to be; I had the structure and the structure was on its way.

The racking, the two body jigs we had leased, the paint booth nobody was yet allowed to run: the build-out finished, and Aifen and the rest hired for it stood at their stations with check sheets clipped up and nothing to check. A factory with no customers is a machine that has been calibrated for a thing that has not been scheduled. We were, by every internal measure I had ever trusted, ready.

The launch date moved that September, as it had moved twice already — not canceled, moved, which is the gentler verb and the more expensive one — and each move was a calendar arithmetic the sales office performed without me, the way you move a patient's chart. I signed the revised date without complaint because the date was not the problem. The problem was standing in front of me every morning in the form of a body-in-white that measured perfectly and meant nothing until a customer's key turned in it. Aifen, who had run first-article inspection at three plants before mine, said it once, quietly, at the lamp: boss, we

are making a perfect thing that nobody asked for. I said I knew. She said she was only saying it once.

CHAPTER 21

Hangzhou, March 2019

The suspension assembly was filed on the eleventh: my name and Gao Yan's, two inventors, with the claims written around a geometry I had drawn on the back of a supplier's invoice. The idea, if I state it flatly, is that a suspension member need not be one stiffness through its whole travel. Bushing rate and bump-stop contact can be arranged so the structure changes its mind as it compresses: soft into the small stuff, graduated through the middle, rigid at the end of the stroke. Staged deflection. The part learns the load before it fights it.

A patent is an argument you hold for twenty years by paying rent on it every March. I knew that when we filed; every engineer does; the annuity is a line item, small enough that no one budgets a meeting for it. The claims I wrote that month were the best technical work of my life, and the drawings were clean, and Gao Yan's fatigue plots were so good I had them framed in my head before they were ever on paper.

Gao Yan did the structural work — the fatigue plots, the mount analysis, the sections. She was the best engineer I hired in the first five years, which I did not say out loud often enough and did say once, in a room full of people, in a tone that made it sound like a warning. We filed the patent that month with the shield question still open, and Old Dai, who thought in assets the way other men think in weather, began the conversation that would settle it in August.

CHAPTER 22

Hangzhou, August 2019

The assignment took place at a kitchen table on a Sunday, with Dai doing the talking and Lu Wan signing where he pointed.

The logic, as he laid it out between servings, was not complicated. A company's assets are a company's assets, which means they are the first thing a creditor's hand closes around; but a right registered in the name of a natural person, a spouse, shielded from the operating entity by an assignment for value and a filing — that is weather a creditor has to go outside to find. He had done it for a tooling shop in his last job. He said it the way you recommend a fastener: correctly torqued, it will outlive the joint.

At the table there was also a practical fact neither of us said aloud and both of us were doing the arithmetic for: in a bad year, a patent whose annuity has to be paid by a household instead of a company gets paid by whichever household member still has a card that works. The shield was for the company's creditors. The rent would come from the house. That is the whole arrangement, stated the way it should have been stated in 2019: a defense for one front, funded by a quiet exposure on another, and both of them written in the same four signatures.

"She holds the patent," I said.

"For now," Dai said, "she holds the patent."

What neither of us said, and both of us were keeping, was the second column of that arrangement: the annuity. A granted patent generates an annual fee every March — small, dull, mechanical, the kind of line item a company absorbs without a meeting. But a patent held by a natural person generates the fee against a household card, and the man who had signed four signatures at a kitchen table on a Sunday had thereby handed his wife a payment obligation that no piece of paper in the company's files would ever acknowledge. I record the structure because the structure is what failed. The sentiment is not a structural member.

I signed as assignor. Lu Wan signed as assignee. The transfer was lodged with the office in the last week of August, entered on the register in September, and

became — this is the part I did not understand in 2019 and understand now — a public record: anyone who read the gazette could see that the suspension patent had moved from the company to Ruan Weimin's wife. In the years since I have thought about the word shielding: a shield protects what is behind it by standing where the blow lands. The patent stood in her name for five years, and then one March it stopped standing, and no one struck it.

CHAPTER 23

Hangzhou, September 2019

The battery mount was her subject, and she put it on my desk in June: a resonance risk between the pack cradle and the frame rail, with the analysis showing a fatigue window if the mount bushing ran warm. She had nine years in the trade and the least time on my floor, to hear me tell it that morning.

I screamed at her. I want the memo to say only what happened: I told her the mount was not her department, that the supplier had been validated, and that she was the least experienced person in that room. My voice did the rest. She stood there with the plots under her arm and did not defend herself, because there was no room in my face for defense, and she left the building on a Friday in September and went to Shenzhen.

There were four others in the room. I know because I have counted them in the years since — counted them the way I count the features on a failed part, looking for where the load went. Nobody spoke after she closed the door. Somebody coughed. I said, let's get back to the agenda, and we got back to the agenda, and the agenda is what I am offering as the explanation I do not have.

Test seven ran in October without her. The mount failed at the predicted hour — a crack, textbook, exactly where her paper said it would be. I have the test record. I have had the test record for six years and I have never once been able to decide what to do with the fact that she was right at seven.

We ran the line 9 to 9, six days, that year — ninety-nine-six, the way the whole industry counted its hours by then. Nobody asked. Everybody came.

The mount was redesigned in November, by a consultant, to a geometry that differed from hers in two dimensions and from mine in none — which is the sentence I have never been able to finish out loud, because its last clause is the confession and its first clause is the credit, and the two of them do not fit in one breath. The redesigned part went into test seven and lived. I signed the drawing. The signature block has room for two names and the second box is empty on

every revision we filed, and the empty box is the truest document my company produced in the year of the high-water mark.

CHAPTER 24

Hangzhou, December 2019

That December was the high-water mark, though water does not know its own mark until it has left.

Eleven hundred people on the payroll. The intake counter past the number I had quoted the board in November, which is to say: I had quoted them a number and the world had obliged, briefly. The plant ran two shifts; the canteen added a third service at ten; the corridor outside my office had the particular smell of a place that is hiring — instant noodles and new plastic chairs. Somebody's kid had drawn a car on the whiteboard in the planning room, and nobody erased it for a week.

I remember standing at the window of the plant office at the end of that month, after the last of the day shift had gone through the gate, doing the thing I did at the end of every month: running the burn rate against the intake, the intake against the tooling schedule, the tooling schedule against the catalog entry that still had no date. The columns did not close. The columns had not closed for a while. I closed them in my head the way you close a gap with a shim — not fixed, held.

There was a board meeting that December, in the room with the whiteboard and the car somebody's kid had drawn, and I gave them the number — the payroll number, the intake number — and I watched the number travel around the table the way a good part travels: picked up, turned over, put down, nobody finding the burr. Then the question I had been dreading from the man who asked gentle questions: what happens if the catalog slips one more quarter? And my answer, which I had rehearsed in the car on the way over and which I delivered in the flat register of a man reading his own instrument: the tooling holds; the crew holds; the launch holds what it can. It was the best I had. It was not true the way the tolerance tables are true, and everyone in that room, including me, knew the difference between a plan and a prayer by the smell of it.

That was the year the auditors first wrote the word *commingled* in a management letter, and Xu Heng brought it to me, and we argued it politely, and nothing changed, and both of us went back to work. I record it because it was there and I read it and I understood it. The record of what I did next is one word long, and the word is nothing, and nothing has been the hardest word in this book.

CHAPTER 25

Hangzhou, 18 January 2020

Payroll fell on the eighteenth and the operating account had ninety thousand yuan in it and eleven hundred people expecting a transfer by Sunday, because the new year was a week away and a worker who is paid late at new year does not come back at new year.

I want the mechanics on the page, because the word theft gets used without them. The deposit account sat next to the operating account, ring-fenced on paper — a notation in the ledger, a second signature required, the kind of control that survives contact with a spreadsheet but not with a man who has decided that the money is already owed. Xu Heng and I were the two signatures. On the evening of the seventeenth I gave the order to move what payroll needed. She executed it that night and wrote, on the covering sheet, in her small accountant's hand: *Executed under protest. Recommendation of 12 May stands.*

The covering sheet is four lines long and I have read them more times than any other four lines my company produced. Beneath the protest, in her second hand, she listed the transfer's full itinerary — source account, destination accounts, the count, the amount, the date-time stamp of release — so that the theft would be legible later to anyone who came looking, which she had to know would include her. She also did something I did not understand until the boxes came in 2024: she attached a copy of the May memorandum to the transfer file, unstapled, as though the two documents had been waiting for each other.

By Saturday morning the money was in eleven hundred individual accounts, disbursed in the ordinary way, indistinguishable from any lawful payroll run in the history of the country.

On Sunday I went to the plant because a man who has just done something unrecoverable checks whether the ordinary world is still turning. The gate was open for the weekend shift. The canteen was serving. A foreman I passed near the tool crib said good weekend, boss, and went on carrying a bin, and not one of the eleven hundred people whose wages had arrived the night before knew that

their pay had traveled through a door I had cut open with my own signature. That is what successful theft looks like: nobody looks up. One person on earth saw the whole thing, wrote it down at the time, and has not needed to revise a word of it since — which is why, though she did not know it, she was already keeping the record I am now writing a second copy of.

I did the rounds the way I always did the rounds — the lamp on the line, the tool crib, the boards with the shift figures — and everything was where it should have been, torqued, logged, signed in columns I had invented. The plant's ordinaryness that Sunday was the thing I could not bear and could not leave: it was running on the money I had taken, and it was running well, and the crew had come in on their own for the weekend overtime because the new year was a week away and the line still had a schedule, and I stood at the window of the plant office at four in the afternoon and understood that I had bought, with one signature, the continued ordinary life of eleven hundred people, and that the receipt for it would be presented to me in a language I had not yet learned.

That is the whole theft. No wires in the night; a transfer, a voucher, a protest note clipped behind it like a second key. I signed the approval the way I have signed a hundred approvals for a hundred shipments, because I had decided, in the part of me that keeps the ledgers of justifications, that this money was already owed — owed to the people who had built the line that was supposed to pay it back. Money does not have intentions. Men give it intentions and then call the intention a plan.

The float was never as deep as it looked. Forty thousand reservations at five thousand each, when we finally got there, is two hundred million yuan — one season of payroll and one press line, not a factory. The company could not have lived on it and did not.

Two weeks later the epidemic closed the plant. The wages I had stolen to pay were paid to people who sat at home from February, and the line I had stolen them to run stood dark until the weather allowed it. The transfer stayed where it was. The protest note stayed clipped to it. The auditors would come for both of them in four years, and Xu Heng, who had signed and warned in the same motion, would be the reason the severance fund survived what came after.

CHAPTER 26

Hangzhou, 18 June 2020

The intake had been open for two years. On the eighteenth, after the night shift had gone and the plant was running its reduced quarantine schedule, I signed into the reservation system from the office terminal and did what I had done once a year since the beginning: I read the counter, wrote the number and the date in a notebook, and logged out. The number was not a sales figure; it was a list of people. The refund column was almost empty, because in a plague nobody abandons a deposit when the deposit is the only thing moving forward that someone else promised.

I did not tell anyone I did this. That is what made it private: there was no one to tell who would have understood it as anything other than a man checking his instruments.

CHAPTER 27

Hangzhou, March 2021

The chip hunt deserves its own page, because it was the first time the shortage stopped being a procurement problem and became a moral one.

The broker network worked like this: men with allocation and men with stories, and the space in between where a twenty-dollar part acquired a comma. Offers came in from three provinces that spring — tray quantities of the door controller we needed, no lot traceability, prices that read like typos. Our own supplier could not quote past the next quarter. The plant was losing a day a week for a part the size of a thumbnail.

I want the texture of the offers on the page, because the moral decision is empty without them. The first came by phone, from a man who knew our tooling vendor's name and used it twice in the first minute. The second came as a photograph of a tray on a WhatsApp group I did not know I was in, sent by a number with no name, with the caption only: available. The third came through a purchasing agent we had used once, in an email that had the correct part number, the correct date code, and a sentence at the bottom about how long the quantity would hold, which is how you sell anything real. Each offer was, on its face, exactly what the line needed. The refusal had to be built out of nothing but the absence of two pieces of paper — lot traceability, and the mill's certificate — and out of a sentence I had learned from a man who was now dead.

I refused the gray stock. I want the reasoning on the record without adornment: certificates that cannot be traced are only certificates, and an untraceable lot into a body-in-white is how a company learns, in five years, what its real warranty reserve is. Also — and this I did not say aloud to anyone, because it was not a reason I could defend in a purchasing meeting — a part without a history is a part somebody made in a hurry, and I had been standing in front of that particular weather since before some of the men on the call were born.

We reran the design instead: a substitute regulator, a board revision, six weeks of validation we could not afford. The line survived on substitutions until it

didn't. The broker offers expired, as offers do, and the men with stories moved on to a company in another district that took them, and two years later I read a recall notice about counterfeit regulators in seat controllers and did not allow myself the comfort of the arithmetic.

CHAPTER 28

Hangzhou, June 2021

That was the year the weather turned from one kind of trouble into another. Lithium had tripled and was not done; the cells for the pack came back quoted with a lead time instead of a price. On the line we were still losing days to the door controller. The supplier republic — forty shops that ran on my signature and a text message — started calling in the favors I had extended since the ground-breaking, and I could hear in their voices the order in which they would stop answering.

The order was always the same, and it was not alphabetical: the tooling shop with the oldest debt to us answered first, because debt in a republic buys time; then the shops whose next program was still mine; then the ones I had only ever paid on time, which is a different kind of relationship entirely — the kind that ends when the payment stops. I ran the list one evening against a column of the weeks each could hold us, and it read the way a stress analysis reads when you are looking for the member that fails first. One of the forty — a stamping shop in the north of the province that had been with us since the first prototype — kept answering past everyone else's limit, and I never found out why, and I did not ask, because asking would have made it a fact I owed.

The divorce papers came in June. Lu Wan filed; it was final the following March. What she could not file away were the guarantees: spouse-signature loans from 2017 and 2018, the banks' habit then, discharged by no piece of paper we signed. The house stood in her name and stood, as my CFO had warned in a sentence I can still hear, as collateral of the company's continuing life.

CHAPTER 29

Hangzhou, 18 June 2021

Third anniversary of the intake. The terminal let me in the same as always; the counter had grown again; beside it the refund ratio was no longer the flat line it had been, but a column that moved now, the way a crack moves in a load-bearing wall — not yet a failure, only a measurement. I wrote the number and the date. Then I sat in the empty office for a while with my hand flat on the desk, which is a thing I have done at desks my whole life and would not describe to anyone as grief.

CHAPTER 30

Hangzhou, 18 June 2022

Fourth year of the reading. The mule program consumed everything that month — the fortieth body was on the fixture — and I did the count at eleven at night from the plant office, the notebook open beside a thermos. The number had stopped growing the way a gauge stops growing when the vessel is no longer being filled. Refunds were a fact now, in ones and twos, each one a small formally-worded letter that Xu Heng routed to me because there was no procedure for returning belief.

I wrote it down, and the date, and under it — the only note I ever made on these pages — three words: *check the ring-fence.* The ring-fence had not existed since January 2020. I knew that when I wrote it. The notebooks are full of such notes: instructions to a man who was still going to fix things.

CHAPTER 31

Hangzhou, July 2022

Old Dai took the call and reported it to me the way he reported everything, standing, in a voice with the numbers already removed.

"Qian called. The city match won't be renewed in the autumn. He says not to spend three more months on the last one."

Deputy Director Qian — the same pen that had opened the site. It was, I understand now, a kindness: a man whose district eats by building, telling us quietly that the arithmetic had already been done somewhere we weren't invited to. He was right. He was right in the way everything was right that year.

I spent the three months anyway. That is the part I would like to be able to call principle. It was compulsion: the fortieth mule would be finished because the fortieth mule was on the schedule, and the schedule was the last place where I was still the kind of man who finished things.

The work itself was good in the way only doomed work is: every problem solved on that car was solved completely, because there was no one left to overrule the solution. The seating buck, the battery cradle's third revision, the door seal that took four attempts — each fix was signed off by me personally, late, with the lamp angled low so I could see the parting lines. Zhou Aifen still had the first-article desk, and still laid her proofs flat under both palms to read them, the way she had on the interview table in 2018. In September the body went to the assessment lab for the final run, and the fortieth mule came back on the transporter with its cells scored and its structure settled, and I stood in the yard and looked at it the way you look at a finished letter you have decided not to send.

That same summer my right knee began its complaint — a catching on stairs, a warning on the long walks through the plant. I did not treat it. There was a company to run, and no insurance I trusted, and the knee was the least of the gauges I was ignoring.

CHAPTER 32

Hangzhou, October 2022

The last mule got its five stars in October.

Forty cars, over the years, driven into barriers at the program's speeds and angles: offset fronts into a deformable barrier, the small-overlap test that eats the wheelhouse, side poles aimed at the door skin, the whiplash sled for the seats. Each run was filmed from six angles, the dummies instrumented at the neck and chest, and the whole ceremony existed to produce one number: the rating, published by the national assessment program, which a buyer could read and a journalist could quote. The program had destroyed forty bodies and given back exactly one set of numbers, and in the weakest year the national rating had recorded — the year the fleet average fell furthest and barely half the entries took the top grade — our numbers came back clean. The dummy in the driver's seat survived every single run. The instruments read out its neck loads and chest deflection like a pulse at a bed I was not allowed to stand beside, and every time the picture froze on the moment of contact, the cells all lived, and there was no customer anywhere in the frame.

The result letter arrived in a plain envelope with the rating body's crest at the top and the five-star row filled in, plus the pages behind it — intrusion measurements, pedal plate movement, the steering column's displacement in millimeters with the pass band printed beside each. I read all of it, the way I read anything with numbers: twice, and then once against the print. It was the best document my company ever produced, and it was a document about a car that would never be built, and I filed it with the others, and in the filing was the shape of what the counting on the eighteenth had already become: take the instrument out, look at what it says, put it back, do not let anyone see you doing it.

I watched that footage later the way other men watch old football: in the frozen years, in the room above the tea, with the sound off.

The subsidy ended on the last day of the year, as it had been scheduled to end since the decree of the year before. Scheduled expiry is the cleanest kind of ending. Nobody has to be the villain of a calendar.

CHAPTER 33

Hangzhou, January 2023

The price war began in the first week of January, when the market's largest foreign maker cut and everyone else answered within the month. Our order book — the intake numbers I had quoted to the board in November — became a fiction between one Wednesday and the next: cancellations do not come as letters, they come as a ratio, and the ratio moved every day in one direction.

I ran the cancellation list myself that January, the way I ran everything then — by hand, late, with the desk lamp angled onto the columns — and the list had a texture you could feel: the fleet buyers first, in blocks, their cancellations arriving with account managers attached, each one apologetic and already employed by somebody else; then the private deposits, in ones and twos, in the flat grammar of the reason fields. What the ratio did not show, and what I saw in the names, was the geography of belief: the buyers from the first season — the ones who had put money in before there was a catalog — cancelled last, and when they cancelled they used the same phrase, four of them in the same week, which I have never been able to read without hearing it: we believed you would deliver.

The refund desk learned a new job in those months: returning belief. A cancellation arrived as a form — three fields and a checkbox that admitted, in the user interface of my own company, that the vehicle might never exist — and behind each form was somebody who had run the arithmetic I had asked them to run and had decided the arithmetic no longer held. The amounts were small and the process was clean, and the refund procedures Xu Heng had forced into being in the first bad year — a fortnight's turnaround, no questions outside the published terms — meant most of them were back in their accounts inside the fortnight. I read a sample of the reason fields the way I read warranty claims. Nobody swore. They wrote things like: I have changed my plans, or the money is needed at home. One of them wrote: please tell me the line is still running.

By spring the dealers of half the industry were advertising below the price we had costed at. I have never said, and will not say here, that this was the weather only. The weather was real: the cut, the lithium roll-off, the old guard's inventory. But a careful man in a careful company can drown in ordinary weather, and I was busy blaming the barometer.

CHAPTER 34

Hangzhou, October 2023

The gate event was organized, which is to say somebody had a megaphone and a route and a list. I remember that morning as cold and ordered: the banners were at the fence by eight, and the organizer — a former shift supervisor whose name I genuinely do not know — had them arranged so each gripe faced the road. Wages owed. Three months of social insurance. Severance calculated on the old scale. The list was read once through the megaphone at nine, in the flat voice of a man reading a packing list, and then nobody read it again, because everyone standing there already knew their own line on it.

Zhou Aifen was in the second row. She held a banner because the organizer had asked her to, and because three months of her social insurance had not been paid, and because a woman who has worked lines for twenty-three years knows that the difference between a grievance and a hunger is somebody writing it down large. Her actual grievance could have fit on a receipt. She held the tall one anyway — the tall one asked for the wages, in the flat imperative grammar of every banner I have ever seen at every gate, the grammar that has no mood in it because the mood ran out first.

Fang Qi was there with a notebook — she had come to watch the species, the way she always came, and she worked the line of us with questions the way you bleed a pipe. When she got to Aifen, Aifen said, level, to the road more than to the journalist:

"He ate the same canteen rice."

I heard it from ten feet away. I had no answer, because the sentence was a measurement and measurements do not answer; they are either in tolerance or they are not, and that one was in tolerance down to the decimal. I had eaten the canteen rice. I had also been the only person in the company who could not be fired for it, which is what she meant, and what I wrote down that night, because I write down every sentence that is about me.

The crowd thinned around noon. The organizer and I did the thing organizers and managements do at these events, which is stand in the guardroom with the list between us and discover that we have both known the numbers for weeks. He wanted a date for the wages and a month for the social insurance; I wanted the road kept clear and the shift not to be disturbed. We reached the only agreement available to both: nothing, to be continued, with a promise to meet that nobody present believed in. Fang Qi stood at the edge of this with her notebook, and when it was over she asked me the single question of the day that I still turn over: not why did the money run out — anyone can answer that — but did you know, at the beginning, that the money would run out? I said no. She wrote something down. I have never read what she wrote down, and I have decided that not reading it is the last private thing I have about that morning.

The banners came down at four, rolled and carried off by the same hands that had hung them, because a banner that stays up overnight is a different instrument — a monument, not a demand — and the organizer, who had the look of a man who had done this before at a different gate in a different bad year, would not leave the fence carrying anything that could be photographed after dark. I watched them go from the guardroom window. The grammar of the gate, I wrote that night: flat imperative, no mood, present tense only — pay, calculate, renew. There is no conditional mood on a banner. The conditional is what the office uses.

One woman stayed back from the banners, near the gate post, and when I came out with the organizer she did not step forward so much as arrive. She held a phone in a clear case and turned the screen to me without a word.

The screen held an order: a reservation, a date — the eighteenth of June, 2018 — five thousand yuan, a confirmation number, no vehicle. I stood and read it the way I read a test report: the whole sentence of it, once. I looked up to say something I had already started to compose about refunds and administrators and the claims process, and she had put the phone down against her leg and was only looking at my face, waiting for me to get to the part I was going to get to.

I did not get to it. She nodded — not forgiveness, just the closing of a transaction — and walked to the road where a car was waiting with its hazards on.

Her name was Chen Shujuan. I did not know that then. Of the forty thousand people who put money into my company, she is the only one I have ever met, and she introduced herself by showing me a timestamp.

CHAPTER 35

Hangzhou, March 2024

The notice came on a Thursday, on exchange paper, in the flat administrative voice those documents use so that no single sentence in them can be accused of cruelty.

The company's shares would be suspended for a final period and terminated from listing. There was an appeal window that everyone in the room understood to be ceremonial; a grace period for trading; a date after which the ticker would belong to the record and not to us. The decision had been batched — our notice sat with others, a week's worth of the exchange's business, and the signature at the bottom was one of forty that week, by a functionary whose name I have genuinely never learned and whose hand could have been anyone's. That is the part I keep: not a face, a stack of signatures.

Nine years to the month. The company was registered on the eleventh of March, 2015; the notice was dated the fourteenth of March, 2024. I checked the arithmetic twice, because arithmetic is what I had instead of a defense.

The notice was read in the room by four of us: me, Xu Heng, the company secretary, and outside the glass a young legal hire whose job that week had been to keep the binder open. Nobody said the sentence aloud. There is a script for these readings and we all knew it — first the suspension, then the transfer to the delisting board, then the quotation's final sessions — and the script's worst feature is that each step is individually survivable, so that you cannot point at any single hour and say: that is when it died. It died in installments, monthly, with receipts.

We ran the appeal anyway. It was filed inside the window, argued in the manner these things are argued, and denied in the manner these things are denied: not refused, exactly — considered, and found not to change anything. I have the denial. It is one page. It sits in the drawer now next to the notice and the memorandum, and of the three it is the one I have read most, because it is the only one that answered a question I had actually asked.

The state channels that had filmed the groundbreaking filmed nothing this time; they wrote. The autopsy ran in the spring weather of every failing industry: nine years, never reached SOP. Start of production — the milestone the whole religion of a car company is built to reach, the day the drawings become a thing with a VIN. Nine years, and the sentence a life is measured out in arrived in fourteen words, in a font I recognized from the stock tables.

I put the notice in the steel drawer, behind the memorandum of 12 May 2018, where the two documents lie against each other now with the whole company between them: a warning, and a verdict.

PART III — Feather Mountain

CHAPTER 36

Hangzhou, April 2024

After the decision there were five trading days, and then the shares moved onto the delisting board for thirty sessions, where they traded for the last time under the old name with a marker beside them. The final close was on a Tuesday. On the Friday, the notice of removal was issued, and the stock — the word itself, meaning a store of goods — went off the exchange the way a body goes off a hill: formally, with paperwork, in a batch that included three other companies that week. Within forty-five sessions the quotation would reappear on the national system for small and medium enterprises, where shares change hands in scheduled sessions and the price of a thing that once aimed at the country's main board is quoted like a used machine.

I watched the sessions the way you watch a kettle after you have decided not to boil it.

Between the notice and the removal the plant went about its reduced existence: the skeleton crews on maintenance, the security rotations, the groundsman cutting a lawn that had stopped needing to be cut for anyone but itself. I went down once in April and walked the length of the press hall. The big transfer presses stood under their covers like parked aircraft; the tooling for the body panels sat in its racks with the rust preventative still tacky in the pinholes; the paint booth had been drained for the season. Everything was where we had put it, torqued to figures I could have read off the wall. A plant that never reaches production does not wear out — it just stops being used, which is a different kind of ending, the kind where nothing has the decency to break.

An administrator's letter came in the same month about access protocols for the estate's assets. I signed it. The machinery was now somebody else's balance, to be appraised, scheduled, and — this was the word in the letter — realized.

The seizure had happened in the spring, on a morning I have dated precisely because that is what I do with mornings like it: two vehicles at the gate, six people with a list, the list executed in the order it was written — servers first, then the

cabinets, then the labeled boxes from the corridor. What they took, they took; what they left was the paper that had not yet been processed into the machines. I filled out the acknowledgment form standing up, in the yard, and for a year afterward I carried around a specific inventory of losses in my head: the design servers, the mail archive, the finance share. The word I used for the whole list, to myself, was *gone*. In April, walking the press hall, I added the notebooks to it — the FMEA library, ninety-two of them, my own confessions in grids, which had been in the cabinet behind my desk and would, by any reading of the receipt, have been the property of the estate and now of nobody.

Fang Qi's autopsy came out on the ninth. She had written it or assigned it — her byline sat at the top either way, which I understood to be the arrangement her profession makes with guilt. It was the fairest thing published about us: it said the deposit float was spent on wages and tooling, that the recorded warning existed, that the cars never reached production, that the state media's arithmetic — nine years, never reached SOP — was correct and also insufficient. She wrote that the profile she had published in 2016 was not wrong either, and that this was the part that would keep her awake. I read it twice. I have kept it.

The piece had one paragraph I did not expect: she quoted the memorandum — not its words, its existence — and wrote that the CFO had put the warning in writing in May 2018 and that the file's subsequent history was, in her phrase, a matter of record. That is all. Two sentences. They told me that the paper trail had already reached the press, six months before the boxes would reach me, and that the woman who wrote the warning had never once needed to explain herself, because she had written it down.

The pieces that followed were the weather: the ones that sold the mania, the ones that sold the collapse, and one from a television commentator who said the district had learned to fail forward, using my company as the grammar of the lesson. Hangzhou forgives on schedule. It forgave early.

Old Dai came by at the end of the month with two kinds of food and one piece of information, which is how he delivers both. He sat down, arranged the containers, and said, without looking up:

"Qiao's back. Has been since January. She called me in April."

He said it the way you report a weather change at a place you have been asked to keep an eye on. My daughter was four kilometers from my old office, and the call she made in April was not to me. I asked what she wanted. Dai said she had asked about suppliers — which vendors had survived, which tooling shops were still answering the phone — and that he had told her everything he knew, because he knew that was what she was for.

"She's building something," he said.

"Good," I said.

And that is the whole of the exchange. I record it because it is the whole of it.

CHAPTER 37

Hangzhou, August 1998

The batch came in with certificates and failed the entrance inspection: the wheel fasteners, the nuts that hold a hub on, hardness below specification across the lot. It was counterfeit material — melted and dressed as something better, which in 1998 was not an event but a weather. The purchasing department had already promised the batch to a coach builder whose line would stop without it. There was a meeting, in the room with the schedule board, with the delivery dates written in two colors: what we had promised, and what we had made. In the end the instruction was to release it, and the release required the inspector's stamp on the inspection record — the three-check system, the countersigns, the personal chop in the box beside the form. I was the inspection engineer on the shift. The form came to me with the material status already argued through; my chop was the last box in the column, the one that made the paperwork a fact.

I had been four years in the quality section. The line pressure was real; the schedule was real; the man who made the decision was not me, and the chop on the form was.

A coach went off a mountain road that autumn. The report that came back through the quality section said twenty-six dead. The fasteners were in the wheel assembly; the metallurgy was as the entrance inspection had found it in June; my stamp was on the release.

I did not learn of it the way men in films learn of things — not at once, not from a single source, but in the slow arithmetic of a plant: the corridor going quiet when I entered it, two men from the works office standing at the quality section's end with a folder held the way you hold something you would rather not have brought, the director's door open for once in the direction of my desk. The report itself came by internal routing, in a gray sleeve, with the covering note unsigned and the date typed. I read it standing up. Then I read it sitting down. I left at the end of shift. Nobody noticed. Then I did the thing I have done with

every unmanageable number since, which is to write it in a column of its own and put the column where the other columns could not see it.

I have kept the clipping. It is folded in the desk drawer at home, under a warranty card and a hotel receipt. Twenty-six — that is the number the report used, and it is the number I have used, for twenty-six years, because he never let them become anything else, and I am not going to give them faces now in order to be seen giving them faces. In the years since, I have watched a hundred tests: the sled, the barrier, the freeze-frame at contact. The dummy always lives. That is the design of the dummy. There was no sled in 1998. There was a road, and a number, and my stamp.

What I did in the weeks after is the part I have rehearsed least, because it is the part with the least to say. I was interviewed, as the inspection engineer of record, by a panel of three from the works and one from outside. They asked about the certificates, the entrance test, the release order, the chain of instruction. I answered each question with the truth that fits inside a question: the certificates were presented as valid; the hardness failed; the instruction to release had come from above me; my chop was on the form. Each answer was accurate. None of them volunteered anything, and volunteering is the thing I did not do, and there is no form on this earth with a box for it. The panel wrote what the panel could defend, and the file closed with a director's countersign at the bottom of the report. I read that report twice, the way I read everything, and I have never said his sentence aloud to anyone in all the years since, and the not-saying has no date on it because it went on without stopping.

In the weeks between the release order and the report there was the particular silence of a plant that knows something without being told: the canteen going quiet when I came in with my tray, two inspectors from my own section finding reasons to be at the other end of the floor, the schedule board still carrying the coach builder's dates in the column of what we had promised, which nobody crossed out, because crossing it out would have been a decision and the whole plant had by then agreed, without a meeting, to stop deciding anything. I went to work. I stamped forms. The forms were correct. That is the part no one writes down: that the machinery of a wrong decision keeps running on ordinary time

for weeks before the number arrives, and during those weeks it is indistinguishable, on the floor, from the machinery of a right one.

CHAPTER 38

Hangzhou, December 2011

Old Kang died on the ninth of December, sixty-two years old, of an illness I could name but will not, because the illness is not the point of him.

The memorial was held in the cold part of the morning at the municipal farewell hall — the standard room, the standard roster of flowers, the urn behind a curtain that opened at the appointed hour. Coworkers from his last shop were there, men who had hired him after the fall out of something like pity, and they stood in a cluster that kept a small clear space around his widow the way people make space around a live wire.

There was a eulogy in the official register: thirty years of service, a man of exacting standards, a loss to the trade. The man who read it had clearly been chosen for steadiness and read it steadily, and when he said *exacting standards* four people in the second row nodded, and the nod is what I think about — that they meant it, that in the end the industry he had been thrown out of still filed him, in its own words, under the heading of the thing he was. The official story and the true story agreed on his quality and disagreed on nothing else, because the true story was not there.

I have never written down what the accident report actually contained, and I am writing it now because this memoir will outlive my excuses. When the report came, it went up the chain over Kang's desk. He countersigned it. The finding of the quality section was placed under his signature as the director's own failure of supervision, with the line I have carried ever since, in his handwriting, on the original: *the boy wouldn't have known; the responsibility is mine.*

He was asked nothing, by anyone, ever. He took the fall into his own file, was dismissed, was finished in the trade the way a man is finished in a trade — the phone stops, the referrals stop, the name stops opening doors; nobody publishes a list, because the list is the room. He never worked in quality again. He never asked me why I had not said, at any point in the thirteen years that followed, that the chop was mine. I did not say it at his funeral. I have not said it to his widow. I

am saying it here, and it is the only payment I have left to make, and I am aware it is made to readers, not to him.

He had one child — a son who went into quality, years later, which I have chosen to read as either inheritance or indictment and have never been entitled to ask which.

I stood at the back of the memorial room. The widow received the line of mourners at the front; she looked along it the way a person counts a room, and she counted me, and she moved her eyes to the next face without her hands doing anything at all. The custom is theirs to give. She did not give it. I signed the book, which was also not mine to sign, and I left. She and I have not been in the same room since December of 2011.

Outside in the cold the wreaths were being loaded onto a truck, the standard flowers of a standard farewell, and the son was standing by the tailgate giving instructions in a voice that had learned, unmistakably, the cadence of his father's: short, level, ending where the instruction ends. He had come into the trade the way men come into trades in this country — late, sideways, out of love or debt — and he was arranging the wreaths by a logic I recognized: the ones with the longest ribbons at the front, because the ribbon is what the road sees. I did not speak to him. I have never spoken to him. The not-speaking has become its own kind of monument, and I am aware that monuments are what a man builds when he cannot build anything else.

The tolerance tables I carried out of the plant in 2014 — the first page of them is in Kang's hand. I have said they were not strictly mine. It would be more honest to say whose they were.

CHAPTER 39

Hangzhou, May 2024

She came to the flat, which surprised both of us, and sat where she could see the door, which surprised neither.

There had been a message on the old phone two days before — six words, no greeting: I am coming Thursday. I spent Wednesday evening doing the thing I do before an inspection I cannot pass: I cleared the desk, took down the two boxes I do not let visitors read, and found, to my irritation, that I had also thought about what to wear, which is a reflex from twenty years of meetings and not, I assure this page, a feeling I know how to name.

She brought nothing, which for Lu Wan is a form of protocol: no fruit, no tea, the visit itself as the item. The rain had started on the bus ride up; she set her wet umbrella by the step in the exact way that used to mean she would not be staying long. We had been divorced two years and the conversation we had down the years was the conversation of people running a shared asset into the ground, and we resumed it at once, without preamble.

The room she looked around was the room she had last seen in the year of the filing, and it had changed the way a workshop changes when its owner stops pretending it is an office: the desk had migrated to the window, the shelves held packing boxes now instead of the catalogs, and the kettle — which she had bought, in a set, in the year we moved to the flat with the view — sat on the ring she had also bought, undiscussed, still working. She took all of this in with the inventory eye she used to bring to the plant's tool cribs, and what she said about it, after a silence, was: you kept the kettle. I said it clicked. She said, it always clicked; that was its fault, not mine. It was the closest thing to tenderness in the room, and it arrived disguised as a complaint about hardware, which is the only dialect the two of us have ever had for it.

The house was still hers on paper and no longer hers in any other way: the guarantees she had signed were the company's collateral, and the creditors were

patient the way water is patient. She had done the arithmetic in advance, in a column on the back of an envelope, and it was right.

Then she said, the way you report the outcome of a chore:

"I didn't pay the patent annuity in March."

The patent — his, hers, the shield's — had been granted in 2022 after three rounds of office actions. The annuity fell due on the filing anniversary every March; there was a grace period with a surcharge; after that the right terminated, with effect from the date the fee should have been paid. I did all of that arithmetic in the air while she watched me do it, and she waited until I had finished, and then she delivered the sentence she had evidently driven across the city to deliver:

"There's a difference between letting a thing die and stopping its food. It's the only difference I had left."

I record my reading and my reading only: it was the last punishment. If the same act is also the inheritance that lets a girl take her father's work freely into the public domain — and a patent lapsed for non-payment belongs to everyone, which is the closest thing this century has to an alms — then that reading is not mine to write. The motive stays unadjudicated, by me, in this book. It is the one case in these pages where I refuse the verdict.

She put her umbrella under her arm, went down the two flights, and I watched from the window as she checked it against the rain before opening it, which is a small thing she has done since before we had a daughter. Then she walked to the stop. Neither of us had said the word patent since the sentence. There was nothing else to say inside it.

In the autumn the office published the termination in the gazette's affairs section, three lines long, effective from March. I had started reading the patent gazette by then the way other men read the obituary pages: for the names they know.

CHAPTER 40

Hangzhou, October 2024

The administrator's file came to me in sections, because that is how an estate is opened: the asset schedules first, then the employee claims, then the books. The sections arrived in flat boxes with the old company seal on the tape, and I read them at the same desk where I had signed most of what was inside them, in the order the estate wanted, which is the order of seniority: the people paid first, the machines next, the banks after, the believers last.

The asset schedules I already knew by heart — forty mules with their test hours, two leased jigs, the tooling for three stampings that no one would ever order, a fleet of forklifts with the batteries ruined by standing. The employee claims I did not know: sixty-one files in the first box, each with a claim number, a date of service, a wage figure, and where the claimant had attached something — a payslip, a screenshot of a shift roster, a photograph of a gate badge — the estate had stamped it received and moved on. These are the documents nobody writes memoirs about. They are also, in my drawer now, the only papers from the whole enterprise that I have never once been ashamed to handle.

I was reading the section on the payroll transfer of January 2020 when I understood that Xu Heng had not merely warned me in 2018 and protested in 2020 — she had, when the auditors came, told them everything, in writing, with the exhibits attached: the memorandum of 12 May with its recommendation untouched, the transfer voucher, her protest note behind it like a second key. Her statement walked the auditors through the float, the commingling, the ring-fence she had demanded, and it did not flinch at the sentence that mattered — that the general manager had moved reservation money into wages. The exhibits were copies of copies, stamped received at each hand they passed through, and on the back of the memorandum — my own file's back, the one I had never turned over — was her May cover note, which I had never read either, because in 2018 I read recommendations and skipped remarks.

She traded my name for the workers' money. The wage claims stood first in the estate; the severance fund I had spent survived her disclosure instead of being consumed by the same liquidation that consumed everything else; and when — years later, in another season — the distribution plan repaid the reservation holders, the road she had cleared in those statements would be the road it traveled on. The file did not go to the police. The statute asks whose pocket. The money had gone to eleven hundred payroll accounts, and my pocket was empty, and that is the whole of my legal defense, and I am aware it is also the whole of my indictment.

I have tried to forgive her. I want the record to show the trying: that I sat with it for a week, that I reread her May memorandum until I could recite it, that I saw — plainly, without any help from charity — that she had been right on every line of it, and had then stayed, and made the books legal around my theft, and spent the only capital a CFO has, which is credibility, to keep the wages whole.

I have not forgiven her. I record that next to it: that I cannot forgive the woman who was right, and that I cannot forgive myself for the not-forgiving, and that this second failure does not repair the first. Two sentences that do not cancel. They go in the ledger as they stand.

The last section was the books, and the books came last in the order of the estate because a library is, legally, furniture. Dai had listed them — ninety-two exercise books, the FMEA library, the grids — as contents of the office, and the administrator's clerk had priced them at a figure I could have paid in coins. I did not bid on them at the auction; the boxes went through the estate's ordinary channel and arrived at Dai's spare room in a week, and Dai, who had been waiting for them the way a man waits for a delivery he has arranged for someone else, telephoned me on the town line to report that they were there and to ask, in the voice he uses for inventory, how I wanted them delivered.

"One Friday at a time," I said. "A library should not arrive all at once."

"That's what I told the clerk," Dai said, and put the phone down, because with Old Dai the sentence and the goodbye have always been the same object.

CHAPTER 41

Hangzhou, late October 2024

The order arrived on a Wednesday, one page, a court's heading, my name in the capacity in which the law counts me — legal representative and actual controller of a debtor that had failed to perform a payment obligation. It listed what I was prohibited from doing. I read it twice, the way I read a specification:

No flights. No seat on any G-train — the high-speed network, the one that had erased the distances I spent my career compressing. No soft sleeper; no ship above second class; no room in a hotel of the rated grades. For the D and C trains, no seat above second class.

And what remained, by the same enumeration, in the small print that nobody writes poems about: the hard seats and hard sleepers of the ordinary trains, still legal, still running; second class on the slower trains; the coaches; the city buses. Beijing was not out of reach — it was twelve hours on a hard sleeper, or an application to the court that would take a week and be granted for a funeral. What was out of reach was the hour.

I had been grounded by a document. The executed man, legally grounded in a country of bullet trains — I wrote that down the evening the order came, and I have left it here not because it is clever but because it is the accurate description of my situation, and because in two years of reading this book back I have not been able to improve it.

Two years, the order said, unless extended. I folded it once, the way you fold something you will need to show people, and I went to look up which buses go south.

That evening I tested it the way you test a specification you distrust: I opened the booking application on the old phone and tried to buy, first, a seat on the morning flight to the capital — refused, by a line of text that did not raise its voice; then, second, the hour-long high-speed train to Ningbo that I had taken perhaps forty times on company business — the seat map came up with every car greyed; then, third, the ordinary train, hard sleeper, twelve hours to Beijing,

which was offered to me at once, at a price that felt like the old days. I did not buy any of it. I had confirmed what the page said: the ban was not on going; it was not on arriving; it was on going quickly.

And then the ordinary texture of it, which no order anticipates: a meeting I had agreed to in the city of the supplier's head office, three hundred kilometers off, that now had to be done by a coach with a curtain down its side, four hours each way, the timing rebuilt around a departure that left at six in the morning. I took it twice in the first month. The second time, in the dark at the terminal, I found I had packed the way I packed for the road in 2014 — the flask, the folder, the pen in the jacket pocket — and I stood in the queue for the coach and laughed at myself once, quietly, the way you laugh at a habit that has outlived its reason, and the man behind me, who had the same folder and the same pen and a face I did not know, did not look up.

PART IV — Three Years

CHAPTER 42

Hangzhou, November 2024

The estate was sold the way everything is sold now: online, in lots, with a counter on a screen and a bidder number attached to each row of the inventory. I watched it from the room above the tea on the town shop's cheapest phone, held at arm's length, the way you hold a document you do not want standing next to you.

The inventory had been public for a fortnight and I had read it the way I read everything: twice. Lot by lot, the company I had built was enumerated in the flat nouns of appraisement. The transfer presses — two of them, the belly of the plant, the machines that had stamped nothing but mules and samples for nine years — came up in the second hour against a reserve that would have bought a good apartment. The body jigs followed, then the dies, the paint booth's recovery system, the forklifts with their batteries ruined from standing, the CMM in its enclosure, the office furniture in lots of ten. Somewhere in the middle of the list was the trademark, filed in our first year, worthless and not worthless.

I bid on nothing. There was nothing to bid with, and the only lot I wanted was the one nobody could sell me: the thing as it had been before the paper started closing around it, and no auction carries that. I watched the counter the way I used to watch the cycle timer: not hoping, exactly — observing the interval, and letting it run to zero, which is the only honest way an interval ends.

The patents went in a block near the end — the estate's portfolio, meaning the filings the company still held rights to: the fixtures, the two process patents, the sealing geometry nobody had ever paid for. The suspension patent of March 2019 was not among them, and I noted its absence the way you note a missing tool from a shadow board: it had not been the company's to sell since the August of that year, and it had not been anyone's at all since the March before this one. A lapsed patent is not an asset in an estate. It is weather.

The press line and the patent block were taken by the same bidder, an entity whose registered name I did not recognize and whose address was a floor in a

building in the district with eleven other names on the doorplate. The auctioneer read the number, waited the thirty seconds, brought the hammer down on a sound like a latch, and the row turned green. In the corner of the screen a small counter kept the time remaining on the next lot. That is the whole belly-cut: no ceremony, no last look, a man in a warehouse with a stamp, and nine years going one row at a time to a name I could not read.

Afterward I sat for a while with the phone face-down on the desk. Then I opened the notebook and wrote the date and, under it, the only note the day suggested: *the presses are still good.* It is the kind of note I have made my whole life — a man checking an instrument that has just been taken away from him.

What the auction did not sell, and could not, was the schedule. The press line's cycle time was 12 seconds, set by a servo recipe that lived in a controller the buyer would re-flash before lunch; the tryout panels still hung on the rack in the old plant's west end with my grease-pencil marks on them, 140 millimeters per second, the figure I had argued with the Japanese line engineer about in the first year and won on data and lost on politics and then won anyway. None of that is an asset. All of it is in this book. A machine's knowledge of itself is the only property that cannot be seized, because it has no schedule the law recognizes — it lives in the hands of the crew, in the grease on the rail, in a sentence like *slow at the start of the stroke, firm at the end*, which is also, without anybody's permission, a way of standing up.

CHAPTER 43

Hangzhou, March 2025

Two envelopes reached the flat in the same week, forwarded twice, which is what forwarding twice means: that there are two addresses in this city where a person can still be found if he is found at all.

The first was from the property office. The house — hers on paper, ours in the arithmetic of the guarantees — had been sold at auction that month to a natural person, the redemption period run, the deed transferred. There were no surprises in it; Lu Wan had drawn me the column on the back of an envelope a year earlier and the column had come true to the yuan. I read the notice twice for the dates, because dates are what I collect, and I put it in the drawer with the memorandum and the delisting notice, where three documents now lie in a row: a warning, a sentence, and a house.

The second envelope was a printout from a business registration service, sent by Dai with no covering note, because Dai does not write covering notes. A new company. The name of it was Guibiao.

Guibiao — *guibiao* (圭表): the ancient instrument of squared earth that measures heaven's light; a gnomon on a level base, its shadow read at the solstices to keep the calendar honest. I knew the word at sight the way I know any word the trade had use for. He had poured earth as walls. She would square the earth and read the light off it, and the difference between the two sentences was, I understood standing in my kitchen, the difference between everything I did and everything I was about to have to watch.

The founders were listed in the registration in the order the service printed them: Lu Qiao, general manager; Deng Zhuo; Dai Guoqiang — my CTO, my Old Dai, who for a year now had been telling me about suppliers, and weather, and the thing his daughter was building, in the tone he used for both.

I have no photograph of what I did next. I put the printout on the desk and read the registration number the way I read a part number: once for the shape of it, once for the digits. Then I took down the boxes I keep from visitors and put

the printout in the bottom, under the clipping from 1998, where the two documents now lie against each other with the whole question of inheritance between them.

CHAPTER 44

Jingshan, Qingming week 2025

The graves are in the city, in the municipal cemetery on the north slope, and I went down at dawn on the Thursday to sweep them: two stones, two names, the same worn path between them — Old Kang's, whose widow still would not have a word with me, and my mother's, whose plot my daughter had chosen in a room I was not in. I cleaned the stones, poured the water, stood a while. I am not a man the mountain can see doing this, because I do not do it here. On Jingshan the whole mountain burns paper at Qingming — the crowds come up from the towns with armfuls of it, strangers burning for their own, a hillside going gray in the afternoon — and I burn none of it. What I had to burn, I burned in the city, at two graves that were not my family's business except that they were.

Dai came up the mountain in the afternoon, on the last bus before the festival crowds, carrying a cardboard box against his chest like a man transporting something that must not be turned over.

The box held the first of the notebooks. There were, he said, ninety-two of them in total, and these were eleven: the early FMEA library, the grids and the failure modes, my handwriting getting older toward the back. He had been holding them since October, he said, in the plain voice of a man reporting a count. He set them on the table one at a time, each one flat, aligned to the table edge, and I let him, because I could see that the arranging was the point — that he was paying something down, installment by installment, and that if I helped he would not be able to finish it.

"You'll want these," he said.

"I wrote them."

"That's why."

The second thing in the box was a printed document with a date on it: August 2021. Her manifesto — which had existed in the world for nearly four years while I existed four kilometers from whatever room it was written in, and

which Dai had carried up the mountain in the same box as the notebooks because, in his taxonomy, both were things I had failed to read.

I will not set the whole of it down; it is not mine to reproduce, and the writer is not here to stand over my shoulder. But its shape is this: written in the fire register, it claimed the failure of the car company as a design lesson rather than a tragedy — the dams that held too long, the drawings that outlived their weather — and it announced a company that would build machines whose joints yielded before they fought. There was a paragraph in it about inheritance that I have read eleven times. It does not mention me. It mentions the discipline: pre-confess the failure before the part has lived; put the numbers where anyone can check them; a map of where the water wants to go is worth more than a wall you were praised for. She had taken the method, not the man, and she had said so in print, in 2021, and nobody in the world knew to bring it to me until now.

Here is the paragraph, set down as it sits, because it is the only inheritance I ever asked for and the only kind I ever received:

> *They will tell you the failure was the money. The money was the weather. The failure was the drawings: we built walls for a flood we had measured and then did not believe. My father measured it and built the wall anyway, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, because the wall was praised and the map was not. I inherit the map. I intend to use it.*

The document is dated August 2021. She was not yet twenty-five, and she had written the only thing of mine that anybody has ever taken forward: the method.

The third thing was an envelope, postmarked in the city, addressed to Dai in a hand I did not know, with no note inside it except a letter — four pages, from a woman whose name I read twice.

Chen Shujuan had written to the only person in her records she could still find: she had looked up the company's former CTO through the registration of the new one, which is either a coincidence or the way information actually travels when everyone keeps their receipts. Her letter was not an accusation. It said what

the screen at the gate had not had room to say: that the five thousand had been wedding money set aside for a daughter who had married in the year the line died; that she had watched the refund ratio reports the way I had watched the intake counter, from the other side of the glass; that she did not write for money, because the forty percent had come, and forty percent of belief, she wrote, is still a form of being answered.

At the end she asked one question, which was not a question about money: *Was the car ever going to be real?* And then, below it, the sentence I will not paraphrase, because it is hers and it arrived at the right time in the wrong life:

I would rather have known a careful man who failed than a careful man who did not try.

I put the letter with the manifesto and the notebooks and said nothing for a while, and Dai, who reads rooms the way I read stacks, poured the tea that had gone cold and poured it again.

"How is she?" I asked — and meant the company.

"Busy," Dai said. "Your daughter's busy."

Then, over the second cup, the way he delivers weather: that Xu Heng had been asked to come in and run the books of the new company, and had declined, in writing, with one line that Dai had evidently committed to memory because he said it looking at the table rather than at me:

"I only keep one founder's books per lifetime."

He waited for what I would say to that. What I said was: that is correct. And it was — it was the most correct sentence anyone had written in either of our companies, and it landed in me somewhere the tea could not reach, because the woman who would not open a second set of books had, by that same correctness, kept the first set worth reading.

CHAPTER 45

Jingshan, May 2025

The footage I had carried out in three USB sticks, each one labeled in my own hand with the program code and the run number, because a man who labels things labels the things he expects to lose.

I watched it first — the mule program on the borrowed laptop I had bought in the town secondhand, sound off, in the room above the tea: the sled runs, the barrier contacts, the freeze-frames at the moment of contact that I had watched a hundred times in a life that had ended. The dummy's head excursion, the neck load cells drawing their little graphs, the intrusion measured in millimeters against the printed band. Every time, the cells lived. Every time the picture froze on the strike and there was nothing in the driver's seat but instrumentation doing its job perfectly, and no customer, and no family, and no road.

Then I did the thing the sticks had been kept for. I bought a number at the counter of the town phone shop — the boy asked what I needed it for and I said paperwork, which was true — and I sent the files to the address listed on the new company's registration contact, from an account with no name on it beyond a number, and I did not write a note. There was no note to write. The footage was the note: here is what a body-in-white survives; here is the evidence that the structure was right; here is nine years of me being right about the only thing that never mattered. She could take it or delete it. Sending it cost me nothing but the sending, which is the only price I have left to pay on anything.

CHAPTER 46

Jingshan, June 2025

The distribution plan came out in June: forty percent, paid through the administrators to the reservation holders against their confirmation numbers, the rest ranked behind the wage claims and the banks in the order the law prefers people in.

I read the arithmetic twice, as I read everything. Of the two hundred million, the believers would get eighty. The wage claims had gone first and whole, because a CFO had traded a name for them in 2020 and a court had not found a reason to undo it. I wrote the figures in the notebook — forty thousand reservations, forty percent, the whole sum once, because this book does not do that sum twice — and under it, the note: *the float was never enough.* That was my defense and my indictment in three words, and it had been true from the first day of the intake, when the number on the screen passed four figures before lunch and I knew, in the part of me that kept the ledgers, that one season of other people's winters was never going to be a factory.

CHAPTER 47

Dajiangdong, October 2025

The eighth-month tide came in on a Friday, between the late shifts of a moon I no longer keep, and I went down to the levee alone, because the levee is where a man goes when he wants to watch water do the one thing it does without anyone's permission.

The bore came up the estuary as a standing wall of gray-green with white at the crown, pushed by the tidal prism into a funnel that narrows until the water has nowhere left to go but up and sideways. It made a sound before it was visible — a working sound, like a crowd at a distance — and then it was there, running the channel, and the men with the measuring stakes on the far bank, who had been paid by the district to care about this, wrote something down. The crowd on the levee — twenty people, thirty, families with thermoses — watched it pass and made the sound people make, and I stood behind them with my hands in my sleeves and watched the water go both ways at once, which is what a tide is: nothing arrives, everything exchanges.

I did not think about her company. I did not think about my plant, three kilometers inland, whose ground was under my heels and had been won from this same water by men with baskets. I thought about the stake men on the far bank, writing down a number for a living, in a country that had stopped paying for that kind of number, and I stayed until the water went flat and ordinary again, and then I walked back up the hill to the room above the tea, and the date went in the notebook like everything else.

CHAPTER 48

Hangzhou, March 2026

They held the failure summit in a conference hotel off the east ring road, in a ballroom with the chairs in circles, and I went to it alone, under no name, because a notebook has no name on it either.

The genre had grown since my day, and now had its own season. On the stage: men who had lost other people's money at scale and now taught the losing back, each with a deck, each with the same three beats — the rise, the weather, the lesson — delivered in the cadence of men who have said the words often enough that the words have worn smooth. In the intervals there were booths: a fund that financed second attempts, a consultancy that turned a collapse into a case study, a publisher taking proposals. Everybody was kind to everybody. It was the kindest room I had entered in eleven years, and I sat at the back of it, at the back of rooms, the way I had sat at the back of a memorial hall, and I wrote down what I saw because that is what I do.

The keynote was a man named Yuan Ye — a car company of his own, collapsed before mine, gone on to the resilience books and the speaking circuit, and he was sincere the way a wall is sincere: total, load-bearing, impossible to argue with. He told the room about his own nine years. The hall went quiet at the number the way crowds do when a speaker finds the one true figure, and then he said the sentence, into the quiet, without looking at his slides: "I wasted my nine years too — until I learned to sell them."

I left the room then — not dramatically, the way one leaves a room one has understood: quietly, through the side door, into the corridor with the coffee urns. I stood by the urns long enough to hear the applause start for the next man, and I thought: there it is. The weather was here too — only it had moved while I was looking at my own water, moved into the new thing, the machines, the mania rising in every third paragraph of every trade page I read on the town phone. Money loose by the quarter, forecasts made fools of, two men I had trained already gone to a new industry that paid triple and gave out titles the way

my era had. I had seen this shape once before, from inside it, and I was watching it now from the corridor of a hotel, with coffee going cold in my hand, and the one person who might have understood what I was seeing was busy building the thing the weather was about.

CHAPTER 49

Jingshan, Qingming week 2026

Dai came on the Friday. The box was lighter: nine more notebooks, set on the table one at a time, the same ceremony of edges.

The mountain was doing what it does — the hillside graying by noon, strangers burning for their own — and I had been down at dawn to the two graves in the city, and I burned nothing here, and neither of us mentioned it, because Dai does not visit me for the ritual, he visits me because Qingming is the one week when a man climbing a mountain to see a failed founder will not be asked why.

He brought news the way he always did, in order of weight, which is never the order I would choose: that the company was in the robotics town now, that the first units had gone out to customers who were, in his phrase, playing with them rather than using them, that a round was in progress with money that asked questions he described as new, and that the demonstrators — the little films the company put out of the machines doing tasks — were being watched by a number of people that he found excessive.

"They dance," he said, "when they want to be shown."

I asked what the machines were for, honestly, because I had not been able to find that in any of the coverage. He thought about it the way he thought about a supplier's failure history.

"For now? For being watched. That's the business in year one. Year two, someone finds work for them."

Outside, the paper on the hillside went up in a sheet of gray. I did not have anything to burn. That is the whole of that scene, and I include the weather because the weather is what the visit is arranged around: the crowd of mourners gives a man anonymity, and my daughter's CTO climbs the mountain in it to pay down the notebooks one Friday at a time.

CHAPTER 50

Hangzhou, September 2026

The district's release was on the local portal in the last week of the month, with a photograph I studied longer than the article warranted: a ribbon, a delegation arranged by height, and Deputy Director Qian at the front of it with the same scissors' posture he had had on my ground nine years earlier, older by the number of years that both of us have and neither of us says.

The land along the east sector — the district's own, the soil that had refused my license and watched my plant return to it — had been allocated to the new robotics company for its works: eleven acres, with what the release called a tax holiday and what the underlying documents, when the trade press printed them, turned out to be a structured remission of the local surcharges over a term of years, plus premises let at a figure that made the rest of the sentence decorative. The article noted the district's continuity of policy: patient capital, long horizons, a willingness to bet on people who have been proven to build.

I read it twice. Then I wrote the sentence the day required, because the day required one:

The land that would not give me a license gave her eleven acres and a tax holiday.

It is not a complaint. A tide does not ask your opinion before it rises on your ground, and the water that drowned my walls is, at this moment, the reason her floor is level. That is the survey's answer, and the survey is the one document in this book I would stake anything on.

CHAPTER 51

Dajiangdong, September 2026

I watched the eighth-month tide from the same levee, in the same week the district gave my ground away, alone again because the habit had made its own instructions.

The bore came up the channel and the families with their thermoses made their sound, and the water went both ways at once. Two years running now I had come down to watch it. I noted that, in the notebook, as a fact about myself: that the eighth month had begun asking for me.

CHAPTER 52

Ningbo, October 2026

The slow train to Ningbo took four hours and cost less than a meal, and the booking application, when I asked it for a seat above second class, said no with no hard feelings. I went in the ordinary way: the platform at seven, a window that opened on a stopper, a folder in the jacket pocket. Grounded men discover the country's actual distances, and the country, it turns out, runs on time — just not on my time.

Master Yao's shop was behind a tooling park in the old industrial strip, the same two bays she had had since before I had a company: measuring room first, the granite table under a cloth, the micrometers on their stands like instruments on a shelf in a chapel. She was seventy-something and the same height as her tolerances. Standards as a love language: nobody who has held this long has to say anything else.

She answered the phone when I called from the town, and at the bench, later, the phone lay face-up on the granite with my incoming call still on the screen and my name saved as it had apparently been saved for some time:

Boss Ruan (deceased)

"Deceased," I said.

"Since the notice," she said, not looking up from the part she was checking. "Companies die. Men keep taking the train."

We spent the afternoon the way we had always spent them, on the gauges and the arguments that are actually affection: she had kept a wear measurement going for a joint family I had specified in 2019 — my last good geometry, the one with the staged deflection — and she showed me the numbers the way other people show photographs. The numbers were beautiful. The numbers were, she said, the last time anybody specified the fit to this standard. Nobody since. Not the robot people.

That was when she said it — not as a confidence, but the way you mention a relative at a wedding: that the niece was working now at the robot place in

Xiaoshan, in the suits, the puppeteer rigs, good money for the county if you did not think about the hours.

"In the suits?" I said.

"The suits with the cameras on them. They move, the machine moves. My niece sits in the county and moves a hand in Xiaoshan."

I did not ask which company. The way she said *the robot place* — definite, the way people say things about the only one there is — did not leave room for a second answer. I helped her recalibrate the granite table's level before I left, because a man who has been dead two years should still be useful, and then I took the four o'clock train back, with the folder unopened in my pocket and the remark sitting in me the way a chip sits in a bearing: not yet noise.

CHAPTER 53

Jingshan, October 2026

I looked, four days later, in the room above the tea, on the borrowed laptop, in the way of a man who has told himself he is only checking something.

The company's public materials were easy enough to find: the demonstrations, the small films Dai had described, of machines opening doors and carrying trays — and beside them, from the autumn's model release, the documentation the robot trade now published with its models: the dataset card. It described, in the flat grammar of such documents, a corpus of manipulation experience gathered through teleoperation — thousands of hours, it said, of human hands driving machine hands, recorded at the joint and the camera, indexed by task. The corpus itself was closed; the card described its shape the way a will describes a house. There was a diagram of the training infrastructure with its nodes named in pinyin, one of them *yushan*, which meant nothing to me and to which I am not entitled to attach a meaning.

What I was entitled to was the sample frames: a dozen images appended to the card as examples of capture quality, each showing a rig-cam view of an operator's hands on the controllers.

I know hands the way a typeface man knows faces: which fingers hold, which wrists give, which hands have been twenty years at a burr. The first frame meant nothing. The second meant nothing. The fifth was a pair of hands with the right thumb's nail set low from a press shears accident and the tendon structure of a woman who had laid her hands flat on an interview table in June 2018 and turned a phone screen toward me in October 2023.

Zhou Aifen was puppeteering my daughter's machines from a county wage office, and the corpus — the sealed, valuable, double-purpose corpus that her company would not open for anyone — contained, indexed by task, the hands of the people who had once built my cars.

I closed the laptop. I sat for a while with the closed laptop in front of me, the way you sit with an instrument that has just given you a reading you did not

order. Then I opened it again and read the card all the way to the bottom, because the card is a document and I read documents twice, and at the bottom where a wage or a site or a source would be, there was only the word *teleoperation* and a date, and the field where an answer could have been was empty the way a field is empty when the form was never designed to ask.

I closed it again and did not open it again. I did not write it in the notebook for days. When I finally did, I wrote only the date. I have told no one, and this page is the first time the reading has been written down — which means, in the accounting of this book, that I have kept it for the reader and told nobody in it, and I do not know whether that is a confidence or one more absence of the kind my daughter keeps a wound about.

CHAPTER 54

Jingshan, March 2027

She came up the mountain in the spring-harvest week, when Auntie Shao was down in the plots from before light and the house held nobody but me and the kettle, and she came alone, with a recorder, which she set on the table between us without ceremony, the way a woman lays a tool where it will be in reach.

"You agreed to this," she said.

"I agreed to being asked."

"You'll be paid in questions."

That is the whole of the pleasantries. She had her mother's way of sitting where she could see the door, and my way of arranging the pens, and for three hours she asked about the Tier-1 — the joints, the working angles, the twenty years — and I answered with the care of a man who knows that whatever he says will be checked against the drawings, which are, one way or another, still in the family. She asked about the founding: who, when, on whose money. She asked about the supplier geography, and I described it, and then — because she asked, and because a question is a door she was entitled to open — I drew it: the map of the forty shops, north to south, with the two columns Dai and I had argued over for a winter. When it was done she photographed the page and then, without asking, slid the original across the table toward her side of it. That is the taking of the map. I let it go because it is a copy of a copy of a thing she already owns the living version of, and because my hands were being watched.

She asked about the gate. The recorder was running; I could see its little meter moving while I decided, in the half-second available, to be accurate.

"I was at the gate," I said. "That day. Where were you?"

"Shenzhen," she said. "Fourteen hundred kilometers. I read it on my phone."

"Thank you for telling me," I said, which is not a thing I say often, and she wrote something in her notebook that I was not shown, and the meter on the recorder went on moving, and neither of us stopped it, because there are exactly

two people on this mountain who know where the other one was that day, and the tape is the only witness that will not be dead by the time it matters.

At the end of the third hour she switched the recorder off herself — not me; the rights were hers — and gathered the cables, and drank the tea I had made badly, and said the questions were enough for now. At the door she did not touch me. That is what I mean by the body being left: the hand stayed on the bag strap, the shoulder never arrived in the space where a hand would have gone, and she was down the two flights before the kettle finished clicking itself off. I watched from the window, which is a habit I have with vehicles leaving, and the bus took her back to the town, and the map was in her bag, and I stood in my own room afterward with the recorder's absence on the table like a missing instrument off a shadow board.

CHAPTER 55

Jingshan, Qingming week 2027

Dai came on the Friday with seven more notebooks — we were down to the thin end of the library now, the grids getting older toward the back, my handwriting learning to hurry — and with the year's document that was not mine.

The annual letter from her company, dated December, printed, Dai's copy posted on to me because in his taxonomy a letter addressed to a founder's CTO must also be offered to the founder. I have it. I will set down its temper rather than its whole, because it is her document and I am its second reader: it is written in the register of frost. Where the manifesto of 2021 had been fire — claim, announce, burn the map — the letter at thirty is capital-efficient prose: the year's shipments in a rounded figure; the standard-boarding work described in the conditional; the corpus referred to once, in a clause doing two jobs, as proprietary and closed; the financing described as adequate; the risk section in the calm of people who have written risk sections before. Not one sentence asks anyone's blessing. Not one sentence offers anyone a wound. The same author, colder weather: the fire had not gone out, it had been put inside an engine where fire is supposed to be.

Two sentences out of the whole of it, the way I read the tariff:

> *The corpus is closed. What went in it went in under documentation. What comes out of it will ship with the manual, and the manual is the product.*

> *We are not building the walls. We are building the instruments. The water will do the rest of the talking, as it always has, and the levels are published so that anyone may take the reading.*

Her L-levels — the autonomy grades the standards group is drafting — were, in that December, eighteen months from adoption, and she had written about

them in the conditional, the way one writes about weather in a country whose forecasts have failed twice in living memory.

Under it, in the small type they put at the bottom of annual letters: the group standard work, the L-levels, the references. I read the references the way I read everything. Her name was not in them yet. It was going to be.

CHAPTER 56

Xiaoshan, May 2027

They put the suit on me in a room that smelled of new fabric and cable, and the young woman doing the markers — a graduate, careful, the kind of careful that comes from having been taught it recently — placed thirty-one points on me the way I used to place points on a datum fixture: by the book, apologizing to the bone each time a sticker went on a knuckle.

The walk was across a floor with the capture volume taped out, eight meters there and back, at whatever speed I liked. I liked it at my own speed, which is to say: the plant's old speed, the walk of a man crossing a yard to look at a machine. Four passes. On the third pass I heard my knee say its sentence — the catching, the small renegotiation on the planting of the right foot — and I saw the girl with the tablet look up, and I did not slow down, because the record should have what the record wants.

"That's the limp," she said, not unkindly. "Onset?"

"Five years," I said, which is close enough to true for a device that is not interested in the exact month.

In the lobby, while they were taking the markers off in the order they went on, Deputy Director Qian was standing by the window with a paper cup, on district business, because a district that has bet eleven acres on a robotics company visits its robotics company the way a man visits a field he has planted. He gave me no cruelty. He gave me arithmetic.

"I signed your groundbreaking," he said, "and I signed your delisting. Same pen."

"Same hand too," I said, which is what I had not been able to say to him in either year.

He almost smiled at that — the almost is the part I kept — and asked how the coaches were running these days, and I said four hours, and he said yes, they do, and that was the whole of the conversation, and it was, between the two of us, the longest either of us had ever spent on the truth.

Before I left I stood for a moment in front of the thing in the corner of the lobby that they had not hidden: a torso — the first body her company had stamped and joined, unpainted, silver under the track lights, on display the way we had displayed ours in pictures that ran in three places. The panels were hers; the geometry was hers; but the press that had kissed those skins stood in a hall in Xiaoshan because an online auction in November of 2024 had sold it row by row to an entity with eleven names on a doorplate, and the crown weld along the rear package tray ran in the bead I would know anywhere, because I had watched it laid by a machine I had commissioned and signed for, in a plant that never reached production, on a body-in-white that was not a car.

I did not touch it. You do not put your hand on a stranger's inheritance. But I stood there long enough for the girl with the tablet to notice, and she said, proudly, the way people speak about equipment they have not personally met: that's the original press line — second shift of its life now.

Second shift. I have been, it turns out, a first shift.

CHAPTER 57

Jingshan, July 2027

I read the patent gazette the way other men read the obituary pages — a habit I had taken up in the year my own company died — and in July the habit did what the habit had been building toward all along.

Her knee patent had published in May, which I had missed in the May issue the way you miss a word you are standing too close to: eighteen months from the November filing, the publication came out with the application's own number and the abstract in the flat register the office requires. I found it in July, at the desk, in the afternoon, and I read the abstract twice before I read the names, because the abstract was, whatever else it was, a good piece of engineering.

A variable-stiffness knee. The structure yields — fifteen degrees of programmed compliance at the start of the stroke, soft into the small loads — and then stiffens through the middle of the travel and goes rigid at the end of it, staged deflection, the part learning the load before it fights it. The claims were written around a bushing arrangement my own hands would have drawn. It was the exact argument of the suspension patent of March 2019 — the one I had drawn on the back of a supplier's invoice — rebuilt at the scale of a robot's leg, with better fatigue plots than mine had been, and one line in the citation field that stopped the room, the desk, the afternoon, and the next several minutes of my life.

The dead one was named there: the suspension patent, filed March 2019, assigned August 2019, annuities unpaid, terminated March 2024, no longer anybody's property — cited by number, and below the number, in the inventor line the office prints when a citation has inventors: *Ruan Weimin.*

I sat with that for a while. The two inventors of the living patent were Lu Qiao and Gao Yan — the engineer I had driven off the floor in September of 2019, who had come back through the citation trail of a dead patent the way a river comes back through an old channel, and the daughter — both of their names, in the present tense, over mine in the past, in a document that any

engineer in either country can open with a free search. She had not bought the thing. She had not inherited it from me: her mother had let it lapse into the weather, and it had come to her the way unguarded soil comes to whoever walks on it. She had simply built on it, and then — this is the part I could not adjudicate and have stopped trying to — she had put my name in the field where an engineer names what she stood on.

An accusation would have hidden the number. A consecration would have used my name in the title. She had done neither. She had done the thing my whole trade does when it is being honest: she had cited the source, because engineers read citations, and because a wall you were praised for and a foundation you actually used are different objects, and she knew the difference, and I was in the field for the one I was actually used as.

Neither of us has ever spoken of it. If you want to know what it says, it is in the public record, next to her name, under a date.

CHAPTER 58

Hangzhou, August 2027

Old Dai's deposition was taken in a lawyer's office on the eighth floor of a building with a view of the river, in a room set up for it: the table, the machine, the two sides, the stenographer the court had sent because the estate suit had grown large enough to require one. Creditors' side: counsel for a committee that was attacking the 2019 spousal assignment and the November auction sales together, on the theory that the whole arrangement had been a conveyance in the face of debts. My side of it, such as it was: I was there as a witness, and because a man who has read every document in his own estate does not skip the ones being read aloud.

They had found the gap in the audit the way these gaps are always found: a list of seized items with a hole in its sequence. The creditors' auditor had asked the administrators what had become of a category of internal correspondence from 2019 and 2020, and the administrators had asked the company's last CTO, and the last CTO had said, under the officer's questions, the thing he had apparently been saving up to say on a record, because Dai does not say things off the record that he has not already said in his head.

"What happened to the documents?"

"I didn't lose them."

"They weren't in the seizure inventory."

"No."

"Where were they?"

"I buried them," Dai said, in the voice he used for counts, "where the creditors don't dig."

Then, because he was Old Dai, he gave the detail: a family storage unit outside the city, under a floor, dry, inventoried in his own hand, the index available to the court on demand. He had done it in the weeks after the seizure, he said, when it had become clear what the estate would be asked to produce and what it would be asked to produce first — and what he had buried, he said, was

not evidence against the workers or the wage claims, which had gone into the boxes like lambs, but the correspondence that would have let a committee argue that the general manager had known, in 2019, how full his own shelves were.

He had buried my knowing. That is what the boxes under the floor were: not documents, a defense, and he had hidden it from the people entitled to it, perjured himself a little in the inventory's margins, and was now offering it to the court with the exactness of a man who had been waiting to pay.

I learned in that room what I had believed since the spring of 2024 — that the papers I had listed as lost were lost — and I learned it sitting five meters from the man who had decided to lose them for me. We did not look at each other while he said it. In the corridor afterward, while the lawyers were doing something with stamps, he said only that the unit was paid up through the year, and did I want the index, and I said I did not, and he said that was what he had supposed, and we stood there like two men at the end of a shift with nothing left on the board.

CHAPTER 59

Jingshan, October 2027

The transcript came in October, in the hand of the court's copyist, partial the way these things are partial: the pages the committee's counsel had ordered and the pages he had not, with the questions in the printer's roman and the answers in the voices of the people who gave them. Dai had carried it up the mountain in the box, and set it on the table, and set nothing else beside it, because he reads rooms.

I read Gao Yan first, because her name was on the cover of my worst year.

> *Q. And you came to this company in 2025 from the citation of the lapsed patent. A. The patent record assembled the team. I saw his name in the field and I knew the geometry. I called about the geometry. Nobody told me to call about a man. Q. Describe the company's stiffness work. A. It is his. Structurally. The staged deflection, the compliance at the start of travel — that's the 2019 suspension claims, rebuilt at robot scale, with our fatigue work on top. He drew the argument on an invoice. I have seen the invoice. I did the fatigue plots on it, in his office, in 2019, before I was the person who screams. Q. And the design dispute of spring 2027? A. In 2019 a man screamed at me for being right. In 2027 his daughter screamed at someone for the same reason — and then walked back in and said, "You're right, it fails at seven." I stayed for the sentence. Nobody ever came back with the sentence before.*

I have read that paragraph enough times now to own the shape of it. She does not forgive me. There is no forgiveness in the transcript, and no request for one, and the sentence I owed in October of 2019 was delivered by my daughter in a room in Xiaoshan, in the spring of 2027, eight years late, to a woman who had

come back for the tolerance and not the man, and it was, by every measure this book still knows how to take, the correct sentence.

I set the transcript down and went to the window. The kettle clicked off below; Auntie Shao's hens made their afternoon noise. I wrote the date in the notebook — the method does not care what it is filing — and let the tea go cold, and then I took the transcript up again.

Deng Zhuo's pages I read next, because Dai had marked them with a pencil the way he used to mark drawings that mattered.

> *Q. The corpus. Why is it closed? A. Because it is the moat. And because she won't open it. Q. You've argued for opening it. A. She closed the corpus. I told her open or die. She said, "Then I'll die knowing whose wrists those are." We're still arguing. It's the best argument in the company.*

Whose wrists those are. I read the line at the desk in the room above the tea, and the October outside was doing nothing in particular, and I did not go down to the levee that month when the eighth moon came round — the first year I have not gone down since the frozen years began — because the water and I had nothing to say to each other while two documents had come to rest at that desk with me, the card from 2026 and the transcript from this summer, each having already said its whole sentence.

That is her moat. I had read it as strategy in the annual letter, because I was reading as a man who had spent his life in strategies. It is not strategy. Or it is strategy the way my deposit float was sacrament: the thing that works, wrapped around the thing that matters.

CHAPTER 60

Jingshan, November 2027

The suit settled in the month the leaves were going, on terms that read like a document written by the sea: slowly, in salt, with everything rearranged.

The auction purchases were affirmed — her presses, her patents, the whole November inheritance, standing. The 2019 assignment was set aside as voidable in part and then, in the part that mattered, left standing, because the creditors who wanted it unwound could not find a single yuan that had gone anywhere they could follow: Lu Wan had paid the annuities out of a household that had nothing else in it, and when the household stopped, the patent had died on its own, unowned, ungrieved by the law. The lapse was ruled valid, which is the court's way of saying what my own trade already knew: that the worthlessness of the thing had been its armor. Nobody steals a dead patent. Nobody guards one either. That is why my daughter has it, and why the citation field is open to everyone, and why I am in it with nothing to my name.

Dai paid a sum at the settlement — his own, not the company's — for the burial of the documents, the court accepting it as a contribution to costs with the small ceremony these things get. The sum was small. The shame in the man's posture was not, and I say that as someone whose own shame, on the same subject, has never once been able to find a figure.

Tan Zheng's demand came out in the trade press the same week, which is either coincidence or the way this city does business: the robotics round, it was reported, had a term sheet from the old money — the man who had passed on the father twice — and the term was theater. His line was quoted, and it was his line, all the way down: every robot on this street is ninety percent teleoperated; show me ninety seconds of full autonomy and I'll lead.

What she opened, instead of the theater, was the manual — the model card, the documentation, the honest ninety seconds of what the machine actually was — and the term sheet died where such things die, politely, in an email that the paper did not print. I read it on the town phone, standing up, in the kitchen, and

I put the phone down and said, out loud, to nobody, the only sentence available to a man watching his daughter lose money the right way: that is correct. It is the same sentence I said about Xu Heng. I am beginning to notice that the sentence is the whole of what I have.

PART V — The Door

CHAPTER 61

Hangzhou, January 2028

It begins again the way these things begin, which is with a sentence in a trade paper that everyone in the city reads before lunch.

The round reopens. The report says the terms are honest — no theater this time, no ninety seconds of anything, a lead investor returning who was quoted, in the man's own dry cadence, as saying to the founder: "I passed on your father twice. I won't make a habit of being right." I read the quote three times. It is Tan Zheng down to the grammar: a verdict delivered in his own voice, on the record, this time in the other direction. The father he passed on twice is me; the daughter he is now leading is mine; and the sentence sits in the paper between a column about supply chains and one about the weather, doing the work of both.

I put the paper down on the desk, where it joins the stack of things I do not throw out because they are dated. Then I take out the notebook — this one, the current one, the exercise book with the ruled blue — and I write the date at the top of a new page, because that is the method, and the method has never once asked me how I feel about the date.

Dai telephones that evening, which he does when something is in the paper that he thinks I should hear from a voice first. He has read the same quote. He reads it aloud to me over the town line, slowly, in the cadence he uses for the parts of a balance sheet that matter, and when he has finished there is the sound of him setting the receiver down on the table the way he sets a cup: deliberate, final, done. Then, from a little distance: "He said it in print. The man said it in print." And I say yes. And we stay on the line in the dark for the length of two men who have run out of sentences on the subject of a daughter, which on this occasion is not a long time and does not need to be.

CHAPTER 62

Jingshan, February 2028

The printout arrives in the town's post, carried up the hill by Auntie Shao's nephew who does the delivery run on Tuesdays, in a flat envelope with the corner bent, because Dai writes the address in his hand and the post does the rest.

Inside: four pages, the deck's cover and three slides, posted because Dai does not transmit things he cannot hold, and because a man who has decided to pay a debt off one installment at a time pays this one in paper. The cover says what decks say. The third slide is the one that matters, and it has a title in the small hard font her company uses, and the title is:

Why the last attempt failed

The slide is her document and not mine and I will not reproduce all of it; I am its second reader and this book has no standing to be its publisher. But its structure is this, and the structure is what I read twice at the desk in February with the kettle going: a single column of causes, in the order she ranks them — the license freeze of 2017 and what a freeze does to a schedule; the deposit program and what a float does to a balance sheet; the nine years measured against the milestone the whole religion is built on, and the absence of the customer in every photograph the company ever took. No names. No absolution. And at the bottom, in the place where a deck usually puts the ask, one line:

The last attempt was a survey. This one is a build.

I sit with that for a while. Then I write, under the date, the only note the page suggests: *she read the files.* Because she does — the estate files, the press files, whatever Dai has kept and whatever has been public all along — and she ranks the causes the way I would have ranked them if ranking them had been my job instead of my life, and she leaves out, on purpose or by instinct, the one cause that has my name on it: the man. A survey has no foreman. That is either mercy or a better engineering practice than I ever managed, and I have decided, standing in my own kitchen in the present tense of this book, that the distinction is not mine to need.

I take the pages out again in the evening, when the mountain has gone to its blue, and I find that the cover page carries, in the bottom corner, the small print of the deck's date: January, this year. The slide is not made for me. Nothing in this company has ever been made for me; that is the whole of its independence and the whole of its insult, and I am aware, turning the page over to put it down, that I am holding the same object — her document, arriving by post, not addressed to me — that I held at the Gala in January of 2025, when the thing on the screen was a robot with no product and a woman who would not look at me. The postmark is Dai's hand; the hand of the slide is hers; and the debt the old man carries up this mountain every other Friday is being paid in the only coin he still keeps: paper, one box at a time, until the library is mine and he is free.

CHAPTER 63

Jingshan, Qingming week 2028

He comes on the Friday with the last of the box.

There are no more after these: the ninety-second notebook is among them, the thin one with the coffee ring, and he sets it on the table with the others in the ceremony we have between us now — flat, aligned, one at a time — and when it is done he puts both hands flat on the table for a moment, the way a man does at the end of loading a truck, and says, without ceremony, because Old Dai does not have any:

"That's the lot."

"That's the lot," I say.

The debt he has been paying down since 2025 — ninety-two notebooks, three years of Fridays, a CTO carrying a dead man's confessions up a mountain in a cardboard box — is now square. He looks around the room as if checking for a remainder — the stacks along the wall, the shelves Auntie Shao built out of the crate the kettle came in — and there is none, and what he says next is not about the notebooks at all: that the graves in the city could use a man with a broom more regularly than once a year, and that he would say so to whoever was asking, and that nobody was asking, and we both laugh once, quietly, at the two of us, standing in the middle of the festival of the dead on a hillside that is burning paper for everybody's ancestors while we burn none of it here.

Then he does the thing he does at the end of every visit, which is pour the second cup himself, from the kettle he has long since learned not to wait for, and hand it across the table with the small bow he once aimed at better men and now aims at me, and say, into the tea rather than at me: "Nine years. You built it all the way through."

I have been down at dawn to the two stones in the city. I clean them. I pour the water. Old Kang's widow still will not have a word with me and I have stopped expecting the custom to arrive; it is hers to give and she has finished giving. My mother's plot is weeded by a service I pay for now, on a card that still

works, and the man from the service has begun leaving the little plastic vase square, which is a form of tenderness I have learned to read.

Dai stays for the second cup and the first of the dark and then takes the last bus down, and I watch him go from the window, an old man with an empty box, and the mountain does its gray afternoon around the two of us who have nothing to burn.

After he has gone I go down again to the two stones in the city, in the late light, because the festival does not end when the boxes do, and because the walk is the only part of the method that has never needed a notebook. My mother's plot is as the service left it that morning: weeded, the little plastic vase square, the stone clean enough to read in the dusk. Old Kang's is three rows over and a generation older, and I sweep it again, with the same brush, in the same silence I have kept since the first year, which is the only language the two of us have ever had in common.

CHAPTER 64

Jingshan, May 2028

Fang Qi finds the mountain the way she finds everything, which is by asking three people who do not want to be asked and then arriving on a Tuesday with a recorder she does not turn on.

Auntie Shao serves her tea below my window, because Auntie Shao serves everyone tea below my window, and the journalist comes up the two flights with the cup in her hand as if she has been issued the building, and sits where she can see the door, which is a habit this mountain seems to install in women.

Below us, through the open window, Auntie Shao's radio is doing the noon broadcast of the commodity prices, and the journalist listens to a sentence of it the way a woman listens to a language she once spoke fluently and has moved out of — with recognition, without returning — and then she sets the cup down and asks her first question about the notebooks, and I answer it without asking hers, and the trade is under way.

She is the age the trade makes people and the number does not go here; what goes here is the trade: she asks about the bore, about the notebooks, about the year of the interviews, and she asks whether she may read what I am writing, and I say no, and she writes something down I am not shown, and then she says the thing she has apparently come up the hill to say, which is her own accounting, delivered flat, the way one delivers a final inspection:

"I never wrote a lie about you. That's the job now — true things, timed."

"Timed," I say.

"Timed," she agrees, and drinks the tea, and does not argue the case, which is how I know the case has already been argued inside her, somewhere between the kind profile and the autopsy, and that she has come out of the argument with exactly one sentence she is willing to stand on.

Before she goes she asks, with the recorder still off and her bag already on her shoulder, the question that was not for the piece: whether I am still writing every day. I say yes, and show her the stack by the door, three years of grids, and she

looks at the stack the way a journalist looks at evidence she has decided not to subpoena, and says, good, and goes down the two flights, and the mountain is quiet again in the way it goes quiet after a vehicle leaves, which is not silence so much as the shape a vehicle has left in it.

Her piece runs later, in the early summer, about the tide and the district and the water that the maps keep having to be reissued for. It names no one. It is the best thing she has ever written and it does not contain my daughter, or me, or the company, except as weather — which, it turns out, is the only medium in which either of us has ever been accurately reported.

CHAPTER 65

Jingshan, June 2028

The adoption notice comes out in the standards bulletin in the month the first flush tea is in, and I read it the way I read everything in the habit I have kept since the delisting: twice, once for the shape and once for the digits.

A group standard — the robotics trade's own, drafted by a working group with her company's name first in the drafting list, on the levels: what a machine at each grade of autonomy may claim, and how the claim is to be measured. The document number is assigned. The publication date is set. The escalation path to a national standard is described in the usual small print, the way a road to a capital is described on a local map.

Engineers read citations. Engineers also read standards, and a standard that measures honesty about a machine's autonomy is the most architectural thing a person can leave standing in a country of men who sold dances. The levels are numbered, which is the first mercy: L1 through L4, each one a contract between the claim and the test, each test specifying the conditions of the world in which the claim must hold — the floor, the light, the interference, the human hands that may and may not be nearby. It is the model card written with the force of the trade behind it. A company may still lie; the standard does not prevent sin. It makes the sin legible, which is the only thing a standard has ever done, and it is enough, because legibility is what the wall never offered. I read her drafting-group line twice. The document will go to the national committee in the autumn. Her name is not first among the drafting list's signatures; the first signature belongs to the oldest engineer in the working group, which is also correct, and also the method: she has put the instrument in front of herself, the way one squares a base before one hangs a needle.

I have thought about the word standard, at this desk, for longer than the bulletin's twelve pages are worth. It is the same word the trade has always used for the thing a part must be before it can be trusted inside an assembly: a document that outlives the men who signed it, that anyone may buy for the price

of the printing, that a supplier in another province can be held to without a phone call. She has done to the claim of autonomy what the old standards did to the runout of a shaft: taken it out of the room where men talk and put it into a document where the numbers live. It is the least romantic act a person can perform on an idea, and it is the only one that has ever lasted.

I put the bulletin in the drawer with the registration printout and the clipping from 1998, where three documents now lie in a row: a death, an inheritance, and a measure.

CHAPTER 66

Jingshan, September 2028

The exchange accepts the filing on a Tuesday in the second half of the month, and the prospectus is on the public site the same morning, because that is the rule now, and I have been reading the rules the way other men read their mail.

I open it at the desk on the borrowed laptop, in the room above the tea, at the hour the acceptance posts: the whole of her company, laid out in the genre's own flat voice — the sponsor's report, the audited figures, the risk factors written by people who write risk factors, the history of the founders without a word of biography that anyone could use for a novel. Her name is on the cover of the thing the way my name is in the citation field of her patent: in the position the law assigns, without commentary. I count the inquiry rounds the way a man counts the posts of a fence he is not allowed to lean on. I read the segment on the closed corpus — the moat described in the calm of capital — and scroll past it the way one walks past a room one has decided not to enter.

There is one page in the document I read three times, which is not the financials and not the risk factors but the one the law requires and the genre usually starves: the use of proceeds. It says, in the flat register, what the money is for. Actuation supply chain. The corpus. The standard's escalation work. A facility whose square meters are not described because square meters are not a securities category. I know which square meters. I do the sum the way I used to do sums — the line items against the drawings of a plant that was never built — and the sum is enough to have built it twice, in the right place, in the right weather, with the license the land would not give me, and I close the laptop at that point the way a man closes a box of his own tools that somebody else has bought, honestly, at the sale.

Then there is a sound on the stairs, which is a thing that does not happen on this mountain twice in the same year, and it is not Dai, and my hands know before my arithmetic does, and I am on my feet when the knock arrives, which is two flights of habit I did not know I still had, and it is she.

Lu Wan comes in as far as the room. She does not sit. She looks at the desk — the exercise books in their stacks, the laptop closed, the printout of the prospectus face-down the way a man hides a page he has been caught reading — and she says the thing she has come up the hill to say, in the voice she uses for arithmetic, and I understand afterward that she has been carrying the sentence since the week it happened, waiting for the week when it would be true:

"She came by during the filing week. Stood in the doorway. Didn't come in. She's yours."

The doorway in question is the one in the city, the rented room where her mother lives now, which the deed no longer calls ours. Three times, Lu Wan says — Monday, Wednesday, Friday, at hours chosen to miss the tea — my daughter has stood on that threshold with her hand on the frame and has not crossed it, and has gone back down the stairs, and has got into whatever car or cab is waiting, and has gone back across the river to the week that is eating her alive. Not a word has been exchanged. There is nothing to exchange; the standing is the sentence.

"She is yours," Lu Wan says again, which is not a gift and not a transfer and not, I notice, a question, and then she squares the stack of exercise books by the door — the hand she used to bring to the tool-crib cards — and sits, because the two flights are the two flights, and we drink the tea that has gone cold on the desk, and neither of us says the word that these years have been storing up, and it is, between the two of us, the closest we have come to a conversation since the day she told me about the annuity.

She stays an hour. She does not ask to read the memoir. She asks, instead, whether the kettle's click has been fixed, and I say I have learned to hear it, and she says, yes, I would, and takes the bus down, and the mountain does what it does in the ninth month, which is to be exactly the same height it was.

In the hour there is also the arithmetic, because with Lu Wan there is always the arithmetic, and it is, this time, about the filing: how many inquiry rounds the exchange has run, how long the silence after each one means, whether the silence is good or bad — the questions a woman asks when her name is not on the cover and her daughter's is, and when the thing being filed is, in a way no document will ever say, the last of the two of us. She does not ask whether Qiao has asked

about her. She does not need to; the doorway is the answer, and the doorway is standing in my room, in the person of the woman who has reported it, and we drink the tea, and neither of us says the word, and the hour runs out the way hours now run out on this mountain: by the light going, not by the clock.

The books are running out. I count the pages the way I count everything — this is the last of the twenty-eight, and the last of the last has perhaps forty leaves in it, and after that the town shop will sell me more, or it will not, and the memoir will have ended in the only manner a memoir of this company could honestly end: out of materials, on schedule, before the last of the work is done.

CHAPTER 67

Dajiangdong, October 2028

The eighth month comes, and I go down to the levee, and the levee is not the levee of 2025 or 2026.

I wrote last night, the last entry this book will hold before its ending: the date, the tide's hour from the almanac, and, under it, the only note the notebook has left room for — *the coat, the phone, the number.* It is the kind of note I have made my whole life: a man checking his instruments before a test he cannot schedule. The exercise books are stacked by the door now, three years of them, the grids getting thinner toward the front where the town shop's paper changed supplier, and the current one goes into the coat's inside pocket, flat, against the ribs, the way a surveyor carries a level.

They have come from the towns in the thousands this year — the mania has done to the bore what the mania does to everything, which is to make it a venue: food stalls along the service road, a man with a loudspeaker selling the tide's timetable like a ferry schedule, families six deep at the rail, the phones up already, an hour before, as if the water might skip its own appointment. I stand in it because there is nowhere else to stand. I am a man at the water. That is the whole of my rank.

And in my hand — in the left hand, in the coat pocket, screened against my thigh the way a man shields a lighter in wind — is the town phone, and on its screen is a number I have had since the spring of 2025, printed in the contact field of a business registration, carried in the bottom of a box under a clipping from 1998, unused, un-dialed, the only instrument in my possession that has never once failed a test I put it to.

The bore is coming. You can hear the working sound of it before the crown shows — the crowd makes its small excitement, the phones rise another few centimeters — and the water, when it arrives, will go both ways at once, the way it has every eighth month of my life, and the mania that has brought these thousands will, on some schedule that the crowd cannot see and I can, turn.

What I know — what the notebooks know, what the survey knows, what a man knows who has had the water take two of his houses — is that a cull comes with every tide, and that hers is out there in the same future as her inquiry rounds, and that the one thing my map cannot teach her is whether to be warned. I have watched this weather twice before: once from inside it, and once from the corridor of a hotel with coffee going cold, and the watching is the only inheritance I have that she did not already build around. She has built everything open so far — the model card, the levels, the honest manual — and every one of those choices was made without my voice in the room. My voice in the room is the one variable her openness has never had to survive. If I press the green key and say the word *cull* into the mouth of a phone on a levee in front of ten thousand people filming the water, she may hear it the way I heard the weather in the mania years: as instruction to build higher, and she will build higher, and she will become the walls, and the water will come anyway, and it will find the walls first. And if I stand here in the coat with the screen dark, she stays open the way the ground here was open before my kind arrived with our drawings, and the flood will find her the way floods find everything that does not harden in time —

I have thought about this for nearly four years, which is the honest count: since the spring of 2025, when the registration contact first put the number in a field my thumb could reach. I have run the call in my head the way I used to run tolerance stack-ups — worst case, mean case, the case where the tooling is good and the weather is not — and every column closes on the same finding: the warning is not information. She has the weather reports; she has the funding reports; she has the survey. What she does not have, and what the green key would give her, is the sound of her father's voice arranging her future for her, and that sound is the one instrument in my possession that has never once been calibrated.

The bore is at the bend now. The crowd is a single body. The white is on the crown, and the sound is the sound of a country watching its water, and what I have to say to my daughter about the weather, standing here with my thumb on the green key and the salt wind doing its work, is

Colophon

洪水滔天。鯀窃帝之息壤以堙洪水，不待帝命。……帝乃命禹卒布土以定九州。

Hongshui taotian. Gun qie di zhi xirang yi yin hongshui, bu dai di ming... Di nai ming Yu bu tu yi ding jiuzhou.

The waters rose until they touched heaven. Gun stole the Emperor's self-renewing soil to dam them, and did not wait for the Emperor's leave. ... And the Emperor commanded Yu to spread that same soil, and set the nine provinces in order. — the Classic of Mountains and Seas · 山海经 · 海内经. The father stole soil and built a wall; the son read the water and cut it a channel.

Gun 鯀 is the father in the flood record: the one who stole the Emperor's self-renewing soil and built walls with it, without waiting for leave, and drowned with the walls. His son Yu was handed the same soil and the same water, and set the nine provinces in order by reading where the water wanted to go and cutting it channels instead. The record keeps them as a pair — the dam and the survey. This novel is the dam's account. Its narrator is a quality engineer who was right about everything except the water: who measured every torque and tolerance across nine years and one car that never reached production, who paid a payroll out of money held in trust, and who writes all of it down, one dated entry to a page, from a rented room above a tea plot on Jingshan — ninety-two notebooks of failure modes, and not one page of them about his daughter.

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.

WHERE THE WATER WANTED TO GO · 67 sections · 31,867 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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