

A man and a woman are looking at an old ledger in a workshop at night. The man is wearing glasses and a dark jacket, and the woman is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark jacket. They are both looking down at the ledger, which is open on a table. On the table, there is also a large key, a photograph of a ship, and some papers. The background shows a city skyline at night.

Xiaolan Life Stories

The Name Missing from the Ledger

A husband, a wife, a 600-square-foot workshop - and a founding story
rewritten forty years later

When parents are ready to talk, dates are not the only things worth keeping.

We want to preserve the moment a father first learned to admit a mistake, the decision a mother made during the hardest month of the business, and the way their daughter came to understand both of them years later.

A family biography worth passing on should not read like an expanded CV. It needs rain at the factory door, machines drowning out a telephone call, and words left unfinished during an argument. The same event may live differently in more than one person's memory.

This sample follows a handwritten ledger from 1982. It begins with a company history wall that leaves out one name, then moves through apprenticeship, marriage, crisis and succession before returning that name to where it belonged.

Fictional composite. No person or company depicted here is a real client. This book demonstrates interview depth, narrative craft and finished-book design.

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People & Timeline

Lam Kai-wing	Born in 1952. Apprentice, machinist, founder and father.
Ho Mei-ling	His wife and co-founder. She wrote quotations, guarded cash flow and remembered the families behind every wage.
Carmen Lam	Their daughter and successor. She refuses to treat her father's experience as an unquestionable answer.
Master Kwok	Kai-wing's first foreman, who taught precision without humiliation.

1971	Kowloon · Apprenticeship begins
1982	Kwun Tong · The couple rent their first workshop
1983	A returned cheque · The company's first cash crisis
2008	Their daughter joins · Two generations collide
2022	Fortieth anniversary · The ledger is opened again

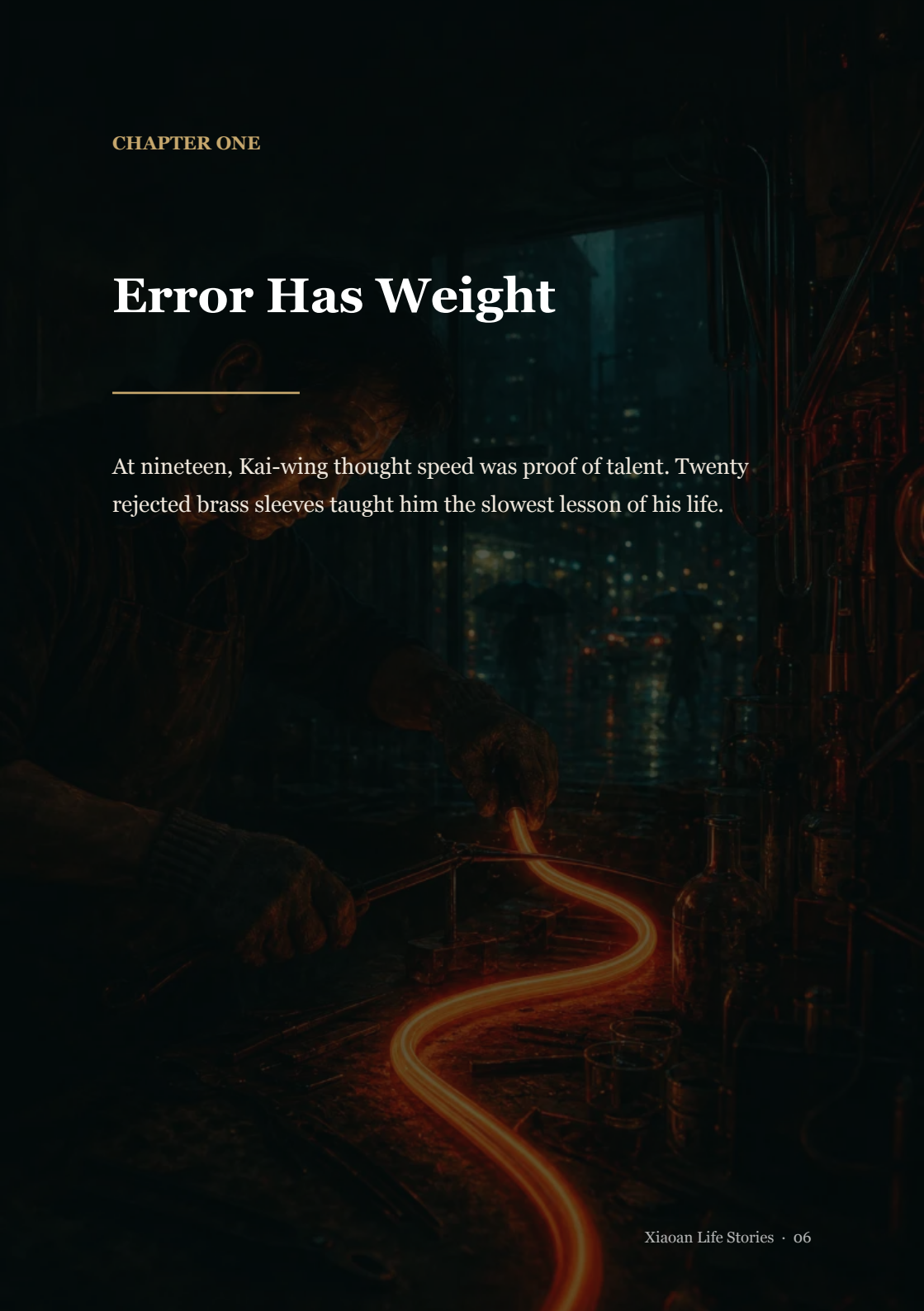
A Name Missing from the Wall

Before the company's fortieth anniversary, the brand team designed a history wall. At the top was a black-and-white photograph of Lam Kai-wing beside an old lathe. Beneath it: 'In 1982, Mr Lam Kai-wing founded Kai Wing Precision in Kwun Tong.' The proof was handsome, and the year was correct.

Carmen brought it home for her parents to approve. Ho Mei-ling looked once and said, 'The year is right.' She pushed the paper back to the centre of the table and went to turn off the stove - containing her opinion, as she had so often, inside one useful sentence.

Kai-wing did not sign. He took a soft-edged school notebook from the bookcase. Orders and electricity filled the front. The back held six employees' names, rent, school fees and money sent home. The first quotation was in Mei-ling's hand. 'I did not start this alone,' he said. Carmen placed a recorder beside the ledger and asked him to begin with his first day in a metal shop.

"Some families do not lack stories. They lack the moment when the people who became background are finally brought forward."



CHAPTER ONE

Error Has Weight

At nineteen, Kai-wing thought speed was proof of talent. Twenty rejected brass sleeves taught him the slowest lesson of his life.

Error Has Weight

In 1971, nineteen-year-old Lam Kai-wing became an apprentice in a Kowloon metal shop. For his first week he swept filings, cleaned callipers and copied Master Kwok's measurements. The grey-green lathe stood three steps away, turning all day, but he was not allowed to touch it. The work felt unbearably slow.

In his third week, Master Kwok asked him to machine twenty brass sleeves. Afraid of looking slow, Kai-wing measured the first part and made the rest by feel. Before lunch, the foreman remeasured only the third and seventeenth. Both were wrong. Kai-wing blamed the callipers. Master Kwok handed the tool back and asked him to measure his own pencil three times. He produced three different readings.

Every sleeve was scrapped. After the others left, Kai-wing swept the brass shavings into a sack. When he lifted it, the weight pulled at his arm. Error was no longer a decimal. It was material, time, trust and another person's patience. Years later, when training apprentices, he rarely said, 'Be careful.' He asked them to keep the first part they got wrong.

“That afternoon I learned that a mistake is not merely 'do better next time'. It can become a bag of brass shavings heavy enough to pull at your arm.”

The Foreman Did Not Hide the Failure

The next morning, Master Kwok laid all twenty sleeves across the bench. Kai-wing measured each one again and wrote the variance beside the job sheet. The first few were only slightly wrong; the drift grew steadily. The failure had not begun with one trembling hand. It began when one lucky measurement persuaded him that checking was unnecessary.

At lunch, an older machinist offered no consolation. He said, 'Work fast and people notice for a day. Work accurately and they return for ten years.' Kai-wing forgot the man's name but kept the sentence. It was not a slogan. It was survival advice passed across a noisy workshop.

Decades later, a young apprentice drilled a batch off-centre and was too frightened to return. Kai-wing placed his own rejected sleeve on the table. 'I made mistakes too. First, we find where this one began.' The shame of nineteen had finally become useful to another person.

“He did not make me pay, and he did not hide the mistake. He made me line up all twenty failed parts.”

CHAPTER TWO

Two People in Six Hundred Square Feet

Founding stories often become stories of one person's courage. The beginning itself was more crowded, practical and shared.

Two People in Six Hundred Square Feet

In the spring of 1982, Kai-wing and Mei-ling inspected a six-hundred-square-foot workshop in Kwun Tong. Its windows faced another building's concrete wall. Inside were one fluorescent tube and old machine-oil stains. Kai-wing crouched beside the electrical panel. Mei-ling stood at the entrance, counting the turns a delivery lorry would need.

Their first lathe was second-hand, and delivery was not included. Kai-wing called former colleagues to dismantle it. After finishing work at a garment shop, Mei-ling printed business cards, opened the bank account and wrote quotations. Whenever the machines started, she covered one ear to hear customers on the telephone. The first ledger began in her hand.

Years later, Kai-wing described the beginning as a time when he had been brave enough to try. Mei-ling remembered who paid late, whose child was entering school, and how wages and household money stayed separate. Carmen asked why she had never told these stories. 'We were busy finishing the work,' Mei-ling said. 'I did not know it counted as a story.'

“He inspected the power box. She counted how many turns a lorry would need. They looked at different things and asked the same question: could a business survive here?”

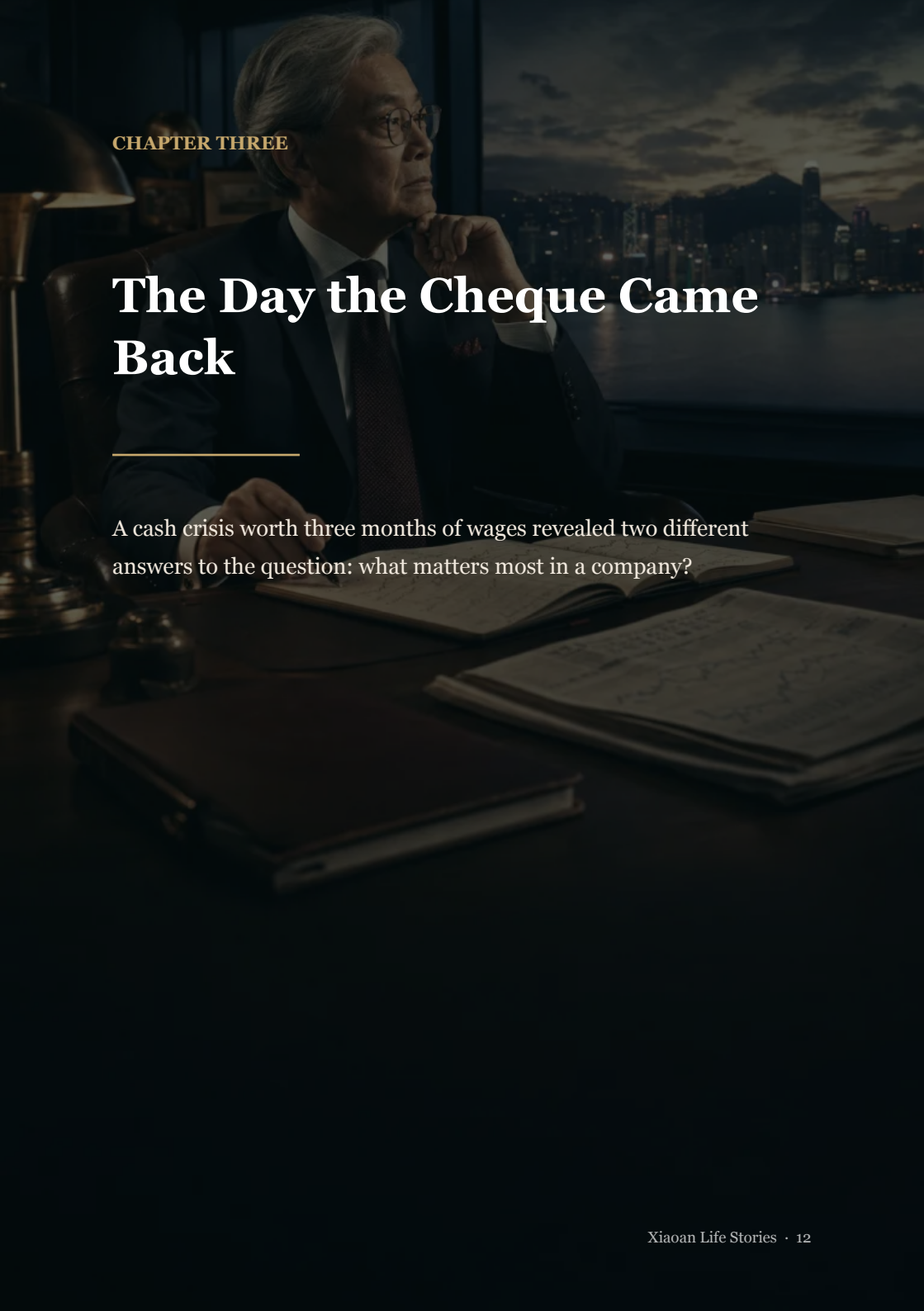
The Second Shift Began After Work

For the first six months, Mei-ling kept her garment-shop job. At six she took a bus to Kwun Tong and reconciled work orders, cash and delivery notes. Kai-wing thought she counted too closely. She wrote out electricity, tooling and scrap until he saw that a busy order could still lose money.

Their first serious argument concerned an order larger than their capacity. He feared missing the opportunity; she feared borrowing beyond recovery. They accepted one third and required staged payment. The profit was modest, but the decision created their first shared rule: courage opens a door; cash flow determines how long it stays open.

Family albums contain almost no photographs of them together from those years. One was always outside the frame, checking accounts, delivering parts or minding a child. Only when those scattered labours were placed side by side did Carmen understand what 'we founded it together' meant.

“He kept the machines turning. I kept tomorrow possible.”

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, is seated at a desk. He is looking thoughtfully out of a large window at a city skyline at dusk. On the desk in front of him are several open books and a closed book. A brass desk lamp is visible on the left side of the desk.

CHAPTER THREE

The Day the Cheque Came Back

A cash crisis worth three months of wages revealed two different answers to the question: what matters most in a company?

The Day the Cheque Came Back

In July 1983, a hard rain crossed Kwun Tong. Water crept beneath the half-open factory door. A customer cheque worth three months of wages had been returned. The customer promised to make good the following week. The bank repeated only that the balance was insufficient.

Kai-wing walked the corridor asking whether the youngest apprentice should be sent home first. On paper, it was the cleanest answer. Mei-ling opened the school notebook. She did not list machines or receivables. She wrote six names, followed by rent, school fees, a mother's medicine and money sent home. She circled three in red. 'These three cannot stop,' she said.

Her garment-shop savings covered that month's wages. Then she visited customers with her husband, breaking monthly settlements into weekly payments. The crisis did not become romantic. They owed money, lost sleep and argued. Yet forty years later, Kai-wing remembered not the returned cheque, but the fact that his wife had placed people before numbers.

“She did not begin by asking how much they had lost. She asked which of the six families could least afford a missing wage.”

The Seven Days After the Cheque

On the first day, they promised wages would be paid without explaining how. On the second, Mei-ling withdrew her savings while Kai-wing returned a measuring tool he had hoped to buy. On the third, they visited customers separately. One advanced a small payment; another claimed the owner was out.

On the fourth night, only one machine remained running. Kai-wing suggested pawning family jewellery. Mei-ling refused, not from sentiment, but because a company could not prove its worth by repeatedly emptying the household. She spread every order on the floor and kept only those that could ship quickly, came from reliable payers or might repeat.

Half the missing payment arrived on day six. It did not clear every debt, but it kept the workshop alive. On payday, none of the six employees knew what had happened. Mei-ling wrote four words at the back of the ledger: 'Never wait again.' Large orders were billed in stages for the next twenty years.

“There was no elegant turnaround. Each day we solved the one thing that could not wait until tomorrow.”

Forty Years Later, They Remembered Different Things

Kai-wing began with the customer, the amount and the bank. Mei-ling interrupted: 'You forgot Ah Keung's mother had just had surgery.' They even disagreed about the date. The editor did not force an immediate verdict. All three versions were preserved until documents and other witnesses could be checked.

A former employee later said he had never known the company was close to missing payroll. He remembered only that Mei-ling asked whether he needed an advance before school started. To the founders, it was an existential crisis. To the employee, it was an ordinary month in which wages arrived.

The interview changed how Carmen understood her mother. She had thought Mei-ling handled support work. She now saw that, at the moment of greatest uncertainty, her mother had defined the company's priorities. The crisis did not create that value. It made it visible.

“Her husband remembered the cheque. She remembered six names. An employee remembered that his wage was never late.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Next Generation Is Not Here to Repeat the Answer

When Carmen challenged her father, it was not because she dismissed experience. She feared a company that could function only inside one person's instincts.

The Next Generation Is Not Here to Repeat the Answer

Carmen joined the company in 2008. Her first project was to turn her father's 'about right' into something others could follow. Kai-wing believed customers wanted speed. Carmen insisted on measuring rework. When they first truly argued in the meeting room, the staff stared at the table.

'I have done this for decades. I know by touch,' her father said. Carmen did not deny his hands. She asked, 'If only you know why, what happens to the company after you?' Experience had carried him from apprentice to owner. Now the next generation was showing him that the same experience could become a wall nobody else could enter.

It took two years to turn private judgement into records, samples and review. One machine Carmen insisted on buying failed repeatedly. Her father did not say, 'I told you so.' He asked her to file the repair record beside the old ledger. Only later did she understand the tenderness of that gesture: he had not taken away her right to make mistakes.

“He said, 'This is how we have always done it.' She asked, 'If only you know why, what happens to the company after you?’”

What the Father Handed Over Was Not a Steering Wheel

During the week after the new machine failed, Carmen stayed latest every night. She expected her father to reclaim authority and prepared a sale proposal. Kai-wing asked only, 'What did you fail to count?' She named maintenance and the team's slow transition. He nodded and told her to continue.

The real shift came in a customer meeting. Questions were habitually directed to Kai-wing. This time he moved his chair back and said, 'Ask Carmen about that.' Six words told the room that his daughter was not merely helping him; she was acquiring responsibility of her own.

Carmen kept her father's rejected brass sleeve and her first machine repair report in the same cabinet. Together they became a language shared by two generations: experience is not permanent correctness. It is the willingness to leave evidence and let the next person revise the judgement.

“He learned to let her choose differently while he was still there.”

Putting the Name Back

The second version of the wall read: 'Founded in 1982 by Lam Kai-wing and Ho Mei-ling.' Mei-ling requested one more line: 'They began production in Kwun Tong with six early colleagues.' Without those six people, she said, the founders' names meant very little.

On the day it was unveiled, Kai-wing stood behind the crowd and did not go on stage. Seeing his wife's name beside his own, he told Carmen, 'It has not taken half of mine away. It has made the story whole.'

Biography does not always need to build another monument. Its more valuable work may be to return omitted names, belated gratitude and newly understood choices to the places where they always belonged.

How One Spoken Memory Becomes a Chapter

'A cheque came back and there wasn't enough money. I thought maybe the youngest one should stop coming. She took out a notebook, wrote some names and said these people could not stop. Then she used what she had saved, and we went to customers one by one. The workers never knew.'

Editing Does Not Decorate the Voice. It Reveals the Choice.

- Fact: a returned cheque threatened payroll
- People: the couple, six employees, customers
- Choice: layoffs or protected wages
- Cost: personal savings and collection visits
- Aftermath: staged-payment policy

The facts were not changed. No heroic rescue or precise amount was invented. Editing restored sequence, followed 'some names' into the six families behind them, and allowed the husband, wife and employee to remember the same week differently.

A readable chapter needs more than information. It needs a scene, resistance, action and consequence. The cheque is not the deepest subject. The deeper subject is what this family chose to protect when money was shortest.

Every added detail must return to an interview, photograph, ledger or family review. What cannot be verified remains a question. Literary confidence must never replace evidence.

Where the Complete Book Could Go Next

This sample presents four pivotal chapters. A full biography follows desire, relationships and consequential choices across a longer life.

01 **Part I • Learning the Work**

Leaving home, apprenticeship, a first mentor and the first failure owned

02 **Part II • A Workshop for Two**

Marriage, founding, the cash crisis, becoming parents and employers

03 **Part III • Letting Experience Go**

Industry change, a daughter's arrival, conflict, succession and repair

04 **Family Archive • Names and Voices**

Family interviews, photographs, objects, original audio and timeline

How a real family story becomes a finished book

01 Preserve the voice

Six to eight or more guided interviews capture speech, pauses, specialist language and defining scenes.

02 Find the story

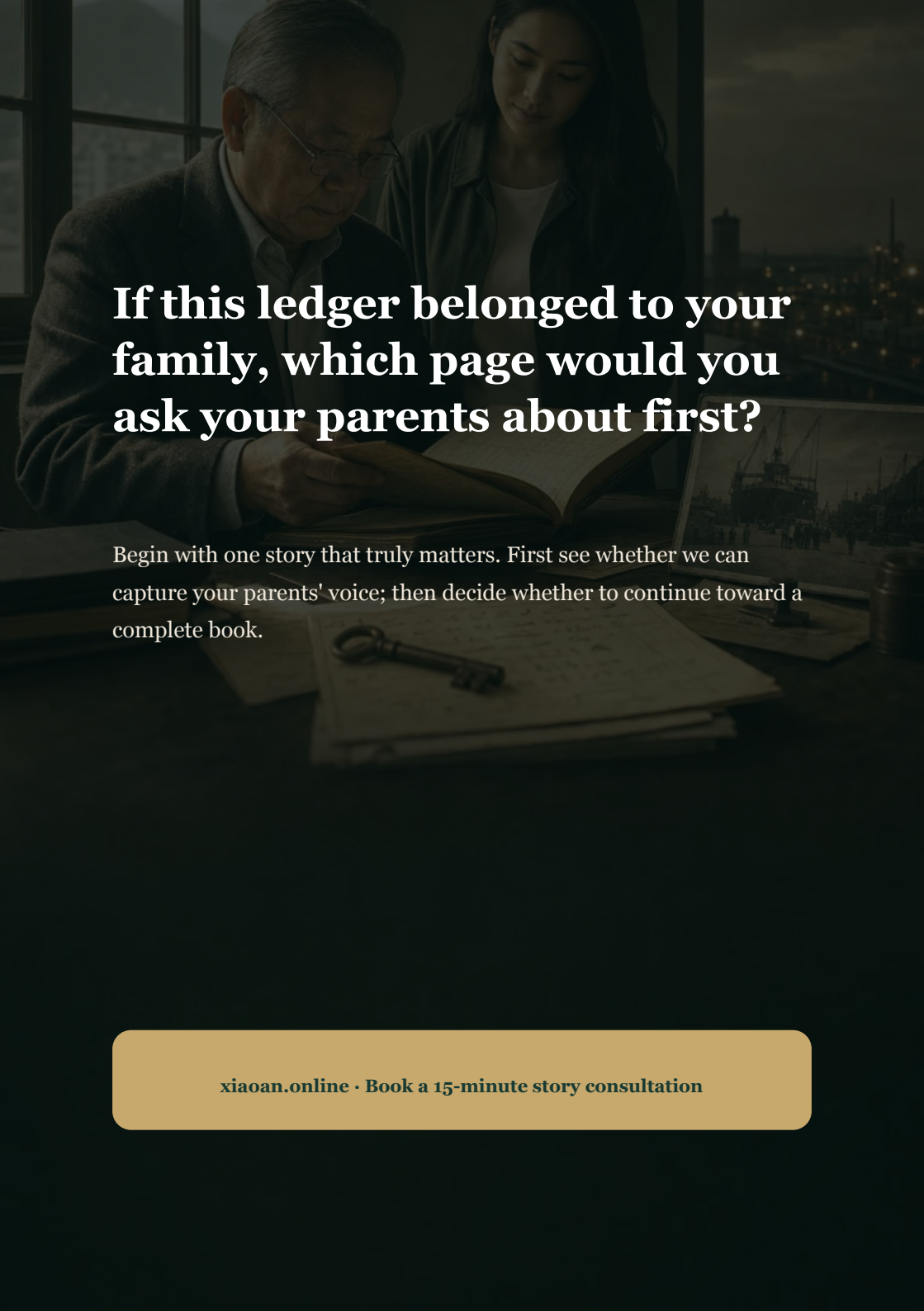
We follow choices, relationships, consequences, turning points and daily life - not a CV year by year.

03 Review it together

Names, dates, photographs and sensitive passages are checked chapter by chapter.

04 Make a book

Editing, cover, photographs, contents and print-ready PDF come together; selected audio may remain in the family archive.

A man and a woman are looking at a book together. The man is on the left, wearing glasses and a dark jacket. The woman is on the right, wearing a dark jacket over a white shirt. They are both looking down at the book. In the background, there is a city skyline at night with lights. The overall tone is dark and moody.

If this ledger belonged to your family, which page would you ask your parents about first?

Begin with one story that truly matters. First see whether we can capture your parents' voice; then decide whether to continue toward a complete book.

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