

# THE DISASTER PROPHECY AGENCY 災難預言事務所

*As a series of natural disasters rocks Taiwan, a man with the ability to predict catastrophes uncovers a plot to intentionally sink the island nation beneath the sea.*

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What if one day we could predict natural disasters? Would humanity as a whole be better prepared to face what comes, or, might some people use this knowledge for personal gain?

After surviving a flood that killed three of his high school classmates, Lin Shao-Heng found he had gained the ability to see the future. Having always had a way with words, Lin Shao-Heng becomes a fortune teller, opening his own “prognostication agency”. What no one realizes is that the spirits of his three dead friends have taken up residence in his office, using their powers to assist with his clients.

One day, a mysterious package containing a tablet computer arrives at the modest agency. After pressing the power button, Lin Shao-Heng discovers this is no ordinary tablet – it is a miraculous device that foretells natural disasters. After announcing his prediction of a volcanic eruption on the outskirts of Taipei, Lin Shao-Heng becomes the focus of media attention, which leads to him getting entangled in a secret plot to profit from future natural disasters. Where did the tablet come from, and why did it end up in Lin Shao-Heng’s hands? And, what should Lin Shao-Heng do now that he foresees that Taiwan will be struck by a catastrophe of biblical proportions?

Freely mixing elements of the science-fiction and crime genres, *The Disaster Prophecy Agency* is a fast-paced thrill-ride with well-defined emotional ties between characters. Cleverly incorporating familiar disaster scenarios, the novel dares to envision the psychological state of humanity in the face of a starkly believable doomsday prophecy.



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Lin Ting-Yi was born in 1986 in Taichung City. A former hospital worker whose suspenseful and fantastical works of crime fiction first gained a following online, he is now a full-time writer and a member of the Crime Writers of Taiwan. His breakout novel, *Working for a Crime Group as a Scriptwriter*, has received numerous awards, and a film adaptation is currently in production.

# THE DISASTER PROPHECY AGENCY

By Lin Ting-Yi

Translated by Zhui Ning Chang

## Prologue: Memories

A natural disaster always sweeps through and is over before anyone realizes. Yet, the chaos left in its wake can last a long while.

At least, that was the case for the nursing home tucked in the corner of a valley in New Taipei City.

A fierce typhoon, fed by the warm waters of the Pacific and an incredible wind speed of 210 kilometers per hour, made landfall at Hualien and then invaded the rest of Taiwan.

At first, the nursing home's staff thought this was a regular summer typhoon. That it would be enough to do as they had done in previous years, reinforcing the large glass windows and piling sandbags where water might easily accumulate. Since the nursing home was in a mountainous area, they stored almost a week's worth of food and water, and had the workers check over the generator and the fuel. As long as no one went out in the lashing wind and rain, they should all survive the storm just fine.

In this instance, there were not many residents in the nursing home. When the police advised them to evacuate to the nearby community center in the town fifteen kilometers away, most of them voluntarily went to shelter there. A handful of intubated residents could not easily be moved, so a few necessary medical and emergency response personnel stayed behind. Everyone else was evacuated.

Following past experience, this was a reasonable decision to make.

Unfortunately, they had underestimated the power of nature. At first, the rainwater flowed from upstream in clear rivulets, but then soil and sand began to mix in with the water, forming thick, hard clumps of mud that continued down the mountain. Although the nursing home's concrete walls were 2.5 meters high and relatively sturdy, it could not hold the water back forever. Also, from the day the rain began to pour down, all external communications were cut off and no one at the nursing home had answered the phone. There was no way to know what was happening inside.

It was now early morning, but the sky was still covered in dark and stormy clouds, as if dawn had not broken. Taking advantage of a brief lull in the rain, someone dressed in a military-green poncho vaulted over the metal gates next to the nursing home guardhouse, which had cracked open due to the strong wind. This person had a slight, natural upturn at the corners of his mouth, and his tall, gangly figure did not impede his movements at all.

As he moved towards the nursing home, he seemed to be muttering incessantly. "If the rain keeps coming down, forget about climbing over the wall! I'd be able to break in by boat."

Lin Shao-heng was a student in his second year of senior high in a neighboring mountain town. The day before, he had gone with his classmates to seek shelter at the community center. But that night, as he was about to lie down and rest, Lin Shao-heng had overheard a group of workers from the nursing home talking, anxious that they had not been able to reach the staff who had remained behind. Only then had he realized that this typhoon was unlike all the rest. It was uncommon for communications to break down in a storm, and to make matters worse, as of their last known correspondence, the situation at the nursing home had seemed bleak.

The wind had been slicing through the air outside and the rain was gradually growing heavier. Lin Shao-heng had looked towards a corner of the community center, where Lan stood listening to the nursing home workers' conversation. After, she turned to stare out the window at the storm. Although she did not say a word, her helplessness and despair were reflected clearly on the rain-spattered window panes.

Lan had always lived in Taipei City, but this year she had come up the mountain to stay with her grandfather for the summer holidays. She was quite shy and did not talk much, but her face dimpled when she smiled. Lin Shao-heng had passed by her grandfather's old courtyard home several times, and always glanced about for Lan, but never had a chance to talk to her. Who would have thought they would meet here, in the community center, while taking shelter from a typhoon?

As an aside, "Lan" was not her given name. She always had a blue hair tie like a garden cosmos holding her ponytail together; if it was not in her hair then it was on her slender wrist, as though it were a part of her. Lin Shao-heng privately called her "little blue", and thought she might not mind it even if she found out.

All the children on the mountain called Lan's grandfather Grandpa Shih. No one was sure what his real name was, but he was always seen carving lovely and lifelike little animal statues, which he then placed on the wall of his courtyard home. Arrayed one after another, they were all quite cute.

People said that Grandpa Shih had gone to live in the nursing home, but he was nowhere to be seen in the community center. Surely, he had not stayed behind?

Deep in the night, Lin Shao-heng kept thinking about this and could not sleep. He tossed and turned on his sleeping bag, and bumped into his best friend, Zhang Cheng, the chubby young man sleeping next to him. Zhang Cheng shifted and accidentally pressed Shao-heng's ribs, which he had injured a few months ago while fighting his archenemy in school. Still tender and aching, Lin Shao-heng could not help crying out.

"Ow, that hurts! Zhang Cheng, you have so much room, why do you have to squeeze over here with me?"

"Huh? Oh, you haven't slept yet. Is the typhoon gone? Can we go home?"

Zhang Cheng turned around and almost squashed him, but Lin Shao-heng hurriedly dodged and glared at him.

If not for the fact that Zhang Cheng was his classmate and best friend, Lin Shao-heng would have picked a fight with him long ago due to his unruly behavior. Just like he fought with his enemy three months ago – Hsu Chih-i, a boy from the next class with the moniker Mad Dog. At that time, Hsu Chih-i had received a hard knock on the head and Lin Shao-heng had broken a rib; the fight was so bloody and intense that the entire school had known about it.

Still, he had no choice but to throw himself into that fight. That thug Hsu Chih-i somehow heard that a female classmate, Wu Wen-hsin, had a secret crush on Lin Shao-heng. He had colluded with gangsters from outside the school to set a trap, planning to kidnap Wu Wen-hsin. Luckily, he was caught in the act by Lin Shao-heng, and the two had beaten each other bloody. As his crime had been more severe, Hsu Chih-i was sentenced to three months in a juvenile detention center. Word was that he still had to check in regularly for correctional counselling after his recent release. As for Lin Shao-heng, he had received a reprimand from the court and was ordered to undergo guidance and counselling sessions during the holidays.

The teachers at school were of the opinion that Lin Shao-heng was a problem student with a spotty record and a habit of lying, and sooner or later would also end up in a juvenile detention center. Some teachers even said that he should have been sent to the center alongside Hsu Chih-i, that if they beat each other to death at least someone else would deal with the bodies. If filthy, nasty thoughts could get one jailed, these high and mighty adults with their disgusting outlook should have been locked up instead, every last one of them. At least, that was what Lin Shao-heng always thought.

“Zhang Cheng, I’m thinking to go take a look around the nursing home.” Lin Shao-heng said.

“Eh, Heng, all the rainwater must have drowned your brain. There’s a goddamn typhoon out there!”

Zhang Cheng turned on his side and stared at Lin Shao-heng with wide eyes. They had both grown up in the mountains and were highly aware of the force of rain during a typhoon. They knew nature could be merciless.

“Look, Grandpa Shih is not here. He must have stayed behind in the nursing home.” Lin Shao-heng briefly described how he had eavesdropped on the nursing home workers and learned they had lost communications with the place. “I’m familiar with the area, I should go and see if there’s anything that can be done.”

“You sure? This isn’t the usual heavy rain. Remember that typhoon when we were in primary school? That road splintered into three sections, and parts of it completely disappeared. If something like that happens again, what’s the point of you being there?”

“I don’t know, but I just can’t stand that look in her eyes.” Lin Shao-heng looked again towards Lan, who was still in the corner. “Besides, Grandpa Shih is so kind to everyone, I should do *something*.”

“You’re not allowed to go.” A girl’s voice suddenly came from above their heads.

Both boys startled. They looked up from where they lay at the same time.

Wu Wen-hsin stood over them. She was like a cat getting ready to throw a fit, her thin eyebrows furrowed and her arms crossed.

Lin Shao-heng raised his head. "You're so annoying! Why don't you go to sleep, instead of eavesdropping on our conversation?"

"Either way, you're still not allowed to go. It's raining heavily outside, and the nursing home is so remote. Who will save you if something happens!"

"Don't you worry, I can take care of myself. It won't be first time I've been outside during a typhoon, right, Zhang Cheng?"

"Um, you're right, but this time the rain seems to be more..."

Lin Shao-heng rolled his eyes, and Zhang Cheng stuttered to a stop.

"If you dare step out of the community center, I will tell the police at the door! Also, when you skipped counselling last time, I was the one who helped you hide. You don't want this to be discovered by the teacher, right?" Wu Wen-hsin's tone became firmer. This was completely different from her usual good-girl image; this time, she was dead set on stopping Lin Shao-heng from venturing into danger.

"Fine, whatever. If you don't want me to go then I won't go."

"Really? You're not lying again?" She raised an eyebrow, deeply familiar with Lin Shao-heng's ways.

"No way! I'll swear it, okay?"

"Even if you swear, I still feel that..."

"Just hurry up and go to bed. It's some rubbish hour." Lin Shao-heng shrugged, knowing it was impossible to convince Wu Wen-hsin, and then buried himself in the sleeping bag.

Outside, the rain was being blown sideways by the powerful wind. Raindrops thudded harshly on the iron roof, loud enough that Lin Shao-heng lay awake the whole night.

In the early morning, Lin Shao-heng braved the rain, crossed the mud-covered parking lot, and finally stepped into the nursing home. He had no idea where the original front door was. There were sharp edges all about the metal hinges, so maybe the door had been ripped off by the ruthless wind. This was one of the best nursing homes in the area, and once achieved excellent reviews. But in the spacious foyer, the white floor tiles were covered in wet mud almost five centimeters high, and the distinctive tang of disinfectant that used to permeate the place was gone, leaving only the smell of damp soil.

Then, a sharp, chemical smell floated down from the end of a nearby corridor.

Lin Shao-heng gripped his backpack tightly. It was filled with drinking water, biscuits, batteries, and basic bandaging supplies pilfered from the community center, and he had even stolen a walkie-talkie from one of the local officials. He originally thought these supplies might help, but as he walked down the waterlogged corridor, his blood ran cold.

Next to the weakly flickering emergency lights, slumped in a wheelchair and bundled in a wool blanket, was the corpse of an old man.

*As I guessed, something did happen.* Lin Shao-heng moved closer, cautious.

He found that the old man's mouth and nose were both filled with mud and water. It appeared that he could not walk very well and had fallen down, then drowned in the muddy water. Lin Shao-heng had never seen such a tragic death before. Yet, someone seemed to have helped the old man into the wheelchair, and even carefully covered the body with a blanket. Maybe it was the staff's doing, but where were they?

"Is anyone here?" Lin Shao-heng shouted.

No response. Only the sound of running water and the wind, blowing his call into the distance.

Lin Shao-heng continued on, checking each of the wards. He could not tell if the ward doors were had been blown open by the wind or forced open by fleeing people. All signs indicated that, not too long ago, the situation had been so dire everyone was forced to evacuate. Although Lin Shao-heng managed to enter the nursing home in a brief interval as the storm subsided, the weather in the mountains was changing every other minute, and he was not certain that he could safely leave.

And he had not found Grandpa Shih yet. Perhaps the staff had taken him off the premises?

As he deliberated, someone rushed out from a door. Despite the mud covering them from head to toe, Lin Shao-heng could make out that they were wearing the white uniform of the nursing home. But their behavior was quite strange: they kept turning back to look behind them before leaving.

"Hey! Wait a minute!"

Before he finished speaking, the person had already vanished in the opposite direction towards the front door.

"Dammit! Gotta ask where everyone else has gone." Lin Shao-heng tried to chase after the mysterious person, but found that the water was starting to rise again, and was already reaching his calves. It was quite difficult to wade forwards, and he knew he wouldn't be able to catch up. The storm was fluctuating wildly, one moment a heavy downpour, the next moment a drizzle.

Suddenly, from near the foyer, there came the sound of a familiar voice shouting.

"Heng! Where are you?"

"Hey, Lin Shao-heng! I told you not to come, but you did it anyway. You're always lying!"

Although the voices came from far away, he recognized them quickly. Zhang Cheng and Wu Wen-hsin.

"How come you're both here?" Lin Shao-heng leaned out of the long corridor and shouted back across the distance.

He hadn't expected these two to follow him, but they were both used to his lies, and knew he couldn't break the habit. Besides, they knew him too well. If Lin Shao-heng set his mind on doing something, nobody could stop him.

"Finally found you! Eh, Heng, did you bump into... I saw him tailing you from the community center..." The violent wind kept cutting off Zhang Cheng's voice.



“Who? Let’s not talk about this right now. Quick, help me stop the worker who just left through the front door!” Lin Shao-heng yelled back, but it was anyone’s guess if the other two could hear him clearly.

Seeing as he was unlikely to catch up to the worker, Lin Shao-heng decided to have a look at the room they had fled from. He waded to the door. The moment he entered, he saw someone on the bed. The figure was damp and frail, like a thin, withered branch, about to break with the next gust of wind.

It was Grandpa Shih.

His eyes were closed, and he was completely motionless. His condition did not look good.

Next to the mud-drenched bed, Lin Shao-heng noted with surprise a ventilator mask and machine that had been set aside, and a clear syringe filled with a medicinal fluid. Looking at the packaging left next to it, he could make out that it was a powerful analgesic called fentanyl. But was that a standard dosage in the syringe? It seemed like a lot...

A jolt went through him. The worker had been behaving strangely.

*Could it be that I just witnessed a murder?*

Lin Shao-heng thought of that old man’s body in the corridor, and his heart squeezed. He approached Grandpa Shih at once, and nervously reached for the artery in his neck.

His fingertips made contact, and suddenly the edge of Grandpa Shih’s mouth twitched.

“Ohhh...” Grandpa Shih made an indiscernible noise.

Lin Shao-heng had not thought that Grandpa Shih was still alive. He reacted quickly, attempting to secure the ventilator mask, but then discovered that the machine had long since run out of power.

Looks like there was only one option left: to get out of here as quickly as possible.

Lin Shao-heng rushed out of the room and went to the body of the old man in the wheelchair. He bobbed a little prayer and said, “I’m so sorry for borrowing your wheelchair, but the old man inside needs it more!”

He pushed the wheelchair, occupant and all, into the room. Then he lifted the body and laid it on the bed, intending to shift Grandpa Shih onto the wheelchair.

Right then, the sound of splashing water came from outside the room.

Lin Shao-heng turned and shouted, excited, “Zhang Cheng, you slow-poke! I’ve already found Grandpa Shih, come quick and help!”

Then he caught sight of the person in the doorway, and his jaw dropped.

Standing there was a fierce, forbidding teenager a little shorter than him, with sallow cheeks and a crew cut. He was wearing a black sports shirt, which clung wetly to him and outlined his lean figure. There was a distinctive wound on his forehead.

It was Hsu Chih-i, his archenemy from school.

“Just because I went to jail, you think you won?” Hsu Chih-i said coldly.

“Motherfucker, Mad Dog! What the hell! What are you doing here?” Lin Shao-heng was entirely bewildered.

Could he be the person Zhang Cheng had seen following him?



*He followed me all the way from the community center. What on earth did he want to do?  
Hang on....*

He glimpsed the folding knife that Hsu Chih-i held at his side, gripped so tight that the veins in his arm were bulging.

*Oh. Guess this low life has some brains, after all. Couldn't let the opportunity slip past.*

On a typhoon day, when there would be no functioning surveillance cameras, and plenty of flowing water to wash away the evidence... It was a perfect time to commit a murder.

Plus, taking into account the person who nearly killed Grandpa Shih, it might have been *two* murders.

Lin Shao-heng wasn't afraid of a fight, but if Grandpa Shih got injured, he was doomed. Lin Shao-heng quickly said, "Stop this crap! We can fight anywhere after we've left this place. You can pick the location; I'll give you that much."

In those few seconds, there came a violent rumbling of mud and rocks from the foyer. It reminded Lin Shao-heng of a juice machine starting up, except that no one would much like the stuff churning in it.

"It is him! I told you!" Zhang Cheng's voice came from the corridor, likely speaking to Wu Wen-hsin.

Hsu Chih-i did not bother noticing the others. He raised the folding knife and rushed at Lin Shao-heng.

Lin Shao-heng panicked, grabbed the ventilator still on the table, and shoved it at his attacker. It flew across the room and hit the wall with a bang, but that only slowed Hsu Chih-i for a few seconds before he was lunging at him again.

"What the hell did I do to piss you off like this?" Lin Shao-heng yelled.

The fact of the matter was that Hsu Chih-i and Lin Shao-heng constantly clashed with each other matters big and small. They had taken an instant dislike to each other when they first met, and if one were to choose their most violent clash, it would have to be the time when Hsu Chih-i tried to kidnap Wu Wen-hsin. In truth, Lin Shao-heng had instigated the whole thing by mocking Hsu Chih-i for losing a fight to him in front of a girl Hsu Chih-i was pursuing, when, in reality, Hsu Chih-i had won the fight. Their mutual enmity had grown increasingly intense, but who would have thought that Hsu Chih-i, with his poor emotional control, would then set his sights on Wu Wen-hsin. This had crossed Lin Shao-heng's bottom line, and resulted in the irreconcilable feud of the past few months.