Chapter 1

THE KILLER RODE THE ELEVATOR TOWARD THE ROOFTOP. Somewhere up there the girl waited, standing exactly where she had been told to stand, wearing exactly what she had been told to wear. The killer knew this, and relished it.

The elevator doors whisked open on the eighteenth floor. The killer padded down carpeted hallways past plush offices, seeing no one. The last person had left hours ago.

_The girl had walked these same hallways, only minutes before._

The elevator doors whisked open on the eighteenth floor. The killer padded down carpeted hallways past plush offices, seeing no one. The last person had left hours ago.

_A metal door led to a flight of cement stairs, and then out onto the rooftop. The killer stopped there, drinking in the sight._

The girl stood at the edge of the roof, facing away, staring out at a breathtaking view of the city. Half-lit skyscrapers marched out to the bay, glimmering in the moonlight.

_The girl waited. The girl would not turn. Her instructions were to remain facing away, and she would follow them._

She wore a tiny denim miniskirt and sparkling high heels, and huddled
in an oversized black jacket. Her pale legs trembled in the cold night air.

The killer frowned. The girl didn’t have permission to wear the jacket. 
*She had not yet learned to obey.* 
The killer started across the rooftop, and the girl looked back at the sound.

You were told not to turn around! the killer thought, breaking into a run.

Now the girl turned all the way around. A smile graced her lips for one sweet moment, and then her eyes widened in surprise.

“What are you…”

The killer tilted into her, full force. The girl’s slim frame gave no resistance. Up she went, and then over the broad cement lip of the building, tumbling out of sight. Eighteen stories down.

Submissive to the end, she never even screamed.

*Done.*

The killer looked over the edge of the building, breathless. The girl’s body lay in a narrow alley, exactly as planned.

No one in the city heard the impact, no one came running, no one cared.

The killer stared, imprinting the scene into memory, *relishing* it. Imagining all of the wonderful things to follow. The girl’s form lay twisted on the pavement below, blood spreading out around her.

And maybe it was better this way. At least she had died in love … and how many people can say that?

The killer headed for the elevator, wanting to see the body one last time.
a gruff bear of a man, but his broad shoulders had carried the weight for me more times than I could count. He nodded at me, then gestured to the girl. “She took a header off the roof, Inspector,” he said. “Don’t know why she was up there. I guess a back exit to the building sticks open sometimes, and she knew about it.”


“Nothing. No guards, and the only cameras are in the lobby.”
I kneeled down to look at the girl. She seemed about 14 years old, long black hair with a simple, home-done cut. Maybe Chinese or Korean. She wore a denim miniskirt so tiny that my father would have beat me senseless for even having it in my closet, along with the tank top and a black jacket. A candy-colored high-heel shoe lay six feet away.

No panties either. “Dressed to kill,” Jacobi said.

“Such a young girl,” I said. “What was she doing here? Meeting a lover on the rooftop? A fight, and she goes over?”

“Maybe the lover dumped her,” said Jacobi. “She got sad, took a header off the roof.”


I didn’t have to finish the thought.

Young girl, sexy clothes, dressed far beyond her years. Lying in an alley at 2 a.m.

Could be murder.

Chapter 3

“How did they get here so quick?” grumbled Jacobi. He headed to the mouth of the alleyway, where he and a young beat cop closed ranks.

“They” were the media, some kind of remote feed for a local Bay Area station. They probably overheard something on the police band and, like me, had nothing better to do tonight.

I continued with the investigation. The girl was dead, but nothing so far showed signs of struggle. Could it be murder?

A bright light washed the alleyway and I looked up. A young cameraman with a scruffy soul patch had faced off with Jacobi, shining his camera light. Next to him stood the reporter, a young Asian woman with a short bob cut. She looked fresh out of college, still innocent.

“What happened here?” she badgered Jacobi and the other cop in a high, sweet voice. “Is this a murder? Is there a suspect in custody?”

I’d been young once, too. And sometimes the young needed saving from themselves. I headed over before she got the full Jacobi treatment.
“There’s no suspect in custody, and as far as we know it’s not a murder,” I said. The camera’s eye swiveled toward me. “Turn the camera off, Jack. We’re working here.” He lowered the camera, hesitant now that I’d identified him by name. “That’s right, I’ve seen you before. Now lower the camera and back up to a safe distance.”

“Safe from what?”

“Safe from me,” said Jacobi, looming over the guy.

Cameraman Jack did the wise thing and backed up. I returned to the alley, and then felt something you don’t often feel at a crime scene … someone plucking your sleeve.

The reporter. She had lowered her microphone and stared at me earnestly. “I’m Tracy Chan,” she said, extending a hand. “Sorry for my friend. He gets a bit agitated when he doesn’t get his evening coffee.”

“I know the feeling.”

Without quite knowing why, I walked back toward the body without ordering her away. She followed, one step behind. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You’re the press, Ms. Chan. In case your boss didn’t tell you, you and I are destined for what you might call a rocky relationship.”

She had stopped walking. The body lay in full view.

“She’s so young.” Tracy whispered. I looked at her, then the girl. They couldn’t have been more than ten years apart, and I wondered if they had grown up in similar circumstances.

“She’s probably about 14,” I said. “Listen, this is gruesome, but I don’t think we have a murder here. It would be best for you and your cameraman to pack up and go home.”

“Sure, OK,” said Tracy, resigned. Then she narrowed her eyes. “Say, what’s that?” she asked, pointing at the girl’s arm.

I looked.

Drawn on the girl’s left forearm, in what looked like ballpoint pen, were four flowers.

Chapter 4

TRACY GOT HOME AROUND 3 A.M., parking her Civic on the street and quick-walking to the door with keys in hand. The house, a small two-story building a few blocks from Chinatown, was worth a fortune because it sat in the middle of San Francisco, but other than that she wouldn’t take the place on a bet. Narrow stairs, old furniture, Chinese knickknacks everywhere. Her parents still haunted the place like living ghosts.

She crept up the back stairs to her room, her same room from childhood. It seemed so small and cluttered to her now, with her 90’s rock posters still on the wall and a giant computer monitor on her small wooden desk.

She booted up the computer and poured herself a glass of red wine from a bottle she kept by her bed. Her twin bed.

“Embarrassing,” she said aloud. She thought about the dead girl again. She pictured her in a room full of modern appliances … television, laptop, sexy clothes in the closet. Why should that young girl have so much more than her?
Chapter 5

STILL TIRED FROM LAST NIGHT’S WORK, I sat at my desk in the Hall of Justice and shuffled through stacks of messages. Right there on the top sat a note from Chief Tracchio. My boss.

I carried my coffee straight up to his office. He waved me in as he barked orders into his phone, feet propped up on the desk. I waited out the storm until he turned to me.

“Heard you visited a dead girl last night, Boxer.”

“Yes, sir.” I gave him the relevant details … young girl, no parents located yet. He raised his eyebrows at the flowers.

“Someone drew flowers on her?”

“Could be. The style looks girlish, though. She could have drawn them herself.”

“So there’s no sign of foul play,” he said.

“Yes sir. Not yet. Still…”

He lifted a meaty hand. “Not now, Boxer. You have homicides. Open homicides.” He flicked a newspaper on his desk. “The business-

But look where it got her. Dead, in an alley.

The computer finished booting and she opened her favorite chat program, which allowed her to send messages to friends all over the world. Not that she really had friends all over the world.

She thought of the female cop, so tall and self-assured. Someone she’d like to know better.

Within seconds a chat message appeared from Matt, logged on as medicalman7070. She had “met” him through an Internet dating site and they had traded chats and emails for over a month, but she still didn’t have the guts to meet him in real life. It was a big, scary world out there. In fact it was a big, scary world inside the computer screen, too.

She gulped some wine. The events of the night whirled through her mind as she typed Matt her typical greeting.

Hi stranger.

Nothing strange about me! he responded, and they fell into a familiar rhythm.
man stabbed near Union Square. The actor’s daughter shot at the nightclub. High profile cases. Stop wandering around in the middle of the night, looking for more trouble. Get your beauty sleep, and bring me your A-game on these open cases.”

“And if the girl was killed, sir? Raped and thrown from the roof?”

“We’ll deal with that when we’re sure of the facts.” He turned to look out the window. “You know what I wanted to be growing up, Boxer? A chef. With my own Italian restaurant. Pasta sauce simmering all day, giving orders to a bunch of sous-chefs in white, chopping away. But I didn’t do it. Do you know why?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t heard the “chef” story before.

“My father told me it would be too stressful.” He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “So I ended up on the force. And look at me now. Even my ulcers have ulcers. But I do have my little chefs, chopping away all day, making my life easier. That’s you, Boxer. So do your job and make my life easier. Chop-chop.”

He waved me out.

I headed back to my desk. I flipped through the case files, but my heart stayed with the young girl. The businessman, the actor’s daughter, we had cops crawling over those cases. They would clear.

But who looked out for the nameless girl?

I flipped open the thin file and looked at her picture again. An innocent teenager, all sexed up, her life ending with an eighteen story fall.

My heart went out to her.

I started to dial Claire Washburn, the city’s top medical examiner, who also happened to be my best friend. She would examine the girl’s body today. I had to know if she found anything.

Then I reconsidered and hung up the phone. This one called for a visit.

“HEY HONEY!” DOWN IN THE MORGUE, Claire’s big girth enfolded me in a warm hug. “Been crazy lately, huh?”

“As always. I could use a trip to the spa.”

“You and me both. You get yourself one massage therapist, and I get two.” Claire seemed to get larger with each passing year, but it never stopped her sweet humor from shining through. She got down to business. “Are you here about the dead girl?”

“You read my mind, butterfly.” Claire’s nickname, butterfly, came from the butterfly tattoo she had on her hip. “Got anything?”

“Inconclusive.” She stepped into the morgue where a small figure lay under a plastic sheet. She whipped back the sheet, and the sight of the girl was like a shot glass of ice water in my face. She looked so small and frail, the life departed.

Claire’s voice took on a more businesslike tone as she looked down at the girl. “Well, cause of death is blunt trauma from the impact. I checked for defensive wounds, skin under the nails, and there was nothing. Only
I got the call about the second girl from Jacobi at 9 a.m. the next morning, on my way into the Hall. So I swung my Explorer around and headed over to the scene. My hands gripped the steering wheel so hard it hurt.

I met Jacobi on a quiet, clean street in ritzy Pacific Heights. Fog rose off the bay, which I could see even from the quiet street where the girl lay.

“Nice view,” said Jacobi, staring down at the bay. I knew what he meant. Two deaths, both in sight of the water?

A generic apartment building rose up next to the narrow street, about twelve stories tall.

I turned my attention to the body.

A casual observer would say this girl looked the same as the other … both around 14 years old and both Asian. But they weren’t the same. Girl number 1 had looked like a skinny bird. Girl number 2 was beautiful. Sexy. Her body had already filled out, and her breasts strained against a black silk tank top. Her hair looked professionally done, silky and permed.
Also, tight black miniskirt. No panties again.
“Rape?” I asked.
“Well, she could have made sweet love on the rooftop and then jumped. But…”
I could taste the bile rising in my throat. I knew Claire would back me up this time.
And on the girl’s arm I could see four flowers, drawn in ballpoint pen.

Chapter 8

“This ISN’T THE KIND OF NEIGHBORHOOD that likes side-shows,” said Jacobi as he snapped photos of the girl’s body. “We’ll need to get this cleaned up fast.” He took a close-up of the flowers. Again I thought that it looked as if the girls were drawing them on themselves. Some kind of club?
“Girls falling from rooftops,” I said. “The Chief has to let us run with this now.”

Jacobi nodded. A media van pulled up, and Tracy Chan climbed down from the driver’s side. Cameraman Jack was nowhere in sight.
Seeing her plaintive look, I wandered over.
“Where’s your friend?” I asked.
“I dropped him off at Starbucks. The one on Union Street.”
I chuckled. That was a good eight blocks away. “Not out for news today?”
“To tell you the truth, Inspector, I know there’s a story here. But I thought of the other girl all night long. No family, dying that way.” She
took a deep breath and let it whoosh out. “I’m new to all this, but I just think, parents have to know. People have to know.”

*Uh-oh.* I liked Tracy, but I wasn’t ready to have stories about flower killers or suicide jumpers all over the news. I needed more time.

“You’re right, Tracy. But so far there’s no evidence of a crime. If this is some kind of suicide club…” I mentally cursed myself. Was I trying to write her headline for her? “Look, we don’t want copycat killers or more jumpers. So please sit on this for now. Let me figure out what’s happening, and I promise to give you everything I find. Let’s not make their deaths a spectacle.”

I stopped and held my breath. A veteran newswoman like my good friend Cindy would have laughed in my face about now, but Tracy seemed to feel a deep identification with the girls.

She wanted to do the right thing.

Finally she reached into her purse and held out a business card. Clean and white, covered with tiny lettering … phone numbers, cell phone numbers, emails, the address of the station. I scanned the block of text.

“Any particular way you want me to reach out here?”

Tracy laughed. “Cell phone is fine. I’ll wait a day for you, but I won’t let these girls die unnoticed.”

“Good,” I said, and I meant it.

**Chapter 9**

AS JACOBI PROMISED, we cleaned up the crime scene quickly. I headed back to the Hall and followed up on other cases, but as soon as the second girl’s belongings had been catalogued, I went to Evidence and checked them out. I carried the paper bag containing her clothes and belongings into an empty interrogation room and spread them out.

First the purse. There was all kinds of stuff in there … more makeup, and more expensive makeup, than I ever carried. A flowered pencil case, a red envelope. But no wallet, no ID, nothing. There were some crumpled bills, so it wasn’t a robbery. And inside the red envelope I found a $100 bill. Interesting.

I also found a tiny address book, empty except for a single phone number. It looked like her home phone number, so I jotted it down. She probably gave up on the address book and just used her cell phone.

Which I couldn’t find. Where was it? A teenager without a cell phone?

I dumped out the clothes bag and went through her pockets. No
phone, but in the back pocket of her skirt I found a folded piece of paper. I unfolded it, hoping for a revelation.

It was a revelation all right. A printed-out chat of some kind, like from an instant messenger program. But it was almost all in Chinese, mixed in with some English phrases and words that wouldn’t be used in polite company. The chat was between two people, one named tekmaster and one named girlflower_daisy.

A dozen guesses who girlflower_daisy was.

But last I checked, I couldn’t read Chinese.

I picked up the phone and requested a department translator. Apparently it would be a couple of days before the chat could be translated. I put a rush on it anyway and faxed the chat over.

I tried the number of a couple of Chinese American cops I knew. One sheepishly admitted he had never learned to read Chinese, and the other was on vacation.

I leaned back in my chair. I needed this translation, and I needed discretion, because even a quick read showed that this wasn’t a grocery list.

The news had been all quiet about the deaths. Tracy seemed to have kept her word. Could she be trusted with this?

I didn’t know, but at this point, truthfully, I wanted someone to talk to.

Chapter 10

THE CELL PHONE CHIRPED FROM HER PURSE. Tracy fished it out and looked at the display. She didn’t recognize the number, but pushed the button to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Tracy? It’s Inspector Boxer.”

“Oh. Hi, Inspector. Have you heard anything about the girl?”

Tracy heard her take a breath. “This is off the record for now, OK?”

“Of course. Please, let me help on this.”

“OK. We found the mother of the second girl through a phone number in the girl’s belongings. I’m heading over there now, but it sounds like she came from a normal immigrant family.”

By habit Tracy was jotting down every word, even though no one reads a story titled “Nice Girl Found Dead.”

Lindsay continued. “I don’t think the mother really knows much about the girl’s social life. Anyway, I found something unusual in her belongings. Do you know the significance of a red envelope?”
“Of course,” said Tracy. “Chinese people use it to give money to each other, as gifts. To friends or family.”

“I see. If you don’t mind my asking, are your parents first generation Chinese?”

“They are. My parents came over to San Francisco over 40 years ago. I still speak to them in Mandarin.”

“Mandarin?” Lindsay asked. “That has to do with dialects?”

“Mandarin and Cantonese are almost like two different languages. Within each there are also hundreds of dialects.”

“Got it.” A pause. “Listen, would you like to meet for coffee? I’d love to get your opinion on something. And let’s leave Cameraman Jack out of it.”

Tracy laughed. “Of course. Where would you like to meet?”

“Why don’t you suggest a place? I can meet you there.”

Tracy thought. “How about Chinatown?”

BEFORE MEETING TRACY I had to steel my nerves and go tell the mother of girl number 2 that her daughter had died. The girl lived in a small house in the rambling Richmond district of San Francisco. The father drove a cab, the mother cooked and cleaned all day. A family as traditional as the seasons.

The mother wailed with grief when I told her. I waited, taking deep breaths, letting the initial shock run its course.

When the mother had calmed down a little, I took a look in the girl’s room. A typical teenager’s room, but she shared it with a younger sister. A quick look at her computer gave me nothing; the girl had even cleared out her web history. Maybe to protect her younger sibling.

I took the computer, hoping that our tech guys could find something I had missed. I left mom behind, slumped on the couch, twisting a tear-soaked dishrag in her hands.

Grief is universal.

What I wanted now was justice.
pot of hot tea and two teacups were on the table, along with some puffy fried things that tasted great with a dish of orange sauce.

I started munching. Did every culture on Earth have an addictive fried food on the menu?

“I’ve had these before,” I said. “They’re great, but I never know what to call them.”

“I call them yummy fried things with orange sauce,” Tracy said. She then held up both her hands, empty. “I left my notebook at home, by the way. Totally off the record. I won’t even print how much you like these fried things.”

I laughed, relaxing. “OK, good, because I want to ask you something. Are you comfortable wearing two hats for a while?”

She wrinkled her forehead, actually turning the question over in her mind. “What are the hats?”

I held up one hand. “One hat, Tracy Chan, news reporter. Digs up dirt and publishes stories to take down the bad guys. The other hat, Tracy Chan, junior detective. Uses the utmost discretion, and never releases information until Inspector Boxer gives the OK.”

Tracy nodded and crunched on one of the fried things. “I understand,” she said.

I still wanted to feel her out a bit. “This girl who died is second generation Chinese,” I said. “Just like you, right?”

She nodded. “But I never dressed like she did, believe me. My parents are old school, strict as can be. They want me to skip dating and just marry my childhood sweetheart.”

“I still wanted to feel her out a bit. “This girl who died is second generation Chinese,” I said. “Just like you, right?”

She nodded. “But I never dressed like she did, believe me. My parents are old school, strict as can be. They want me to skip dating and just marry my childhood sweetheart.”

“And will you?” I was warming up to her, wanting to hear her story.

“Well, he’s just not my type,” Tracy said. “Too nice! He’s my childhood friend, like a brother!”

I thought about the men I had dated, and those I had wanted. And how good it was when they were one and the same. “The man I’m seeing now is a good guy, but also tough,” I shared. “And he lives far away,
so I never know when I’ll see him. He appears and vanishes without a moment’s notice.”

I was talking about my current boyfriend, Joe Molinari, whose high-powered job with Homeland Security took him back and forth across the country dealing with constant emergencies. I never knew when I would see him next, and it wore on me sometimes. In fact I hadn’t seen him for over two months now.

“How romantic!” gushed Tracy. “The truth is, I probably will marry my guy some day. But right now I just can’t.”

I poured some more tea from the metal teapot. “Listen, Tracy, what I’m about to show you is completely private for now. I can’t give you a copy. But I could really use your help.”

I took a copy of the girl’s chat and pushed it across to Tracy. Tracy scanned the page. “Is this from the girl?”

“This printout was found in her pocket. Can you give me a quick translation?”

She started to scan the printout, and her eyes widened. “I’m not totally fluent, but I can read most of it. A lot of these words you don’t learn in Chinese class.” Her brow furrowed as she read. “It seems to be a girl talking to a man. Very casual. She’s excited she will see him later.” She trailed off. Her words got slower and further apart. “The man is … giving her orders.” She skimmed the chat, her eyes moving faster and faster.

“Keep going,” I urged her. “Tell me everything, it’s important.”

“He’s telling her what to wear. A sexy black skirt, tight tank top. Things about … there is a slang word for breasts here, how he will breathe on her nipples. Telling her not to wear panties, something about putting his fingers inside of her…” Tracy had flushed deep red now. “She will get wet, he will do things to her.”

“Tracy, is there anything at all about who he is or where he’s coming from?”

She scanned down further. “Only that he said he is leaving work at ten.

And could meet around eleven. He tells her to meet at ‘the usual place,’ but ‘face the bay and don’t turn around.’ He is firm on that. Then he says he will…” She glanced up at me and pushed the paper back. “He tells her all the sexual things he will do to her. From the back.”

I nodded. “That’s it. Work until ten, then an hour drive? That time of night?”

Tracy caught on. “He’s either night manager at a Napa Valley McDonald’s…”

“…or a tech worker down in Silicon Valley. Looks like we’ve got a sexually frustrated valley dude.”

So the killer was online. And the girls were doing exactly what he told them to do, right up until he killed them.

Now how would we find him?
I DIALED UP THE COMPUTER CRIMES DIVISION and spoke to Peter, one of the “nerd cop” technicians over there. I wanted an update on the second girl’s computer.

“We’re busy, Inspector, but I did take a quick spin around the hard drive. All of the chat takes place inside a web site. You go to the web site, log in, and a window pops up. It’s very crude, and because of that it doesn’t leave many traces. Ironic, right?”

“What’s ironic?”

“That sometimes simpler technology is harder to trace. That’s ironic.”

I took a deep breath. “You can’t find anything?”

“Not enough. Not with this. If it were me, I’d go after the company that made the web site. The site is fallenflowers.net. It’s a kind of dating site, if you want to call it that. Looks pretty sleazy, if you ask me.”

Fallen flowers?

“The girl was chatting with a guy named tekmaster. But we don’t know who that is, of course. Heck, I’m a tech master, it could even be me.”
Chapter 14

TRACY HUNG UP AFTER TALKING TO LINDSAY.

Time to stir things up a little.

Lindsay had given her permission to run the story. Something juicy enough to get picked up in Silicon Valley, where this tekmaster guy might have been seen with one of the girls.

_Dying girls, dirty chats._

It would play. But it had to be good.

This would be the most important story of her career.

She hurried toward her cluttered desk in the back corner of the newsroom, head down, hoping no one would distract her. _Don’t bother me, don’t bother me…_

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of white silk, a woman with lustrous hair. Men’s eyes shifted sideways.

_Jennie Kwong_. Up-and-coming star reporter, so beautiful she stopped hearts. Even Tracy’s.

Tracy continued to her desk. Booted up her creaky old PC and started pecking away on copy. She’d be meeting Jack in the editing bay in an hour. She hunched over the screen, intensely focused as she mapped out her approach to the story.

On her way to the vending machines for a snack break, she saw Jennie again, sitting in a canvas chair and staring out the window over the streets below. Tea steamed in a paper cup next to her.

Tracy hesitated, then plunged in. “Everything all right?”

Jennie’s head jerked around, then her face softened. She gave Tracy her famous smile.

“I just have a story on my mind.”

Tracy sat down. “Me, too. But if you’re worried, maybe I should be twice as worried, because I’m in way over my head here.”

“We all are. I’ve met with politicians, wealthy men … they’re all just dogs in a dirty yard.”

_Woah_. Tracy decided to take that as an opening. “Listen, Jennie, I know you’ve heard this before, but I really admire what you do. You’re not afraid to…” her fingers drummed nervously on the table “…take it to the man.”

Jennie laughed and relaxed a little. “I get in trouble for it, believe me.”

“I’m working on this story. Young women pushed off buildings. Or jumping. We don’t know. But they’re young Chinese girls like…” _us_. No, too informal. She bit off the word.

“What kind of girls?” Jennie asked. “Prostitutes?”

“I don’t think so. Dressed sexy, but just normal kids. They’re meeting older men on the Internet, and the worst part is, we can’t find anyone who has seen them with these men. And I wonder, is it OK to kind of, you know, help the story along? We think one of the lovers is from down in Silicon Valley.”

“Can’t tell you what to do.” Jennie took a sip of tea. Something
heavy seemed to be weighing on her. Tracy knew Jennie had a reputation for fighting the shadowy powers that ran Chinatown. “Do you have a photo?”

Tracy pulled a photo out of the file folder that hadn’t left her side since the case began.

Jennie studied the photo. “She’s pretty. Gruesome, though. What’s your angle?”

“Innocent girls found dead, after jumping off buildings. We need to get this story played in prime time. Get people to notice it, so if anyone saw this man with the girl…”

Jennie nodded and bit her lip. She turned to look out the window again. “Well, no one wants to see a story about normal girls. Work the sex angle, the dirty chats. People will pay attention. Then we can get it run on the evening segment, all the way down the coast.”

“Thank you, Jennie.”

Jennie stood up, brushed invisible crumbs off of her skirt, and her face froze back into the doll-like beauty a half million viewers saw every morning. “Be careful, though. People in our community have long memories.”

“Years?”

“Decades. Centuries,” said Jennie, and she hurried off.

Chapter 15

THE NEXT DAY TRACY GOT THE MESSAGE at her news desk and called me with the tip.

A video clerk had recognized the second girl from the photo in her newscast. The girl had come into the store a couple of times with an older man, to rent video games.

I called the store to talk to him before taking a ride over there.

“Hi. Can I speak to John?”

A beefy manager grunted and then called for John. A breathless young man came on the phone. “Lo?”

“John, we got your tip. Did you see the girl in the newscast?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m sure it was her, she had that mole on her chin. Always dressed real sexy.”

“And the man she was with?”

“Older guy, maybe in his forties. Wearing sunglasses, so it was hard to see his face. He wore those khaki pants and button-downs like the tech guys do, but he seemed like kind of a big shot. Real possessive too. Old
“You got a point there.” He went over to the computer, clicked away for a couple of minutes.

“Here’s his info. Should I accidentally leave it onscreen and walk away?”

“That would be great.”

I glanced at the name. A chill went through me. Anyone who knew Silicon Valley knew this name. He was one of the titans, already on his first billion and with plans of world domination.

“Thanks,” I said, and headed out, a little bit shaken. “If he comes back in, call me.”

I hopped in the Explorer and ripped down gorgeous I-280, the tree-covered hills racing by. The video store was an independent store in Redwood City, just another of the sprawling tech towns that ranged up and down the Valley. I pulled up and parked in the back of the lot.

I entered the store, a spacious and clean location in a strip mall. A couple of people browsed the shelves, and I noticed that one of them happened to be Tracy Chan. I hoped she was here as a junior detective and not an up-and-coming investigative reporter.

I saw a young guy in a dark blue polo with a store logo and approached him, flashing my badge. A beefy guy in a matching blue polo sucked a Big Gulp in the back of the store. Beefy guy looked like the manager, and I thought things would go smoother if he wasn’t involved in all this, seeing as how I still didn’t have a warrant.

I greeted the kid and he verified everything … he had seen the guy, he was older, it was definitely the girl. “Do you remember the man’s name?” I asked.

The kid shifted. His eyes went to the manager, who sat in the back like Buddha with a Big Gulp.

“Actually, I totally recognized his name when I did the rental. I was kinda blown away.”

“Can you give me his name?”

“Um, I should probably ask the manager.”

I put my foot up on a little stool, kind of leaning over him. “Look, we have a dead girl here. You seem like a sharp kid. So ask yourself, is your manager going to help or hinder this investigation?”
I left the store, Tracy following close enough to trip on my heels.

“What happened? Did you get the guy’s name?”

I nodded. “Thanks to you and your story.” We stopped. I enjoyed the heat of the Valley sun, so different from often-overcast San Francisco.

“So do I get an honorary junior detective card?”

“Well, budget cutbacks and all…” I glanced again at my notebook, distracted. I still couldn’t believe the name. “Your tip paid off. But I can’t tell you the man’s name right now.”

She looked mortally wounded. “Why not? I helped you find the guy!”

“Tracy, I’m sorry, but this is a serious investigation. I promise, when it’s time to release information, you’re first in line. But give me some time to work this.”

“I don’t understand. Did I break your trust?”

“Not at all. Just…” This is too big. “Give me a little time.” I saw her eyes flicker to the video store. “And don’t go back in there!” I squeezed her arm, then hopped in my Explorer. “Call me later, Tracy. I promise to give you an update.”

I roared off. I felt bad for Tracy, but things had just gotten a lot crazier.

The name on my pad was Jason Vella. He was the chairman and CEO of Silico, one of the most famous new technology companies in the Valley. He was well known for his hard-charging style and take-no-prisoners attitude. He raced cars, played hockey, and made mincemeat of his business rivals.

And yet there he was, trolling the Internet for young girls. Reckless.

I wondered how far he would go for a thrill.
lights swirled, I guess playing to a young, tragically hip workforce. Silico made online game networks that connected 20-somethings on six continents. A fat security guard and a woman in a short skirt manned a curve of brushed metal desk.

The building pulsed with a nervous geek energy—everyone’s thoughts racing, living in their heads, inhabiting virtual worlds.

Time to give them a taste of the real world.

Chapter 17

I MOSTLY KNEW THE WAY TO THE SILICO OFFICES, a pair of distinctive glass towers located in Mountain View. What was the button on Google? “I Feel Lucky”?

Yeah, I was feeling lucky. I decided to cruise over and have a chat with the guy, before he jetted off to some rented European castle. Or before I lost my nerve.

I took a connecting road over to Highway 101, went south through the thick lunchtime traffic, and then took an exit into Mountain View. Winding around a bit brought me to the Silico offices, its two glass towers surrounded by low-slung parking garages.

I had to take a guess which tower held his office, and settled on the taller one. I pulled into a visitor parking space and stepped out into the Valley heat. A geeky white guy with choppy hair and a plastic badge around his neck sized me up out of the corner of his eye but skittered off without saying anything.

I pushed my way into the lobby. Hip-hop music blared and colored
sleek and luxurious, but give me my cluttered Victorian and my sweet border collie any day. The workers, mostly young white men, squinted into large flat-screen monitors. Coke cans and Japanese toys littered the desks.

“Nice place. What is it you do?”

“We create social networks that allow people to play games and communicate across the world.”

“And Vella, has he been here long?”

She turned and looked at me. “He was employee number two. He’s been CEO since the founder stepped down, three years ago. He and the founder were best friends growing up.”

I wondered what made the founder step down. A little pressure from Mr. Vella, perhaps?

We went up in a glass-paneled elevator, leaving the masses behind and ascending to the rarified air of the executive level. The carpet felt thicker and the air more hushed as we stepped into a large reception area. Four offices clustered around a big central room, each office with its own secretary seated at a stylish glass and metal desk. All of the secretaries were young and wore short skirts that showed off slender legs.

Not surprisingly, we angled toward a young Asian secretary with a baby face and very long legs. On a couch nearby sat a woman in a beautiful crisp white suit, clutching a white leather handbag that probably cost more than I made in two months. She looked imperious, her face frozen in ice.

My tour guide addressed the secretary. “Ms. Boxer is here to see…”

But I had already pushed my way through the door.

Chapter 18

“SFPD,” I SAID AS I FLASHED THE BADGE at the receptionist. “I want to talk to Mr. Vella.”

The girl’s face didn’t crack. “Is he expecting you?”

“Send me up, please. This is urgent.”

Her lips clamped shut and she set down her clipboard with a clunk.

I started walking for the doors behind her, which had some kind of electronic locking mechanism, guarding the work spaces beyond. I sized them up as if looking for the best place to put a bullet. “Come on, Miss, this is an emergency.”

She glanced at the security guard, then started moving towards me. As the door buzzed open I noticed the guard’s hand going for the desk phone.

She took me back into the complex, which seemed to be an endless series of elevators, conference rooms, and cubicles ranged around a central tower. The sun winked through glass high above. It was supposed to be
Chapter 19

THE OFFICE WAS LARGE, the desk on the far wall in front of a bank of windows. A few papers were scattered on the desk, and two monitors glowed. How did he see the monitors in the sunlight?

He had a double reflex as I walked in ... glancing quickly towards me at the same moment he pounded a couple of keys. Was he closing documents? Shutting down chat windows?

I sized up Jason Vella. He looked relatively short, with spiky gray hair and a rough, tanned face. He wore a polo shirt and khakis, the classic Silicon Valley executive uniform, and a simple wedding band gleamed on his left hand. His blue eyes looked crystal clear and cold. They looked right at me and narrowed.

“Who are you?” Gruff and direct.

“Mr. Vella, I’m Inspector Boxer, SFPD. I was hoping you could help us out with an investigation.”

I walked toward his desk as if I owned the place, angling off to one side so I could catch a glimpse of his monitors. As I suspected, this agitated him a little.

“How did you get in here? Stay on that side of the desk, Boxer.”

Boxer? I had never been called that by a suspect before.

“I’m SFPD, Mr. Vella. Inspector Boxer. This is a homicide investigation, so good citizens like your office staff tend to cooperate.”

“Homicide?” He punched a number on his phone. “Sally, get legal up here.”

“Do you think you’re a suspect in a homicide, sir?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. But I don’t talk to the police. My lawyers do that for me.”

“I understand.” The strong approach wasn’t working. I smiled and relaxed, sinking into a chair opposite him. “Sorry for the dramatic entrance, sir, but getting through your troops was like storming the beach at Normandy. Actually, I don’t even know that I have a real homicide. I was hoping you could help me out.”

He stared at my face. “So what do you want, Inspector?”

“Well, I was wondering if you could answer a few questions about this girl.”

I slid a picture across the table. He glanced down and then back to his computer. He started tapping and clicking, as if getting back to work.

“I don’t know her. Is she an employee?”

“Do you know the name girflower_daisy?” He stopped and stared at me. “Look at the photo again.” I prodded. “You were seen with that girl several times, by witnesses.”

He looked down and nodded. “So? What did she tell you about me?”

“She didn’t tell me anything. She’s dead.”

His eyes had shifted back to the monitor. His face had taken on a cold, hard cast. “I saw the news today. I couldn’t tell if it was her.”

I pulled out a copy of the translated chat.

“Wear that black skirt. No panties.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know anything about that.”
“Can you speak Chinese?”
“I can speak Chinese, Korean and French, at least at a business level.
What about it?”
“Where did you meet the girl?”
“You’re fishing, Boxer. If you want to talk to a company lawyer, you’d better do that now. Either way, the door is over there.”
He pointed. His hand was rock solid, without a hint of tremble. Had I underestimated him?
I headed for the lobby.

Chapter 20

THE ICE QUEEN IN THE WHITE SUIT HAD LEFT THE LOBBY. I looked again at the secretary, her baby face. She was almost a dead ringer for girl number 2.
I took a stab.
“Excuse me, where did Mrs. Vella go?”
The girl gave me a busy half smile. “Lunch, I think.”
“Sorry to take up her husband’s time. I bet she was angry.”
She snorted. “When isn’t she?”
I saw a well-dressed man with white hair and a perfectly round potbelly angling my direction from the elevator. “Inspector Boxer! I’m Mr. Coleman from the Silico legal department. Would you care to…”
“Nope. Just leaving.”
I brushed past him on my way out.
Sometimes you get lucky. The ice queen’s car was parked outside a coffee shop. She wasn’t in the coffee shop, but she was in the expensive clothing store next door. I approached.

“Excuse me, are you Mrs. Vella?”

“Not for long,” she spat, barely looking at me as she held up a slinky black dress.

This was going to be an easy one.

“What do you want anyway?” she asked.

“Inspector Boxer, SFPD. We’re investigating a case of sexual misconduct.” I was on dangerous ground here. Things like libel, slander, and being busted back to desk jockey. But something told me Mrs. Vella would play along.

“Sexual misconduct? Give me a break. Is one of those little tramps trying to shake him down? Serves him right.”

“Tramps? You mean the girls he meets on the Internet?”

“Yes, those girls. The little whores he meets with.”

“These are … young women? Mrs. Vella, this is important. Are you aware of anything illegal going on with your husband? It would be best if you told us.”

“Look, I’m going to divorce that bastard. Everything you do to him gets me more of his money. Yes, he meets whores on the Internet. His computer is so littered with porn I have to disinfect the keyboard every time I look at it.”

I looked over at Tracy, who blinked in awe.

“Ma’am,” I asked, “would you mind inviting us back to your house?”

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I looked over at Tracy, who blinked in awe.

“Ma’am,” I asked, “would you mind inviting us back to your house?”
"Yes, my husband loves old Chinese things. But not as much as he loves young Chinese things." I could tell she had delivered the line more than once.

It suddenly occurred to her that Tracy was there with us. Her eyes widened. "Are you...?"

"She's an associate of mine," I said quickly. "She's never met Mr. Vella."

"All right, then. I don't have much time. If you want to see his computer, let's go to the office."

She led us back through the house to a massive door. She punched a six-digit code into a keypad set in a brass panel by the door, and it clicked open. "He doesn't know I know the code," she said.

"How'd you get that?" Tracy asked.

"I know everything that goes on in this house," she said, and entered. We followed. "Leave everything how you found it."

The office was dim and paneled in dark cherry. The far wall featured a large wooden desk and several bookshelves loaded with books in even rows. I saw only one computer, but three flat screen monitors.

I scanned the bookshelf, doing a dime-store psychological profile. I saw business books, and classics, some leather bound. Also a row of books on hypnosis, and martial arts. Plus a magazine, turned face out, featuring a cover story about our man himself.

Interesting.

I was itching to get at the computer but Mrs. Vella shook her head. "That thing's password protected, full of work stuff. I think he does his personal surfing on this."

She slid open a narrow drawer at the bottom of a credenza. Inside rested a thin, sleek laptop.

I lifted it out and booted it up.

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Chapter 22

WE HEADED TOWARD THE VELLA MANSION in the wooded hillsides west of Silicon Valley. Tracy rode with me in my Explorer, and the ice queen cruised ahead in her white Mercedes. I wondered if she had a different colored Mercedes for each of her outfits.

Vella’s house was as ornate as his offices were sleek. An immaculate gravel drive led up to a three-story manor nestled among the trees. The air smelled crisp, and groups of men worked at landscaping.

The gravel crunched as we pulled to a stop behind the Mercedes. “It feels like we’re checking into a five-star hotel,” murmured Tracy.

We hopped out. A man in a black jacket appeared from nowhere. “Leave the car, they won’t be long,” the ice queen snapped at him. We followed her through double doors and into a 20-foot tall foyer. Sweeping staircases, the works.

Not to mention large expensive-looking Chinese vases. And glass cases holding curved swords, probably museum quality.

“Does your husband like Chinese antiques?” I asked.
Chapter 23

That night, I pulled up to a spot outside of Susie’s and hurried into the warm, noisy restaurant, my favorite dive in the city. My girls were waiting for me at our back booth, and when I saw them I felt the stresses of the day’s caseload falling away. Margaritas glowed on the table, the music was loud, and Cindy already looked halfway to the moon.

Claire greeted me first with a warm “Hey, girlfriend, where have you been?”

“Following up that dead girl case. The not-a-homicidal-sex-killer case.”

“Sorry, honey, I call them like I see them.” Claire was looking directly at me, concerned but firm. “There was nothing on that first girl…”

I squeezed her thick arm. “I’m not blaming you, butterfly. You did call it like you saw it, and you were right. The first girl was inconclusive. But the second…there’s bad stuff going on there.”

I slammed up and gulped down an icy swallow of margarita.
“Tell us,” said Cindy, leaning into me. “Let it all out.” Cindy Thomas was an ace reporter at the Chronicle, and she had helped me solve a few cases before with her amazing recall and research skills.

“Well,” I said, “you know the story that ran about the girls falling off the rooftops?”

“Yeah, that was juicy,” Cindy said. “Is that your case?”

“Yes. And, off the record, this rich business guy, he’s been seeing at least one of the girls. She’s 14 and he’s almost 50. And from what his wife says, it’s not the first time.”

Claire whistled. “Robbing the cradle. Statutory rape if you can prove it.”

I nodded. “This chat he had with her, it’s really sexual. Don’t wear panties, this is what I’m going to do to you…” I flushed and used a menu to wave a cool breeze in my face. Claire shook her head.

“Sometimes I wish a man would talk to me like that,” murmured Cindy. “But I’m not 14!” she caught herself.

“Exactly. Anyway, I want to get to this guy.”

“You’ll see my full report tomorrow, but it’s like you say,” said Claire. “There was evidence of sex, though not violent enough to classify as definite rape. The DNA doesn’t match any we have on file. And she had some possible defensive wounds.”

“Unless she scratched the old man’s back,” said Cindy. “You think he might have done it? Killed this girl?”

I nodded. A plate of wings appeared on the table as our favorite waitress, Loretta, flashed by in a whirlwind. I nibbled one before diving in. “Maybe she was going to talk, ruin his career. Maybe he’s just a sick guy.”

“We’ve run into a few of those in our line of work,” said Cindy.

“The stuff he looked at. Sex, violence against women, those young girls…” I stopped again. All of us stayed silent a moment, lost in thought.

“We can’t understand men’s minds,” said Claire, finally. “There are things in there closed to us. That’s why every man needs a good woman to keep him honest. Like us.” She lifted her margarita, and we all did the same.

“To us!” we toasted, laughing.

“By the way, I’m cheating on you,” I said to Cindy, as we lowered our drinks.

“What?!”

I told her about Tracy, what she had done to help me out. Cindy shook her head and laughed.

“Sounds like she has even more chutzpah than me! Well, I’ll let it slide this one time. But I don’t want to hear I’m losing my place in our little club!”

“Never!”

Loretta came by again. More margaritas chased by deep belly laughs put the thought of young girls far behind me, for at least a few hours.
It always happened this way.
Just when I got restless, just when it became unbearable, he showed up.
My heart raced as I opened the door.
He came towards me, with no words, just heat. Leaving the door open he kissed me deeply, and the day’s troubles fell away. I pressed my entire body into his, clutching his back.
He picked me up, headed for the bedroom, then changed course to the couch. My breath caught in my throat as he set me down.
“Joe…”
He put his fingers on my lips, then his lips on mine. Tugged my robe open as I arched against him. I saw the door, still hanging open, with the dark hallway beyond. And then I didn’t care.

Later, we lay together on the bed, after another shower for both of us. I traced my fingers across his broad chest as he drifted off to sleep.
“You know, Joe, your instincts never fail.”
He cracked an eye and looked at me. “Meaning…”
“Just when I think I’ll never see you again, just when it gets too hard, you appear. How do you know?”
He smiled. “Intuition. Comes in handy when catching the bad guys. Right place, right time.”
I nestled into his neck, muffling my words.
“Right now.”

Chapter 24

THAT NIGHT I WRAPPED MYSELF in my most fluffy white robe, having just showered some of the margarita off of my brain, when my cell phone started vibrating on the table.
I stared at it for a moment, watching it dance on my glass tabletop, wondering who it could be at this hour. The man of my dreams? I won the lottery?
I checked the caller.
In fact, it was the man of my dreams. I answered.
“Hi, Joe. Is anything wrong?”
“I’m locked out.”
“Of your house?” His house was thousands of miles away, near Washington D.C.
“No. Of your house. I forgot my key.”
And the doorbell rang. I felt a rush of heat go through me, flushing my skin under the robe.
“Sorry. Anyway, this Australian company is reputable. If you send them a warrant, they’ll cough up the contact info for the person or company that owns fallenflowers.” A few more tentative chews. “Hope you find the bastards.”

“Thanks for your help.”

A fax to Australia, and then a wait. Finally the fax machine in the office spit back a sparse, technical document. Jacobi had staked out the fax machine and got to it first.

He pushed his way to my desk, scanning the crinkled paper.

“Interesting,” he said.

“I’m sure it is, Warren. Care to share with the class?”

He grunted. “The company that runs fallenflowers.net is based right here, in good old San Francisco. Near Nob Hill, if I’m not mistaken.”

I was on my feet, grabbing the phone to call Jill with one hand and my jacket with the other.

“Jill will send us a warrant for the property. Let’s take a ride, Warren. I want to see fallenflowers for myself.”
I’m not sure which gives me the bigger rush, holding a gun or holding a warrant. The gun makes the bad guys sit up and pay attention, but it’s the warrant that can get you to the bad guys in the first place. Not run-of-the-mill street scum, but the real bad guys. Murderers, rapists, dirty businessmen and politicians, the evil that hides among us … they all have to open their doors to these notarized pieces of paper.

Fallenflowers.net was registered to an LLC based in Nevada, which was registered to an agent who represented a guy named Steve Callie. Who lived in a painted lady on Sacramento Street, right here in our fair city.

Jacobi and I rushed over there in the Explorer. Child sex rings operate in the shadow world of international commerce, and they were hard to find and shut down. But this site basically amounted to a child sex enabler, and we had the physical address. I loved it.

We screeched up to the painted lady, pounded up the stairs, and did a hard rap on the door. All the while I took in the details … the house looked clean and well taken care of. Newly painted trim, polished brass trappings, exotic shrubs in unusual shapes flanking the stairs. Outside someone had parked a silver BMW at a careless angle, halfway into the driveway.

“What?” came a man’s gruff voice from inside.

“Police, open up.”

“What’s this about?”

“Open up and we’ll tell you.”

I could hear some shuffling and breathing that told me this guy had stopped paying attention to us, and started paying attention to his drugs, cell phone, or whatever else he thought would get him in trouble.

Jacobi tilted into the door, hard. The painted trim splintered.

He shouldered it again, and the door burst inward.

A fat, bearded man in a rumpled white shirt clicked frantically on a Blackberry.

Jacobi solved that problem by tackling the guy. The two rolled and brought down an expensive-looking vase that sat on a table inside the foyer.

I helped Jacobi cuff the fat man. I had already noticed the design of the shattered vase.

It was a lovely Chinese pattern, of lotus stems woven together.
“I’D LIKE MY PHONE BACK.”

The fat man was sitting at a chair in his kitchen, which had clean, yellow walls brushed by stray sunlight that found its way down between the neighboring houses. The look didn’t jibe at all with the rumpled man, with his wrinkled clothes and stained shorts.

But his shirt looked expensive, even if he seemed to treat it like a wearable dishrag. Maybe he was trying to develop some style.

“Your phone is evidence,” said Jacobi, “along with any computer or electronic equipment on the premises.” He jabbed the warrant with a finger. “Your Blackberry, your Xbox, hell, even your microwave, we’ll take it all. But if you make this easy for us you’ll be down at the computer store in no time, ordering up a new machine.”

From the time Jacobi said “computer” the fat man’s eyes had widened. We let it sink in for a little bit. I picked up his Blackberry and clicked around in it.

“Trouble is spelled with an ou,” I said, reading back his own words.

“In trouble, cops here.”

“But with those fat sausage fingers typing can be difficult,” said Jacobi.

The fat man oozed sweat now. “Look, guys, can’t I get a break on this? Everyone does it.”

That raised an eyebrow from Jacobi. “Everyone? Everyone rapes young girls and throws them off rooftops?”

The fat man literally recoiled in his seat, almost dumping himself on the floor. “No! What are you talking about? My god!”

“You know what we’re talking about.” Jacobi leaned into him. “Meeting girls, wrapping your fat fingers around their skinny little arms, giving them the heave-ho.”

The fat man looked shocked. “No way! Look, I’m just a dumb nerd. I worked with … pictures … yeah, that’s true. It’s supposed to be all legal, though. I mean, it’s just porn, everyone does it! I wouldn’t know what to do with a real girl if you threw her on my bed naked.”

The image sickened me. I leaned over and pointed a finger in his face, practically shouting: “What’s bouncing around in that head of yours? Naked on your bed? Is that what would you like to do to those girls, Steve?”

“Steve?” Now he looked genuinely confused. “I’m not Steve. I’m Frank.”

“Frank?” I double-checked the warrant. We wanted Steve Callie. “So who’s Steve?”

The fat man shook his head. “She’s the woman who owns this house. I rent a room from her, down on the bottom floor.”
Fallen Flowers

Chapter 28

STEVE CALLIE WAS A WOMAN. FIGURED.

We left the fat man to collect his thoughts in the kitchen and took a second look around. First I punched up the BlackBerry message again. “In trouble, cops here.” Sent to Callie.

Then we swept the place again, top to bottom. It was a tall, narrow row house, as elegant inside as it appeared outside. The furnishings looked new and tasteful, with touches of luxury everywhere. Fresh flowers in expensive vases on every floor. And there were no pictures of family visible, often a sign of someone with a troubled past.

A bedroom dominated the top floor, complete with a large bed covered by a deep crimson bedspread. The warrant only covered electronics but I couldn’t help taking a peek in the drawers of the cedar dresser. The bottom drawer caught my attention, with some leather toys, silk scarves, and handcuffs.

“No laptops in here,” I pointed out to Jacobi. He looked in the drawer and nodded.

Her perfumes smelled exotic and expensive, and the dresses in her closet looked like butterfly wings of silk.

“I’d like to see a picture of this gal,” Jacobi said.

“Maybe she’ll do us a favor and show up. Save us some trouble.”

The next floor down had a TV room with clean leather couches, and a back office. There we found a laptop resting on a minimalist desk that looked like a sheet of glass on two pieces of aluminum.

“Doesn’t look like this thing could run fallenflowers,” said Jacobi.

“Depends on how busy the site is,” I said. I didn’t really know, but it seemed unlikely.

I booted it up. It needed a password.

“Let’s take it.” I said, and picked it up.

The first floor contained the kitchen. The fat man stared out the window, a vacant expression on his face.

“Do you know the password for this laptop?” I asked.

“Look, no. I just use the guest room. I don’t know anything about Stevie’s life.”

“Does she have men over? An active social life?”

“She’s out a lot. I don’t know.” He was sweating like a wet melon.

We continued on down to the guest room.

If the rest of the apartment was the Ritz Carlton, then the guest room was a seedy fleabag hotel. Pizza boxes lay piled on top of DVDs and computer magazines. Equipment scattered everywhere, PC towers, hard drives, cables. Heavy curtains covered the windows.

“His room?”

I shook my head. “There’s something funny about this.”

A narrow bed sat next to a cheap armoire. Stacks of papers and more pizza boxes were piled on top of the bed. I pulled at the pile, and found a pizza box with a piece half out, sticking to the sheets.

“How old is this pizza?” I asked. “Does he even really live here?”
“Maybe he sleeps with the princess upstairs.”

“Ugh.”

I opened the armoire. A row of three identical white shirts hung there, wrinkled, but I looked at the label.

“Hermes,” said Jacobi, peering in. “That’s expensive, right? How many beers is that worth?”

“These are probably $300 shirts,” I said. The same as the one he wore upstairs.

Under the cheap wooden desk, lights blinked on a large PC case. A monitor on the desk had been turned off, so I pushed the power button and held my breath.

On the computer monitor a small window indicated a flurry of data going in and out. I clicked around and found some kind of design program, with photos of girls all laid out.

I clicked a small icon marked “Media Library.”

More girls appeared. Teenagers mostly, photographed in sexy clothes, some shots looking professional, some like candids the girls had taken themselves.

I switched programs again. Chat windows popped open. Conversations with men, with girls, camera feeds from teenage apartments.

We had found ground zero.

“We gotta get this to computer crimes,” Jacobi said.

“But if we rip the PC out, it will shut the site down. We’ll lose access to these customers.”

Jacobi nodded. “You’re right. We’ll seal this room, get computer crimes to come here.”

We heard the front door open. Our hands went to our guns in unison, and we hurried upstairs to meet the new arrival.

A tall, elegant blonde waited for us, her cheekbones impossibly high. She wore a form-fitting business jacket and skirt, and gleaming red heels.

“Who are you?” she asked, shocked and angry.

“Steve Callie?” I asked in return. She flushed and nodded. “You’re under arrest for child prostitution.”

“And your fat friend too,” added Jacobi.
“CHILD PROSTITUTION, BOXER? REALLY? You blew the lid off of this one?”

Chief Tracchio sized me up from across the desk. He knew I had nothing of the sort yet. “Not exactly, Chief. But we have to keep these two away from their house. If we pull out the computer, the site goes down.”

“And that’s bad? Explain it in plain English, Boxer. I still get the buttons mixed up on the fax machine.”

I nodded patiently. “The computer in the spare room runs the web site. If we pull out the computer, the site will disappear, and the perverts move on to something else, including our friend Vella. If we leave the computer there, we can use it as a trap.”

“A computer as a trap?”

“Exactly. Let the perverts keep coming, track them and get them. Everything they say or do goes straight to us now.”

“And if you cut this Callie or her friend loose, they rush home and pull the site themselves.”

I shrugged. “We can tell them not to, but the connection is right there in their house. And the woman doesn’t seem like the good citizen type.”

Tracchio turned his head and stared out the window. He spoke again without looking. “Seems to me you had some other murders I asked you to focus on.”

“Child prostitution rings, Chief? That’s not important? If we don’t throw water on this thing, the papers will be throwing gasoline.”

I got a tight smile with that one. “OK, Boxer, hold them as long as you can, which will be a day at the most. And put this thing to bed.”

When I went back out to the squad room, a sophisticated-looking Asian man in a very expensive suit was being ushered into the interrogation room. I angled straight over.

“Who is that?” I asked Jacobi.

He grimaced. “Mr. Ling, attorney at law, being retained by Ms. Callie. The fat man is on his own.”

I hurried into the interrogation room and started speaking before Mr. Ling.

“Ms. Callie, would you like to tell us about the web site being run out of your home? I’m sure we can clear this all up if you’re forthcoming.”

“She has nothing to say,” said Mr. Ling in a silky smooth voice. “And I would like you to charge my client or release her.”

“Are you sure your client doesn’t want to clear this up, Mr. Ling? This is child prostitution, trafficking, the works.”

The slick lawyer leaned over and murmured to Callie. She hissed something back. He turned to me and arched an eyebrow. “The web site in question is not illegal in any way. It is used for entertainment purposes, and only allows harmless chatting. My client fully expects that the privacy of her computer will be respected. You are not to touch the computer or any of its contents.”

“So that is her computer? Because we found it in her guest room. Does

Chapter 29
it belong to your client, or to her guest?”
A crack appeared in the smooth facade of the lawyer. He could see the dilemma … if she admitted the computer belonged to the fat man, then he could cut a deal with us. If she admitted it was hers, then she took the fall for anything we found.
Mr. Ling took the easy way out, which was to dodge the question.
“Again, I expect you will keep the contents private and not go on a fishing expedition. Is my client released?”
Reluctantly, I nodded. “Yes. But…” I placed the wrinkled warrant down on the table. “The computers belong to us, along with all of the contents. You rushed too fast to get down here, Mr. Ling. You don’t even know why we were there.”

Chapter 30

LEAVING THE LAWYER BLINKING OWLISHLY, I signaled to Jacobi as I hurried out of the interrogation room.
“We need to keep that site live if we can. So we have to find a reason to re-arrest the woman, before she gets home to pull the plug.”
“Why does that matter, Boxer?”
“We can get the computer, great, but this is the Internet world, Warren. We want to keep the site online, so all the little pervert bees can buzz over into our trap. We’re in a legal gray area here … the warrant covered the computer, but not the house. If Callie gets back, she can pull the plug on the site. That lawyer is slick, he’s not going to let us sit in her house standing guard over a piece of cable.”
“So you want me to drive over and await your call?”
“You got it. If she gets home, though, grab the machine. Don’t let her touch it.”

My cell rang as I went back to my office to collect my thoughts. The
display showed it was a call from Tracy. I thought I owed her a quick update.

“Tracy, how are you?”
“Good, Lindsay. I was wondering, any breaks on the case?”
“Are you asking as a concerned junior detective, or as a journalist?”
She laughed. “Can we take it one at a time? As a reporter… any breaks?”
“Not yet. We’ll notify you. Next.”
“As a concerned junior detective … any breaks?”
I laughed too. I liked her, she was quick.
“Well, we have something. I think we found the source of the web site. But she has a lawyer.”
“Which lawyer?”
“High-powered guy. Mr. Ling. Heard of him?”
Tracy whistled. “He’s the go-to guy in Chinatown. Politicians, Donald Wong’s business interests, they are all covered by Mr. Ling’s firm. The person you have in custody must be very important.” I knew that Donald Wong was a very prominent San Francisco businessman, a real estate tycoon.
“OK, I’ll keep you posted. Remember, that was secret junior detective information, for now.”
“Gotcha.”
I hung up. So the client must be very important?
The thing was, she wasn’t. None of us had ever heard of her.

Chapter 31

I TOOK A LOOK THROUGH THE WINDOW to center myself before entering the fat man’s interrogation room. He was sweating all over his Hermes shirt. His eyes rolled miserably in his head. This guy wasn’t cut out for prison life.

I opened the door and walked in.
“Hungry?” I asked him.
“Why does everyone ask me that? No. I feel ill.”
I sat down. “Listen, Frank, let me ask you straight out. Did you just get caught up in something bigger than you bargained for?”
He shook his head.
“Because, Frank, we don’t have much time. I could stand here and put on a show, bang the table, keep you guessing what we know. But you’re a smart guy, and we don’t have much time. So if you want to help yourself, start talking.”
He sighed, deep and miserable.
I continued. “If we find one single photo of one single girl on your
I parked outside my Blue Victorian, anticipating another night with Joe. But I saw no light in the window. Not even the flicker of a candle.

I walked up the stairs, my steps getting slower, not wanting to face the emptiness. This had happened so many times before. Joe’s job amounted to a string of crises, demanding fast action. He had to be everywhere, yesterday. So whenever the call came, a government limo was only moments behind.

I unlocked the door and absently gave Sweet Martha a scratch on the head as she snuffled around my legs. The white note gleamed on the kitchen table.

My Love,

Sorry. Had to return, an unexpected crisis. I promise, next time really will be the right time.

Your eternal Joe
Next time.
The problem was, I never knew when the next time would come.

Chapter 33

TRACY ALMOST FELL OUT OF HER TAXI, a block short of her house. She threw a twenty at the driver, pulled herself together, and walked the one block. The taxi drove off.

She felt so tired she could barely see. The success of her flower girls story had unexpected side effects. The bosses called her into their office once an hour, demanding follow-ups, new stories, food to feed the media machine.

So she spent hours today jammed in the tiny editing booth. Cutting photos into footage, re-recording voiceover. And now home for a few hours of sleep.

Her life had gone from studying night and day in school to slaving night and day at work. But at least for once she would go to bed without a night’s worth of Internet chat burned onto her eyeballs.

As she neared her front door, a dark car pulled up. A large Chinese man with close-cropped hair stepped out and approached her.

“Tracy Chan.” It was a statement, not a question.
Chapter 34

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up to the sight of early morning light streaming in, and an empty bed. Empty except for my beloved dog.

I had already settled back into the routine of being alone. It happened so easily now, and I wondered if I was still capable of a normal relationship.

At least I had the case. Arresting Callie, digging into those juicy hard drives on her computer.

I rang Jacobi, apparently the most loyal man in my life. He answered, gruff. “Jacobi here.”

“Morning, Warren. Did you get Callie?”

“I left you a message on your cell.” The cell was in the bag, left on the couch all night as I drowned my sorrows in red wine.

“Pretend I didn’t get the message and tell me again.”

“Callie never showed up.” That jolted me awake. “I waited until midnight, and she never showed. I left a uniformed patrolman on it. I’ll check with him again, but something tells me Callie’s not coming back.”
I hung up, my mood falling a few more notches.
We had two dead girls, and a web site ready to trap their killers.
Now the queen bee had abandoned her hive?

Chapter 35

AT THE OFFICE, A PLAIN WHITE COMPUTER sat on my desk with a Post-it note stuck to the front. The note from computer crimes said “Here it is, cloned computer, Callie case.”

I stared at it as if it were a piece of Egyptian stone from 800 B.C.

Jacobi came over and sat on the edge of my desk. “Being a cop ain’t what it used to be.”

“What do I do now, Warren? Computer crimes doesn’t have time to dig into this.”

“Not now. They’re understaffed and this case isn’t high profile enough. Need some help?”

“Yeah.”

He stabbed the On button with one finger. The PC clicked and whirred as it started up.

“There you go. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I looked at the stack of files on my desk. More murders, plus a pink call slip that Tracchio expected an update today on the other cases. I
flipped open the first one, the businessman found stabbed behind a cheap hotel. I took the file and flipped it to Jacobi.

“Can you go out and canvass that hotel again? Let’s get something for the chief. I’m going to take a look at this computer.”

“Sure, Boxer.” He walked off, happy to leave me with the plastic clue box.

I needed someone who cared and who knew Chinese to help me. And I knew where to find her, even if she wasn’t a detective.

I dialed Tracy. She didn’t answer so I left a message, asking her if she would like to help me out. Then I sat down and started clicking.

Chapter 36

TRACY DECIDED NOT TO CALL LINDSAY BACK, or tell her what was going on with Donald Wong. The man in the suit had intimidated her. She had to admit, she felt afraid.

She took a cab downtown, reasoning that if she disappeared at least the cab driver would know. She even showed him the card, printed with the address of an office building downtown.

The office building rose up in the financial district. After the cab dropped her off she walked past a huge fountain, where businessmen and women in gray and blue suits ate salads from plastic containers. A cool breeze blew in from the bay.

She entered the office building and took the elevator to the 23rd floor, two floors shy of the top.

A secretary greeted her as she pushed through heavy glass doors. Discrete lettering on the doors identified this business as the Stolus Group.

“Tracy Chan to see Mr. Wong,” she said to the secretary, feeling like
Donald Wong emerged from his office with a band of sharply dressed businessmen. He shook hands all around, smiled broadly, and waved them out.

Then he turned to his secretary, traded a few words with her and disappeared back into his office without a glance at Tracy.

The secretary turned to her. “Mr. Wong will see you now.”

The office was large, with simple furnishings and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the bay. Donald Wong settled behind a large wooden desk covered with some file folders and expensive-looking knickknacks. A big paperweight on the desk had a flower encased inside.

Wong motioned her to sit down.

“Tracy Chan? I’m Donald Wong.”

“Of course. Very pleased to meet you.” She made a show of looking around. “Very nice office.”

He laughed. “It’s not my office. Or rather, it’s only one of them. This is
the headquarters of a small business group I run, one of many.”

He pushed a button, and metal shades started to close over the windows. The effect was as if a shadow passed over the sun. Tracy blinked in the sudden dimness.

“Business is best done with no distractions,” said Wong. He settled back in his leather chair and sized her up. “So, you do TV news.”

“A few remotes, yes.”

“Do you want to go far in that business?”

“Of course.”

“Then let me put it to you bluntly, Ms. Chan. Stop embarrassing our people.”

Tracy felt her heart racing. “Excuse me?”

Donald Wong smiled and tapped his fingers together. “You heard me clearly. You need to remember, you and I are strangers in this country. On television shows, in clothing advertisements, America looks like the great melting pot. But where I work, in the corridors of power…” He lifted his hands and separated them. “We are one, and they are another. So stick with your kind. Stop embarrassing our people.”

“Our people?”

He slammed his hand on the desk. “You know what I am talking about. Your stories about Internet dating, this scandal with the Chinese girls.”

She stared back at him, feeling anger rising in her chest. “I’m helping our people, Mr. Wong. I’m helping those girls, trying to find their killers. I want to keep them safe.”

“We will find their killers, Ms. Chan. We look out for our own. So stop concerning yourself with it. You’re stirring up the police, worrying the parents, causing unnecessary gossip. It is no good.”

“Well, I’m a journalist, Mr. Wong, and I intend to follow this story until the end.” Tracy stood up. “I have nothing more to say.”

And yet she waited. He seemed to have a magnetic power, keeping her rooted to the spot with his eyes.

Finally she broke the spell and turned, hurrying for the door. As she opened it she took one last look back. Donald Wong continued to stare, tapping his fingers together rhythmically.

Sizing her up.
We ended up at 2 a.m. that night gathered around a table in one of the interrogation rooms. Under the fluorescent lights with the smell of coffee, it wasn’t exactly the Ritz Carlton, but we were both focused. Unraveling the mystery.

“Here is the membership list,” Tracy said, tapping a four-page document. “Or I should say, lists. There are two of them. There are no identifying details here … it’s just made-up user names, like girlflower_daisy. No credit card, nothing. Seems girls could join for free.”

“This,” she tapped another document, which also showed rows of names and numbers, “is a second member list. Also made-up user names, with one extra column. These names sound more like men, so these must be johns. Our friend tekmaster is listed in here.”

“What’s the extra column?”

“Some kind of account number. Not a credit card, not a phone number. It must cross-reference to some other database. So when these guys log in, they get access.”

“To what?”

Tracy clicked and rows of beautiful women appeared on the screen. Not just party-girl teenagers, but elegant, refined young women in expensive clothes.

I whistled. “A prostitution ring inside a dating site? How can we find out who these people are?”

I called Tracy again, and this time she answered.

“Hey, junior detective, how’s everything?”

“All right.” Her voice sounded a bit distant.

“Are you OK, Tracy? Do you need anything?”

A pause, then “No, Lindsay, it’s all right. Nothing I can’t handle. What’s up with you?”

I explained about the computer, the endless chats in Chinese, and how backed up computer crimes was. She agreed to come right over.

Tracy sat at the computer and started clicking around. She seemed to know her way around a computer pretty well. She opened files, examined them, opened other files, cross referenced. The printer cranked out sheet after sheet.

The next day my fishing on the computer seemed fruitless. Nothing directly connected Vella to the girls, and with the Chinese characters I couldn’t read half the chats anyway. Even when we could track where the chats originated, the relevant ones came from Internet cafes far away from Vella’s house. In short, I was getting nowhere.

I called Tracy again, and this time she answered.

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“All right.” Her voice sounded a bit distant.

“Are you OK, Tracy? Do you need anything?”

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Tracy ruffled through stacks and stacks of other papers, piled around the table.

“Chats. These are chats. All anonymous, and many in Chinese. I couldn’t find any kind of payment information on the computer so far. It must be kept somewhere else, linked here with these eight-digit account numbers. So if we want to find out who these people are, we’re going to have to find clues in these chats. Luckily the site saves a history.”

Chapter 38
I stared at the piles. A few of them had pink Post-its on top, with names on them. There were four girlflower names: girlflower_lily, girlflower_daisy, girlflower_orchid, and girlflower_rose.

“So our best clue is the girlflowers. There are two more of them out there.”

I sighed and picked one up. The girlflower chats were almost all in Chinese. “Do you think you can stay awhile and help me with these?”

Chapter 39

THE NEXT NIGHT I WAS DRIVING HOME after more long hours of reviewing computer chats when my Nextel beeped. Jacobi.

“This is Boxer,” I answered. “I’m almost home and ready for a hot bath, so this better be good.”

“Save the girly stuff for later, Inspector,” said Jacobi. “We’ve got a possible suicide here.”

“Possible? Who is it? Another young girl?”

“An older woman. A friend of ours. Steve Callie. She hung herself in a shed up in Marin County.”

I turned the Explorer around, mentally kissing my warm tub, red wine and Sweet Martha good-bye, and pointed straight north to Napa. Marin County, the land of hot tubs, trees and leisure, was just north of San Francisco. I raced across the Golden Gate bridge and into the wooded hills. Jacobi had given me the location … a large house back in the wooded hills near a small tourist town.
The house sat on a large wooded property, as big as Jacobi had implied. I was waved toward the house by a cop holding a coffee, making me think that I wanted a coffee but should have thought of that back in the nearest town, which was about eight miles back.

I drove up a two-hundred-yard driveway. Only two cop cars. Jacobi was there. He had a cup of coffee too, which he pushed into my hand. Warm and fragrant.

“Warren, if you were twenty years younger and forty pounds lighter, I think I could fall in love with you.”

“If you were twenty pounds heavier and a better cook, likewise,” he grunted. “The vic is around back.”

We walked through the house to get there. A large foyer, though nothing approaching Vella’s house. A man, mid-forties, wearing spectacles and plaid pajamas, stood in the kitchen looking shell-shocked. A woman that looked like his wife paced like a tiger, wrapped in a thick white robe.

“What do you think?” I asked Jacobi.

“They seem genuinely clueless. Maybe it’s a random location.”

“Who’s the husband? Must be important.”

“Well, he runs a small antique shop in a nearby town. But she is the founder of a company named DSI, which, if I follow my Silicon Valley technology news, grossed about $1.2 billion last year.”

“Since when do you follow Silicon Valley tech news?”

“I don’t. The cop outside told me. He’s an amateur stockbroker.”

“DSI. Isn’t that a competitor of Silico?”

“Yep. Tekmaster’s number one rival is right there in the kitchen.”

Chapter 40

A SERIES OF SMALL BUILDINGS surrounded the main house. A guest house, a storage building, a large garage. The cops had roped off the storage building with yellow crime scene tape.

I stepped inside. A mossy smell hit my nostrils. Tools and broken wooden objects cut the space at odd angles.

Callie hung dead center, swaying gently, her hair piled high on her head and still in makeup. She wore nothing but a pair of tiny red panties and high heels, her head dangling.

“Her car is half buried in brush outside. One scenario would be, she got drunk in the town, drove up here in the dark, crashed in the bushes, staggered over here and hung herself.”

“You believe that?”

“Like I said, that’s one scenario. Her clothes are scattered around the car. The husband in there thought he heard noise outside at about 10 p.m. but figured it was just deer. You know, nature sounds.”

“What was she doing out in Marin, anyway?”
He shrugged. “We’ll find out.”

I heard a car pull up on the lawn outside. Claire folded herself out of the driver side and walked in my direction.

“Think they mind?” she asked, nodding at the tire tracks on the lawn.

“Least of their worries,” I said. “Looks like a suicide, but she’s almost naked.”

“I heard. And this is the woman from the case with the young girls?”

“Yes, Claire. Thanks for coming.”

I headed into the house with Jacobi while Claire went to work. The husband started to address us but the wife stepped up, cutting him off sharply. “What’s going on out there? Who is that dead woman?”

I put up a hand to calm her down. “I know you’re upset, ma’am, but let us ask the questions first. Do you know that woman?”

“I didn’t see her. My husband found her.”

Jacobi pulled out a polaroid of Callie’s face. “Look closely, sir. Recognize her?”

He shook his head. The wife looked, too. Her face seemed cast in ice as she studied the picture. “I don’t know this woman either. Who is she?”

Couldn’t blame her for asking, but I had a few more things I wanted to know. “Ma’am, do you know Jason Vella?”

“We’ve met. As I’m sure you know, we’re business rivals.”

“Bitter rivals?”

“He’s a no-holds-barred fighter. He has no love for me. In fact he would do anything to destroy my company.” Her eyes suddenly widened. “Why, is he involved in this?”

“We’re just trying to figure out the big picture here.”

“She was a suicide, wasn’t she? Is this murder?”

“We’re just checking all the angles. Don’t get too excited.” Asking sensitive questions while keeping key information under wraps is one of those things that makes a cop’s life so enjoyable.

The woman glared at me. “No, a dead woman just turned up naked in my storage shed in the middle of the night. I won’t get excited. Not at all.”
was keeping her close.”

“I’m thinking, she knows some important fallenflowers clients, like Vella. The type of guys you don’t mess with. So they send in Mr. Ling to keep her nearby, waiting for this to blow over. But she’s getting hinkey. So they decide, it’s safer to erase the problem.” Jacobi brushed his palms together.

I nodded. “Or, she just looks down the road and sees a lonely life in prison or on the run. Gets drunk and does herself in. Any connection between her and the house husband?”

“None yet. We’re checking.”

“Try to get permission to check his computer. And remember the victims. Anything you can find on the girlflowers … lily, daisy, rose and orchid.”

“Done, Inspector.” Jacobi turned and headed out.

I leaned back and thought again of the dead woman, hanging naked in the shed. Her high heels still polished to a shine.

**Chapter 41**

WITH THE THIRD DEAD BODY related to our Internet site, Tracchio finally got off my back. I was flipping through stacks of chats at my desk when Jacobi wandered over.

“We canvassed the town near the dead woman,” he said.

That got my attention. “What did you find?”

“She was apparently staying in a hotel in that town. Kept to herself all day. Seemed nervous, walked around wearing hats and giant sunglasses, all that. Then at night she would go out and hit the local bars. Met a few men for sex. She seemed…” he opened his notebook, “‘scared, restless and horny.’ That’s according to the 20-year-old rock star wannabe working as a desk clerk at the hotel. She would come back very late at night, plastered.”

“How late?”

“So late it was early. Morning, most days.”

“So she was in hiding but didn’t handle the isolation well. Got drunk, depressed, killed herself. But why didn’t she run farther? Maybe someone
Chapter 42

THE KILLER SET IT ALL UP PERFECTLY. Nothing else would do.

The killer always made sure things were just so. This was no different. And when you understood the human mind, anything was possible. The killer had a knack for it. Old people, young people, powerful people … it made no difference.

The chat continued. The killer was in an Internet cafe in a far-flung neighborhood. No one could trace it.

--Do you miss your friends? the killer asked.

--Yeah. I’m scared.

--Don’t be scared. Never be scared. They were just stupid.

A long pause as the girl weighed her words.

--What if it’s u?

The killer laughed out loud.

--A killer? After what we’ve done together? What we shared? I’m a lover, not a killer. Your lover.

--Yeahhh. I know.

A pause. The killer imagined her, fiddling at her keyboard, waiting for the next words. But she would have to ask. It would have to be her.

--Can u meet? she finally asked.

--Yes, rose. I can.

And then,

--I want to meet at your house. I want to come to your window. I want to hold you in your own room, in your own bed.

--Nooooo. The response was, typically, girlish and overly dramatic. Predictable. With this girl, the house she lived in, the suggestion would be absolutely forbidden. Taboo, and therefore irresistible.

The killer knew it was the secret fantasy of this girl, to sneak someone into her house, into her tiny bed, to writhe and moan under her pink and white sheets. With her father in the next room.

Tonight it would happen. But not the way she planned it. This was the killer’s fantasy, not hers.
i sipped, not bothering to make notes. i could imagine the brutal scene clearly.

“The rape kit showed sexual activity. Unprotected … she had semen inside her. Two samples, could have happened within the last 72 hours. No sign of bruising or rape trauma. No match to anything we’ve got on file.”

“That jibes with what we’ve learned about her. She got drunk, hit the town.”

Claire nodded and scanned a printout. “Her blood alcohol level was .20.”

I whistled. “The car crashed in the bushes. Any bruising from the seatbelt?”

Claire shook her head. “Not wearing one.”

“So for all we know she wasn’t driving.”

“She had some skin under her fingernails. It could have been defensive. Could also have been rough sex. I took samples, so if we get some DNA….” Claire shrugged. Then she reached over and squeezed my hand.

“You all right?”

I nodded. “It’s just, all these women. They all could have been doing … something different. Instead of being the sexual playthings of men. It bothers me that they might have killed themselves. It’s almost worse than murder in a way.”

Claire nodded. “I know what you mean. Murder, their life is taken from them. They can go down fighting, at least. But suicide … it’s like they just got used up. The men took their spirits, and so they finished their bodies on their own.”

THE NEXT DAY I CALLED CLAIRE for her update. She asked me to come on down and share a Diet Coke.

I went downstairs, eager to share some time enjoying the company of my friend. She already had two Cokes popped, but we went in to look at the body first.

“She kept herself together,” said Claire. “What I might call a ‘cougar’ if I were a young male with no social graces.”

I looked. Callie appeared older now, the wrinkles and slack skin showing with her makeup gone. Her hair was long and beautiful, her face made of imperious angles. I could see stretch marks from a pregnancy and wondered how long ago it had been.

“Come on,” said Claire. “Coke’s waiting.”

She settled back into her desk chair with a sigh and sipped. I waited.

“She died from the hanging,” said Claire. “It happened slow, unfortunately … a strangulation rather than a clean break. Lots of lacerations. She probably thrashed around.”
“THERE IT IS.”

I circled a line on one of the many pages of chat that Tracy and I had printed. It referred to a picture that daisy had sent to tekmaster.

“Can we get this photo?” I asked Tracy.

“Ummm,” she hesitated. “Not here. We’d have to use the main site.”

“It’s still online,” I said. “Let’s log on.”

Tracy typed fallenflowers.net into the computer and hit enter. The home page appeared again, with its rows of girls. Tracy entered girlflower_daisy and the password.

The page opened again.

“Logged on as a dead girl,” murmured Tracy.

She opened the chat window and went to the girl’s history. “I hope the site saved the photo. Not all programs would do it.” She clicked back to the date in question and scrolled down the long chat. Chinese characters flew past.

She found the link there to the photo, which daisy had sent inside the chat. In English daisy had written, “Look at me and my friends, would u like a 4sum? ;)”

Tracy clicked the link. The photo opened on screen. I leaned in closer, and noticed my breath had stopped.

It was a photo of four young girls, all Asian, posed at a party in some apartment. It was night, and the light of the flash reflected in the dark glass window behind them.

The four girls wore teenage party clothes. Denim miniskirts and jeans, tight tank tops, plastic jewelry, none of it expensive looking. They were flashing thumbs up and peace signs, big smiles on their faces.

“This is daisy and lily,” said Tracy, using her mouse to trace circles around the two girls we had already found. “So this must be rose and orchid.”

“Might be,” I said. “So far it’s just four friends. But this is the first time we’ve linked lily and tekmaster.”

“And look,” said Tracy. She pointed to the middle of the photo.

Each girl had four flowers drawn in ballpoint pen on their young, smooth forearms.

I checked my watch. It was already way after dinner.

“Tomorrow morning I’m taking this photo to daisy’s mom. It’s time we found the other girlflowers.”
Chapter 45

THAT NIGHT THE KILLER TAPPED THE WINDOW. After a moment, the girl appeared.

The killer wore a heavy coat, and waited back in the shadows. The girl couldn't know, until it was too late. The girl leaned out, extending her hand down.

“Come on,” she whispered. The killer could see her long hair, the silky nightgown she wore.

The killer grabbed her arm and pulled, hard. She tumbled to the ground and turned over, opening her small mouth to scream. The killer swung, lightning fast, striking her twice across the forehead with a metal pipe.

The girl never even had time to cry out.

The killer stared, breathing heavily. The nightgown had ridden up, exposing her legs. She wore panties, though she had been instructed not to.

The killer leaned down and tore them off. Time to get to work.

Chapter 46

EARLY THE NEXT DAY I drove straight over to talk to daisy's mom, a printout of the girls' photo in hand.

I knocked. Daisy's mom opened the door, and I could see a white cloth hanging in the doorway as a sign of mourning. Incense burned from somewhere in the house. Grief had bled the life from the woman's face.

I greeted her and offered my sympathies again, then showed her the photo. I asked if she knew any of the other girls.

The woman shook her head, and slowly closed the door, locking herself back in with her pain.

A quick call back to the Hall got me the address of the third girl, Mai
Lei Leung. I prayed she was still alive.

As I waited at a stop light I looked again at the photo. Mai Lei was a round-faced, slightly sullen girl, squeezed in back of the other three. Her hips filled out a denim miniskirt, and she wore a low-cut blouse, showing off the round breasts that were probably her best asset.

I stopped at her building, a tall, unremarkable apartment complex. I could see laundry hanging on the checkerboard of balconies above me, probably twelve apartments on every floor.

I entered the lobby as two boys pushed their way out, one Asian, one white. They didn’t even glance at me as I entered the building.

I checked the directory by the call box. The girl, Mai Lei/orchid, lived on the fourteenth floor.

I buzzed the apartment. A young boy answered.

“Hello?”

“SFPD. I need to talk to your mother. Could you buzz me up?” I held my badge toward the camera, as if the camera even worked.

I could hear chattering back and forth in Chinese. Then a woman’s voice came on, harsh and staccato.

“Go away please. We don’t need police.”

“Ma’am, this is a homicide investigation. Your daughter might be in danger. Please let me up.”

Silence.

I noticed that the door to the inner lobby hung open. I pushed through it and went for the elevator.

Chapter 47

FACE TO FACE, orchid’s mother got less assertive. She stared at me suspiciously through a half open door, then finally let me in.

The apartment appeared small and cluttered, but clean. Tiny kitchen, a living room with shaded windows, a television. An old stuffed chair held piles of clothes. Gold and red knickknacks decorated a cheap bookshelf, including a plastic good fortune cat with one paw lifted. Orchid was still alive, so I figured the cat must be doing its job.

A young Chinese boy with a moon face stared at me. I smiled and after a moment he gave me a giant smile back, then ran off. Mom chattered something at him.

“Mrs. Leung, is this your daughter?”

I showed her the photo. The four girls. She nodded.

“Can I speak to her? It’s very important.”

The woman nodded again, and called out “Mai Lei!” The girl I knew as orchid came from the back room. She wore overalls and a scoop-neck T-shirt and held a tiny gray dog, some kind of little Chihuahua, that had
silver bows tied in its ear fur. The girl seemed shy and sweet, not like the more outgoing girl in the photo.

I softened my voice. “Mai Lei, I’m Inspector Boxer. Can I speak to you about your friends?” I extended my hand for a handshake, and she extended hers.

Drawn on her arm were four flowers in ballpoint pen.

I sat with orchid on the couch, trying to keep the conversation out of mom’s earshot. Mom had retreated into the kitchen, banging around as she cooked.

“Mai Lei, did you know that a couple of your friends have died recently?”

She nodded. Her hand moved faster on the little dog’s ears.

“You chatted with your friend daisy online, didn’t you? Did you know she was meeting men on the Internet?”

She looked right at me. “Yes, I knew that. We all were.”

I leaned back a bit. I hadn’t expected the directness. “You were meeting boys your own age? Or older men?”

“Men and boys. Some. A few.”

“Do you know who daisy was meeting that night? Do you know if she was seeing an older man?”

Orchid bit her lip and then nodded. “She was seeing a man, I think. Two men. A white guy, and a Chinese guy. I don’t know for sure.” She got agitated. “We started on this site as a joke. The four flowers. We posted pictures and said our age was 27 or 32. Men would chat with us, and we would joke with them. Then they started sending us gifts. I got kind of scared.”

“I understand. Did you meet any of the same men that daisy or lily met?”

She shook her head. “No! I chatted with them. I was just joking around, but daisy started to get serious. She is so confident and beautiful.

She wanted to meet some of the guys. She said they made her feel sexy, they offered her gifts. She didn’t think anyone could hurt her.”

“So she was seeing two men. Was lily also seeing those men?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. And maybe some others. My mom doesn’t let me use Internet much. I didn’t see all the chats.”

I jotted some notes and then looked at her. “Is there anything you can tell us about these men that daisy was seeing, Mai Lei? It’s very important.”

She shook her head. She wouldn’t look me in the eyes anymore. I could see real shame building in her. I showed her the photo again, and pointed to the last girl.

“What about this girl, Mai Lei. Who is that?”

“That’s Lara.”

Now orchid started crying. I looked around for a tissue, which is not standard-issue cop gear.

“What’s wrong? Tell me about Lara. Is she called rose?”

Orchid nodded. Then she whispered, “Her father found out what we were doing. He found out about meeting the men, chatting online. All the girls do this, but he got so angry. He beat her, I think. Smashed her computer. She called and then never called back. She hasn’t been to school.”

My heart had started racing. “Where does your friend live?”

“On Balboa street. A little yellow house, near the park.”
I RACED THROUGH THE STREETS in my Explorer as if a homicide was imminent, which for all I knew it was.

I pulled up to the house, which belonged to the Cheng family. It seemed quiet. Two-story house, nondescript, clean lawn. Everything from the bushes outside to the window decorations looked sparse and almost military.

I weighed my options for a long minute. On the one hand, I was just knocking on a door to follow up a lead. On the other hand, three people had already died.

I radioed Jacobi. Told him my location and what I was about to do.
“Wait for me, Boxer. Don’t go in alone.”
“I’m OK, Warren. But if you’re available, be on standby in case Dad gets unpleasant.”
“I’m available, Boxer. Wait for me.”

I parked and walked up to the house without waiting. As soon as I lifted my hand to knock, the door flew open. My hand jerked to my pistol by reflex.

“What do you want?” It was a short Chinese man in a clean yellow polo shirt. He looked well muscled and angry.
“SFPD, sir. Can I come in for a moment?”
“No. You cannot.”

Win some, lose some. But I wasn’t leaving without seeing the girl.
“I’m Inspector Boxer, sir, and I’m investigating a homicide involving your daughter. Can I speak to her?”

Usually the words homicide and daughter in the same sentence would get a concerned father to at least ask a question or two, but not this guy.
“No,” he said.

He moved to slam the door.

Now, citizens have rights, but I would be damned if this guy was going to slam a door in my face.

I moved forward, and the door smacked into my shoulder. Adrenaline rushed through my body and I lunged through the door, tackling the guy. He twisted away. He felt like a solid wall of muscle.

“Stop resisting! Hands behind your back! Now!”

We had an audience. A woman was screaming, and another girl too, around seven years old.

He fought me, hard.

“Sir, I am a police officer! Stop resisting!”

He threw me off. I rolled into some kind of small table. The guy was on his feet and breathing heavily, veins standing out on his neck and arms.

I saw that he wasn’t stupid enough to grab a weapon and come at me.

I got to my feet. Hand on my weapon.

“Turn around, put your hands on the wall right now. Now!”

The guy was breathing like a racehorse. He pointed at me. “You. You people. Your world. You took my daughter from me. You made her into jianhuo,” he said, using a Chinese word I didn’t know but probably could guess.
“Down on your knees, sir. I don’t want to hurt you. But get down or you will get hurt.”

He choked back rage. A long moment passed.

He sank down to his knees and spread his arms out.

Jacobi took that moment to make his appearance, bursting through the front door.

“What did I miss, Boxer?”

I moved in to cuff Mr. Cheng. We were about to find out.

Chapter 49

WE ESCORTED MR. CHENG out to the car. His body felt tense, his muscles like cables, but his face now flushed with shame as we took him out to one of the patrol cars that had arrived.

Jacobi pushed him into the car while I went back to the house to talk to the family. They looked shocked, grief-stricken, and frightened.

I took inventory of the family. There was the wife, and a tough looking old grandmother staring daggers at me, a sullen boy around 17 years old, and the younger daughter around seven.

Where was Rose?

“Mrs. Cheng, you have a 14-year-old daughter. Where is she?”

The woman stared at me as if stricken.

“Is she in school today? What school does she go to?”

“She ran away,” spit the son. I turned my attention to him.

“Ran away? How do you know?”

“She ran off with some man. We haven’t seen her in two days.”

“You’re sure? Who is this man? Do you have his name?”
The boy glared at me. He looked thin, but had his father’s pent-up rage. I saw bruises on his arm. I repeated my question. “How do you know she ran away? Did she call?”

“She’s a whore,” spat the boy. “She ran away with a man. We’re done with her.”

We were getting nowhere. The mother hadn’t said a word yet, and I thought about how to get her in private, where she might talk more freely.

When Jacobi and I had swept the house we had looked into each room, clearing it before moving on to the next. I remembered a room that had to be rose’s. I motioned to the mother.

“Come with me, please, Mrs. Cheng.”

She followed obediently to the girl’s room, but said nothing. The boy followed too.

The girl’s room amounted to a pink shoebox … small and clean, covered with a riot of cute teenage girl stuff. She had covered a tiny wooden desk with stickers, and an old laptop sat there, the screen cracked in half. Her bed was small and neatly made, clean sheets, turned down. Part of the father’s precision life? Or was rose naturally tidy?

A small window by the desk looked out into a narrow alley. Not much of a view.

“Mrs. Cheng, are you waiting for your daughter to come back? Is she coming back?”

Mrs. Cheng said nothing, but had started to cry. I didn’t know if they were tears of hope or grief.

Chapter 50

MR. CHENG SAT IN INTERROGATION 1, handcuffed to the table. I looked through the small glass window.

“If his blood pressure goes any higher, he’ll burst,” I said.

“Yeah, he’s a hothead,” said Jacobi. “This might be too easy.”

We stepped into the room.

The father said nothing, just shifted his glance to the surface of the table, studying the stains and coffee cup rings there.

“You’re daughter is missing, Mr. Cheng,” I said. “Do you know anything about that?”

He continued staring.

“Do you need a translator? How is your English?”

He looked up. “My English is perfect. I don’t need translator.”

I slipped into a seat across from him, meeting him at eye level.

“We’re worried about your daughter, Mr. Cheng, and we know you are, too. We need to find her. Her life might be in danger. Do you know where she is?”
“I don’t care.”
“When did you see her last?”
“Two days ago. She ran away.”
I glanced at Jacobi. “Do you know why?”
He took a deep shuddering breath. “She ran away with a man. An older white man. Met on computer.”
“Mr. Cheng, we think we know the man in question. We’ve been to his house. We didn’t see your daughter. We also have her computer files. We can look back and find out who she talked to, what they said. We can find out if she really did run away with him.”
“So what? Go and get her. Leave us alone.”
“Did you kill your daughter, Mr. Cheng? Is that what happened?”
His head jerked up and he flew into a rage. “Kill my daughter? You stupid cops, cào nǐ zǐzōng shìbā dài…” and he dissolved into a series of very nasty-sounding Chinese words that I didn’t understand. Jacobi blinked, not sure if the insults were bad enough to warrant bouncing Mr. Cheng off of the walls a little.
I tapped my fingers on the table and waited for the tirade to stop.

The interrogation continued, but Mr. Cheng didn’t break. He led us in circles, saying no more than that his daughter was gone, had run off with a man, he didn’t know anything, and she was dead to him.

After hours of this we had to cut him loose. I sat at my desk, staring at the ceiling tiles overhead. I turned the case over in my mind.


Tekmaster gave me the creeps. He was capable of anything, but would he really kill? His wife could even have killed one of the girls in a jealous rage, but I didn’t see her tracking down Callie and killing her. Unless Callie really was a suicide.

Mr. Cheng was a control freak and a natural for killing rose. Could he have gone after the other girls too?

Family rage was mixing with lust and power, and I couldn’t put the pieces together. I needed to talk it through, to get a fresh perspective.
we went over to the table. Cindy and Claire greeted me warmly, while casting questioning glances at Tracy.

"Cindy, Jill, this is Tracy. She's a reporter from the local station."

"Uh-oh," said Cindy. "My competition."

"She's also a junior detective and new friend of mine, so don't worry."

"I left my note pad at home." said Tracy, and Claire chuckled.

"Sit down, and welcome to our world."

Icy margaritas were poured all around, and I finally loosened up. Tracy looked like a scared rabbit, but was slowly unwinding under Claire's warm, watchful gaze.

"So what happened with the dead girls?" asked Cindy. "Any closer to the killer?"

I told her about the run-in with Mr. Cheng, and how Rose had vanished. Tracy whistled, a terrible whistle actually, but it was the thought that counts.

"Chinese families are mostly conservative and hard working," she said. "You know that. My grandmother worked 12 hours a day every day of the week in her sixties. It's not uncommon to enforce the father's word with a good beating."

I knew that feeling. It certainly wasn't unique to Chinese culture.

"But this girl must have been very disrespectful," Tracy said.

Claire gave a little harumph. "Still, honey, there's nothing Chinese about a father freaking out about his little girl's sexuality. That could be anyone."

I sipped my margarita. It created a pleasant, warm feeling inside of me. I remembered the controlling father, and the girl's room with its tiny bed, waiting for her to slide in. What time of day did the father say she had disappeared?

I thought about the sheets, clean and turned down.

"You know, I'm going to take a ride back over there tomorrow,"

Chapter 51

THAT NIGHT, SUSIE'S WAS HOPPING, full of people who, from their smiles and boisterous laughter, didn't have murder and molestation on their minds.

I hoped to be one of them, for a couple of hours at least.

When I arrived, Claire was already there, and Cindy. Tracy was sitting alone at a seat at the bar, looking a little uncomfortable. I had invited her along, but naturally she hadn't met my other two friends.

I angled over to her and gave her a big hug. She looked relieved to see me.

"Lindsay! Did you solve the case? Any suspects?"

I laughed. "Get over here and meet my friends. We'll talk about all that later. What are you drinking?"

"Ice water," she said, and wrinkled her nose at it. "Kind of boring, right?"

"Leave it there. We've got a pitcher of margaritas with your name on it."

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Waiting for the girl, and someone else?

"You know, I'm going to take a ride back over there tomorrow,"

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Waiting for the girl, and someone else?

"You know, I'm going to take a ride back over there tomorrow,"
Chapter 52

THE HOUSE LOOKED EXACTLY AS BEFORE … sparse and empty. No sign of life, though there was a car I hadn’t seen before in the driveway. A souped-up Honda with glowing lights around the license plate, probably the kid’s.

What was I doing here? If Mr. Cheng saw me, it could cause a real scene.

I walked around back. Opened the trash cans. Nothing, except trash. The girl’s window looked out on this alley. Across a chain link fence I could see the back of another house. From this angle, no one on the street could see what went on here.

Too simple.

But it wasn’t.

Looking down at a pile of black garbage bags behind the other house, I could just see a hand poking out, pale with pink nail polish.

A body.

A young body.
I hopped the fence and hurried over, moving the bags away. And there they were, the flowers on her forearm.

Chapter 53

NO CHANCES WITH MR. CHENG THIS TIME. We brought in two SWAT guys to go in strong and wrestle him down. He didn't go easy, but with 460 pounds of gear-wearing armor-clad SWAT on you, you don't have a choice.

“Walk him back,” I said, after Mr. Cheng was secured. We took him back to the alley. The trash bags had been moved, the body exposed. The girl looked so frail in her thin, silky nightgown. Her face was caked with make-up, trying so hard to look like an adult.

*Rose.*

Mr. Cheng started gasping, then shouting in Chinese. From behind me I heard the screams of his wife.

The sound of pure grief.

We dragged Mr. Cheng to the car and got him secured. One of the SWAT guys took his helmet off, revealing a clean-cut, tan face and short spiky hair. Jun, a decorated Chinese member of the force.

“What did he shout?” I asked him.
I SAT IN A SMALL CAFE NEAR WORK, sipping coffee and reading the paper. I had just sent another batch of papers over to the District Attorney’s office.

Mr. Cheng’s DNA matched the semen found in daisy. In addition, there were signs of a sexual assault on rose. The bastard would be indicted for the murder of his daughter, and the rape and murder of daisy. Lily we couldn’t be sure about. Maybe she really had killed herself, and somehow that set off the whole chain of events.

I wondered if all the cases would close. Mr. Cheng had a lot of frustration. Even the most routine check turned up problems … he had touched a couple of girls at the restaurant he managed, and there had been a couple of calls to his house for disturbance and domestic violence.

Sex, frustration, anger, violence.

But I kept seeing Vella, that cocky bastard, getting off scott free. Meeting 14-year-olds on the Internet, dating them. Getting them killed, maybe.
I thought of Vella’s wicked wife. Maybe she would finish him off one day. Or take the guy for everything he was worth.

Then I opened the paper, and remembered there were two kinds of justice.

The Metro section had picked up a story based on Tracy’s evening broadcast. “Sex Web Targets Chinatown Girls, Three Dead,” the headline said, along with a collage of photos … some of the crime scenes, some happier shots of the fresh-faced girls.

I had seen the broadcast last night, and it was being picked up nationwide. Tracy had gone a bit heavy-handed, but it did the job. A “high level technology executive” was mentioned, along with hints that Chinatown business interests were behind the web site. The implication that the young, innocent girls were being unwittingly used as a gateway to a more sinister operation. One we hadn’t even begun to penetrate.

Chinatown businessmen, packaging their own and auctioning them off on the Internet.

I tapped the photo of the young rose, staring at it for so long I began to see tiny black specks in the newsprint. She deserved better. They all did.

As for Tracy, she was young, but she would polish her delivery over time. I think we had a reporter on our hands.

“SOMEONE HERE TO SEE YOU.” Jacobi’s eyebrows were twitching like epileptic caterpillars. I let out a burst of laughter.

“What?” he asked.

“What’s the matter? You look a little off your game.”

He started to speak when a tiny leather whirlwind blew in behind him. It was Mrs. Vella, dressed in a black leather suit immaculately cut, with heels so high they looked like stepladders.

“I want to talk to you,” she hissed at me.

“OK.” I looked around for an empty office. “Let’s go in here. Close the door if you like.”

She closed the door and turned on me. “What happened with my husband?”

“What about your husband?”

“I thought we had an understanding. I gave you information about him, let you see his personal computer files. He’s out there having sex with young girls. What are you going to do about it?”
I took a deep breath and steadied myself. Hell hath no fury…

“It appeared from the computer files you showed me that your husband might be involved with young women, Mrs. Vella, but there is no definite evidence of it. At least not enough to bring charges. But I have forwarded the case to the D.A.’s office and they will definitely take a look, after the current bigger case is settled. We certainly take child sex crimes very seriously.”

“I thought that the girl, one of the girls, was raped. Before she died. You mean you’re going to just write that off?”

“We have a suspect in custody, Mrs. Vella. His DNA was a match.”

“What?” She stared at me, shocked. Her small chest heaved under her Italian suit jacket. “A suspect? Someone else raped and killed the girl my husband was seeing?”

I leaned in to her. Something was wrong here. “Mrs. Vella, what are you saying? What do you know about all this?”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe how low the bastard could sink.”

“Do you think he’s a rapist, Mrs. Vella? A killer?”

She stared at me almost in pity, and finally shook her head. “Idiots. You had him on a silver platter.”

She stormed out of the office.

CASE CLOSED. Back to the real world. Or the virtual world.

That night, Tracy booted up the computer and swallowed more red wine. Her mind whirled, not just from the wine, but from the bigness of everything. The Internet, the city around her, the millions of girls and men.

All the things she never had.

She flipped through the photos of daisy’s room for the hundredth time. She looked at the rock band posters, the sexy clothes daisy had bought with the money her mother gave her. Tracy had seen daisy, two nights before her death. Dancing for the other girls on her web cam. Stripping off her tank top, displaying her firm flesh for her girlfriends, for men, for anyone who cared to take a look.

Sick.

And yet, she envied the girls. Envied them their freedom, that tiny window of freedom they had when they were young and could have whatever they wanted.
Tracy had missed her shot. She had spent those same years hunched over books in the same dim room she lived in now.

Those girls who died young, died lucky. She knew that, even if they didn’t.

Her computer played a short tune. Tracy looked and saw that orchid had actually come online.

That took some guts. What’s she looking for?

Tracy hesitated, then she typed in `girflower_daisy` and the password.

There were no girlflowers left to imitate, and tekmaster had closed his account.

She would have to send these messages … as a dead girl.

---

MY NEXTEL BEEPED and I answered it, still drying my hair. “Boxer.”

“Hey, Inspector. This is Peter.”

The computer crimes guy. I heard him crunching food again. An apple?

“Yes, Peter. You working late?”

“Yeah, nothing on the tube, sick of surfing the net. Thought I’d check out that site of yours, fish around a little. We’re looking for saved activity on girflower_orchid, and daisy and rose, right?”

“And lily. She was the first. But I think that case closed today.”

“Well, I thought you might like to know, orchid is online. Like, right now.”

Right now?

“Can you read what she’s saying?”

“Actually, yes. There’s a whole administrator thing programmed into the site. I can watch any chats as they happen, delete chats…”

Delete chats? “Peter, what’s happening now? What does the chat say?”
My cop’s intuition was in overdrive. I pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, grabbing the keys from their dish by the door while juggling my phone.

“Well, daisy is saying, *maybe you’re right. Would it matter?*

Daisy? But daisy was dead.

“Now the orchid girl says, *You killed them didn’t you?*”

Orchid knew the killer? I almost leapt down the stairs toward my car, mentally tracing the fastest route to orchid’s place.

“Peter, what are they talking about? Can you see the previous lines from the chat?”

“Not while I’m watching this, and … daisy wants to meet orchid, right now.”

“Where?”

“Daisy says, *on the rooftop.*”

I raced through the city, running lights of every color, swerving around the late-night pedestrians drifting down the dark streets.

According to Peter the two had logged off, so I hung up and focused on the road. The car sailed over the hill crests as I raced across the city.

Orchid was going to meet someone on the roof.

But who?

I SCREECHED UP TO ORCHID’S BUILDING, my heart in my throat. I craned my neck, looking fifteen stories up, but saw only the lip of the building.

Would orchid really go up there? Did she want to die?

The main door to the building was locked. I buzzed every apartment until someone clicked the door open.

No time for the elevator. This is why I spent those early mornings jogging.

Adrenaline pushed me up the stairs.

I burst out onto the rooftop.

Two figures wrestled on the lip of the building. One was orchid, wearing only a thin white T-shirt and pink running shorts.

*The other was Tracy.*

Tracy lashed out at orchid furiously, punching and kicking. Orchid was younger, but her body, a little overweight, resisted slender Tracy’s
attack. Orchid’s face twisted with exertion as they struggled, Tracy trying to force orchid over the lip of the building.

My gun was already out as I took my last step. “Freeze! Hands up, now!”

I can be loud when I want to. Two heads jerked towards me.

It was Tracy who stepped backed first, with orchid’s hands still tangled in her jacket. The two breathed heavily, but wouldn’t let go of each other. Death grip.

I took a step. “Let go of each other. Both of you, get on the ground!”

I had my Nextel out and I was calling for backup, double-quick.

“Lindsay. Get out of here,” said Tracy. She stared at me. Her face looked utterly blank, not at all like the vibrant young woman I had worked with so recently.

“Tracy, untangle and get down on the ground. Mai Lei, let her go. Now.”

“You make me sick. You,” Tracy looked at me, spitting the words. “And you.” She looked directly into orchid’s face. She had started weeping. “You don’t know what you have. You’ve got everything. And I had it, and I can never have it back.”

She lunged at orchid again. My trigger finger tightened but I still hesitated. How could I open fire on these two women?

Something broke in orchid, and I saw her face finally twist into rage and pain.

“You … killed … my friend!” The final word rose into a loud shriek as orchid lunged forward with all her weight.

Tracy, caught by surprise, backpedalled as orchid pushed into her.

The back of Tracy’s legs hit the lip of the building. Orchid didn’t stop, all of her weight angling right into Tracy.

I saw my friend, my former friend, go up and over. Her eyes met mine for a single blink as her body crossed over the building’s edge.

Why? she seemed to ask. Her blank expression dissolved into utter confusion.

I thought she whooshed out one last breath.
Then she went over the side, and fifteen stories down.
AND SO I FOUND MYSELF IN ANOTHER ALLEY, with another dead girl. Or this time, a dead woman.

JACOBI came and helped me sort it out, taking crime scene photos, doing the interviews. After many hours he drove me back to the station to file the necessary reports.

My mind spun. It had been Tracy the whole time.

Peter dug into Tracy's computer as soon as we brought it in, and it told the whole tale. While researching another story Tracy had found fallenflowers.net, and became obsessed with it. The sex chats, the rich men, the young girls. In her deep explorations she discovered a “back door” password that allowed her access to all of the chats on the site. That started night after night of watching, reading the young girls’ chats, seeing the pictures, tasting the lives she had never lived.

She had found Vella and the girlflowers, and then learned the art of logging on as Vella and chatting with his young conquests just as the real Vella decided to dump them. Tracy played them just like she had played me.

It was lily that had set her off. Lily, who offered herself to Vella, body and soul. Anything he wanted. And Vella accepted. Tracy couldn't handle the jealousy, rage, and desire that welled up in her.

She had met Lily and killed her. And then the others, one by one.

She had even convinced daisy to seduce rose’s father, securing the semen that she had planted later, framing him. She had almost gotten away with it.

I thought of rose’s father, that angry, conflicted man. And I thought of daisy and the other girlflowers, so desperate to be loved.

As for Callie I had no idea. Perhaps she really had been a suicide after all. I’d follow it up, but with no evidence it didn’t seem a killer would be found. No way Tracy could have tracked her to Marin and hung her in a shed.

No, Tracy worked from a distance. Manipulated minds, scheduled meetings with young girls on lonely rooftops, used the power of surprise.

All this, and staring at the screen, night after night. A lonely woman lost in the city.

And taking three lonely girls with her.
JASON VELLA HUMMED AS HE DROVE DOWN 280. The mountains whizzed by as he kept the Aston Martin needled at 120. Jazzy music pumped through the ridiculously large sound system. Sinatra. Old school.

Damn the cops. Let them try and stop him. A speeding ticket? He owned this road, this city, the politicians, the police chief.

And after tonight, he thought, the last of his current problems would fade away.

It had been a fun ride. But it was time for new horizons, new problems, new rushes. He had made the call today. The art dealers would come tomorrow, and clear all the Chinese antiques from his estate. Ship them all to a buyer in Beijing. He had had enough of that.

He already had a call in to his decorator. Redo the house, top to bottom. Persian rugs, each one worth more than his just-fired secretary made in a year. Banners of silk. A hookah. That would be a riot.

He had a connection. Women in Dubai, living in luxurious apartments, dressed in wisps of silk, the scent of sandalwood. Ready to fly anywhere in the world on his whim.

After all, these young girls were too messy. Too emotional. He needed understanding, not drama. He had gotten lucky, really, with the girls going off the roof like that. They had subtracted themselves from the equation. It wasn’t the first time he had gotten lucky.

He pulled off at his exit, sailed through the dark night. Trees racing by, music blasting.

Into his driveway. His house was all dark, just as he liked it. Because it meant his wife wasn’t home.

It was time to bite the bullet and divorce her anyway. She’d want half, but she would be lucky to get five percent. He was a rough and tumble guy, he was ready for anything she could throw at him. He relished it.

He entered the house. At the touch of a pad by the door lights went on throughout the house, all to preset levels. The living room lights dimmed, music filled the vast space of the foyer.

Vella froze.

Five men in black suits waited for him. Spiky black hair, arms as thick as tree trunks.

He set his jaw as he slowly took off his jacket. Back in New York, growing up, he had regularly tangled with the toughest kids. He wasn’t afraid. He felt a warm rush of fear go through him, priming him for a fight.

Still, it had been a long time. These days his brass knuckles were lawyers, his steel toed boots were lobbyists.

He nodded to the men, waiting for things to play out. They surrounded him, escorting him into his own living room.
Fallen Flowers

Chapter 61

DONALD WONG WAITED FOR HIM in the living room, sitting on a white leather couch. Wong had already helped himself to some $2000 scotch from the polished bar.

“We made a mistake, Vella,” said Wong. “We let you into our world. You begged us, and we let you in. Some of my associates didn’t want to, but I vouched for you.”

Vella walked over to another padded couch and kicked back like he owned the place. Which he did. The men in black watched him. “Of course you let me in, Wong. I’m a good friend to have, and a terrible enemy.”

“Yes. But you promised us discretion. My associates said that men outside of our community can never understand how we do things. Our ways. But I said you understood.” He set the scotch down with a clack. “Yet, you didn’t understand.”

“I enjoyed your services, Wong, and now I’m out. The girls, they had problems.”

“You are the problem,” said Wong. “Now we have all eyes on our community. People question our ethics, shuffle through our businesses. Talk about child sex and murder. And it’s your fault.”

“I didn’t kill those girls, you idiot. What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t kill them, Vella. But you got them killed. The woman who killed them, she found the girls through you.” Wong shook his head. “A real man controls his appetites, but you are too busy depleting yourself, chasing girls and spending money.”

Vella sat bolt upright. “You bastard, don’t talk to me like that.”

Wong jabbed a finger at him. “You defiled those girls, and you got them killed. But this reporter, she took care of one part of your problem. And we took care of the other. The web site is gone, and the people who made it are gone. You’re going to get off scott free.”

Vella opened his mouth, but no words came out. What could he say? Wong walked over to the fire that crackled in the huge marble fireplace.

“You got lucky, Vella. The girls are gone. As for you, never contact us again. Never talk to another Chinese businessman again. You are strong, but our community runs deep. Chinese never forget, not for a thousand years.”

Vella felt an iron grip on his arm. It crushed him like a vise. One of the big men forced him deeper into the couch. Pushed up his sleeve.

From the fireplace Wong pulled a brand. Now two of the big men held Vella down. He struggled, but these guys were made of steel.

Wong leaned over him, his face hot and beaded with sweat. “You like our ways so much. Here is an accessory for you. Show it off to your next woman.”

He pressed the brand into Vella’s arm. Vella shouted as the pain raced through him. Where was everyone? His staff? His wife?

After a long moment of agony, it ended.

Wong handed the brand to one of the men. Vella stared down at the Chinese symbol burned into his arm, still smoking.

“You bastard,” he said, but he felt weak.
“Exactly,” said Wong. He pointed. “Bastard. Don’t show it around.”
He laughed, and walked out the door with his men.

**Chapter 62**

DONALD WONG GOT INTO THE BLACK LIMO with his men and they took off. He stared out the window, fingerling his cufflinks and lost in thought.

The fallenflowers site had failed. He had hoped to lure men in, tempt them, sell them girls, and then take only the wealthiest and classiest men to the next level. The top girls, the best men, in what he saw as more discreet, long-term relationships. But it wasn’t working. It was all too open.

The site was gone for good. His friends at City Hall would bury the last remnants of the case. The police would get off his back, the reporters would leave them alone. Tracy Chan was no longer a problem, and the other one, Jennie Kwong … Donald was sure her husband would bring her in line.

Wong and his associates would return to a more private way of doing things.

It was more fitting that way.