

THE DEATH OF A FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

死了一個娛樂女記者之後

* Television adaptation *Tabloid* currently playing on Netflix

The mysterious death of a colleague draws an entertainment reporter into a dangerous investigation that threatens to expose a criminal network reaching all the way to the highest tiers of society. Delving into a dark world of sex trafficking, illicit drugs, and corrupt media moguls, how much is one reporter willing to risk to uncover the truth?

Accustomed to hiding behind the printed word, entertainment reporter Liu Chih-chun never imagined that one day she would find herself caught up in the media maelstrom. After friend and colleague Lin Pei-ting dies at a drug-fueled sex party held at a private party venue, the dominant narrative that emerges is that Pei-ting had become obsessed with money and fame, and thus began working as a hostess at the venue, which catered to a celebrity clientele. Unconvinced, Chih-chun begins her own investigation, discovering that prior to her death, Pei-ting had been pursuing leads for a story about young models being drugged and sexually assaulted, and that her investigations may have threatened the wrong people.

As Chih-chun follows the trail of clues from exclusive clubs to private yachts, she begins to suspect that the scandal is far more than just casting couch shenanigans. Everything points to a criminal network that extends to the highest levels of society, involving entertainment industry elites, politicians, wealthy playboys, and other power brokers who treat young women as tokens of exchange. Drawing closer to the core of the network, Chih-chun is forced to question her own motives:



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TV Series (Netflix)

is she pursuing the truth to find justice for Pei-ting, or is she doing it to prove her own mettle as a reporter? More ominously, the subjects of her investigation have begun to take notice of her inquiries...

With dispassionate precision, author Ke Ying-An dissects the dark side of the entertainment industry's power hierarchy, deftly rewriting today's headline stories to construct the narrative of this realist crime thriller. More than just a murder mystery, *The Death of a Female Entertainment Reporter* is equally a fast-paced thriller that exposes society's exploitation of women, and a battle anthem for anyone fighting against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Ke Ying-An 柯映安

A writer of screenplays, comic book scripts, and novels, Ke Ying-An has worked in a vast array of genres, from romance to comedy to fantasy. Her recent works include the television series *The Zoo and First Note of Love*, both the novel and television adaptation of *The Death of a Female Entertainment Reporter*, and the novel *Manufacturing Power*.

THE DEATH OF A FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

By Ke Ying-An

Translated by Lee Anderson

Prologue

As an entertainment journalist accustomed to hiding behind her words, Liu Chih-chun never suspected that one day she would be the one sucked into the middle of the storm, watched by thousands of eyes, blamed at every turn, sinking deeper into the quagmire with every step until she was no longer able to struggle free.

But the true start of the story, or rather, the start of the tragedy, stretched back months to that cold, murderous winter.

Chapter 1

The last message for help Lin Pei-ting sent before she died lay peacefully on Liu Chih-chun's phone.

It was the night after the Lunar New Year and Chih-chun, an entertainment journalist for a gossip weekly, had finally been able to make it home before midnight and get more than five hours' sleep for the first time since she'd been saddled with the cover stories for the two latest editions. It wasn't because she was the most capable reporter; it was simply a chance to take advantage of her so that the rest of the staff could relax and enjoy the holidays. But she didn't care – she hated any holiday, big or small, that was dressed up as a time to be with family.

That night, she'd skimmed quickly through Taipei's murky, rain-sodden alleys before trudging her way up the cramped, narrow stairwell in her apartment block until she reached her sixth-floor, rooftop apartment.

After college, Chih-chun had moved to Taipei from a remote fishing village on the midwestern coast and graduated from dilapidated, leaky dorms to a private studio that had been illegally partitioned off by the landlord. Back then she was fresh out of college, saddled with student loans and her mother's back-breaking debt, living on a crummy starting salary in a damp basement room whose only window facing outside was a transom window, barely bigger than a cereal box, embedded along the top of the wall.

During that period of her life, the only thing she wanted to do after getting off work was to lie on her bed and stare blankly at the faint glow of the streetlight as it filtered in through that window. Reporters have to spend all day interacting with people, so when they go home and it's

just them on their own, the loneliness feels even starker by comparison. That light coming in through the window, or the sounds of footsteps, or the shadows that swept along her wall as a car drove past, were trivial things, and yet, they provided crucial psychological support for a young woman trying to make it on her own in the city with no family to support her. She *needed* the sounds of her neighbors seeping through the poorly soundproofed walls, or the occasional street noise outside her window, to keep it all together. It was the only way she was able to get to sleep.

Now, she was financially better off and had moved into this rooftop apartment with a bathroom of her own. The soundproofing still sucked, but the muffled voices of her neighbors made for the perfect lullaby.

When she'd first started working, with an exhausting job, no friends, and no support, that basement studio had been her only way to communicate with the outside world. She'd put up a tough front, but in reality she was scared of the dark (and of ghosts), so any information transmitted through that tiny window felt like a sliver of proof that she was still connected to the human race. She loved it.

After working her butt off for a few years, she was able to leave the basement floor she shared with the college sports student, the dad and his dim-witted son, and the old woman whose room was piled high with garbage, and move into her sixth-floor apartment that had been built as a rooftop extension. Yes, the soundproofing was bad and she could clearly hear her neighbor on the phone and the clatter of the washing machine, but she had almost 180 square feet to herself, a warm wooden floor, and some cute furniture. Compared to her last place, it was the difference between heaven and hell. And the thing she loved most about it was the big outside-facing window. No matter where she went after that, she always had the same requirement: an outside-facing window that let the morning light spill in and allowed her to see the weather at a glance.

When she got home that night the first thing she did, as always, was open the window. A cool breeze drifted in, fluttering the sheer curtains she'd put up especially for this purpose. As though she had finished her final task of the day, drowsiness assailed her, and the second her fingers left the windowsill she felt the irresistible urge to sleep. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in a long time, and tonight was the perfect opportunity. Workaholic that she was, she normally wasn't able to fall asleep without first checking her various work group chats to make sure nothing had popped up, and in truth that had still been her plan. However, as soon as she lay in bed and opened the messaging app, her eyelids began to droop, melting the words on screen into a ball of meaningless symbols that wouldn't enter her brain.

As she lay on her side, her phone, screen still on, slowly slid from her hand onto the blanket beside her. Her eyelashes flickered before closing completely, and her breathing became slow and steady.

At that moment her phone, half in hand and half on the bed, lit back up with a new message from someone called Lin Pei-ting.

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The room was pitch-black, save for the moonlight bathing half of the bed. The pale light followed the line of Chih-chun's elbow, brushed past her fingers, and eventually reached the cell phone still partly lying against her hand. The screen went from white to black, black to white, white to black.

Pei-ting's messages read:

"Chih-chun, help"

"They're trying to kill me..."

"Save me"

"Help"

"They're gonna kill"

The screen lit up with each new message, before eventually falling into permanent darkness. Chih-chun did not wake up in time.

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The morning after the five-day-long Lunar New Year celebrations, Taiwan was rocked by the news that a female reporter had been found dead from a drug overdose in a high-end hotel.

Early media reports claimed that a group of rich businessmen had been hosting a wild party, and had invited some young models to join in the fun. There were signs of drug use at the scene. With her pretty face and ample chest, Lin Pei-ting, the woman who'd died, would not have looked out of place in such a crowd. Indeed, it was these particular assets that enabled the story to gain traction and be featured in the sensationalist headlines of all the major news networks. Her face may have been lightly pixelated out in the news reports, but her piercing eyes and warm smile were still discernible.

A flashy news ticker dominated the TV screen, but quickly cut away to a news anchor motioning to a messaging app screenshot displayed behind her and revealing that, thirty minutes before she'd died, Pei-ting had messaged her best friend begging for help. If you switched to another news channel, you'd have seen that this "close friend" had been confirmed to be one of Pei-ting's colleagues at the gossip magazine where she worked, referred to only as "Ms. Liu". According to inside sources, this Liu had started working at the magazine around the same time as Pei-ting, was a similar age, and had gotten on well with the victim. Perhaps Liu knew what Pei-ting was doing at this party, and what kind of circles she mixed with.

As the last person to have heard anything from Pei-ting, Chih-chun had been brought in by the police for questioning early that morning. Having found herself unexpectedly swept up in the storm, she currently sat in a tiny interview room, temporarily hidden away from the throng of reporters who had set up camp outside the station.

Earlier that morning, before the sun had even risen, Chih-chun (who'd been hoping to lie in until lunchtime) was woken by the beep of her phone warning her that its battery was running low. Blearily opening her eyes, she was confronted by dozens of missed calls, as well as a current

incoming call from Huang Tzu-fang, the magazine's chief reporter. Her brain felt like sludge but she instinctively picked up, her years of working in journalism having conditioned her to enter work mode the second she awoke. As such, she answered the phone sounding full of gusto rather than barely awake, entirely unaware that this call which had finally managed to reach her would be breaking the news of her friend's death.

In the hour since, from getting dressed, to taking the cab, to arriving at the police station, Chih-chun had felt like she was in a fog and that it wasn't her doing these mundane things, but a robot disguised as her. On her way to the station, she began to research what had happened in those fateful few hours she'd been asleep.

Based on news reports and the information on her phone, she knew that Pei-ting had gone to a party in a fancy hotel at around midnight last night. It wasn't yet clear who else was at this party, but there were some powerful, influential men accompanied by beautiful models and bar hostesses. Such parties, usually held in private suites, were nothing out of the ordinary. Nor were the alcohol and drugs. What no one could figure out was what a journalist was doing there. To Chih-chun, now labeled by the media as Pei-ting's "best friend", it was even more mystifying.

It had been over a year since Chih-chun and Pei-ting had joined the ranks of *Now Weekly* during the same recruitment campaign. She still remembered her first day. Her stomach had hurt so much that morning that she hadn't managed to eat any breakfast, so to stop it from churning she'd sat in the convenience store on the ground floor of the company building and forced down some plain bread. The pained expression on her face must have made the other customers think she was eating something truly awful.

Just as she was taking some stomach medicine, a girl came and sat down beside her. Unlike Chih-chun in her cautious outfit, the girl was dressed freely and comfortably, and turned to her with an easy, natural smile.

"Hi! Are you new here too? My name's Lin Pei-ting."

Chih-chun still remembered the shock of seeing this girl for the first time; she looked just like Chih-chun's mother when she was young. Confident, outspoken, those big, dark eyes forever twinkling with intelligence yet suggesting mischief and ill intent when they were turned on you. Unlike Chih-chun's mother, however, this girl's smile reached her eyes and dug dimples in her cheeks, which made her look less cold and distant. She spoke again.

"You got the job already, you know – why are you still so tense?"

Chih-chun felt herself flush with embarrassment. "I don't know. I'm always this tense."

Pei-ting tilted her head to one side. "You're not Liu Chih-chun, are you? The one who landed that big newspaper job as soon as she graduated?"

While Chih-chun wondered how on earth this girl knew who she was, Pei-ting continued, as though to herself. "I didn't think a star student like you would get nerves, too."

Chih-chun, her embarrassment deepening, didn't know whether to refute the accolade or not.

"It's fine!" chuckled Pei-ting who then, with a wink, suddenly produced a bottle of mineral water out of her bag and carefully poured two drops into Chih-chun's water bottle. She then

furtively returned the bottle to her bag, as though it were precious treasure, and said, “That was holy water. Try it and see.”

Chih-chun looked at her skeptically, but she persisted.

“Look, I was feeling nervous yesterday too, so I went to temple to ask for some. Try it and see.”

Chih-chun had never been good at saying no, so she did as she was told and took a couple of sips as Pei-ting watched expectantly.

“So? Do you feel better now?”

Chih-chun placed a hand on her chest and focused. She couldn’t tell if something had in fact changed, but the more she thought about it, the calmer she now felt. So, she nodded and said, somewhat surprised, “I think so.”

Pei-ting clapped her hands to her cheeks and grinned in satisfaction. “It’s reassuring to know how easy it is to trick star students.”

Chih-chun’s memory of Pei-ting’s cunning yet cutesy smile was as fresh as though it had happened yesterday. And in the days to come, Chih-chun understood that, no matter what happened, she could always rely on Pei-ting’s nonchalant reminders to relax and “Take a chill pill”.

If you wanted to describe Lin Pei-ting, you only needed one example to clearly demonstrate how she refused to play by the rules. She hadn’t graduated from a traditional college communications course, nor did she have a flashy diploma, so finding a job in the news industry was even more difficult than one would expect. She’d flitted from one tabloid to the next, but she knew in her heart that this wasn’t what she wanted to do. She wanted to become a “proper journalist”.

What was a proper journalist? Pei-ting had her own definition of that.

In early spring of that year, when the weather was much as it was now, Pei-ting by chance learned that *Now Weekly* would be holding a massive recruitment examination in July. It wasn’t often that magazines used entrance exams to recruit new employees. The day she found out, Pei-ting pretended she was sick to take the day off at the old, overcrowded tabloid she was working for at the time, and took a rickety bus from her ancient apartment block in east Taipei to a swanky new business district on the west side. She walked slowly and leisurely, looking up to admire the gleaming new office building in the dazzling springtime sun. She glanced around, then strode lightly and purposefully inside. She didn’t know how she pulled it off, but her confidence seemed to make her invisible to the guards and she was able to make her way up to the magazine office on the eighth floor. Once there, she palmed off the receptionist with an offhand excuse and walked onto bright, spacious office floor, taking a casual stroll amidst the milling journalists. She loved the break room facing the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the colorful seats almost made her squeal in delight. She picked the pink one and sat down on it, staring out of the window. It was around then that someone else came into the break room, saw her, and asked in confusion, “Are you new here?”

Pei-ting had only told Chih-chun all of this months after she’d started working at the magazine, but she could almost picture Pei-ting’s expression at that moment. With perfect

composure and that friendly-without-being-familiar smile, as if she had just gotten into character, she had answered, “Yeah.”

After that afternoon, the woman claiming to be a new employee disappeared as abruptly as she had arrived. No one knew who she was. Like that overexposed spring afternoon, she had vanished into the harsh white sunlight, until her name was officially added to the roster after the recruitment exam some months later.

With no academic qualifications or background to her name, let alone experience, she decided that the only way to stand out from the crowd of college grads with impressive resumes was to quit her old job and work undercover at a club for three months. During that time she happened to discover that a well-loved actor was having an affair, which unleashed a wave of scandals and gossip that shook Taiwan’s entertainment world to its very foundations. No one outside the magazine knew that the story was broken by a young reporter with no background or qualifications. Within the magazine it caused an uproar, allowing Lin Pei-ting to become the magazine’s youngest ever entertainment journalist at the age of twenty-four.

Liu Chih-chun was not like Pei-ting. She had been a rigid rule-follower since childhood, a workaholic in the classroom and then in the office. Without any family to support her, she had to rely on her own grit and determination to get accepted into the journalism department of a prestigious university and gain the qualifications which led to her being hired as a reporter for a well-known newspaper just after graduation.

Fresh out of college and with no connections, she was forced to roll up her sleeves and do things the old-fashioned way, making contacts and cultivating her own network from scratch, but it paid off with one scoop after another. Chih-chun was a talented reporter but she was unpopular among her colleagues, who couldn’t believe that someone so young could land so many exclusives in their first few years on the job. Some of them even privately speculated that she was sleeping her way to the top. Chih-chun was furious, but the rumors continued to swirl. Her only option was to keep her head down and work hard until the day finally came when she could look back up and realize how far she’d come. Until she met Lin Pei-ting.

But Pei-ting was dead.

She felt like a part of something inside her was crashing down, but nobody could hear it. Questions wove themselves into knots in her mind, and no matter how hard she tried to separate them, they’d just get tangled up again.

What the hell was Pei-ting doing there?

Did she know those people?

What was her relationship to them?

Why would they want to kill her?

Should Chih-chun blame herself for not waking up?

What was she thinking about in that half-hour before she died?

Thinking about Pei-ting’s last messages on her cell filled Chih-chun with guilt. If only she’d gone to bed later, or woken up earlier... A stream of what-ifs flooded her mind.

Dead, gone, never to be seen again.

It didn't feel real when she thought about it, but being inside the police station was a constant reminder: Pei-ting was dead.

The door to the interview room opened and a haggard detective in his fifties walked in. None of the officers had been allowed to go home since news of the case broke the night before, and they were all looking worse for wear.

"Hello Miss Liu, I'm detective Wang." He handed Chih-chun her phone back, then pulled up a chair. Her phone was slightly warm to the touch, its screen littered with unread message notifications. "We've finished examining your phone. You can have it back."

She accepted it in a daze, in no mood to read any of the messages she'd received in the interim. She felt its warmth in her hand, this machine containing the last messages Pei-ting ever sent, and became lost in thought.