

JAMES
PATTERSON

THE WORLD'S #**1**
BESTSELLING WRITER

& MAXINE PAETRO



THE
HOTTEST,
MOST
TERRIFYING
WOMEN'S
MURDER
CLUB
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ANNIVERSARY

10th Anniversary

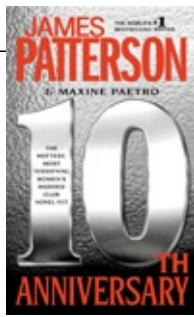
James Patterson

AND

Maxine Paetro



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For Isabelle Patterson and
Madeline Paetro

WITH BELLS ON

THIS WAS THE DAY I was getting married.

Our suite at the Ritz in Half Moon Bay was in chaos. My best friends and I had stripped down to our underwear, and our street clothes had been flung over the furniture. Sorbet-colored dresses hung from the moldings and door frames.

The scene looked like a Degas painting of ballerinas before the curtain went up, or maybe a romanticized bordello in the Wild West. Jokes were cracked. Giddiness reigned—and then the door opened and my sister Catherine stepped in, wearing her brave face: a tight smile, pain visible at the corners of her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Cat?” I asked.

“He’s not here.”

I blinked, tried to ignore the sharp pang of disappointment. I said sarcastically, “Well, there’s a shock.”

Cat was talking about our father, Marty Boxer, who left home when we were kids and failed to show when my mom was dying. I’d seen him only twice in the past ten years and hadn’t missed him, but after he’d told Cat he’d come to my wedding, I’d had an expectation.

“He *said* he would be here. He *promised*,” Cat said.

I’m six years older than my sister and a century more jaded. I should have known better. I hugged her.

“Forget it,” I said. “He can’t hurt us. He’s nobody to us.”

Claire, my best bosom buddy, sat up in bed, swung her legs over, and put her bare feet on the floor. She’s a large black woman and funny—acidly so. If she weren’t a pathologist, she could do stand-up comedy.

“I’ll give you away, Lindsay,” she said. “But I want you back.”

Cindy and I cracked up, and Yuki piped up, “I know who can stand in for Marty, that jerk.” She stepped into her pink satin dress, pulled it up over her tiny little bones, and zipped it herself. She said, “Be right back.”

Getting things done was Yuki’s specialty. Don’t get in her way when she’s in gear. Even if she’s in the *wrong* gear.

“Yuki, wait,” I called as she rushed out the door. I turned to Claire, saw that she was holding up what used to be called a foundation garment. It was boned and forbidding-looking.

“I don’t mind wearing a dress that makes me look like a cupcake, but how in hell am I supposed to get into this?”

“I love my dress,” said Cindy, fingering the peach-colored silk organza. She was probably the first bridesmaid in the world to express that sentiment, but Cindy was terminally lovesick. She turned her pretty face toward me and said dreamily, “You should get ready.”

Two yards of creamy satin slid out of the garment bag. I wriggled into the strapless Vera Wang confection, then stood with my sister in front of the long freestanding mirror: a pair of tall brown-eyed blondes, looking so much like our dad.

“Grace Kelly never looked so good,” said Cat, her eyes welling up.

“Dip your head, gorgeous,” said Cindy.

She fastened her pearls around my neck.

I did a little pirouette, and Claire caught my hand and twirled me under her arm. She said, “Do you believe it, Linds? I’m going to dance at your wedding.”

She didn’t say “finally,” but she was right to think it, having lived through my roller-coaster, long distance romance with Joe, punctuated by his moving to San Francisco to be with me, my house burning down, a couple of near-death experiences, and a huge diamond engagement ring that I’d kept in a drawer for most of a year.

“Thanks for keeping the faith,” I said.

“I wouldn’t call it faith, darling,” Claire cracked. “I never expected to *see* a miracle, let alone be *part* of one.”

I gave her a playful jab on the arm. She ducked and fainted. The door opened and Yuki came in with my bouquet: a lavish bunch of peonies and roses tied with baby blue streamers.

“This hankie belonged to my grandmother,” Cindy said, tucking a bit of lace into my cleavage, checking off the details. “Old, new, borrowed, blue. You’re good.”

“I cued up the music, Linds,” said Yuki. “We’re *on*.”

My God.

Joe and I were really getting married.

JACOBI MET ME in the hotel lobby, stuck out his elbow, and laughed out loud. Yuki had been right. Jacobi was the perfect stand-in Dad. I took his arm and he kissed my cheek.

First time ever.

“You look beautiful, Boxer. You know, more than usual.”

Another first.

Jacobi and I had spent so much time in a squad car together, we could almost read each other’s minds. But I didn’t have to be clairvoyant to read the love in his eyes.

I grinned at him and said, “Thanks, Jacobi. Thanks a lot.”

I squeezed his arm and we walked across an acre of marble, through tall French doors, and into my future.

Jacobi had a limp and a wheeze, the remnants of a shooting a couple of years back in the Tenderloin. I’d thought we were both going to check out that night. But that was then.

Now the warm, salty air embraced me. The great lawns flowed around the shining white gazebo and down to the bluff. The Pacific crashed against the cliff side, and the setting sun tinted the clouds glowing whiskey pink that you could never capture on film. I’d never seen a more beautiful place.

“Take it easy, now,” Jacobi said. “No sprinting down the aisle. Just keep step with the music.”

“If you insist,” I said, laughing.

Two blocks of chairs had been set up facing the gazebo, and the aisle had been cordoned off with yellow crime scene tape. POLICE LINE. DO NOT CROSS.

The tape had to have been Conklin’s idea. I was sure of it when he caught my eye and gave me a broad grin and a thumbs-up. Cat’s young daughters skipped down the grassy aisle tossing rose petals as the wedding march began. My best friends stepped out in time, and I followed behind them.

Smiling faces turned to me. Charlie Clapper on the aisle, guys from the squad, and new and old friends were on the left. Five of Joe’s look-alike brothers and their families were on my right. Joe’s parents turned to beam at me from the front row.

Jacobi brought me up the gazebo steps to the altar and released my arm, and I looked up at my wonderful, handsome husband-to-be. Joe’s eyes connected with mine, and I knew without any doubt that the roller-coaster ride had been worth it. I knew this man so well. Our tested love was rich and deep and solid.

Longtime family friend the Reverend Lynn Boyer put our hands together, Joe’s hand over mine, then whispered theatrically so that everyone could hear, “Enjoy this moment, Joseph. This is the last time you’ll have the upper hand with Lindsay.”

Delighted laughter rang out and then hushed. With the sound of seagulls calling, Joe and I exchanged promises to love and cherish through good days and bad, through sickness and health, for as long as we both lived.

Do you take this man to be your wedded husband?

I do. I really do.

There were nervous titters as I fumbled with Joe’s wedding band and it spun out of my hand. Joe and I both stooped, grabbed the ring at the same time, and held it between our fingers.

“Steady, Blondie,” Joe said. “It only gets better from here.”

I laughed, and when we resumed our positions, I got that gold band onto Joe’s finger. The Reverend

Boyer told Joe he could kiss the bride, and my husband held my face between his hands.

~~We kissed, and then again. And again. And again.~~

There was wild applause and a surge of music.

This was real. I was Mrs. Joseph Molinari. Joe took my hand and, grinning like little kids, we walked back up the aisle through a shower of rose petals.

LITTLE BOY LOST

Chapter 1

A TEENAGE GIRL wearing a neon green plastic poncho, naked underneath, stumbled along a dark road. She was scared out of her mind and in pain, the cramps coming like repeated blows to her gut and getting worse. Blood had started coming out of her a while ago, and now it was running fast and hot down her legs.

What had she done?

People always told her she was a smart kid, but—and this was a fact—she'd made a horrible mistake, and if she didn't get help soon, she was going to die.

But where was she?

She had the sense that she was walking in circles but getting nowhere. During the day, the area around Lake Merced was full of traffic—joggers, cyclists, a steady stream of cars on the road around the lake. But at night it was completely deserted. The darkness was bad enough, but now fog filled the basin. She couldn't see farther than a few yards in front of her.

And she was really scared.

People had gone missing around here. There had been *murders*. Plenty of them.

Her feet dragged. She really couldn't lift them, and then she felt herself fading out, just leaving her body. She reached out to brace her fall, and her hand found the trunk of a tree. She gripped it with both hands and held on hard to the rough bark until she felt rooted in the black, moonless night.

Oh my God. Where am I now?

Two cars had already passed her without stopping, and now she thought of abandoning her plan to flag down a car and return to the house. They were gone. She could sleep. Maybe the blood would stop flowing if she could lie down—but she was so lost. She didn't know which way to turn.

The girl stumbled forward, looking for light, any light.

Blood was running faster out of her body, dripping down her legs, and she felt so faint that her legs hardly held her up.

As she pushed herself forward, she stubbed her toe on something hard and unforgiving, a root or a stone, and she pitched forward. She put out her hands, bracing for the fall.

Her chin and knees and palms took the brunt of it, but she was all right. Panting from the pain, the girl got to her feet.

She could make out the trees along the roadside, the eucalyptus and the pines looming overhead. Grasses scratched at her arms and legs as she staggered through them.

She imagined a car stopping, or a house coming into view. She imagined how she would tell the story. Would she have a chance to do that? Please. She couldn't die now. She was only fifteen years old.

A dog barked in the distance and the girl changed course and headed toward that sound. A dog meant a house, a phone, a car, a hospital.

She was thinking of her room, of being safe there. She saw her bed and her desk and the pictures on the wall and her phone—oh, man, if only she still had her phone—and that's when her foot turned over, her ankle twisting, and she went down again, falling really hard, skinning half of her body.

This was too much. Too much.

She stayed down this time. Everything hurt so much. She made a pillow of her arms and just rested her head. Maybe if she took a little nap. Yeah, maybe some sleep was what she needed and then, in the

morning... when the sun came up...

It took a long moment to understand that the dull light growing brighter in the fog was a pair of headlights coming toward her.

She put up her hand and there was a squeal of brakes.

A woman's voice said, "Oh my God. Are you hurt?"

"Help me," she said. "I need help."

"Stay with me," said the woman's voice. "Don't go to sleep, young lady. I'm calling nine one one. Look at me. Keep your eyes open."

"I've lost my baby," the girl said.

And then she didn't feel any more pain.

Chapter 2

RAIN WAS BATTERING the hood and sheeting down the windshield as I pulled my ancient Explorer into the lot next to the Medical Examiner's Office on Harriet Street, right behind the Hall of Justice. I had some anxiety about returning to work after taking time off to get married.

In a few minutes, I was going to have some catching up to do, and then there was a new fact I would have to deal with.

I would be reporting to a new lieutenant.

I was prepared for that—as much as I could be.

I pulled up the collar of my well-used blue blazer and made a wild, wet dash for the back entrance of the Hall, the gray granite building that housed the Justice Department, criminal court, two jails, and the Southern Station of the SFPD.

I badged Kevin at the back door, then took the stairs at a jog. When I got to the third floor, I opened the stairwell door to the Homicide Division and pushed through the double-hinged gate to the squad room.

It was a zoo.

I said, "Hey, there," to Brenda, who stood up and gave me a hug and a paper towel.

"I wish you so much happiness," she said.

I thanked Brenda, promised wedding pictures, and then mopped my face and hair. I took a visual inventory of who was on the job at 7:45 a.m.

The bullpen was packed.

The night shift was straightening up, sinking refuse into trash baskets, and a half-dozen day-shift cops were waiting for their desks. Last time I was here, Jacobi still occupied what we laughingly call the corner office: a ten-foot-square glass cubicle overlooking the James Lick Freeway.

Since then, Jacobi had been bumped upstairs to chief of police, and the new guy, Jackson Brady, had scored the lieutenant's job.

I had a little history with Brady. He had transferred to San Francisco from Miami PD only a month before, and in his first weeks as a floater, he had shown heroism in the field. I worked with him on the explosive multiple homicide case that put him on the short list for Jacobi's old job.

I'd been offered the job, too, thanks very much, but I'd turned it down. I'd already held down the corner office for a few years, until I got sick of the administrative overload: the budgets, payrolls, meetings with everyone, and layers of bureaucratic bull.

Brady could have the job with my blessing.

I just hoped he'd let me do mine.

I saw Brady through the walls of his cube. His white-blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he wore a shoulder holster over a starched blue cotton shirt that stretched across his massive chest.

He looked up and signaled for me to come to his office. When I got there, he hung up the phone. Reaching across the desk that was once mine, he shook my hand and congratulated me.

"Are you using Boxer or Molinari?" he asked me.

"Boxer."

"Well, have a seat, Sergeant Boxer," he said, waving me toward the chair across from his desk. "I got a call from Major Case Division about ten minutes ago. They're short on manpower and asked for help. I want you and Conklin to check it out."

“The case is a homicide?” I asked.

~~“Could be. Or maybe not. Right now it’s an open case. Your open case.”~~

What kind of bull was this?

Step out of line for a couple of weeks, and the only open case was a spillover from another unit? C

was Brady testing me—alpha-dog management style?

“Conklin has the case file,” Brady said. “Keep me in the loop. And welcome back, Boxer.”

Welcome back, indeed.

I showed myself out, feeling like all eyes in the squad were on me as I crossed the room to find my partner.

Chapter 3

DR. ARI RIFKIN was intense and busy, judging from the incessant buzz of her pager. Still, she seemed eager to brief me and my partner, Richard Conklin, aka Inspector Hottie. Conklin scribbled in his notebook as Dr. Rifkin talked.

“Her name is Avis Richardson, age fifteen. She was hemorrhaging when she was brought into the ER last night,” the doctor said, wiping her wire-rimmed specs with her coattail.

“From the looks of her, she delivered a baby within the past thirty-six hours. She got herself into grave trouble by running and falling down—too much activity too soon after giving birth.”

“How’d she get here?” Conklin asked.

“A couple—uh, here’s their names—John and Sarah McCann, found Avis lying in the street. Thought she’d been hit by a car. They told the police that they don’t know her at all.”

“Was Avis conscious when she came in?” I asked Dr. Rifkin.

“She was in shock. Going in and out of lucidity—mostly out. We sedated her, transfused her, gave her a D and C. Right now, she’s in guarded but stable condition.”

“When can we talk with her?” Conklin asked.

“Give me a moment,” said the doctor.

She parted the curtains around the stall of the ICU where her patient was lying. I saw through the opening that the girl was young and white, with lank auburn hair. An IV line was in her arm and a vital-signs machine blinked her stats onto a monitor.

Dr. Rifkin exchanged a few words with her patient and then came out and said, “She says that she lost her baby. But given her state of mind, I don’t know if she means that the baby died or that she misplaced it.”

“Did she have a handbag with her?” I asked. “Did she have any kind of ID?”

“She was only wearing a thin plastic poncho. Dime-store variety.”

“We’ll need the poncho,” I said. “And we need her statement.”

“Give it a shot, Sergeant,” said Dr. Rifkin.

Avis Richardson looked impossibly young to be a mother. She also looked as though she’d been dragged behind a truck. I noted the bruises and scrapes on her arms, her cheek, her palms, her chin.

I pulled up a chair and touched her arm.

“Hi, Avis,” I said. “My name is Lindsay Boxer. I’m with the police department. Can you hear me?”

“Uh-huh,” she said.

She half-opened her green eyes, then closed them again. I pleaded with her under my breath to stay awake. I had to find out what had happened to her. And by giving us this case, Brady had charged Conklin and me with finding her baby.

Avis opened her eyes again, and I asked a dozen basic questions: Where do you live? What’s your phone number? Who is the baby’s father? Who are your parents? But I might as well have been talking to a department-store dummy. Avis Richardson kept nodding off without answering. So, after half hour of that, I got up and gave my chair to Conklin.

To say that my partner has “a way with women” is to play up his charm and all-American good looks and cheapen his real gift for getting people to trust him.

I said, “Rich, you’re on deck. Go for it.”

He nodded, sat down, and said to Avis in his deep, calm voice, “My name is Rich Conklin. I work

with Sergeant Boxer. We need to find your baby, Avis. Every minute that passes puts your little one in more danger. Please talk to me. We really need your help.”

The girl’s eyes seemed unfocused. Her gaze shifted from Conklin to me, to the door, to the IV lean in her arm. Then she said to Conklin, “A couple of months ago... I called the number. Help for pregnant girls? A man... he spoke with an accent. French accent. But... it wasn’t authentic. I met them... outside my school...”

“Them?”

“Two men. Their car was a blue four-door?... And when I woke up, I was in a bed. I saw the baby,” she said, tears gathering in her eyes, spilling over. “It was a little boy.”

And now my heart was breaking apart.

What the hell was this crime? Baby trafficking? It was outrageous. It was a *sin*. Make that a lot of sins. I tallied up two counts of felony kidnapping before we even knew the fate of the baby.

Conklin said, “I want to hear the whole story from the beginning. Tell me what you remember, okay, Avis?”

I couldn’t be sure, but it could have been that Avis Richardson was talking to herself. She said, “I saw my baby.... Then, I was on the street. Alone. In the dark.”

Chapter 4

I STAYED at Avis Richardson's bedside for the next eight hours, hoping she'd wake up for real and tell me what had happened to her and her newborn. Time passed. Her sleep only deepened. And every minute that went by made me more certain that this girl's baby would not be found alive.

I still didn't know anything about what had happened to this teenager. Had she given birth alone and left the baby in a gas station bathroom? Had her child been snatched?

We couldn't even get the FBI involved until we knew if a crime had been committed.

While I sat at Avis's bedside, Conklin went back to the Hall and threw himself into the hands-on work of the case. He reached into the missing persons databases and ran searches for Avis Richardson or any missing Caucasian teenage girls matching her description.

He interviewed the couple who had brought Avis to the hospital and established the approximate area where they had found her: Lake Merced, near Brotherhood Way.

Working with the K-9 unit, Conklin went out into the field. Cops and hounds looked for the blood trail that Avis Richardson had surely left behind. If the house where she'd given birth could be located, there'd be evidence there, and maybe the truth.

As the hounds worked the scent, the crime lab processed the plastic poncho Avis had been wearing. It would hold prints, for sure, but a few dozen people at the hospital had handled that poncho. It didn't make any sense that she was wearing a rain poncho but no clothes.

Another mystery.

I kept vigil with a sleeping Avis. And the longer I sat, the more depressed I became. Where were the worried friends and parents? Why wasn't someone looking for this young girl?

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Avis?" I said.

"Huh," she answered. Then she closed her eyes again.

I took a break at around four in the afternoon, pushed dollar bills into a vending machine, and ate something with peanut butter and oats in it. Washed it down with a cup of bitter coffee.

I contacted a dozen hospitals to see if a motherless baby had been brought in and got in touch with Child Protective Services as well. I came up with nothing more than a mounting heap of frustration.

I borrowed Dr. Rifkin's laptop and went out to VICAP, the FBI's Violent Crime Apprehension Program database, to see what they had on the abduction of pregnant women.

I found a few crimes against pregnant women—domestic violence mainly, but no cases that resembled this one.

After my fruitless Internet crawl, I went back to the ICU and slept in the big vinyl-covered reclining chair beside Avis's bed. I woke up when she was wheeled out of the ICU and down the hall to a private room.

I called Brady, told him that we were still nowhere, my voice sounding defensive to my own ears.

"Anything on the baby?"

"Brady, this girl hasn't said boo."

When I hung up with Brady, my phone buzzed with an incoming call from Conklin.

"Talk to me," I said.

"The hounds found her trail."

I was instantly hopeful. I gripped my little phone, almost strangling it to death.

“She bled for about a mile,” Conklin told me. “She put down a circular path at the southernmost part of Lake Merced.”

“That sounds like she was looking for help. Desperately looking.”

“The hounds are still on it, Lindsay, but the searchable area is expanding. They’re working a grid on the golf course now. The gun club area is next. This could take years.”

“I haven’t found anything in missing persons,” I said.

“Me, neither. I’m in the car, calling people with the name Richardson in San Francisco. There are over four hundred listings.”

“I’ll help with that. You start at A. Richardson. I’ll start at Z. Richardson, and we’ll work toward the middle,” I said. “I’ll meet you at the letter *M*.”

When I hung up with Richie, Avis opened her pretty, green eyes. She focused them on me.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you feeling?”

I had a white-knuckle grip on the rails of her bed.

“Where am I?” the girl asked me. “What happened to me?”

I bit back the words “Ah, shit” and told Avis Richardson what little I knew.

“We’re trying to find your baby,” I said.

Chapter 5

I PUT MY KEY in the lock of the front door to our apartment, and at that precise moment, I remembered that I hadn't called Joe to say I wouldn't be home for dinner. Actually, I hadn't spoken to him in about twelve hours.

Way to go, Lindsay. Brilliant.

My border collie, Martha, heard me at the front door, barked, and, with toenails clattering across the wooden floor, hurled herself at my chest.

I cooed to her, ruffled her ears, and then found Joe in the living room. He was sitting in an armchair, reading light on, with eight different newspapers lying on the floor around the chair in sections.

He looked at me with reproach in his eyes.

"Your mailbox is full."

"My mailbox?"

"Your phone."

"Is it? I'm sorry, Joe. I had to turn my phone off. I was in the hospital ICU all day. A new case I'm working."

"We were supposed to take my folks out for dinner tonight."

"Oh my God. I'm sorry," I said as my stomach dropped toward my toes. Joe had told me that we were going to take them out for some quality time and first-class steak at Harris'. I'd filed that information in a folder at the back of my mind and never looked back.

"They're on the flight back to New York."

"Honey, I'll call them tomorrow and apologize. I feel like crap. They're so great to me."

"They're treating us to a honeymoon. A little luxury shack in Hawaii. When we've got time."

"Ah, shit. Is that what they said? That makes me feel even more rotten. There's a baby missing..."

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Just vending machine stuff. A long time ago."

Joe got out of the chair and strolled to the kitchen. I followed him like a puppy that had had an accident on the rug. Taking a chicken breast out of a bowl of marinade, he put a pan on the stove and fired it up.

"I can do that," I said.

"Tell me about your case."

I poured myself a giant glass of merlot and left the bottle on the counter. Then I dragged up a stool and watched Joe cook. It was one of my favorite things to do.

I told him that a teenage girl had been found in the street like roadkill, bleeding out from a recent pregnancy and delivery. That she'd almost died from loss of blood. That she was still barely lucid, so I had spent the past twelve hours running through missing persons files in every state in the union, waiting for her to talk.

"All we know is that her name is Avis Richardson," I said to Joe. "Conklin and I have called about two hundred Richardsons in the Bay Area. So far no luck. Wouldn't you think her parents—or someone—would have reported her missing?"

"You think she was abducted? Maybe she's not local."

"Good point," I said. "But still, no hits in VICAP." I worked on my butter-sautéed chicken. Slurped

some wine. I was kind of hoping that between the sustenance and Joe's FBI-trained mind, some insight would come to me.

There was a newborn out there somewhere. He might be dying or dead, or in transit to another country. Dr. Rifkin said the gap in Avis Richardson's memory had to do with whatever medication she had taken and that she didn't know what kind it was or how long ago she had taken it. There was a chance Avis might *never* remember more than what she'd already told us. Particularly if she'd been knocked out during the trauma.

I was hoping that her body had a memory of giving birth and that she was emotionally aware of her terrible loss. That maybe that physical memory would trigger an actual one and she'd remember something critical if we gave her enough time.

"Joe, despite all that has happened to her recently, why can't she tell us how to reach her parents? Is she unable? Or unwilling?"

Joe said, "Maybe she was living on the street."

"She was found just about naked. Wearing a two-dollar rain poncho. You could be right."

Joe took away my empty plate, loaded the dishwasher according to a system of his own devising, and gave me a bowl of praline ice cream and a spoon. I got up from my stool and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"I don't deserve you," I said. "But I sure do love you to death."

He kissed me and said, "Did you try Facebook?"

"Facebook?"

"See if Avis has a page. And then here's an idea. Come to bed."

Chapter 6

“I’LL JOIN YOU IN A BIT,” I said to Joe’s back as he walked down the hall to our bedroom.

I took my laptop to the sofa and reclined with my head against the armrest, Martha lying across my feet.

I opened a Facebook account and did a search for Avis Richardson. After some fancy finger navigation, I found her home page, which wasn’t privacy protected. I read the messages on her wall, mostly innocuous shout-outs and references to parties, all of which meant nothing to me. But I did learn that Avis attended Brighton Academy, a pricey boarding school near the Presidio.

I called Conklin at around midnight to tell him that we had to track down the head of Brighton, but I got his voice mail. I left a message saying, “Call me anytime. I’m up.” I made coffee and then accessed Brighton’s website.

The site was designed to attract kids and their parents to the school and, if you could believe the hype and the photos, Brighton Academy was a little bit of heaven. The kids—all of them good-looking and well groomed—were shown studying, onstage in the auditorium, or on the soccer field. Avis was in a couple of those photos. I saw a happy kid who was nothing like the young woman lying in a hospital bed.

I recognized other kids, ones I’d seen on Avis’s Facebook page.

I made a list of their names.

And then I heard a baby crying.

When I opened my eyes, I was still on the sofa, my laptop closed, with Martha on the floor beside me. She was whining in her dreams.

The digital clock on the DVR showed a couple of minutes before seven in the morning. I had a terrible realization. This was only my second night in our apartment as a married woman, and it was the first time, ever, that I’d slept in the same house as Joe but not in the same bed.

I poured out some kibble for Martha, then peeked into the bedroom where Joe was sleeping. I called his name and touched his face, but he rolled over and went deeper into sleep. I showered and dressed quietly and then walked Martha up and down Lake Street, thinking about Joe and our marriage vows and about what it meant to be part of this team of two.

I would have to be more considerate.

I had to remember that I wasn’t single anymore.

A moment later, my mind boomeranged back to Avis Richardson and her missing baby.

That child. That child. Where was that baby?

Was he lying in the cold grass? Or had he been stuffed in a suitcase and into the cargo hold of a ship?

I called Conklin’s cell at 7:30, and this time I got him.

“Avis Richardson goes to Brighton Academy. That’s one of those boarding schools where parents who live out of state park their kids.”

“It might explain why no one is looking for her,” Conklin said. “I was just talking with K-9. The hounds are going in circles. If Avis was transported from point A to point B by car, that would have broken the circular trail.”

“Crap,” I said. “So, she could have delivered the baby anywhere and then been dumped by the lake. No way to know where point A was.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” he said.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital in fifteen minutes,” I said. “~~Avis Richardson’s memory is all we’ve got.~~”

When we got to Avis Richardson’s hospital room, it was empty, and so was her bed.

“What’s this now? Did she *die*?” I asked my partner, my voice colored by unadulterated exasperation.

The nurse came in behind me on crepe-soled shoes. She was a tiny thing with very muscular arms and wild gray hair. I recognized her from the night before.

“It’s not my fault, Sergeant. I checked on Ms. Richardson, then went down the hall for a quarter of a minute,” said the nurse. “This girl of yours scampered when my back was turned. Appears she took some clothing from Mrs. Klein in the room next door. And then she must’ve just walked the hell out of here.”

Chapter 7

AT 8:30 THAT MORNING, Yuki Castellano was sitting at the oak table in a small conference room in the DA's Office on the eighth floor of the Hall.

Predictably, she was anxious.

Right now, she was running a low-grade anxiety that would heat up as it got closer to the actual start of the trial.

Today was a big day. And a lot was at stake.

She'd put in a year of work on this case, and it was all going to happen in less than half an hour. Court would convene. Dr. Candace Martin would go on trial for murder in the first degree, and Yuki was the prosecuting attorney.

Yuki knew every angle of this case, every witness, every crumb of physical and circumstantial evidence.

The defendant was guilty, and Yuki needed to convict her, for the sake of her reputation in the office and for her belief in herself.

Yuki was satisfied with the jury selection. The case folders stored on her laptop were in perfect order. She had exhibits in an accordion file, and a short stack of index cards to prompt her in case she got stuck while giving her opening statement.

She'd been practicing her opener for several days, rehearsing with her boss and several of her ADA colleagues. She'd rehearsed again with her deputy and second chair, Nick Gaines.

She had her opening statement down cold, and the case would simply flow from there.

Just then, Nick came into the conference room, bringing coffee for two, a smile on his face, his shaggy hair hanging over his collar.

"You look hot," he said to her.

Yuki waved away the compliment. She was in what she called her "full-court dress": a white button-down silk-blend shirt, her late mother's pearls, a navy-blue pin-striped suit, and short stacked heels. One magenta streak blazed in her shoulder-length black hair.

"I want to look *cool*," she said. "Unflappable. Prepared. And I want to scare the snot out of the defense."

Gaines laughed. And then Yuki did, too.

"What do you say, Nicky? Let's get there early," she said.

The two ADAs walked through the maze of cubicles out to the hallway. They got on the elevator and rode down to the third floor, where doors to the courtrooms lined both sides of the main corridor.

Yuki was inside her head, psyching herself up as she made this walk. She reminded herself that she was dedicated. She was smart. She was buttoned up to her chin and she knew what she was going to say.

And now for the hardest thing.

She had to kick doubt's ass right out of her mind.

Chapter 8

GAINES HELD THE DOOR for Yuki, then followed her into the wood-paneled courtroom. The defense table was empty. There were only half a dozen people in the gallery.

They settled in at the prosecutors' table behind the bar. Yuki straightened her jacket and her hair and then squared her notebook computer with the edge of the table.

"If I get stuck, just smile at me," Yuki said to her second chair.

Gaines grinned, gave her a thumbs-up, and said, "You've heard of *Cool Hand Luke*? When you see this, it means Cool Hand Yuki."

"Thanks, Nicky."

Yuki was always prepared, but she'd lost a number of cases she had been favored to win. And that losing streak had taken a bite out of her confidence. She'd won her last case, but her opponent had given her a parting shot that still stung.

"What's that, Yuki?" the jerk had said. "Your first win in how long?"

Now she was going up against Philip Hoffman, and she'd lost to him before. Hoffman was no jerk. In fact, he was a gentleman. He wasn't theatrical. He wasn't snide. He was a serious dude, partner in a law firm of the highest order, and he specialized in criminal defense of the wealthy.

Hoffman's client, Dr. Candace Martin, was a well-known heart surgeon who'd killed her philandering louse of a husband.

Candace Martin was pleading not guilty. She said she didn't kill Dennis Martin, but that was a monumental lie. There was enough evidence to convict her a few times over. And yes, the People even had the smoking gun.

Yuki's nervousness faded.

She knew her stuff. And she had the evidence to prove it.

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