JAMES PATTERSON
& MAXINE PAETRO

SPECIAL FREE PREVIEW:
THE FIRST 30 CHAPTERS

10TH ANNIVERSARY
10th Anniversary
The Women’s Murder Club

10th Anniversary (with Maxine Paetro)
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10th Anniversary

James Patterson

AND

Maxine Paetro

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK   BOSTON   LONDON
For Isabelle Patterson
and Madeline Paetro
Prologue

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 feinted. 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 a 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.
Book One

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.
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? Or 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 a 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 lead 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.”
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.
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 deliv-
ery. That she’d almost died from loss of blood. That she was
still barely lucid, so I had spent the past twelve hours run-
ning 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 Rich-
ardsons 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. Riffkin
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.”
“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.”
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.
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.
CINDY THOMAS was one of two dozen people in the editorial meeting in the big conference room at the San Francisco Chronicle. The meeting had started an hour ago and it looked as though it could go on for another hour.

Used to be that these meetings were collegial and fun, with people making cracks and busting chops, but ever since the economic downturn and the free-and-easy access to the Internet as a news source, editorial meetings had a scary subtext.

Who would keep their job?
Who would be doing the job of two people?
And could the paper stay in business for another year?

There was a new gunslinger in town: Lisa Greening, who had come in as managing editor under the publisher. Lisa had eight years of management experience, two years at
the New York Times, three at the Chicago Tribune, and three at the L.A. Times.

Her claim to fame had been an investigative report for the latter on the PC Killer, a smooth con man with a foot fetish who’d terrorized the Pacific Coast, luring women, killing them, and keeping their feet in his freezer as trophies.

Greening had won a Pulitzer for that story and had parlayed it into her new post at the Chronicle.

Since Cindy was the Chronicle’s crime desk reporter, she felt particularly vulnerable. Lisa Greening knew the crime beat as well as Cindy did—probably better—and if she failed to live up to a very high standard, Cindy knew she could become a budget cut. Greening would pick up her territory, and Cindy would become a freelancer working for scraps.

Half the editors in the room had given status reports, and Abadaya Premawardena, the travel editor, was up.

Prem was talking about cruise ship packages and discounts on Fiji and Samoa when Cindy got up and went to the back of the room and refilled her mug at the coffee urn.

Her last big story, which was about Hello Kitty, a jewel thief who preyed on the rich and famous, had been a huge and splashy success. The thief had either skipped town or retired, probably due to the work Cindy had done. But that was old news now, and the next big story, the kind that sold newspapers, had yet to appear.

Cindy sat back down as Prem finished his report, and Lisa Greening turned her sharp gray eyes on Cindy.

“Cynthia, what’s coming up for us this week?”
“My ATM mugger story is wrapping up,” Cindy said. “The kid was arraigned and is being held without bond.”

“That was in your column yesterday, Cynthia. What’s up for today?”

“I’m working on a couple of ideas,” she said.

“Speak up if you need assistance.”

“I’m good,” said Cindy. “Not a problem.”

She flashed a smile at Greening, a smile that was both charming and confident, and the editor moved on to the next in line. Cindy couldn’t have reported anything about the next hour.

Only that it was finally over.
CINDY LEFT the editorial meeting in a deep funk. She walked down the hall to her office and before even sitting down called Hai Nguyen, her cop contact in Robbery.

“Anything new on ATM Boy?” she asked.

Nguyen said, “Sorry, Cindy, but we’ve got no comment at this time.”

Cindy believed that Nguyen would help her if he could, but that woulda-coulda sentiment was of no help to her. While the cops and robber worked out their deal, Cindy still had eight column inches to fill by four o’clock today.

How was she going to do that?

She had just hung her coat on the hanger behind her office door when her desk phone rang.

The caller ID read “Metro Hospital ER.”
She grabbed the receiver and said, “Crime desk. Thomas.”

“Cindy, it’s me, Joyce.”

Joyce Miller was an ER nurse, smart, compassionate, and companionable. She and Cindy had once lived in the same apartment building and had bonded over single-girl nights, drinking cheap Bordeaux and watching movies on Sundance.

“Joyce. What’s wrong?”

“My cousin Laura, she’s acting weird. Like she’s just visited an alternate universe. You met her at my birthday. She works for a law firm. She loved you. Listen, I talked her into coming into the ER by saying I’d get her some sleep meds, but she won’t let a doctor touch her and she won’t call the police.”

“What do you mean, she’s ‘acting weird’?”

“She must’ve been drugged. And I think something happened to her while she was out. For eight hours. Woke up in the shrubbery near her front door. That’s what I mean by acting weird. I love this girl, Cindy. Will you come here while I’ve got her? I think together we can get her to talk.”

“Right now?” Cindy asked. She looked at her Swatch. Only six hours until her drop-dead deadline at four o’clock. Eight empty column inches that she’d told Lisa Greening she could fill. It was a crevasse of empty space.

“She’s like a sister to me, Cindy,” Joyce said, her voice breaking with emotion.

Cindy sighed.
She forwarded her calls to the front desk and left the building. She took BART to 24th, walked four blocks to Metropolitan Hospital at Valencia and 26th, and met Joyce just outside the ambulance bay. The friends hugged, and then Joyce led Cindy into the crush and swarm of the ER.
LAURA RIZZO sat at the edge of a hospital bed in the ER. She was about Cindy’s age, around thirty-five, raven-haired with an athletic build, and she was wearing jeans and a dark blue Boston U sweatshirt. Her movements were jerky and her eyes were open so wide, you could see a margin of white completely surrounding her irises. She looked like she’d been plugged into an electric outlet.

“Laura,” Joyce said. “You remember Cindy Thomas?”

“Yeah…. Hi. Why—why are you here?”

Joyce said, “Cindy is smart about things like this. I want you to tell her what happened to you.”

“Look. It’s nice of you to come, I guess, but what is this, Joyce? I didn’t tell you so that you’d bring in reinforcements. I’m fine. I just need something for sleep.”

“Listen, Laura. Get real, would you, please? You called me
because you’re freaked out, and you should be freaked out. Something happened to you. Something bad.”

Laura glared at Joyce, then turned and said to Cindy, “I have to say, my mind’s a blank. I was coming home from work last night. I remember thinking about getting pizza for dinner and a bottle of wine. I woke up lying in the hydrangeas outside my apartment building at around 2 a.m. No pizza. No wine. And I don't know how I got there.”

“Good lord,” Joyce said, shaking her head. “So you just got up and went inside?”

“What else could I do? My bag was right there. Everything was in it, so I hadn't been robbed. I went upstairs and took a shower. I noticed then that I felt sore—”

“Sore where? Like you'd been in a fight?” Cindy asked.

“Here,” Laura said, pointing to the crotch of her jeans.

“You were assaulted?”

“Yeah. Like that. And as I'm standing there in the shower, I have like this vague memory of a man’s voice. Something about winning a lot of money, but I sure don't feel like I won anything.”

“Did you go somewhere after work? A bar or a party?”

“I’m not a party girl, Cindy. I’m like a nun. I was going home. Somehow, I—I don’t know,” Laura said. “Joyce, even if I let a doctor examine me, I don’t want to tell the cops. “I know cops. My uncle was a cop. If I tell them that I don’t know anything about what happened to me, they’re going to think I’m a wacko.”
PHIL HOFFMAN PACED in front of the reception desk at the seventh-floor jail in the Hall of Justice. He was waiting for his client Dr. Candace Martin, who was changing out of her prison uniform in preparation for her first day of trial.

Candace was holding up well.

She was determined. She was focused. And while she was uncomfortable in her present circumstances, she had borne up well under the confinement—the close contact with the other inmates, the rules—because that was what it took to get to this day.

Now it was up to him.

If Phil won an acquittal, Candace would go back to her job as head of cardiac surgery at Metro Hospital. The stain on her name would be eradicated. She would be able to pick
up the parenting of her two children, who were, even now, waiting for them outside the courtroom.

Phil had talked to both of the kids, and in his judgment they could handle the pressure. But he did expect a challenge from opposing counsel.

Phil had gone up against Yuki Castellano before, and he quite liked her. She was feisty and she was smart, but Hoffman knew her greatest weakness, too. Yuki bulled ahead, wielding her passion while skipping over potholes and ignoring warning signs that the bridge ahead was out.

Without being cocky about it, he liked his odds of winning better than hers.

Phil stopped pacing. There was a clanking of barred doors, then the echo of footsteps, and Candace came through the door in a tailored suit and handcuffs.

“Hey, Phil,” Candace said.

Phil came toward her, touched her shoulder, and said, “How are you doing? Okay?”

“Way better than okay, Phil. I’ve been waiting for this day for a lifetime. A year, anyway.”

The guard removed her handcuffs and said, “Good luck, Dr. Martin.”

Candace rubbed her wrists. “Thanks, Dede. See you later.”

Phil held the elevator door for Candace and smiled at her as they descended to the third floor.

He’d also been waiting for this day for more than a year. And he was pretty sure that today was going to be a very good day.
ALL TWO HUNDRED people in courtroom 3B seemed to be talking at once. Yuki was texting her boss to tell him there’d been a mysterious delay when, at just after ten, the bailiff called out, “All rise for His Honor, Judge Byron LaVan,” and the judge entered the oak-paneled courtroom.

LaVan was fifty-two, a square-jawed man with wild dark hair and black-rimmed glasses. He was known to be a short-tempered judge with an impressive background in criminal law.

He took the bench, the seal of the state of California behind him, the American flag to his right, the state flag to his left. Laptop open in front of him, he was ready to start.

When the gallery was reseated, the judge brusquely apologized for his lateness, saying there had been a family emergency. Then he asked the bailiff to bring in the jury.
The twelve jurors and two alternates filed into the jury box, fumbled with their handbags and notebooks, and settled into their maroon swivel chairs. To Yuki’s right, Phil Hoffman whispered to his client, Dr. Candace Martin.

Sitting in the first row, directly behind Dr. Martin, were her two beautiful young children, Caitlin and Duncan, looking like angels. Angels who didn’t know what the hell was happening.

So, that was how Hoffman was going to play it, Yuki thought. He was going to go for sympathy from the jury.

Suddenly Yuki was struck with a sickening realization. Bringing the kids to court wasn’t just a bid for sympathy from the jury. Hoffman was forcing her to dial down her rhetoric so that she wouldn’t upset the kids.

Controlling son of a bitch.

She couldn’t let him get away with that.

Yuki listened to the judge instruct the jury, but a part of her mind was on her former, lucrative job in a big-deal law firm, which she’d quit so that she could do something meaningful—for herself and for the people of San Francisco.

Not that she was a selfless do-gooder. After two years of defending the rich, Yuki had become highly motivated to put away killers like Candace Martin who thought they could hire a thousand-dollar-an-hour defense attorney and beat the rap.

The judge finished his talk to the jury and turned to face the courtroom. Yuki got to her feet and said, “Your Honor, may I approach the bench?”

Judge LaVan looked at her like she had farted in court.
Too bad, she thought. She stood firm until the judge signaled to Yuki and Hoffman to step forward.

Hoffman’s sequoia-like height dwarfed Yuki’s five foot two. She felt young and small by comparison, the top of her head about level with Hoffman’s armpit.

Yuki said, “Your Honor, I object to the defendant’s young children being present in the courtroom. The State is accusing their mother of killing their father. When I say what I have to say, the kids are going to get upset, which is going to make the jury sympathize with the defendant.”

LaVan said, “Mr. Hoffman? Have you got a position on this?”

“The kids are well behaved and they know the truth, Your Honor. Their mother is innocent. They’re here to show their support.”

LaVan cleaned his glasses with a tissue, repositioned them on the bridge of his nose, and said, “Ms. Castellano, do your job. Ignore the kids. I’ll instruct the jury to do the same. Let’s get on with it, shall we? Is the prosecution ready?”

“Yes, Your Honor, we are.”

“Then tell us what you’ve got.”
YUKI’S HEART WAS PUMPING pure hot adrenaline as she crossed the well of the courtroom and took the lectern. She reminded herself to relax her shoulders and smile as she swept the jury box with her eyes. Then she launched into her opening argument.

“The defendant is charged with premeditated murder—that is, murder in the first degree,” Yuki said, her voice ringing out over the courtroom.

“In the next few days, the State will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant, Candace Martin, shot and killed her husband, Dennis Martin. We will introduce physical evidence and testimony that will show that Dr. Martin’s hands are not just dirty, they’re as black as sin.”

There was a gratifying intake of breath in the courtroom,
and Yuki waited out the whispers moving like a wind across the gallery. Then she began to lay out the prosecution’s case as neatly as a hand of solitaire.

“Dennis Martin was shot to death in the foyer of his home on the night of September fourteenth of last year. This is not in dispute.

“The four people who were in the house at the time of the murder were Candace Martin, her two children, and the family cook. All were questioned by the police, and evidence was taken. The twenty-two-caliber handgun that was used to kill Dennis Martin was collected at the scene of the crime and so was the gunshot residue on Candace Martin’s hands.

“There is only one way to get GSR on your hands,” Yuki told the jury. “You get it by firing a gun.”

Yuki told the jury that Candace Martin had the means and the opportunity to kill her husband.

“We’re not required to show motive, but we will tell you why Candace Martin planned and executed this murder.

“Dennis Martin was a habitual womanizer, and at the time of his death, he was having another affair. But Mr. Martin didn’t try to cover up his activities.

“During their thirteen years of marriage, Mr. Martin taunted his wife with his infidelity and finally, on September fourteenth, she’d had enough.

“In our society, marital infidelity is punishable by divorce, but Candace Martin figured her husband deserved the death penalty. With her husband dead, she’d get the kids, the three-point-five-million-dollar home, and everything in their
combined bank accounts. She’d also get the meal that is best served cold — revenge.”

Yuki sneaked a glance at the Martin children. The little boy’s mouth was hanging open. The little girl was scowling. The judge had said “Ignore them” and Yuki tried to do that as she preemptively set fire to the defense’s position.

“Mr. Hoffman will tell you that his client didn’t do it,” Yuki told the jurors. “He will say that the defendant was in her home office when she heard shots in the foyer. He will say that she found her husband bleeding on the floor, that she checked his pulse, that she realized that her husband was dead. And then — what do you know? She heard an intruder leaving by the front door.

“Mr. Hoffman will tell you that Candace Martin called out and that the intruder was startled and dropped his gun. And he will tell you that his client picked up the gun and followed the intruder outside and fired at him.

“That’s the defense’s explanation for the gunshot residue on Candace Martin’s hands.

“There’s only one problem,” Yuki said to the fourteen men and women in the jury box. “This story is entirely *bogus.*

“There was no intruder.

“There was no forced entry into the house, and nothing was stolen.

“But Candace Martin had told several people that she wanted her husband dead, and the *very evening* of the fatal incident she was seen handling a gun.

“Our job in the DA’s office is to speak for the victim,” Yuki
said, “and we will do that. But if Mr. Martin could speak for himself, he’d tell you who killed him,” said Yuki, pointing at the pretty, blond heart surgeon who was chewing on the ends of her hair.

“He’d tell you that his dear wife shot him dead.”
Chapter 15

SUSIE’S CARIBBEAN CAFÉ is a mood changer in the best possible way. The walls are yellow, the calypso music is live, the food is hot, and the beer is cold. Susie’s is also the unofficial clubhouse of our gang of four, branded the Women’s Murder Club by our friend, girl reporter Cindy Thomas.

I desperately needed an hour at Susie’s. Conklin and I had spent the day looking for a newborn baby. We’d walked with cadaver dogs, checked in with divers at the edge of Lake Merced, and made an all-day, fruitless canvass of houses in the area, with Avis Richardson’s photo in hand, asking, “Have you seen this girl?”

Then, ten minutes ago, a stunning call had come in to Jacobi. Avis Richardson had turned up behind the locked doors of a schoolmate’s parents’ apartment on Russian Hill. These “do-gooders” were keeping Avis away from the cops.
until her parents could arrive from New Zealand. So Avis had been located, but we still had no leads on her baby, who was either missing or dead.

Probably both.

Claire and I drove to Susie’s together in my car and parked in a miraculously empty spot on Jackson Street near the corner of Montgomery. We came through the door into the lilt- ing beat of steel drums and laughter, and waved to casual friends. We passed the bar and took the narrow and aromatic aisle past the kitchen to the cozy back room where Yuki was already holding down our booth.

Lorraine called out, “Hey, y’all,” and brought over a frosty pitcher of beer, along with Yuki’s watermelon margarita. Yuki cannot hold her liquor, but that doesn’t stop her from drinking it.

I slid into the banquette next to Yuki, while Claire took the other side of the booth. Yuki lifted her glass of pink liquid mind-bender and took a slug.

“Sip it!” we shouted to her in unison.

Yuki snorted tequila up her nose and sputtered, “I have earned the right to get drunk. I made a brilliant opener and then the judge gets a call. His sick mother is fading fast. He adjourns court for the day. By tomorrow, Phil Hoffman will have read the transcript and will pick my bones clean in his opener.”

At that, Cindy, dependably the last to arrive, scooted into the booth next to Claire and bumped her hip, saying, “Give me a couple of inches here, girlfriend.”

Claire said, “Are you all going to listen to what happened
to me today? Or do I have to fight for the talking stick? Because I will do it.”

“You go first,” Yuki said, holding up her empty glass to the light. Claire didn’t wait for anyone to object.

“I get called to go to this house in the Sacramento Delta,” she said. “A friend of mine called in a favor. So I drive to this swampland—can only get there by these veiny little roads and levees—and I find this hunting cabin.

“This old dude who lives there paid all his bills two weeks in advance and hasn’t been seen since. Now people are starting to ask, ‘What happened to Mr. Wingnut?’”

Cindy was thumbing the keys on her Crackberry while Claire told her story.

“There’s this long lump under the bedcovers,” Claire said, plucking the PDA out of Cindy’s hand, putting it in her pocket, treating Cindy like she was a little girl.

“Hey!” said Cindy.

I had to laugh—and I did.

Claire went on, ignoring Cindy pawing at her pocket and retrieving her phone. “I pull back the blankets and the dead man has been mummified by the heat and he’s holding a freakin’ AK forty-seven in his hands.”

Cindy stopped what she was doing and stared at Claire.

“He was dead? Holding an AK forty-seven?”

“He killed himself with that gun,” Claire said. “Sent my pulse rocketing into the low one-eighties. You can believe that.”

Cindy looked stricken.

“I’m okay, now, sugar,” said Claire. “It was just a scare.”
10th Anniversary

Cindy swiveled her head toward me, her blond curls bouncing, her clear blue eyes locking on mine.

“That text I just got was from Metro Emergency,” she said. “Another girl thinks she was raped.”

“Another girl? *Thinks* she was raped?”

“Linds, I feel it in my gut. A very wonky story is brewing. Do me a favor, will you? Give me a lift to the hospital.”
I GUNNED MY CAR along Columbus Avenue to Montgomery Street and past the Transamerica Pyramid, my siren whooping to clear a lane in the dinner-hour rush.

Beside me Cindy clung to her armrest and told me about Laura Rizzo, a woman who might have been drugged and assaulted the same night Avis Richardson was found wandering under a moonless sky fifteen miles north of the city.

I had to check out Cindy’s “wonky story.”

Two girls had been assaulted now, maybe three—and none of them had memories of the assaults? Could there be a connection to Avis Richardson? Or was I just wishing for a lead—any lead?

I brought Cindy up to speed on the Richardson case as
I reached the intersection of Montgomery and Market streets. I came close to clipping a big-assed Lexus and ran onto the trolley tracks along Market. I jerked the wheel again and put the traffic jam behind me. Cindy was pale, but I just kept driving.

“A teenage girl was brought into Metro ER by passersby a couple of nights ago,” I told Cindy. “That’s off the record.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Seriously.”

“Yes, Lindsay. O. Kay. It’s off the record.”

I nodded, took a hard right, and turned onto Mission on two wheels, flying past Yerba Buena Gardens on my left. You almost had to get promises from Cindy in writing. She’s honest, but what can I say? She’s a reporter. And we weren’t ready to churn the waters with a kidnapped baby story.

I still didn’t know what we had. Was Avis Richardson a victim of multiple savage crimes? Or had she killed her own child? I kept my foot on the gas as if that would actually bring the Richardson baby home.

“This teenager had recently given birth,” I went on, taking the car through the heart of the Hispanic area of town. We passed check-cashing holes-in-the-wall and cheap souvenir vendors selling T-shirts out of the old 1920s theaters under their cracked and faded marquees.

I turned right onto 26th, still talking. “But the thing is, Cindy, no baby was found. The girl didn’t remember the delivery, and now that the shock is wearing off and she might be able to talk to us, she won’t do it.”
“Why the hell not?”
“I swear I don’t know.”

Cindy made me promise to tell her *whatever* I could, *whenever* I could, *on* the record. I nodded yes as I turned left on Valencia and parked my old heap in front of the hospital.
Cindy and I entered the crowded lobby of Metropolitan Hospital and found Cindy’s friend, Joyce Miller, waiting for us at the main desk. She was a dark-haired woman, maybe thirty-five, wearing a nurse’s uniform.

She pumped my hand with both of hers.

“Thanks for coming, Lindsay. Thanks so much.”

We followed Joyce down a number of branching linoleum-tiled corridors, around corners, and then through the ER, an obstacle course of gurneys and wheelchairs, before we came to a partitioned stall where we met Anne Bennett, a possible rape victim.

Ms. Bennett was a travel agent in her early forties. She looked as fatigued as if she’d been running on a treadmill for the past eight hours.

Her voice quavered as she said that she remembered
taking a cab to her office this morning but she woke up behind a Dumpster in an alley a block from her house.

“I don’t remember a damned thing,” Ms. Bennett told me. “My blouse had been buttoned wrong. My pantyhose were gone, but I was still wearing my black pumps with the gold buckles. My handbag was on my chest and my phone and my wallet were still in it. Forty-four bucks. Just what I’d had.”

“And you remember nothing of the ten hours between leaving for work and waking up?”

“It was as if someone had turned off my lights,” Anne Bennett said, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes.

“The doctor said it appeared I’d suffered sexual trauma. The last time I had sex with my boyfriend was four days ago. And there was nothing traumatic about it. We’ve been together so long, it’s no-drama sex, and that’s just the way I like it.”

Anne Bennett was telling the story straight and clearly, but panic flashed in her eyes. It was like she was searching her memory—and finding nothing there.
Chapter 18

HOFFMAN STOOD AS COURT was called to order and the jury filed in. He retook his seat, thinking about juror number three, Valerie Truman, the single mother who worked at a library and earned a thousandth of what Candace Martin made in a year. And he thought of number seven, William Breitling, a retired golf pro with a ton of charisma. Breitling wasn’t the foreman, but Hoffman believed he could influence the jury.

When Judge LaVan asked Hoffman if he was ready to present his case, he said that he was and walked from his seat beside Candace Martin directly to the jury box.

He rested his hand on the railing, greeted the jurors, and began.

“Yesterday, the prosecution gave their opening statement. I think Ms. Castellano did a pretty good job, but she left out a
couple of important points. For starters, Dr. Martin is innocent.”

William Breitling smiled with a full set of veneers, and Hoffman felt the ice melt in the jury box.

“Here's what happened on the evening of September fourteenth,” Hoffman said. “Dr. Martin had just come home from the hospital. She had successfully repaired a man's heart that day and she was satisfied that her patient was going to recover completely.

“She said hello to each of her children, then went down the hall to her home office to call the patient’s wife.

“Dr. Martin had removed her glasses so she could rub her eyes and was about to make the call when she heard what sounded like shots coming from the foyer.

“The shots startled her and she knocked her glasses to the floor. This is one of those important points I mentioned.”

Hoffman walked the length of the jury box, touching the rail now and then for emphasis. The jurors followed him with their eyes as he described how his client had found her husband lying on the floor, saw the blood, and, after checking, discovered that Dennis Martin had no vital signs.

“When she looked up, she saw someone, an intruder, who was in the shadows of the foyer. Dr. Martin couldn’t make out the intruder's face and she was terrified. She shouted in surprise, and the intruder dropped his gun and ran. My client picked the gun up and ran after him, through the front door and out onto the front steps.

“Dr. Martin had never fired a gun before, but she let off a
couple of shots into the air. She hit nothing. That is how she got gunshot residue on her hands.

“Immediately after firing those shots, Dr. Martin went back into her house and called the police. That is the act of an innocent person,” Hoffman said.

“The prosecution says that Dennis Martin was a philandering rat but that being a rat isn’t a crime punishable by death. Well, that’s true. And Dr. Martin knew it. She also knew that her marriage was going through a bad spell. She, too, was having an affair.

“She wasn’t jealous. She figured the marriage would right itself in due course or it would end. She was prepared for either outcome.

“Candace Martin is a modern and successful woman. She isn’t a Pollyanna and she isn’t the Orange Blossom princess, but she is a highly respected cardiac surgeon and a marvelous mother, and she also loved her husband.”

Hoffman turned toward his client.

“I want you to look at her now,” he said to the jurors, “and see her for what she is: the victim of an overworked police department that took the easy solution—blame the spouse. And she’s being tried by an overzealous prosecutor who, for her own reasons, needs to score a big win.”
YUKI FELT PHIL HOFFMAN’S smash return right between her eyes. Holy crap. Hoffman’s shot at her was outrageous and maybe even defamatory. She had a flash fantasy of making an objection: “Your Honor, opposing counsel is freaking desperate and should be thrown out of the court.”

Nick Gaines, Yuki’s second chair and wingman, pushed a notepad toward her. He was a gifted cartoonist and in a few strokes had captured a lanky Phil Hoffman grabbing at his throat and a stick-figure Yuki with a slingshot and a title: “Underdog.”

Yuki pushed the pad back to Gaines. She got his point. The jury would like her more as a result of Hoffman’s low blow. She would overcome the slam. As for now she reminded herself, “Never let ‘em see you sweat.”
She stood and said, “Your Honor, will you please remind the jury that opening statements are not evidence?”

“Consider it done, Ms. Castellano,” LaVan said with a sigh.

Yuki’s first witness was the uniformed patrolman who answered the radio call to the Martins’ house. Officer Patrick Lawrence testified that he was only blocks away and had arrived with his partner within a minute of the call. He said that he had interviewed Dr. Martin and kept her company as the EMS arrived and until Inspector Chi of Homicide and Lieutenant Clapper of the Crime Scene Unit took possession of the scene.

Yuki established that Dr. Martin seemed in control of her emotions and that because of Officer Lawrence’s quick arrival, Candace Martin hadn’t had a chance to wash her hands or clean up the crime scene.

After Officer Lawrence left the stand, Yuki called private investigator Joseph Podesta, and he was sworn in. Podesta was a neat and pleasant-looking man in his fifties who had been hired by Dennis Martin to snoop on his wife.

Yuki questioned Podesta on his credentials, and he told the jury that he had been an investigator for the district attorney in Sacramento for twelve years and a private investigator, first in Chicago and currently in San Francisco, for a combined twenty years.

“Why did Dennis Martin hire you, Mr. Podesta?” Yuki asked.

“Mr. Martin knew that his wife was having an affair and he wanted pictures of them, uh, in flagrante delicto.”
“Did you get pictures of the defendant with her lover?”
“Yes, I did.”
“Did you learn anything else during the time she was the subject of your investigation?” Yuki asked.
“Yes.”
“Please tell us what you learned.”
“On one of the nights I was tailing her, Candace Martin met with a man I believe to be a contract killer.”

A rumble came up from the gallery, and Hoffman shot to his feet with an objection.

“Your Honor, this is pure hearsay. How can this witness know that the man he says he saw is a contract killer? If he was so sure, why didn’t he call the police? Instead, the State is using this extremely dubious testimony to impugn the reputation of a heart surgeon. How does this make any sense?”

The judge quieted the room with two hard bangs of his gavel and said, “I’d like to hear this, Mr. Hoffman.”

When she could speak again, Yuki asked, “You have proof of this meeting, Mr. Podesta?”

“I followed Dr. Martin from her house in St. Francis Wood to Hunters Point. I followed her to Davidson Avenue. That’s a dead end. A late-model Toyota SUV was parked at the end of the street, where it butts up against the I-280 overpass. This is a bad neighborhood, but I was able to watch without being seen.”

“Go on, Mr. Podesta.”

“The meeting was clearly clandestine,” Podesta said. “I took photographs of Dr. Martin getting into this SUV. When
I downloaded them onto my computer later, I thought I’d seen the man’s face before.”

“And what happened next?”

“Two weeks later Dennis Martin was murdered.”

“What did you do, Mr. Podesta?”

“I compared my picture of the man in the SUV to pictures on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. In my opinion, the man I saw talking to Dr. Martin was Gregor Guzman.”

“And why is Mr. Guzman on the FBI list?”

“Your Honor. Is this witness an FBI agent? What the—?”

“Sit down, Mr. Hoffman. The witness may answer to the best of his knowledge.”

“Gregor Guzman is wanted on suspicion of murder in California as well as a few other states and other countries. He’s never been arrested. I contacted the FBI three times, but no one ever got back to me.”

Yuki introduced the photograph of Candace Martin sitting in a dark sports utility vehicle with a balding man with a shock of hair at the front of his scalp. It was a grainy photo, taken with a long lens at night, but it appeared as Podesta described it.

“Thank you,” Yuki said. “That’s all I have for you, Mr. Podesta.”
“YOUR HONOR, SIDEBAR?” Hoffman said stiffly.

The judge waved the two attorneys in toward the bench and said, “Go ahead, Mr. Hoffman.”

“Your Honor, this witness is a private investigator. He’s not even a cop. His testimony is pure guesswork. Where is this so-called hit man? Why isn’t he on the witness list? How do we know why my client was seeing this man, or even if this person is who the witness says he is?”

“Ms. Castellano?”

“Mr. Podesta didn’t say he was an expert witness. He followed the defendant, who got into a car with a man who resembles Gregor Guzman. Mr. Podesta took pictures of a clandestine meeting between them. He compared the picture of the man in the SUV with photos of Gregor Guzman issued by the FBI. He made a match—in his opinion. That’s his testimony.”
“Mr. Hoffman, I’ve heard you. Now, please cross-examine the witness,” LaVan said.

Phil Hoffman addressed Joseph Podesta from his seat beside his client, trying to show the jury how little regard he had for the witness.

“Mr. Podesta, I don’t know which piece of fiction to begin with. Okay, I’ve got it,” he said before Yuki could object.

“First, have you ever worked for the FBI?”

“No.”

“Do you have any specialized training in the identification of contract killers?”

“I have a very good eye.”

“That wasn’t my question, Mr. Podesta. Do you have any specialized training in the identification of contract killers? Did you get this man’s fingerprints? Did you get his DNA? Do you have a tape recording of this assumed conversation?”

“Objection,” Yuki said. “Which question does counsel want the witness to answer?”

“I’ll withdraw all of them,” Hoffman said, “but I object to this exhibit. The quality of this photograph stinks and it proves nothing. In fact, I object to this entire testimony and move that it be stricken from the record.”

“Overruled,” said the judge. “If you’re finished questioning this witness, Mr. Hoffman, he may step down.”
“THE PEOPLE CALL Ellen Lafferty,” Yuki said.

The doors opened at the back, and a pretty, auburn-haired woman in her early twenties wearing a tight blue suit and a blouse with a bow at the neck came into the courtroom and walked down the aisle. She passed through the gate to the witness stand, where she was sworn in.

“Are you employed by Candace and the late Dennis Martin?” Yuki asked her witness.

“I am.”

“In what capacity?”

“I am the children’s nanny. I work days and live out.”

“How long have you worked in the Martin house?” Yuki asked.

“Just about three years.”
Yuki nodded encouragingly. “In your opinion, what was the state of the Martin marriage?” she asked.

“In a word,” Lafferty said, “explosive.”

“Could you give us a couple more words?”

“They hated each other,” said the nanny. “Dennis wanted to divorce Candace, and she was furious about it. She once told me she thought getting a divorce would be messy. It would hurt her children as well as her standing in the medical community.”

“I see,” Yuki said. The witness was describing a marriage held together by practical considerations rather than love, and Yuki knew the jury would understand that.

“Were you in the Martin house on the day that Dennis Martin was killed?”

“Yes. I was,” Lafferty said. She had kept her eyes on Yuki until this moment, but now she swung her gaze toward the defendant and fixed it there.

“Did something remarkable happen that evening?”

“Absolutely.”

“Please go on.”

Lafferty turned back to Yuki.

“I was getting ready to leave for the day. It was six o’clock and I was going to meet a girlfriend at Dow’s Imperial Chinese at six-fifteen. We hadn’t seen each other in a while and I was really looking forward to seeing her.”

“Go on,” Yuki said.

Lafferty said, “I was putting on my lipstick when Dr. Martin came home. She had a funny look on her face. Distracted,
or maybe angry. I went into her office to ask her if everything was okay, and when I got there, she was putting a handgun in her desk drawer.”

“You’re sure it was a gun?” Yuki asked.

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Did Dr. Martin ever tell you she wished her husband were dead?”

“Many times. Too many to count.”

“Too many to count,” Yuki said pointedly to the jury.

“And did Mr. Martin tell you about his feelings for his wife?”

“He said she was cold. He used to say that he didn’t trust her.”

“Thank you, Ms. Lafferty. That’s all I have for this witness.”

Hoffman stood, his chair scraping noisily against the oak floor. He put his hands in his pockets and approached the witness, who stiffened her shoulders and looked up at him.

“Ellen. May I call you Ellen?”

“No. I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. Ms. Lafferty. Did you think Dr. Martin was going to kill her husband?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So, if you thought she was going to commit murder and you saw Dr. Martin with a weapon, why didn’t you call the police?”

Yuki watched Lafferty’s righteous indignation melt into an expression of grief.

She said, almost begging Hoffman and the jury to understand, “I wasn’t thinking about her that night. I was in a
hurry. In hindsight, I should have called the police or warned Mr. Martin. I blame myself. If I’d done something, Mr. Martin would still be alive and the children would still have their father.”

The little boy’s wail cut through the air like a siren: “Elllllll-ennnnnnnn.”

The witness leaned forward in her chair and called out across the well of the courtroom, “Duncan. Baby. I’m right here, sweetie.”

That’s when Judge LaVan went nuts.
YUKI TOOK THE ELEVATOR up to the DA’s offices, her mind still busy with the sound of the child’s scream and Judge LaVan’s reaction.

Christ. It was as if Duncan Martin had yelled, “Stop beating me!” There was a good chance Hoffman’s sympathy ploy had worked.

Yuki left her briefcase in her windowless office, made her way to the corner office facing Bryant Street, and knocked on the open door.

Leonard Parisi, deputy district attorney and her direct superior, asked her to come in and sit down.

Parisi had been nicknamed Red Dog for his thick red hair and his unshakable determination. He was a large, pear-shaped man of fifty with coarse skin and clogged arteries, but the expression on his face was just beautiful.
He was smiling. At her.

“I peeked in this morning. Saw your examination of that private eye. Fantastic job, Yuki,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, Len. LaVan just called us into chambers,” Yuki said, taking the chair in front of his desk.

“Oh? What was that about?”

“Hoffman had the defendant’s kids in the courtroom, half to gain sympathy from the jury, half to rattle me. I objected, but LaVan overruled me.

“So I've got the Martins’ nanny on the stand, and she says if she'd called the police on Candace, Dennis would still be alive. And, Len, the little boy just screams for his nanny. Nanny calls out to him from the stand, ‘There, there, I’m here, baby.’”

“Huh, huh, huh,” Parisi grunted sympathetically.

“Court's adjourned for the day. The judge says to me and Hoffman, ‘You two. See you in back.’ He tells Hoffman, any more out of the kids, he's barring them from the courthouse.”

“Good. LaVan doesn't kid around.”

“Len, tell me what you make of this. Hoffman came up to me afterward,” Yuki told her boss. “He said, ‘You know, Ellen Lafferty's testimony was a pack of lies.’ I said, ‘Well, I sure didn't see that on cross.’ Hoffman wanted to talk to me about it, but I didn't have time. I knew it was just going to be more of his B.S.”

“Sure. He's trying to mess with your head, Yuki. Shake your confidence. Disrupt your momentum, that SOB. Listen, switching gears, I've been wanting to tell you. Craig Jasper is leaving. Moving to San Diego at the end of the month.”
Craig Jasper was a bright light in the department and had been Parisi’s protégé. Yuki told Red Dog she was sorry, but he waved the comment away.

“I see opportunities for you, Yuki. You just need a couple of wins under your belt.”

Yuki’s face brightened and she nodded. She would love to get an upgrade in status and pay grade. It was really time. The Martin case had been important a minute ago, and it just got more important.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this case,” she said, standing to leave.

“Me, too,” said Red Dog. And he smiled again.

Yuki fixed her makeup in the bathroom at the end of the hallway. She was psyched at the idea of the job and more responsibility, but it also meant more pressure. And she already had no shortage of that.

She had a date later with a guy who was almost too gorgeous for her. She hoped she could calm down and not talk too much, not scare the guy off.

They had a lot in common. The guy was a cop.
Chapter 23

I WAS LEAVING for the day when Phil Hoffman galloped up to me in the all-day lot across from the Hall. I like Hoffman, even though his job is getting off killers and perverts and other living human garbage. He was one of the few criminal defense attorneys I’d met who could actually pull off this kind of dirty work without acting smug about it.

On the other hand, Yuki was locked in mortal combat with Hoffman and she was my friend.

“Hey, Phil,” I said as he pulled up next to the spot where I’d parked my Explorer. I took off my jacket and tossed it into the backseat.

“Lindsay, I need your help.”

“Can we talk tomorrow?” I asked him. “I’ve been slogging through hell all day,” I said, thinking of the dozens of con-
secutive hours I’d been working on finding the Richardson baby.

“This will only take a minute.”

“Okay, then. Shoot.”

“You’re aware of Candace Martin?”

“Sure. My colleague Paul Chi worked the Martin case. And Yuki, of course.”

“Yes. That’s right,” Hoffman said, putting his briefcase down on the asphalt. He ran a hand through his hair. “Something new has come up regarding the testimony of one of the witnesses. I asked Yuki to hear me out, but I’m the enemy. She’s not inclined to believe anything I say.”

“Phil, why don’t you just say your piece in court?”

“If I could get Yuki’s ear out of court, it would be better for all concerned. This new information I have is going to reverse the trial. Let me be clear. The case will be dismissed and you’ll be booking someone else for Dennis Martin’s murder.”

My mind spun. I heard what he said, but I didn’t get why Hoffman was talking to me. “How can I help you?”

“I want you to talk to my client.”

“Me?”

“Yes. After that, maybe you can get Yuki to hear me out.”

“So if I get this right, this is the long way around in getting Yuki to talk to you.”

Everything about Hoffman’s request was inappropriate. I was the wrong cop and he was going around everyone in the Hall of Justice. But Paul Chi reported to me. I had to worry if
the SFPD and the District Attorney’s Office had the wrong person in the dock.

Hoffman’s request made me uncomfortable. But off the record? Unofficially?

Phil Hoffman had definitely gotten my attention.
Chapter 24

INSPECTOR PAUL CHI is a certified genius and a lifelong student of criminal behavior. It was hard to believe that he had arrested the wrong person for the murder of Dennis Martin.

So what was Hoffman up to?

I left Joe a message saying I'd be late, then retraced my steps into the stream of Justice Department workers leaving the lobby of 850 Bryant.

Chi and McNeill were with Brady in the corner office when I rapped on the glass. Brady waved me in and Cappy McNeill stood, sucked in his stomach so I could get past him, and then gave me his chair. McNeill has five years on me both in age and time in grade. He's not ambitious, but he's steady. He's all about instinct and experience and bringing down the bad guys.

As for Brady, I'd seen him go through a firestorm and con-
front a killer who had nothing to lose. Brady had guts to spare, but he was new to San Francisco. He didn’t know Phil Hoffman, and he hadn’t been in charge of Homicide when Candace Martin was investigated for murder.

I reset my ponytail and then laid out my conversation with Hoffman in the parking lot. “Bottom line, Hoffman says the wrong person is being charged with murder. He says we should withdraw the charges, reopen the case, and bring in the person who really killed Dennis Martin.”

“Really? And who does Hoffman say did it?” Chi asked me.

“Hoffman said his client will tell me.”

“Ah, shit, Lindsay,” McNeill grumbled. “Candace Martin damn well is the doer. Hoffman is cornered, so he’s working any angle he can dream up. And I gotta give him credit. This angle is pretty damned creative.”

“This case opened and shut itself,” said Chi. “And then it tied itself with a big red bow.” He started ticking off the physical evidence on his fingers: gun, prints, GSR.

“You’re saying that no innocent person has ever been convicted?” I asked Chi.

“What’s in this for you, Sergeant, because I just don’t get where you’re going,” Brady said. He texted a message, closed the phone, and put his eyes on me. “How many hours have you worked in the past twenty-four?”

“I don’t keep track.”

“I do. You’ve gone about eighteen hours straight. The Martin case was closed—what, a year ago? It’s in the hands of the justice system. So go home, Boxer. Get some sleep. Tomorrow let’s see some progress on Richardson.”
I felt the little hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. First time I'd ever felt this kind of opposition from Chi and McNeill. As for the new lieutenant? I didn't know if his mind was just closed—or if he was right.

I threw up my hands, said okay, and left the squad room again. I called Hoffman from the stairwell and told him I'd meet him on the seventh floor in five minutes.

He thanked me and said, “You won't be sorry.”

I was already sorry. Phil Hoffman's story had gotten to me, and now I was bucking the boss with absolutely nothing to gain.
There are two jails at the Hall, each with separate elevators that go only from the lobby to the jail. Prisoners awaiting trial are held in the jail on the seventh floor, and that's where I met Phil Hoffman.

Hoffman's expression showed that he was relieved to see me, but my stomach heaved with anxiety. I didn't belong here, doing this. Not my job.

“Thanks for coming, Lindsay,” Hoffman said. Doors buzzed open as we walked along grimy, overlit corridors toward a meeting room used for prisoners and their lawyers.

“I'm doing this on my own time, Phil. Nothing official about it.”

“I understand and I appreciate it.”

A moment later, Candace Martin was escorted by a guard into the room. She was wearing jailhouse orange, and somehow
it looked good on her. She wore no makeup and had her blond hair tucked behind her ears, and she looked younger than her forty years. Hoffman introduced us and we all sat down.

“Candace, tell Sergeant Boxer what you told me.”

“First, thanks for coming, Sergeant Boxer,” she said. “I know you’re doing a big favor for Phil.”

“I only have a few minutes.”

Candace Martin nodded and said, “Ellen flat out lied. I never had a gun in my office. The gun came into my house with the killer,” she said. “So why did Ellen lie? It makes no sense, unless she’s trying to get me convicted.”

“Why would she want to do that?” I asked.

“My husband was handsome and a self-described sex addict. He would screw a tree if it breathed. He liked to tell me that Ellen was ‘a treasure,’ and he’d put a little spin on it to see what I would do. But I never gave him the satisfaction of a reaction.”

Now Candace Martin clenched her fists on the tabletop. “You know what I cared about, Sergeant? The kids. Caitlin and Duncan love Ellen. I wanted to trust her, so I did.”

I said, “I don’t see where this is going, Dr. Martin. Whatever was going on between Ellen Lafferty and your husband, why would she commit perjury? Why would she accuse you of murder?”

“Here’s what I think, Sergeant. I didn’t understand why an intruder would shoot Dennis. But today, when Ellen turned the air purple with her lies, it clicked.

“What if Dennis was screwing her? What if he was making promises to her about divorcing me, and it wasn’t hap-
pening fast enough? What if she gave him an ultimatum and he didn’t go for it? What if she was the so-called intruder who shot my husband?”

I said, “That’s a lot of what ifs and no evidence at all.” I stood up, already projecting myself out of the Hall, heading home to my husband, leaving this whole questionable action behind me.

“I know, I know,” Candace said, putting her head in her hands. “I know it’s just speculation, but if you knew what a manipulative prick Dennis was, you’d see how he could use her to enrage me—and use me to enrage her.”

“Sorry, Dr. Martin. It’s an interesting theory,” I said, “but that’s all it is.”

I was acting tough, but Candace Martin was getting to me. I’d once been on trial, accused of wrongful death, and had been abandoned by everyone but my attorneys. What Candace Martin said made sense. I sympathized with her and I even liked her.

Still. This was not my job.

“Please, Sergeant. Do something,” Candace Martin said, as I signaled to the guard to open the door. “I didn’t kill my husband. That girl is taking care of my kids while I’m in a cage and on trial for my life.”
THE NEXT MORNING, Conklin and I were in the Richards-
os’ posh wood-and-amber-toned luxury suite at the Mark
Hopkins, simply one of the most elegant, beautiful hotels in
San Francisco, with a view of the world from the top of Nob
Hill.

Conklin questioned Avis Richardson as her devastated,
borderline-hysterical parents hovered in the background.

Conklin was not only kind to Avis, he was sincere, and
his first-class interview should have yielded more from her
than “I don’t remember anything.”

More than three days after she was admitted to the hospi-
tal, she still looked bombed-out and withdrawn. Her body
language told me that she wasn’t really listening to Conklin,
that her mind was on the far side of the moon.

Paul Richardson paused in his pacing around the Orien-
tal carpet to say, “Avis, try, for God’s sake. Give Inspector Conklin something to work with. This is life and death. Do you understand me? Do you?”

Room service rang the doorbell.

Sonja Richardson brought her daughter a mug of hot chocolate, then pulled me aside to say, “Avis is not herself. Normally, she’s quick. She’s funny. I tell you, she’s having a nervous breakdown. Oh my God, I can’t believe we listened to her. She begged us to let her stay here when Paul was transferred. She had friends, and the staff at Brighton… We felt she was safe at that school.”

I went back to the sitting room and sat a few feet from Avis. Her eyes were vacant. She’d been physically hurt. Her baby was gone. And I was guessing that she blamed herself.

Still, why didn’t Avis ask about her son? She should have had a lot of questions: What were we doing to find him? Was there any chance he was alive? But she didn’t ask a thing.

Did she know that he was dead?

Had she buried him herself?

Was the baby’s father involved in this horror story?

Conklin took a new tack. He said, “Avis, were you threatened? Is that it? Did someone tell you that if you spoke to the police they’d hurt the baby?”

I could almost see the lightbulb go on over her head. Avis turned her eyes up and to the right and said, “Yeah. The Frenchman said he’d kill my baby if I talked to the police.”

My bull-crap alarm went off, a three-alarm clamor.

Avis had just lied.

I stood up from the chubby armchair, cast my five-foot-ten
shadow across the girl on the couch, and said, “I have to talk to Avis alone.”

There was silence for a full three seconds and then Conklin said, “Mr. and Mrs. Richardson, let’s go into the other room. I need to get some contact information and so forth.”

The girl looked up at me as the room cleared, and I saw fear in her eyes. She was afraid of me. Maybe she figured that Conklin was the good cop and I was the other one.

She got that right.

I said, “It’s time, Avis. I want to find your baby and I’m staying in your face, here or at the police station, until you tell me the truth. Do you understand?”

“I’m the victim,” she whined. “I was kidnapped. You can’t hold me responsible.”

“I can damn well hold you responsible. I can hold you as a material witness for forty-eight hours. During that time, I won’t be bringing you hot cocoa. I will make you as miserable as possible, and when I get tired, I’ll send in a fresh team of bullies.”

“No.”

“Yes. Right now, cops are getting a warrant for your phone records,” I said, picking up the armchair and setting it down hard, closer to the couch. “We’re going to know the names of everyone you’ve spoken to in the past year. We will find something.”

No comment.

Her silence was infuriating.

“Dammit, little girl. Your baby is missing. Maybe he’s dead. You’re his mother. You’re all he has. And you’re all I have. The bullshit stops now. Do you read me?”
Avis Richardson shot a furtive look at the door. “They’ll kill me,” she said.

I crossed the floor, locked the door to the adjoining room, threw the bolt, and sat back down. My heart was pumping like it was about to explode.

Tears gathered in Avis Richardson’s eyes. Then she started to talk.
“I DIDN’T WANT my parents to know that I was…pregnant,” Avis Richardson said.

She sat scrunched against the back of the couch, her knees tucked up to her chin, her black-painted toenails peeking out from under a blanket. “I saw an ad on Prattslist a couple of months back,” she said.

Prattslist. It was a message board for virtual tag sales and personal ads, and it also functioned as the yellow pages for prostitutes and sex offenders and predators of all types and stripes prowling for victims.

“Tell me about the ad,” I said.

“It said something like ‘Pregnant? We’ll help you from birth to…uh, placement with your baby’s new parents.’” She gave me a glancing look. “So I called the number.”

I shook my head, sick that this girl who could have had
the best medical care in the world had hidden her pregnancy from people who cared about her. Then she’d turned her life over to an anonymous phone number on Pervs “R” Us. I said, “Go on.”

Avis said that her call had been answered by the man with a French accent who told her to call again when she was in labor. He’d said there would be papers to sign.

“He said that he was a doctor and that the delivery would be as safe as if I were in a hospital. He told me that the adopting parents would be completely vetted. And he said I’d be reimbursed ten thousand dollars for prenatal expenses.”

_Holy crap. Avis Richardson had sold her baby._

I was furious, frustrated, and still hopeful that the child was alive, but I kept emotion out of my voice.

I said, “You believed all this, Avis? You weren’t suspicious at all?”

“I was grateful.”

I didn’t know whether to spit or go blind.

Avis Richardson had known what had happened to her baby from the start. She had lied to the SFPD, and we’d pressed half of our resources into a phony dragnet that had wasted time and manpower and could never have turned up her baby.

Well, at least the time for lying was over.

If Avis didn’t want to sleep in general holding tonight, she was going to tell me the truth about everything she knew.
AVIS RICHARDSON PICKED at her nail polish as she told me that two months after her first call to “the Frenchman” she’d found on Prattscist, she started having contractions. She called the number again and arranged to be picked up a couple of blocks from the school.

“You’ve got the number?”

“No one answers it anymore.”

And then she returned to her story.

“I was nervous that someone might see me standing on the street like that,” she said. “When the car pulled up, I saw that it was a regular four-door type. Dark color. Clean. I ducked into the backseat really quick.”

Rental car, I thought.

Avis said there were two men in the front seat of the
10th Anniversary

car, but their faces were in shadow and after she was inside, all she saw were the backs of their heads. She was told to lie down on the floor in back and cover herself with a blanket.

“How long was the drive?” I asked. “Did you hear anything that could help us figure out where you were taken?”

“I don’t know how long I was in the car. An hour? They turned on the radio,” Avis told me. “Lite music station. Pretty soon after that, I felt a needle stab my hip, right through the blanket. Next thing I knew, I was being hustled out of the car and helped up a walk toward a house. Sergeant Boxer, I was in agony.”

“What can you remember about the house? Color? Style? Was it on a residential block?”

“I don’t know. I was hanging on to the men’s arms, looking at my feet….I think I heard the door slam behind me, but I was knocked out again, and when I woke up, I was in a bed having contractions every couple of minutes,” she said.

I sighed. Put my anger down. This was such a bleeping awful story. Maybe the only way the kid could deal with what had happened to her was to distance herself as she had done.

“Next time I woke up, there was a light shining in my face. It was clipped to a door. One of those aluminum bowl-shaped lights?”

I nodded and noted the non-clue detail.

“I couldn’t see anyone because of the light in my eyes, and
I was numb,” she said. “They gave me some water out of a red bottle with a sippy straw.

“I heard the baby cry. I asked to see it,” she went on, her voice and expression as flat as a photograph. “I was told, no, it wouldn’t do me any good. That he was a healthy baby boy. And then I woke up on the street,” she told me.

“It was dark,” Avis said. “I didn’t know where I was. Then I saw a street sign that said Lake Merced. My clothes were bloody and disgusting. I found a rain poncho blown into some bushes, so I took off my clothes and put it on.”

The green plastic poncho, the only hard evidence we had, hadn’t even been handled by the men who’d taken her. So much for the thirty-six hours of lab time spent processing traces off it.

“They could have killed me,” she said.

I nodded. “It’s hard to say you were lucky, but you were.”

The girl’s sharpest memories were utterly useless. Fake French accent. Dark sedan. Aluminum lamp. Red bottle with a sippy straw. Green plastic poncho that had never had contact with the perps. Everything led to nothing.

I understood why Avis had blocked more traumatic memories.

But her continued lack of interest in the baby stunned me. It didn’t matter that she didn’t care. I cared.

I would find that baby boy or die trying.

“No.”

“No. Have you been honest with me?”
“Yes. I swear,” Avis said.

My bullshit meter went on the blink. I couldn’t tell if she was lying or not. But there was another entire line of inquiry we hadn’t yet pursued.

“Who is the baby’s father?” I asked.
BRIGHTON ACADEMY is in the Presidio Heights area, tucked away, nearly hidden behind trees and a neighborhood of sleepy, Victorian-lined streets. It was a surprise to turn a corner and see four handsome stone buildings set in a square around a compact campus of clipped lawns punctuated with carved boxwood cones and hedges.

High-school kids played field hockey and tennis, and others were grouped on benches or lying under trees in the quad.

The whole place smelled green. Greenback green.

Like Hogwarts for the really, truly rich.

Conklin and I checked in at the Administration Office, where we met with Dean Hanover, a big man wearing a pink shirt and polka-dot bow tie under his blue blazer.

We told him about our investigation into the possible kidnapping of Avis Richardson and the disappearance of her
child. Hanover was sweating on a cool day, and I knew why. The dean had a big problem.

“This goes beyond nightmare,” Hanover said to me. “That poor kid. And, of course, her parents are going to sue us to the walls.”

I got the dean’s in loco parentis permission to interview Avis’s boyfriend, E. Lawrence Foster, as well as my short list of Avis’s six best friends.

“Tell me about these kids,” I said.

“Foster is an average kid, friendly. Parents own a magazine in New York. He’s got a lot of friends, but I confess I don’t know much about his relationship with Avis.”

Hanover gave us one-paragraph bios on the other kids: all children of wealthy parents who lived in other states or other countries. Avis’s roommate, Kristin Beale, was no exception. Her parents were in the military, stationed overseas.

We left the sweaty dean, headed out through the stone-arch entrance to the Administration Office, and took one of the shrub-lined paths toward the main hall.

“You want to be the good cop for a change?” Rich asked me.

“I would if I could,” I told him.
WE FOUND LARRY FOSTER in the high-tech chemistry lab in the southernmost wing of the school. He was as the dean had described him: a friendly, good-looking tenth-grader from the East Coast. He was neatly dressed in the school uniform—blazer, necktie, gray pants, and state-of-the-art cross-trainers.

We invited Larry into an empty classroom and seated ourselves at desks. I sent up a prayer that this teenage boy would know something that would lead us to his son.

“You think I’m the father? I’m not,” Larry Foster said. His sleepy gray eyes opened wide. His lower lip quivered. “Avis and I are friends. That’s all.”

“Friends, huh,” said Conklin. “Avis said you were closer than that. Why would she lie?”

“I don’t know why she would lie. We never hooked up, not
ever,” the kid said. “I never had those kinds of feelings about Avis, I swear.”

“You knew she was pregnant?” I said.

“Yeah, like since last week, and I didn’t tell anyone. Avis said she was having the baby for an infertile couple. I told her she was full of it, and she said, ‘Yeah, full of baby.’ And then I thought, Hey, she hasn’t called me back the past couple of days. Is she okay?”

“We have reason to believe that Avis got pregnant the regular way,” Conklin said. “If that is true, who’s your first guess for the father of her baby?”

“No idea. I didn’t even know she was with anyone,” the kid said.

Next up was Brandon Tucker, a kid with a future as a professional soccer player. He was taller than me and he had a disarmingly wicked smile. I’d seen a lot of pictures of this kid on Avis’s Facebook page.

Was he baby Richardson’s father?

After the preliminary introductions, I asked Tucker what he knew about Avis—her pregnancy, her baby, and her whereabouts over the past three days.

“Ma’am, I don’t know anything about a baby,” said Tucker. “I only heard that she was pregnant, like, a week ago. And I was, like, totally shocked. Avis is a very quiet girl. And heavy. I just thought she was bulking up.”

“So, what was she to you?” I asked. “She has you on her Facebook friends list.”

“Like that means anything. She asked to friend me. I said
okay. She used to help me with my French,” he laughed. “She tutored me for exams once in a while. I paid her by the hour. For tutoring,” he said.

“You ever hook up with Avis?” Conklin asked.
The kid looked offended.

“Me? Hell, no. Not my type, dude. Not even if I was drunk—she just wasn’t my type.”

“Who was her type?” I asked.

“Larry Foster, right?”

We used the same classroom to talk to three other teens, and by this time, they all knew why we were there. Not one of those kids admitted to knowing that Avis was pregnant until a week ago, and no one knew the identity of the father of her child.

We were told repeatedly that she was a quiet girl, intelligent, not popular, not an outcast, either. She got good grades and kept to herself.

Even the girls we interviewed, when implored to help us find the baby, said they didn't have an idea in the world.

“You believe this?” Conklin said to me when the last kid had left the room. “A school like this. Avis was nine months pregnant, and no one knew nothin’.”

“Reminds me of something I once heard,” I said to my partner. “How do you know if a teenager is lying?”

“How?” Conklin asked.

“Their lips are moving.”
The story continues!

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