

Meet The Women's Murder Club

EXCLUSIVE PROFILES by Our Crime Desk

LINDSAY BOXER

A homicide detective in the San Francisco Police Department, juggling the worst murder cases with the challenges of being a first-time mother. Her loving husband Joe, daughter Julie and loyal border-collie Martha give her a reason to protect the city. She didn't have the easiest start to life, with an absent father and an ill mother, but she didn't shy away from a difficult and

demanding career. With the help of her friends, Lindsay makes it her mission to solve the toughest cases.

CLAIRE WASHBURN

Chief Medical Examiner for San Francisco and one of Lindsay's oldest friends. Wise, confident and viciously funny, she can be relied on to help whatever the problem. She virtually runs the Office of the Coroner for her overbearing, credit-stealing

boss, but rarely complains. Happily married with children, her personal life is relatively calm in comparison to her professional life.

CINDY THOMAS

An up-and-coming journalist who's always looking for the next big story. She'll go the extra mile, risking life and limb to get her scoop. Sometimes she prefers to grill her friends over cocktails for a juicy secret, but, luckily for them, she's totally trustworthy (most of the time...). She somehow found the time to publish a book between solving cases, writing articles for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and keeping together her relationship with Lindsay's partner, Rich Conklin.

“When your job is murder, you need friends you can count on”

YUKI CASTELLANO

One of the best lawyers in the city, she's desperate to make her mark. Ambitious, intelligent and passionate, she'll fight for what's right, always defending the underdog even if it means standing in the way of those she loves. Often this includes her husband - who is also Lindsay's boss - Lt. Jackson Brady.

San Francisco





Coit Tower

Yuki and Brady's home

Filbert Steps

1 mile

1 kilometres

80

RUSSIAN HILL

TELEGRAPH HILL

Union Street

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

NOB HILL

CHINATOWN

EMBARCADERO M

Lafayette Park

Grace Cathedral

RINCON HILL

SOUTH BEACH

101

Union Square M MONTGOMERY

M POWELL STREET

TENDERLOIN

FBI HQ

San Francisco Chronicle HQ

SOMA

San Francisco City Hall

M CIVIC CENTRE

80

AT&T Park

Hall of Justice
Susie's Café

MacBain's Beers o' the World Saloon

San Francisco Station

MISSION BAY

San Francisco Police Department HQ

101

280

Port of San Francisco

MISSION DISTRICT

POTRERO HILL

Mission Dolores Park

DOGPATCH

Bud's Bar

Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital

BERNAL HEIGHTS

Bernal Heights Park

101

280

INDIA BASIN

GLEN PARK

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

A list of titles by James Patterson
appears at the back of this book

21ST

BIRTHDAY

JAMES
PATTERSON

& MAXINE PAETRO



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*In memory of Philip R. Hoffman
Counselor and friend*

PROLOGUE

CINDY THOMAS FOLLOWED Robert Barnett's assistant down the long corridor at the law firm of Barnett and Associates in Washington, DC.

This meeting could be the beginning of something terrific, and she had dressed for the win; sleek black dress, tailored leather jacket, a touch of lipstick, and an air of confidence that came from the material itself.

As a senior crime reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she had dominated the inside track, investigating and reporting on the vilest and most audacious serial murders of our time.

Bob Barnett, a lawyer and a literary agent, had represented her true-crime epic, *Fish's Girl*, making a very respectable sale to a good publishing house. Then, as was said, "It debuted to great reviews" and had briefly touched the hem of the *Times* Best Seller list.

Fish's Girl was the real-life story of a psychopathic serial killer with an equally deadly and immoral girlfriend. Reporting for the *Chronicle*, Cindy had helped the police catch "Fish's Girl," and

the finale in the book—and in real life—had been a shoot-out. Cindy had been winged by a 9mm bullet and then returned fire, bringing down the psycho killer herself.

The entire *Fish's Girl* experience had been extraordinary, but now it was old news. Industry press reported that book sales were down in all categories, and Cindy had been busy with her all-consuming day job.

Then, last week, Bob Barnett called her at home, saying, "I've been following your Burke serial avidly. Great work, Cindy. If you craft it into a proposal, I believe I can sell it."

He'd asked her to write a treatment of the story; an introduction, a chapter outline, and at least one fully written chapter to show off her style for those potential deal makers who didn't read the *Chronicle*. He had offered her a plane ticket and a room at the Ritz if she would fly to DC and meet with him about her recent coverage of the serial murders. Cindy had allowed herself to hope that Barnett would work his magic again.

"Call me when you're ready," he had said.

It hadn't taken long.

Now, Barnett's assistant led her into the corner office, told her that the boss was running a little late, and said, "Make yourself at home, Ms. Thomas. I'm right outside if you need anything."

The office looked just as Cindy remembered it. The carpet was grass green. A slab of green marble was set into Barnett's desk-top, and potted orchids, most in full bloom, stood proudly on every flat surface. The floor-to-ceiling bookcase at a right angle to Barnett's desk held every book he'd sold; Cindy saw *Fish's Girl* was at eye level slightly out of line, as if Bob had taken it out to review before this meeting.

Cindy loved seeing it fitted in between the big author names,

21st Birthday

and after snapping a selfie with her book to show Richie, she took a seat on the sofa in the meeting area.

She was ready for Barnett when he strode into his office, saying, “Cindy, I’m so sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Not a problem, Bob.”

He shook her hand with both of his and took the chair at an angle to her seat on the sofa. He was a nice-looking man, designer glasses, natural tan, thick gray hair, and he was easy to talk with.

“I’ve been enjoying the view,” Cindy said. “And the orchids.”

“I’m a genius with orchids,” he said. “And not too bad at picking winners, either.”

She smiled appreciatively, and leaning forward, he got to the point.

“I read your proposal in one sitting. This story is right up there with *Helter Skelter*, *Black Dablia*, and *In Cold Blood*. I’m dying to hear the up-to-the-minute conclusion. We get the right people on board, this story could be a monster, Cindy. An absolute monster.”

PART ONE

FIVE MONTHS
EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

CINDY THOMAS WAS at work in her office at the *San Francisco Chronicle* on Monday at 5:30 p.m. when she heard a woman calling her name.

More accurately, she was *screaming* it.

“Cinnn-ddyyyyyy!”

Cindy lifted her eyes from her laptop, looked through her glass office wall that faced the newsroom, and saw a tall, nimble woman zigzagging through the maze of cubicles. She was taking the corners with the deftness of a polo pony as a security guard with a truck-sized spare tire chased her—and he was falling behind.

As a reporter, Cindy had a sharp eye for details. The woman shrieking her name wore yoga pants and a Bruins sweatshirt, a knit cap over chin-length brown hair, and mascara was bleeding down her cheeks. She looked determined—and deranged. The woman, who appeared to be in her mid-forties, didn’t slow as she raced toward Cindy’s open door, but a moment later, the lanky woman was inside Cindy’s office, both hands planted on her desk, black-rimmed red eyes fastened on hers.

She shouted at Cindy, "I'm Kathleen *Wyatt. K.Y.* You remember?"
"Your screen name."

Wyatt said, "I posted on your crime *blog* this morning. My *daughter* and her little baby *girl* are missing and her husband *killed* them."

Security guard Sean Arsenault pulled up to the doorway, panting. "I'm sorry, Ms. Thomas. You," he said to the woman who was leaning over the desk. "You come with me. Now."

Cindy said, "Kathleen, are you armed?"

"Be serious."

"Stand by, Sean," Cindy said. "Kathleen. Sit down."

The guard said that he would be right outside the door and took a position a few feet away. Cindy turned her attention back to the woman now sitting in the chair across from her desk and ignored the inquisitive eyes of the writers in the newsroom peering through her glass office wall.

Cindy said, "I remember you now. Kathleen, I had to take down your post from my blog."

"He *beats* her. They're *gone*."

Cindy's publisher and editor in chief, Henry Tyler, leaned into her office. "Everything okay, Cindy?"

"Thanks, Henry. We're fine."

He nodded, then tapped the face of his watch.

Cindy nodded acknowledgment of the six o'clock closing. Her story about a shooting in the Tenderloin was in the polish phase. Henry had a word with Sean and then closed the door.

Cindy turned back to Kathleen Wyatt, saying, "You accused a man of murder and used his name. The rules are right there on the site. No vulgarity, name-calling, or personal attacks. He could sue you for defamation. He could keep the *Chronicle* in court until the next ice age."

21st Birthday

Wyatt said, “You come across as such a nice person, Cindy. But like everyone else, you’re all about the money.”

“You’re doing it again, Kathleen. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The woman folded her arms over Cindy’s desk, dropped her head, and sobbed. Cindy thought Kathleen Wyatt seemed out of her mind with fear.

Cindy said, “Kathleen. Kathleen, do you know for a fact that this man murdered your daughter and granddaughter?”

Kathleen lifted her head and shook it. “No.”

Cindy said, “Another question. Have you called the police?”

This time when Kathleen Wyatt raised her head, she said, “Yes. Yes, yes, yes, but have they found the baby? No.”

CHAPTER 2

WHILE KATHLEEN WYATT dried her eyes with her sweat-shirt, Cindy retrieved the post she'd deleted this morning and read it again.

Kathleen had written about her son-in-law, Lucas Burke, using ALL CAPS to shout that Burke had abused her daughter, Tara, and that he'd even been violent with their baby, Lorrie. Kathleen had written that she was terrified for them both and trusted her gut.

Cindy had seen the post a few minutes after Kathleen had submitted it. The screaming capital letters, many misspellings, and the nature of the post unloaded on a newspaper blog made the poster sound crazy. Or like a troll.

Now that Kathleen had told Cindy the story to her face, her credibility had risen. But, damn it, Cindy couldn't know if Kathleen was paranoid or in an understandable panic that her loved ones could be in danger—or worse. Her fear was relatable and the idea of a murderous husband *plausible*. It happened too often. And that it may have happened since Kathleen posted her cri de coeur this morning made Cindy feel awful and guilty. And still, there was nothing she could do to help.

21st Birthday

Kathleen slapped the desk to draw Cindy's attention.

Her voice was rough from yelling but she said, "I called the police as soon as I couldn't locate Tara. And after you call the police once or three times, you have to beg them to pay attention. But I did it. My daughter's twenty now. An adult. The cops called in the K-9 unit, put out an Amber Alert on my granddaughter. Or so they say. It hasn't come through on my phone."

Cindy said, "The missing baby—what'd you say, she's a year old?"

"Closer to a year and a half."

"They're looking for her."

Kathleen reached into her fanny pack and pulled out a picture of mother and child. Tara was a brunette like Kathleen, and Lorrie was a redhead. They both looked very young.

"Lorrie is sixteen months old to be exact. My daughter is always home all day with the baby. I went over there. The house is empty. Her car is gone. I've called her and called her and we always, *always* speak in the morning after Lucas has gone to work. That baby could be dead already. If you'd run this picture in the paper six hours ago—"

"I'm a reporter, Kathleen. I need confirmation, you must know that. But, still, I feel sorry—"

"Don't you dare tell me how sorry you are. Sorry won't help my daughter. Sorry won't help her baby girl."

"Sit tight," Cindy said. She reviewed her story about the shooting in the Tenderloin, changed a few words, and then rewrote the last-line "kicker." She addressed an email to Tyler, attached her story, and pressed send.

Deadline met, Cindy turned back to Kathleen. "No promises. Let me see what I can do."

CHAPTER 3

CINDY SPEED-DIALED the number, then drummed her fingers on her desk until Lindsay picked up.

“Boxer.”

“Linds, I need some advice. It’s important.”

“What’s wrong?”

“No, I’m fine. Can you give a couple of moments to a woman with a missing daughter and grandchild?”

“Me?”

“Thanks, Linds. I’m putting you on speaker. I’m here with Kathleen Wyatt. I’ll let her tell you why. Kathleen, this is Sergeant Lindsay Boxer of Homicide.”

Lindsay said, “Kathleen. What happened?”

“They’ve disappeared into a black hole.”

“Say again?”

Kathleen said, “My daughter, Tara, and her baby disappeared this morning and her husband has threatened to kill them.”

“You say they disappeared. Is there any indication that they were hurt?”

21st Birthday

Kathleen paused before answering, “Tara has run away with the baby before.”

“From her husband?”

“Tara has told me I don’t know how many times that he’s said that he hates her. He’s hit her, but not so it shows. He wishes Lorrie had never been born. And yes, I’ve called the police.”

Lindsay asked, “Had Tara taken out a restraining order on Lucas?”

“She wouldn’t do it. She’s only twenty. She’s too young. Too dumb. Too needy. She doesn’t work. She’s *afraid* of him, and also, oh, God help her, she loves him. At seventeen, she begged me to consent to their marriage, and God help *me*, I did.”

Horns honked over the phone line. Lindsay was in her car. She raised her voice over the clamor and asked Kathleen, “What was the police response?”

“Today? They say they talked to Lucas but he had an alibi. A girlfriend, probably. You should see him. Smooth as ice. He denies threatening her, them, of course. They have some units searching and they have dogs now in the vicinity of the house. And drones. And they say Tara will come home. And, Lindsay—if I may—I really think it may be too late.”

The words “too late” tailed up into a heart-wrenching howl. Kathleen was crying as if she were sure they were dead. As if she knew. The security guard reached for the door, but Cindy put up her hand and shook her head.

Lindsay said, finally, “Who was the officer who took your report?”

“Bernard. Officer Bernard.”

“Okay, Kathleen,” Lindsay said, “I’ll check with Officer Bernard. Give Cindy your number and I’ll get back to you. If a baby has

been missing since eight this morning, that's a police matter. Call the SFPD and ask for Tom Murry in Major Crimes. He's the head of Missing Persons. Keep your phone charged."

"I've met Lieutenant Murry," Kathleen said. "He doesn't take me seriously."

"I'll call him, too," said Lindsay. "See how the investigation—" she broke off. "Sorry, I've got to go."

Cindy said good-bye to Lindsay, watched Kathleen write down her phone number with a shaking hand, muttering, "You should help me, Cindy. Lorrie is dead. I feel it in my heart."

Cindy said, "It's almost dark. Go home and call the police, again. Did you call Tara's friends? What about her neighbors? If you hear anything at all, let me know. Wait. Let me see that picture."

Kathleen handed the picture of Tara and Lorrie to Cindy, who snapped it with her phone. She told Kathleen that she could run it with a request for information as to the pair's whereabouts without mentioning Lucas Burke.

Tugging at her watch cap, Kathleen muttered a thank-you as Cindy walked her out to the elevator. Cindy walked back to her office, wondering why Kathleen Wyatt had come to her. Was she right about her son-in-law? Or was Kathleen Wyatt just paranoid?

CHAPTER 4

I'D BEEN AT MY DESK since seven Tuesday morning.

It was now eight thirty. I wanted to get some answers for Kathleen Wyatt before the 9 a.m. all-hands meeting Lieutenant Jackson Brady had called. As the mother of a daughter myself, I felt an extra urgency.

My partner, Inspector Richard Conklin, and I sit at facing desks, at the front of the dull gray Homicide bullpen. He'd just arrived, but when Rich heard me talking to Lieutenant Murry over the phone, he went to the break room to get coffee.

Rich knew I was doing a favor for Cindy, his live-in love and my friend. When he got back to his desk, I thanked Murry, hung up, and Conklin pushed a fresh mug of mud over to my desk. It was black, three sugars, just how I like it.

"Boxer. What did Murry say?"

"He said that Lucas Burke is a bad dude, but he doesn't think he's a killer."

"How bad?"

I blew on my coffee, then referred to my notes.

“Last year, Lucas threatened a female motorist after a fender bender, grabbed her shoulders, called her names, and shook her. He was taken in for assault and battery but the motorist didn’t press charges.

“A few months later, Lucas took a chain saw to a neighbor’s tree he claimed was on his property. It was not. He got fined eight hundred dollars. End of that.

“Then, Kathleen reported him for domestic abuse of her daughter, but Tara denied it, said her mother was nuts. Kathleen is a little loosely wrapped, Richie. Which makes her hard to read. But it’s also true that abused women often deny the abuse.

“Anyway, that’s Lucas Burke’s record. He’s at least combative.”

I called Cindy and sipped coffee while Rich walked over to Sergeant Cappy O’Neil’s desk, sat on the edge of it, and traded what-ifs with him and Sergeant Paul Chi. I could hear them opining on the upcoming meeting, but there was little controversy. We were all of the same opinion. Brady was going to announce his future plans. But what had he decided to do?

The root of the matter was the scandal that had devastated the Southern Station, our station, not long ago. Lieutenant Ted Swanson of Robbery had enlisted two teams of bad cops to knock off drug dealers and payday loan joints for cash. Eighteen people died in several shoot-outs, and even Swanson took enough lead to kill him two or three times over. But he survived his injuries and was now serving out the rest of his worthless life at Chino, a maximum-security prison.

Warren Jacobi, our friend, my former partner, and at that time chief of police, had to take the fall. He was retired out, and Jackson Brady, our good lieutenant, picked up the slack for Jacobi, simultaneously running Homicide and the Southern

21st Birthday

Station. When asked to choose which job he wanted, he'd put off the decision. Maybe he took too long. Lately, rumor had it that the mayor was having talks with Stefan Rowan, a heavyweight organized-crime commander from New York.

I loved working for Brady. He was smart. He never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't do. He was brave. And he was loyal to the people who reported to him.

What scared me most was that the rumor might be wrong. That Brady was going to step up to become chief of police, and the hard-ass New Yorker would replace *him* as Homicide CO.

Maybe a promotion would be good for Brady, but speaking for myself, it would break my heart.

CHAPTER 5

I LOOKED PAST CONKLIN and saw Brady leave his office in the back corner of the squad room. He put on his jacket and headed up the center aisle toward the front of the room. Conklin got up from Cappy's desk as Brady passed and joined me at our desks.

Brady took the floor, his blond-white hair pulled back in a pony, his denim shirt tucked in, his dark jacket unbuttoned. I couldn't read his expression.

Brady took center stage at the front of the squad room, facing the dozen Homicide cops from the day shift, another dozen cops from the night shift, and more were coming in. Cops from other departments leaned against the walls, sat in empty chairs, or perched on the corners of desks, all quietly waiting for Brady to drop a bomb.

When the anticipation had stretched so thin it was starting to thrum, Brady said, "I know the wait time has been hard on everyone. I did my best to hold things together with your help. My wife says I look like I've been dragged behind a car. To tell the truth, I feel a little like that, but I was of two minds.

21st Birthday

“Now, y’all know I’ve been running up and down the stairs, changing hats in the landing. I was asked to choose, fourth floor or fifth, but if I coulda kept doing both jobs, I woulda done it. But in the interest of safety, public good and welfare, and living to see my forty-fifth birthday, I’ve decided to hang my hat in Homicide.”

Big sigh of relief from me, and a spontaneous round of raucous applause and hooting from the squad.

I said loud enough for Brady to hear, “So glad, Brady. That was a sacrifice.”

“No,” he said, “it was selfish. I just couldn’t move into Jacobi’s swell office and push paper. I’m a street cop and I like being part of the action.”

Laughter came up all around the room and it was like sunshine breaking through the clouds. Then I realized we hadn’t heard the rest of the story.

Who was our new police chief?

Anticipating the question, Brady said, “And that leaves the last shoe. I make it to be size eleven medium wide, currently filled by a former Homicide cop from LA and Vegas who for the last dozen years has been heading up our forensic lab, ably, with good humor. Not prideful, but we know he’s a first-class CSI.”

It took a minute for the parts to come together, and then I got it. I had just never considered Charlie Clapper as chief of police, but damn, he was an excellent choice.

Brady was saying, “At this point, I’m supposed to draw back the curtain and say about a former cop and highly respected forensic scientist, ‘Round of applause for our own Charlie Clapper, now police chief, SFPD.’

“But I forgot to get a curtain, and Clapper isn’t here. He’s going to be across the street at MacBain’s—second-floor private room

reserved for alla us, from noon to two. No cover charge, beer's on the house. If there are any questions, we'll get ya answers all in good time."

Conklin got to his feet and said, "Brady? If you had anything to do with recommending Clapper for the chief job, I just want to say, hot dog. Good choice and all in the family. And I'm glad you're staying with us."

CHAPTER 6

CONKLIN AND I WALKED across the street at the appointed time, still stunned by the breaking news. But pleased.

We both liked Clapper. A lot. He was a solid pro, never a showboat. I remembered so many cases where he'd been the forensic specialist; when hamburgers had become bombs, when we dug up a dozen decapitated heads in a backyard, when he'd gone through the exploded science museum where my husband, Joe, had been almost killed. He'd taken us through crime scenes and pointed out things he thought we ought to know.

The bottom line: Charlie Clapper had never let us down.

Richie held the door for me at MacBain's and we entered the favorite watering hole for Hall of Justice workers, from court stenographers to the motorcycle police. At lunchtime, the ancient jukebox was cranked up and the place was packed to the walls, but we didn't have to look for a table. We headed straight up the stairs to the second floor, where it was clear that the party had already started. A buffet had been set up with hot plates and servers, tables were arranged around the room, and a lot of

cops were in attendance, not just from Homicide but from every section at the Hall.

Altogether, a hundred people were there, including Brady, everyone with a glass in their hand. I waved to Clapper as we passed and he waved back. When everyone from Lieutenant Tom Murry from Major Crimes to Lieutenant Lena Hurvitz from Special Victims to DA Len Parisi had a plate and was seated, Brady clinked his glass with a spoon.

He had our attention. He said, "Charles Clapper, former director of our Forensics unit, needs no introduction. Most of you have hung on to his shirttails as he ran a crime scene, questioned him on the witness stand, relied on him for his wisdom when a crime was so unbearably awful you didn't know whether to puke or bawl your eyes out.

"Starting tomorrow morning, Charlie is going to take over as chief of police and move into the fancy office on the fifth floor. You all are stuck with me heading up Homicide.

"Charlie, please take it from here."

There was applause and shouts of "Way to go, Charlie!" and a minute later Clapper had a drink in his hand. As always, Clapper was perfectly dressed, his hair cut and combed, a mirror shine on his shoes. He stood with one hand in his pocket as he said, "Thanks, everyone, for that very kind welcome to a job none of you want or would take on pain of death."

When the laughter died down, Charlie went on.

"As Lieutenant Brady said, I've known some of you for more than fifteen years, and I'm glad that I had that much time to learn the SFPD and be of help to putting the wicked behind bars.

"Now I've got a different job and the number one task the mayor has given me is to rebuild the Southern Station. Most of

21st Birthday

you have lived through the corruption of our good name. Our Robbery and Narcotic departments are thin. I have some major recruiting to do.

“I’m a perfectionist. I do things by the book. That’s how I pulled CSU back from the brink and why I was drafted for this job. Here’s what it means to you. The by-the-book rules are in effect; color within the lines, button every last button, stay in your own lane. Keep thorough notes, keep your phones and radios on, and keep your eyes and ears open. Stay in touch with dispatch or your CO. I love you all, but effective immediately, love’s got nothing to do with it.

“I have to be the enforcer.”

CHAPTER 7

AS THE PARTY WAS breaking up, I checked in with Lieutenant Tom Murry, head of Missing Persons.

Tom sounded hoarse and worn-out as he told me that now that his search had passed the twenty-four-hour mark, he was expanding his canvass.

“Tara Burke and her kiddo are still missing. We’re following every dumb-ass lead. The hounds alerted on a dead cat, but that was all. We’re running plates around the Burke house and Lucas is cooperating, has offered other places we can look. We’ll be at this all night.”

I commiserated. Asked if he wanted any help.

“Yes.”

I called Joe to remind him that I was having dinner with the girls tonight, then I researched Lucas Burke. My search was limited to the internet and our police files, but there was some new background from a bio he’d given in a speech I found online.

I learned that Lucas’s mother and sister had died when

21st Birthday

Lucas was in grad school, but his father, Evan Burke, was still alive and had not remarried. Lucas taught at Sunset Park Prep, a private girls' school in the Sunset District. Three years ago, Burke divorced his wife of ten years and married Tara Wyatt. Lorrie was Burke's only child.

I highlighted names and places, saved the research into a file, and went to go find Brady.

Brady wasn't in his office. It was second nature to head up to the fifth floor. I asked squad assistant, Brenda Fregosi, to let Rich know I'd be back in a few.

I found Clapper in his new office, an office I'd been in so many times I was on first-name terms with the dust bunnies under the sofa.

I said, "Gotta minute, chief?"

Clapper waved me in.

Piles of papers covered his desk. There were cardboard bankers' boxes stacked along the window wall, labeled by date in marker pen, lids taped in place.

Those would be Clapper's papers, yet to be filed.

Charlie looked harried, a change from his usual benign countenance. But I got it. The man was organized. His job in Forensics had been a perfect match for his personality type.

Brady had been overwhelmed and not organized by nature.

It would take Clapper a few days to see the desktop and get his files up to speed.

I pulled out a side chair and sat down.

I briefed him on my last case in two sentences and we commiserated in one. Then, I said, "Chief, a woman came to Cindy Thomas's office yesterday claiming that her daughter and

sixteen-month-old grandchild were missing. She believes that her son-in-law is violent and could have killed them.”

“Thomas called you?”

“Yep. I spoke with the complainant and I spoke with the officer in charge, Lieutenant Tom Murry, and he hasn’t turned up anything yet. Hounds are out. Drones, too. Canvass of the neighborhood and school where the husband works. Now, over twenty-four hours have passed.”

Clapper sat back in the desk chair. He said, “I’m aware, Boxer. And know Lieutenant Murry to be thorough. What are you asking?”

“I want to bring in the husband for questioning. See if I detect a falsehood, and maybe I can break him—”

Clapper cut me short.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but this isn’t your case.”

“Uh.”

“Murry interviewed the husband?”

“Yes, but he didn’t get anything from him.”

“Boxer, it’s Murry’s case. He’s working it. What did I say earlier today?”

“Many things.”

“I said stay in your lane. If your board is empty, it won’t be for long. Don’t call me, Boxer. Have Brady call me. That’s the chain of command.”

I was insulted and hurt. I felt my cheeks heat up as I stood from the chair and went to the door. Clapper didn’t look up, didn’t say good-bye or thanks or see ya around.

Without seeing her, I said, “Kathleen Wyatt.”

21st Birthday

“Bingo,” said Brenda. She made a little circle with her index finger next to her temple, universal sign for crazy.

I clenched my fists and headed toward my desk.

CHAPTER 8

CLEARLY, KATHLEEN WYATT was in yesterday's clothes.

My guess was that she'd been driving around the city looking for her daughter and granddaughter since then. She seemed out of it, but I put it down to stress and exhaustion.

I took her to the break room, got her coffee and a leftover donut, waited for her outside the ladies' room.

Given the Clapper rules, I told her that Lieutenant Murry was working the case full-bore. I quoted the record: that at ten after eleven Monday morning, Lucas called his wife from his cell phone and she answered. Their call lasted just under three minutes. Then I moved on to reassurances: that most likely Tara wasn't ready to be found, and she would be in touch. And then I heard myself say that I would drive out to Sunset Park Prep and talk to Lucas personally to assure myself that he hadn't hurt anyone.

She gave me a disbelieving look.

"Kathleen. Either trust me or leave me out of this."

"Okay. I trust you."

21st Birthday

“Good. Go home and get some sleep.”

I walked Kathleen down to the street, watched as she drove off in her ancient Fiat. Then I went to the day lot across Bryant and got my car out of stir. I’d thought that I had a decision to make, but I’d already made it. Something was drawing me to this case. I can’t explain it, but I felt attached and that maybe I could bring Tara and Lorrie Burke home safely.

It was half past two. School was still in session.

I called dispatch, told them I had to take a half day lost time, texted Rich that the less he knew the better and I’d call him later. Then I called Cindy.

“This is so off the record, it’s in a different time zone,” I said to her.

“What’ve you got?”

“I’m taking a flier. Gonna talk to the husband. Don’t tell Richie. I’m disobeying the new chief.”

“Love you, Linds.”

Sunset Park Prep was located on Thirty-Seventh Avenue and Rivera Street, and this was where Lucas taught English to eleventh- and twelfth-grade girls. I knew of the school, which was reputed to offer a college-level experience in a day-school environment.

I parked the car on Sunset Boulevard, clipped my badge to the inside pocket of my jacket, and tucked my gun into the back waistband of my chinos.

I looked up Lucas Burke’s class schedule again—and, yes, from three to four he had an office hour in the Academic Building.

Couldn’t have timed it better if I’d tried.

I put my phone in my breast pocket and got out of my car.

Ready or not, Lucas Burke. Here I come.

CHAPTER 9

I WAS DEFYING a direct order, but I felt justified.

In three out of four cases of familial homicide, the husband was the killer. Dozens of cases came to me; bludgeoned wives and smothered children, buried in shallow graves or put through wood chippers, entire families shot and tucked into their beds, the husband displaying grief, begging the real killer to come forward, or leaving the country. Often they remarried in under a year.

I hadn't given up on Tara and Lorrie Burke after less than a day and a half. This was still a presumed missing persons case, even if the chance of finding the two alive was heading toward zero. I needed to get a take on Lucas Burke, the man at the center of it.

I parked in the lot at Sunset Park Prep. The ten-acre campus had grounds like clipped green velvet. The main building was imposing, built of white stone in the early twentieth century. Athletic fields and smaller buildings stretched out beyond it.

I'd just flashed my badge at the visitors' check-in when the bell

rang and students exited classrooms, chattering as they walked the broad corridor to their next class.

I stopped a group of young ladies and asked where I could find Mr. Lucas Burke's office.

One said, "You just passed it."

I reversed course, saw "Mr. Burke" on a nameplate to the left of an office door. I knocked and heard "Come innnn."

Burke looked up when I entered his office.

He was a good-looking fortyish man sitting behind a desk heaped with neat stacks of paper. His hair was a thick and wavy auburn, and he wore tortoiseshell glasses, a blazer over a blue shirt, a rep tie, and a wedding band on his ring finger.

I showed him the badge clipped to my inside jacket pocket and introduced myself. We shook hands and he offered me a chair. I took it and started talking.

"You know that Kathleen Wyatt filed a report against you," I said, in a neutral tone. I didn't want to anger or alarm him. I wanted to come off as a friendly neighborhood cop, checking out a complaint.

Burke took off his glasses, swiped his face with his hand, and sighed at the same time. "Sergeant, you've met Kathleen?"

"Yes. She's distraught. Very."

"I've already made a statement to Missing Persons about this," said Burke. He picked up a business card from his desk and read the name, "Lieutenant Tom Murry. You should check with him, but since you're here, I'll repeat myself. Kathleen Wyatt is—how shall I say this? Eccentric. Paranoid. Off her rocker. She calls me at all hours and I'm afraid to turn off the phone in case Tara tries to reach me."

"She still hasn't called?"

“No, we haven’t spoken since I called her yesterday morning, but I’m not having a panic attack. Tara, like her mother, is high-strung. We had a fight. I don’t even remember what it was about.”

“Really?”

“Okay. If you must know, she ran through our credit line on frivolous purchases. I bought her a Volvo when Lorrie was born, and that wasn’t enough. Underwear and makeup and some stupid gadget to calm her mind. She bought a chair. From England! Never even saw the chair. Four thousand dollars plus shipping. I work my butt off and she gets high on online shopping sprees, so I took her credit card and ran it through my shredder.”

Burke did look annoyed. Highly. I could see his point. Then again, he was providing motive. He might be innocent or could be a killer. My instincts weren’t making a call.

He said, “Sergeant, I can tell you everything I know right now. I last saw Tara yesterday morning at about seven thirty when we had our fight. Shouting and name calling only. I walked out and was on time for my eight o’clock class. An hour or so later, Kathleen began calling my cell every ten minutes.

I was looking for tells as I sat across from him. He wasn’t sweating or avoiding my gaze. There was a framed photo on his desk. I moved it toward me. Tara and Lorrie at her first birthday, about four months ago. Visible on the inside of Tara’s wrist was a small heart-shaped tattoo lettered “LuLu.”

He said, “Help yourself. Anything else you need to know about my personal life?”

“You’re not my concern, Mr. Burke. There’s a statewide Amber Alert out for your daughter. Help us out, will you? You must have some thoughts about where Tara and Lorrie might be.”