

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES COMMEY

"Outstanding"
HARLAN COBEN

"A winning debut"
ALAFAIR BURKE

CENTRAL PARK WEST

A CRIME NOVEL

CENTRAL PARK WEST

A CRIME NOVEL

JAMES COMEY



THE MYSTERIOUS PRESS
NEW YORK

To all who have dedicated their lives to justice.

PROLOGUE

The doorman barely glanced up as she breezed past, bright blonde hair spilling from under her navy blue Hermès scarf, fancy Jackie O sunglasses on even at night, black Prada gabardine raincoat. *She was never very friendly anyway.* But he didn't want to upset her because she was a good holiday tipper—better than most of the tight-asses in this fancy place. Besides, tonight he had these two poodles from 12D in quilted dog vests yipping and nipping at him. Why people thought it was okay to hand him the leashes to their little mutts while they went to the package room was beyond him. No, he knew why. Tips. They had money and he needed money. *But one of these little things better not crap in my lobby.* The place to do that, apparently, was out on the sidewalk, on Central Park West or the Eighty-First Street side, where he would have to hose it off in the morning.

When he looked up from the dogs, Mrs. Burke was gone, into the tasteful maroon-carpeted elevator with the little fold-down seat on the wall where the operator would sit back in the day, because old-timey rich people apparently couldn't press their own floor button. *So we've made some progress; course some poor elevator operator lost a job while the residents pushed their own buttons and just kept getting richer.* He watched the bronze arrow above the door slowly turn to the penthouse. *Must be nice,* he thought.

After receiving the security code, the elevator doors opened softly, directly into the apartment, onto an entryway identical to the black-and-white marble tile of the building's lobby. She walked quietly in the enormous space, through the living room, down the hallway lined with dozens of pictures of the former governor flanked by politicians and celebrities—none of whom wanted anything to do with him now that he had been exposed as a creepy perv of a boss—past the music room with its grand piano, and into the office, with its view of Central Park and the American Museum of Natural History just down the street. There wasn't much of a view after the sun went down; mostly what Antonio “Tony” Burke could see, if he bothered to look up from the book he was reading, was his own reflection in the twelve-foot-high wall of windows. Of course, that wasn't a view that bothered him, if the rows of pictures on his “me wall” were any indication. And even after all those women violated their nondisclosure agreements to bad-mouth him to reporters, his love of self hadn't been shaken.

By the time he heard her steps and looked up into the window's reflection, she was pressing the cold barrel of a gun against the back of his neck.

“Don't move,” she whispered. He recognized her voice and his heart started pounding. *Breathe,* he thought, *keep breathing and think.*

He went with his usual move—bravado. “What the hell are you doing here?” he said, his voice not as strong as he wanted it to sound.

“You're gonna do exactly what I tell you to do.”

Now he found his executive cadence. “No, I’m not, and you better get the fuck out of my apartment before the cops get here.”

She laughed quietly. “For once, you’re not in charge, Mr. Governor. And the beauty of being on the top floor in a prewar building is—what’s that expression?—nobody can hear you scream. You’d be much better off just doing what I say.”

Gesturing to the pen and pad on the desk in front of him, she ordered him to write, *I’m sorry for hurting so many people.*

When he hesitated, she pushed the gun barrel into his neck and said, “Do it or I’ll shoot you right now. Think I’m kidding?”

He hated that his hand shook slightly as he wrote the words. Finished, he sat back, his mind racing, trying to stall, to keep her engaged, so he returned to the bluster that had served him well for decades in politics. “I know you’re in bed with my guy Conor. I know everything. Just tell me what you really want. Money? It can’t just be that stupid note.”

She ignored him. “Don’t move,” she said, staying directly behind him. He could hear her coat rustle. In the window, he saw her removing something from her pocket with her left hand and working her gloved fingers, while still pressing the small handgun into his neck with her right hand.

“Sit back, arms on the chair with your palms up, where I can see them. Good. Now close your eyes,” she said.

He did what she asked, but squinted enough to see her suddenly stab his forearm through his shirt with a large syringe, depressing the plunger in the same move. It took less than a second.

“Ow! What the hell was that?” he gasped.

“The world becoming a better place,” she answered as she set an empty bottle of insulin and the used syringe on the end table next to him.

He wanted to yell, to struggle, but it was too late. He slumped in the chair, deep in a hypoglycemic coma, headed for death. She pressed the syringe into his limp right hand, placing his thumb on the plunger before dropping it to the floor and leaning over to roll up the sleeve on his left arm.

In the lobby, she was past the doorman before he even saw her. “Evening, Mrs. Burke,” he called. She acknowledged him with the back of a gloved hand and was gone.

These fucking rich people, he thought.

Ten minutes later, a black electric-motor bicycle skidded to a stop on the sidewalk out front and a short man wearing a large insulated backpack walked into the lobby. He had a delivery for Mr. Burke in the penthouse, dinner from a fancy steakhouse. The doorman knew Mr. Burke loved the coffee-rubbed Wagyu strip. He rang upstairs several times, with no answer. He couldn’t allow the delivery guy into the elevator, so he signed for the dinner box and called the janitor to the lobby, telling him he was running food up to the penthouse. He punched the penthouse code into the elevator and moments later quietly stepped into Mr. Burke’s home, using his most subservient tone to call the great man’s name. Calling and stepping, calling and stepping, he slowly made his way through the apartment to the office, finding the body, open-mouthed and staring with empty eyes. *Dead fucking rich people.*

CHAPTER ONE

Hoboken smelled like coffee. Nora Carleton stepped up to the sidewalk from her basement apartment and took a deep breath of morning air. For decades, this once-shabby little New Jersey city on the west bank of the Hudson River had been home to coffee-roasting factories. There was coffee in the air when Hoboken was an Italian enclave and Frank Sinatra was a local hero. There was coffee in the air when the Italians moved out in the 1970s and Puerto Ricans moved in to raise their families. And it was still in your nose now that Hoboken was a gentrified city where Manhattan commuters paid six bucks in upscale cafés for what they could almost get with a deep breath.

Nora's rental in her hometown—the Mile Square City—was a basement with little natural light—nothing like the grand brownstone apartments in the floors above—but at least she could afford it on a federal prosecutor's salary. And Eleventh and Bloomfield was a fancy spot—for Hoboken. It meant a short commute; she could stroll one block to Washington Street and then to the PATH train station into Manhattan. It also meant that every morning she passed within sight of what her father long believed was America's holiest ground. Nora didn't see it that way because she didn't love baseball—and no matter how much you loved the game, there was nothing left to see—but, yes, she passed the location of Elysian Fields, where the first-ever baseball game was played in 1846. Underneath all those apartment buildings and townhouses was earth on which the game was invented, despite the fairy tales they tell tourists in Cooperstown.

It was a warm September morning, so she carried her Brooks Brothers navy blue suit jacket over her arm as she walked, a black canvas computer bag slung on her shoulder, her rubber-soled Clarks shoes making no sound on the sidewalk. Thanks to an awesome two-for-the-price-of-one Labor Day sale, she now owned four pantsuits—two blue, one black, and one gray. The salesman said the off-the-rack fit her six-foot frame perfectly, saving her on alterations. Her only splurge was the not-on-sale Brooks Brothers 100 percent cotton white shirts. She had to spend extra money getting them cleaned and pressed every week, but she decided it was worth it because she represented the United States of America. The first time she rose in court and said that—“*Nora Carleton for the United States, Your Honor*”—she got chills, and they had never fully gone away.

Being an Assistant US Attorney for the Southern District of New York was her dream job and she was determined to look the part. Her former boss liked to say they did good for a living. That was inspiring, but “good” didn't pay much, so she shopped at sales and clearance racks to represent her country. She would also splurge for a trial haircut to clean up her chin-length auburn bob, and buy a little makeup—just blush and mascara—to play up what her dad

had called her BBB eyes—Big, Brown, and Beautiful. Remembering his words made her feel more confident. It also made her lift her shoulders. She had heard it a hundred times. *Stand up straight, my beautiful girl. Show 'em exactly how tall you are. Show 'em those BBB eyes. No one's gonna mess with you then.* God how she missed him.

She didn't think much about Hoboken history, ever really, but especially not today. She would be late to work because she had to pick Sophie up from her mom's house to take her to school. Not that she *had* to; her mother could easily walk five-year-old Sophie around the corner to Joseph F. Brandt Elementary. No, she wanted to, because with a big mob trial coming up, she wasn't going to be a great parent this fall. The chance to hold her ladybug's hand on the way to school—full-day kindergarten!—was too precious.

So today Nora walked in the opposite direction from the hallowed baseball ground, going two blocks west on Eleventh and then left on Park. In the middle of the block between Ninth and Tenth, she bounded up the four stone stairs to her childhood home, a three-story brick townhouse, two windows wide, built in 1885. The heavy wood door was unlocked—she needed to remind her mother to keep it locked; there really were bad people in the world—and she stepped into the front hall. Nick was coming down the stairs and still looked like a high school kid, backpack over his shoulder, messy black hair, running shoes, jeans, and a hoodie. “Wall Street back-office casual,” he called it. He worked in a technical support role for a big bank in their Jersey City complex, moving money or analyzing something; she was never quite sure.

“Hey, prosecutor-lady,” he said, “you look fancy.”

“Hey Nick,” she answered, ignoring the awkward sorta compliment. “How's ladybug today?”

“She's great. Kid talks more in the morning than most people do all day.” He brushed past her. “Have a good one.”

“Yeah, you too.”

He wasn't a bad guy. In fact, he had been a good partner in figuring out what was best for Sophie. Nora thought he was pretty cool in high school and liked having a boyfriend to do things with, but she never felt the spark people wrote songs about. She didn't meet any other guys at college in Connecticut, and apparently, he didn't meet anybody at Seton Hall, so they just kept rolling along, Nora and Nick, the couple from Hoboken. The only time they ever fought was when he said they should fool around more often. When she was in law school, they almost broke up after he said she was “frigid.” She got drunk that night on Thanksgiving break—too drunk to think clearly—and they had sex. Nora got pregnant, which was both the worst and the best thing that ever happened to her. Sophie was born the summer following graduation, just after Nora passed the New York bar exam.

She and Nick agreed to share custody of Sophie in a “nesting” arrangement, made possible by Teresa Carleton, Nora's mom. Teresa had mightily offended her own family by marrying a non-Italian, but she and Rick Carleton had had the good sense to repair the damage by buying an old townhouse near her family—before prices got crazy—to raise their daughter. Now Rick was gone, Teresa was a widow, and Nora needed help, so Sophie lived in Nana's house, in her own room, and her parents alternated weeks staying there. Nick had been part of the Carleton family since high school, so it felt natural to everyone, and Sophie thrived. Nick looked for love on the apps, but didn't bring dates around Sophie, at least not until it got serious. Nora didn't date; she had enough on her plate and was married to her job anyway. She liked to tell friends she had only four things she cared about outside work: Sophie, food, exercise, and sleep.

Teresa came out of the kitchen. “Hey, beautiful, how are you this fine morning?”

“I’m good, Ma,” Nora answered, welcoming her mother’s hug. “How’s our big girl?”
“She is very excited. Has the lead for show-and-tell at circle-time today. Big stuff, big stuff. Gonna go with the Junior FBI Special Agent badge you got her.”

“Awesome. And I’m gonna take her to Lisa’s for a bite on the way, if that’s okay. Sorry if you made breakfast.”

“No problem. She’s in a toaster-waffle phase, so they’ll keep.”

Nora squeezed her mother again. “You rock.” Breaking away, she leaned over the stair railing and called up to the second floor. “Ladybug! Your favorite mom is here! Let’s roll!”

She could hear Sophie’s feet pounding above before she appeared at the top of the stairs looking like Nora’s personal mini-me. “Mommy!” she shouted and galloped down, one hand on the railing, her Skip Hop Zoo butterfly backpack already on. Three stairs from the bottom, Sophie launched herself into Nora’s arms.

“Nana says it’s okay if we stop at Lisa’s for breakfast,” Nora said. “You up for it?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, let’s do it. Hug for Nana, then we stroll.”

Since Nora was a little girl, Lisa’s Italian Deli had occupied the corner of Ninth and Park, just down the street from their house and across from the school. Nora leaned in the front door of the small store and waved, calling out her familiar order. “Hey Freddy. Two OJs and two bacon-and-egg on whole-wheat toast, please.” She and Sophie found chairs in the fenced sidewalk eating area under a black-and-red umbrella.

While they waited, Nora did what her mother had always done for her. They “pre-gamed” the big circle-time presentation, even if Sophie didn’t yet realize that’s what was going on.

“Tell me how the show-and-tell will go,” Nora said.

“I’m gonna show them the cool badge you got me.”

“I can’t be there, so can you do it for me like you will for them?”

“Sure, Mommy.” Sophie switched to her louder school voice. “‘My mom is a federal prosecutor in New York, which means she works with the FBI to put bad people in jail. She got me this badge from the FBI. I want to be like my mom someday.’ Then I’m gonna hold it up.”

Nora was surprised by the wave of emotion—affection, guilt, worry—washing over her. She took a breath. “Wow, I wish I could be there. It’s gonna be great. And you are gonna be a great prosecutor someday—or whatever you decide to be. Work hard in school and always be kind, okay?”

Then she reached across the table, extending her little finger. “And no secrets between us, ever. Pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear,” Sophie answered, linking fingers before dropping her hand as Freddy put the sandwiches on the table.

Nora sat watching her chomping her breakfast. *This is so fucking hard*, she thought. *School loans, no life, no sleep. Yup, all worth it. For this.*

“Why you smiling, Mommy?” Sophie mumbled, her mouth full.

“You make me so happy,” Nora answered. “Now don’t talk and eat, baby girl.”

An hour later, Nora walked onto the bricks of the pedestrian plaza in front of the Church of St. Andrew and stopped to buy a coffee from a vendor’s stand. At the far end of the red bricks—past the enormous *5 in 1* statue that was supposed to represent the city’s five boroughs, but instead seemed to represent five huge red poker chips—she could see NYPD headquarters, which was why the area was known to most New Yorkers as Police Plaza. Since opening in

1973, the fourteen-story red stone, brutalist-style police building had claimed the address of One Police Plaza, or “1PP” to insiders.

When the US Government opened a new office the next year for Manhattan’s federal prosecutors, squeezing a building between the Catholic church and 1PP, the feds couldn’t bear the thought of being on the NYPD’s turf—with the added indignity of being called “2PP” and enduring decades of urination jokes—so they made up an address that had bedeviled delivery services ever since. “One St. Andrew’s Plaza” didn’t seem to exist to Grubhub or Uber Eats, but it was a real ten-story living indictment of 1970s federal procurement. Its eyesore of a gray prefabricated facade was horizontally striped with tall, wide windows on each floor, ensuring that bad people could always see into the building, at least until the window seals failed and the double-pane glass clouded with mold.

Nora thought her boss, Frederick Simpson, the current chief federal prosecutor—the presidentially appointed United States Attorney—was an insufferable ass, which is why she so loved the story of Simpson ignoring the office manager’s advice to not put anything near the wall of windows that ran down one side of his huge triangular eighth-floor office. *Yes, the thirty-foot-long black HVAC housing, sitting just a couple feet off the royal blue wall-to-wall carpet, is a tempting place to put photos and knickknacks but, Mr. Simpson, sir, it would be a mistake because the wall of windows has been a weather-sealing challenge since 1974.* He did it anyway. It didn’t rain hard for the first two weeks of his tenure, but then it did and a whole lot of his me-wall photos got soaked, and he screamed at everybody for being idiots. *So great.*

Nora’s office, which was neither triangular nor grand—nor carpeted really, except in the sense of mismatched glued-down gray padded squares—was four floors below the US Attorney’s, but Nora didn’t look out on St. Andrew’s Plaza. From her fourth-floor spot in the Violent and Organized Crime unit—known by its initials and pronounced *vock*—she looked out across an alley to the federal prison, the Metropolitan Correctional Center. The MCC was built at the same time as the US Attorney’s building and connected by a loading dock and a small power station, making them appear as conjoined twins of bad architecture.

Like most Assistant US Attorneys for the Southern District of New York—the federal district that covered not just Manhattan, but also the Bronx and six counties to the north and northwest of the city—Nora was fiercely proud of how dumpy the offices were. Dented file cabinets as old as the building jammed everywhere; sensitive papers stacked on top; the private offices along the exterior walls crowded with government-issue desks, beat-up chairs, and the occasional—and coveted—faux-leather couch. Non-lawyers usually sat in the hall, their workspaces separated by wobbly gray “privacy walls” that only provided privacy from really short people. The office had long ago outgrown the space, forcing the attorneys who represented the government in noncriminal cases—the Civil Division AUSAs—to move to another building blocks away.

One St. Andrew’s was awful and it shocked visitors, especially those from other US Attorney’s offices—*This is the famous Southern District of New York?*—but alumni of the office grew misty-eyed telling stories of the awfulness, like surgeons regaling colleagues who were never fortunate enough to serve in a MASH unit.

Nora bounded up the stairs toward the entrance, waving to the guards as she passed through the two visitor-screening posts and into the elevator lobby. On four, she used her access card to open the bullet-proof entry door and strode down the hall to her office. A deep voice stopped her at her doorway.

“Ms. Smooth, we should talk about the Frenchman.”

It was Benny Dugan, a mountain of a man and legendary Mafia investigator whose office was next to Nora’s. His crew-cut hair still blond in middle age, he was six foot five, 250

pounds of Brooklyn, and he'd been doing the work for thirty years, starting as the youngest detective in NYPD history. The US Attorney's office hired him years ago as a federal investigator because he knew more about the mob than anyone in the FBI, which was technically the lead agency on federal Mafia cases. Benny connected with criminals in extraordinary ways, somehow both frightening them and communicating respect. Although Benny and Nora were twenty years apart, they'd become close and established a familial banter, which might have had something to do with Dugan's own family story. His beloved wife was dead and his two sons were estranged from their father, who had been absent—on surveillance, likely—during their childhoods.

Benny was fond of calling Nora “Ms. Smooth” because she was good on her feet in court. In return, Nora called Benny “Mr. Rough”—a nod to his complete lack of diplomatic skills—frequently adding in a tone of mock apology, “Just messing with you. Don't mean anything bad about you.”

Benny would invariably give her a sideways look, adding, “I'm not as good a person as you think I am.”

Nora's practiced reply was the final piece of this shtick: “Did I say you were a good person?”

She turned and looked into Dugan's large office, which he shared with FBI Special Agent Jessica Watson, detailed to the United States Attorney's office to show the Bureau's “support” for the prosecution of Dominic “The Nose” D'Amico. In truth, the supervisor of the FBI squad dedicated to the Gambino Mafia Family didn't care much about the D'Amico case. Mostly, Nora thought, because the FBI hadn't made it themselves; Dugan had, with his uncanny ability to develop witnesses.

So the FBI's “support” took the form of Watson, a twenty-nine-year-old fresh-out-of-Quantico agent and former Northern California high school chemistry teacher, with smooth dark skin and a soft Afro kept very short. She was a happy teacher—and weekend triathlete—until a friend dragged her to an FBI Bay Area recruiting event. She found herself riveted as the Bureau rep—a ramrod-straight Black woman in her forties—explained the need for diversity in law enforcement and dared the audience to try a job with moral content—one where fitness was part of the mission description. She felt the call, became a Special Agent, and got sent to New York, her forty-seventh choice in the Quantico field office ranking exercise.

Dugan had long ago come to understand the FBI's approach to “supporting” cases the agency didn't believe in. It was, he explained, like the expansion draft in a professional sports league, where teams jealously guard stars and make only lowly rookies available to other teams. His comparison invariably launched one of his favorite routines with “the new kid,” whom he had come to like.

“But a lot of the so-called stars are turds, and sometimes the low pick is the GOAT,” Dugan would say. “We got us the next Tom Brady. So fuck them.”

Watson corrected him every time. “Dude, seriously? I look like Tom Brady to you? Can't I be Kobe in your little metaphor? He wasn't a top-ten pick.”

“I'll consider it,” Benny always answered, with a grin.

This morning, Benny wanted to talk about one of the witnesses he had developed; nicknamed Frenchie, he was to be the key witness in Nora's case against D'Amico—a bad man out on the streets pending trial after the judge denied Nora's motion to detain him as a danger to the community. She dropped into one of the chairs scattered around Dugan's office.

“What's wrong with him now?” she sighed.

Dugan shook his head. “Nope, nope. First I get a full report on our angel. You took her out to breakfast today on the way to school drop-off?”

Nora laughed and looked at Jessica, who held the backs of her hands up, flexing her fingers toward her chest—the classic “gimme, gimme” signal. So Nora beamed and told the story of breakfast alfresco and the planned show-and-tell, her head ping-ponging between the beaming Benny and Jessica. The mob could wait.