

JAMES PATTERSON

THE NEW WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB NOVEL

THE **23** RD

A crow is perched on a dark, bare branch in the foreground. Behind the crow, a large, bright full moon is visible against a dark, cloudy night sky. The scene is framed by the large, stylized numbers '23' and the word 'THE' to the left, and 'RD' to the right.

MIDNIGHT
& MAXINE PAETRO



About the Authors

JAMES PATTERSON is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. His books have sold in excess of 400 million copies worldwide. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past two decades – the Alex Cross, Women’s Murder Club, Detective Michael Bennett and Private novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including standalone thrillers and non-fiction.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books for young readers including the Middle School, Dog Diaries, Treasure Hunters and Max Einstein series. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed author in UK libraries for the past thirteen years in a row. He lives in Florida with his family.

MAXINE PAETRO is a novelist who has collaborated with James Patterson on the bestselling Women’s Murder Club, Private and Confessions series, *Woman of God*, and other stand-alone novels. She lives with her husband, John, in New York.

[A list of titles by James Patterson appears at the back of this book](#)

James Patterson
& Maxine Paetro

23RD MIDNIGHT



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Dedicated to our friends and fans of the
Women's Murder Club. This book's for you.*

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.

Prologue

MONDAY

ONE

AT DAWN THAT morning, a man dressed entirely in black nosed his gray Ford sedan up to the curb on Taylor Street. To the east, the morning sun struggled to rise through the clouds over San Francisco Bay. It was still dark but the man, who was now in “Blackout” mode, knew this street as well as he knew his own mind.

He cut his headlights, released the trunk latch, lowered the seat back a few inches and adjusted his video glasses in the rearview mirror. With his unobstructed view of Victorian row houses and the wooden staircase across the street, Blackout waited for Catherine. She was always on time, one of the many things he liked about her.

At twenty-five, Catherine Fleet was a beautiful mother of a baby girl named Josephina, and an integral part of the masterwork he was creating. He wished he could talk with her about it, but there wouldn't be time. She was leaving her house on Leavenworth now. She would turn down Macondray Lane, the quarter mile of footpath that ran downhill and at a right angle to Taylor.

The lane parted a smattering of trees and hugged the walls of the large homes until it merged with the wooden staircase that ended only yards from the rear of Blackout's stripped-down cop car.

Catherine would pause there, Josie strapped into her front-facing carrier, and together they would take in the magnificent view of dawn breaking over San Francisco Bay. Moments later, she would head south to Ina Coolbrith Park for their morning walk.

As he rounded off that thought, Blackout saw a flicker of movement in his rearview mirror. Catherine was halfway down the staircase, as regular as a metronome. Her unbuttoned dark coat revealed a garnet-red, snowflake-patterned sweater over dark pants. Her long, dark hair spilled over her shoulders and floated around the redheaded baby's ears.

Perfect. She was perfect.

Blackout secured his video glasses, worked his gloves over his large hands, and got out of his car. In only a dozen strides he'd reached the foot of the staircase. Catherine looked down briefly, gripping the banister, giving the good-looking young man a brief smile.

Blackout smiled back, took the first two steps upward, snagging the toe of his shoe on the third. As he'd calculated, he tripped and fell facedown spectacularly, sprawling with his arms spread like a large broken bird.

She called out, "Oh, my gosh. Are you all right?"

"I, uh, don't know," he said. "I think I slammed my knee on the edge of the riser ..."

Blackout was awkwardly working himself up into a crouch when Catherine reached him.

"Can you stand up?"

The concern in her voice sent a wave of pleasure through him as he looked up into her blue eyes, the irises rimmed with gold halos. The baby was awake, beating her fists against the air.

"I'm good," said Blackout. "Embarrassed, is all. I try to impress with finesse."

Catherine laughed, saying, "Forget it ever happened," never seeing the small vial Blackout had secreted in his clenched hand. Called "Down Dog," it was an inelegant name, but it got the job done. He aimed the sprayer at Catherine Fleet's golden blue eyes and thumbed the lever.

Her reaction was instant, sharp, pained. She cried, "What did you do?" She sat down hard, tearing up from the pepper spray and palming her eyes. The baby girl was gulping air, exhaling wails that could be heard through brick walls.

Blackout had to move fast, before someone else came down the stairs on their way to the park. He scrambled up and got behind Catherine, cradled her lovely neck between his forearm and biceps. She could barely draw breath, gasping, "Don't. Hurt. My baby."

"Don't worry. She's in good hands."

Catherine tried to push off the step, to get away from him, but Blackout held her in place and spoke gently to her as he squeezed.

“Don’t fight me, Catherine. It’ll be all over soon. Shhh, shhhh. I’ve got you.”

In fifteen seconds, Catherine was unconscious. In forty seconds, a woman who’d been at the peak of life was dead. But the baby was wailing.

Blackout assessed their combined weight at a hundred and twenty pounds. He checked in all directions. They were alone. He gathered up mother and child and carried them twenty yards to his car’s unlatched trunk.

He stowed them without trouble and was reaching inside to kill the baby, when a man’s voice called out.

“Pardon me. Do you need some help there?”

TWO

BLACKOUT TURNED TO see a jogger in shorts and a tennis shirt materialize in the gloom, coming slowly toward him. He had seen him before, a man in his seventies, stiff, arthritic, now winded from climbing the hill out of the park.

“We’re fine,” Blackout shouted back. “We’re all fine.”

The jogger’s expression showed confusion, then, as the baby’s cries filled the air, the old man put it all together. And he held up his phone.

He shot pictures, then turned and ran surprisingly fast back down the hill, with his phone clapped to his ear. *He was calling 911. Had to be. He had pictures on his phone. Of him. Of his car. Maybe he’d gotten an angle on his plates and the contents of the trunk.*

The baby was shrieking.

There was no time for rage. Blackout covered the baby’s mouth and nose with his large gloved hand until moments later the baby had stopped breathing. Then he dragged blankets over the two dead bodies. Slamming the trunk lid closed, he surveyed the field with a chopper gunner’s eyes, tipping the street toward him and dividing it into a grid.

The jogger was sixty feet away and gaining downhill speed. Farther down the block, near the Victorian row houses, an impatient woman yanked on the leash of a small, prancy dog before disappearing through a doorway.

And now, the sun was burning off the cloud cover and pinking up the sky. Blackout slid into the driver’s seat and backed his old Ford into a K-turn. Straightening out, he touched his foot to the gas. He trailed behind the old man for a moment before darting around him, braking suddenly, blocking him in. The old man faltered, dodged, then made for the space between two parked cars.

Blackout reached for the weapon lying on the passenger seat. A stun cane. He grasped it, exited his vehicle, and using the stick as a

bat, he swung and connected with the back of the old man's head. The jogger fell against a parked van then slumped to the street. He cried out weakly, but the sound didn't carry.

The phone had jumped from the jogger's hand, skidded a few yards downhill. Blackout walked over and crushed it with his heel, then uncapped the stun cane.

The jogger was weeping, helpless. He couldn't stand.

Blackout looked down at him and carefully placed the business end of the stun cane against the jogger's throat.

He spoke in a soothing voice, "What's your name?"

The old man pushed futilely at the stick. His face was red. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Don't," he said. "I didn't see anything."

"I said, 'What is your name?'"

He wheezed, "Jay. Cob."

"Jacob. Got it. You took pictures, buddy. Big mistake. Hang on for the thrill of your life."

Blackout pulled the stun cane's trigger, sending a million volts into the old man's body, enough to light up the entire block. He knew that the human body could only absorb one percent of a charge that strong, but that plus the current knocked the old man out and with luck, stopped his heart.

But no. The old man blinked his eyes. His mouth moved.

The sky was brightening and Blackout had no more time for this. Back in his car, he pulled the classic Ruger Mark IV, complete with suppressor, from his glove box. He walked back to the old man and aimed the gun point-blank at his forehead and fired it. Then put two more in his chest.

With his back to the many-windowed houses on Taylor's west side, Blackout picked the SIM card out of the litter of Jacob's broken phone. He tossed the stun cane back into his car and took the driver's seat, returning the gun to the glove box. The engine was still running and now Blackout allowed elation, that precious, elusive feeling, to fill him up. He heard in his deep and heaving breaths, the soundtrack of his life.

He made a mental note to freeze frame on the bullet hole in Jacob's forehead. Fade to black.

And then he headed the car downhill.
Blackout still had a lot of work to do, of the most important kind.