

JAMES PATTERSON



THE
PICASSO
HEIST

A THRILLER

AND HOWARD ROUGHAN

THE PICASSO HEIST

JAMES PATTERSON
AND HOWARD ROUGHAN



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FOREWORD

THIS IS A true story.¹

How James Patterson even heard about it in the first place is still a mystery to me, although I guess that's what a lot of his books are—mysteries—so, yeah, there you go. Still, it's not like I was scurrying around door to door and hawking my tale to the highest bidder. Or any bidder, for that matter. That's one of the rules of the Witness Protection Program. You're not allowed to profit off the very reason they stick you in it.

Somehow, some way, Patterson must have had access to somebody awfully high up and with a badge, because that's the only way to explain how he ever got hold of me. Of course, that's mere speculation. I'll never know for sure, and I'm more than fine with that. Just because Patterson wanted to know my secrets didn't mean I needed to ask about his. As for why I ultimately said yes to him, I think it's because I had every reason to say no. Someone near and dear to me once explained that the secret to life was learning how to zig when the rest of the world zags. Otherwise, what's the point of it all?

So what more can I tell you before I let the storytellers take over? Well, maybe this. There's a reason none of what you're about to read ever made it into the press. It's complicated. Not so much the reason but the story itself. When you combine organized crime, power-hungry federal officials, and filthy-rich people with a hell of a lot to hide, the results are never neat and tidy. Especially in New York. Go figure, right? If it ain't extra-messy, it ain't Manhattan.

As you turn these pages, you might think you know what's going on, and you might think you know what's going to happen next. And maybe some of you will.

Most of you won't.

—*Halston G.*

Footnote

1 Except for the parts that aren't.

PROLOGUE

SERIOUS AS A HEART ATTACK

"So can we trust her?"

"Can we afford not to?"

"What if she can't pull it off?"

"She's pretty damn smart."

"How smart?"

"Second in her class at Columbia."

"What do they call that, again?"

"Salutatorian."

"That's right."

"She should've been the valedictorian."

"What do you mean?"

"She got all As until her last semester. Then got a C in one course."

"So?"

"The course was Twentieth-Century Art History."

"She could've taught that class."

"Exactly. She tanked the final on purpose."

"How do you know?"

"The professor's convinced."

"What about her? Did she admit it?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not relevant."

"It is if we intend to trust her."

"Remember, she's not working alone."

"He's not the one I'm

worried about."

"Of course he would say that. He's her brother."

"I understand. But their motive..."

"Sometimes people get blinded. Emotions—"

"We're not shrinks."

"This is personal for them."

"That's what I'm saying."

"So you're okay with that?"

"Because it's so personal?"

"Some people would call that crazy."

"Because that's the risk if things go sideways."

"Are you really, though?"

"I want you to say it out loud."

"As a heart attack."

"And he says she can handle it."

"He's not just some guy, though."

"Can you blame them?"

"That's what we're here for."

"I know."

"Very personal."

"How can it not be, though?"

"It's why I trust her."

"Because she's willing to risk her life."

"I'm well aware."

"Well aware of that too."

"What do you want me to say?"

"You serious?"

"You mean, if she gets found out?"

“Yes. What happens to this girl, Halston, if she gets caught?”

“Fine.”

“Fine what? Let me hear the words.”

“She’s as good as dead, that’s what.”

ACT I

GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

CHAPTER 1

TENNIS, ANYONE?

Growing up, I remember my mother really wanting me to learn how to play the sport. She never asked if it was actually something I wanted to do, and not once did I express even the slightest interest in setting foot on a court. Still, for my twelfth birthday, she handed me a pink envelope with my name, Halston, spelled out in rainbow-glitter glue, and inside was a card announcing that I'd been signed up for a dozen tennis lessons at the local YWCA.

Honestly, I think my mother simply liked the *idea* of having a daughter who played tennis. It conveyed normalcy, as if we were your typical upper-middle-class family living in Westchester, New York. (Spoiler alert: We weren't.)

But that's what most alcoholics do, and that's why my mother used to bury her empty liquor bottles at the bottom of our recycling bins: They try like hell to hide the truth. Or, better yet, they construct their own reality. So whether or not I was having fun playing tennis didn't seem to matter much to my mother. It looked good, like she was being a good parent. Who cared if I enjoyed it? (Spoiler alert: I didn't.)

Still, I never missed a single one of those tennis lessons. I learned how to play, and that of course included learning how to keep score. It's ten years later, I'm twenty-two, and I haven't picked up a racket since then. But I still know how to keep score.

And that's where this story begins.

"Skip, talk to me. How's the volume?" I whisper, testing the level in my earpiece, which is hidden by the blond wig underneath my baseball cap. I'm in Queens at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, right next to Citi Field, where the Mets play, so I'm wearing a

Mets cap. This whole operation is about blending in.

"Volume's good," I hear back in my ear, "although I'm getting a little static, and you broke up on me there for a sec—"

Skip's voice suddenly cuts out, and I start dropping F-bombs, thinking we're screwed. Skip laughs. He's messing with me. That's what older brothers do. He can hear me crystal clear in his hotel room at the W Hoboken over in New Jersey. The hotel has good Wi-Fi, over 100 Mbps. More important, at least according to Skip, it's got a kick-ass bacon cheeseburger on the room-service menu.

"You logged in?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Skip. "Are they done warming up?"

"Yep. They're just about to start."

It's day two of the US Open tennis tournament, still the first round in a crowded field of over two hundred men and women. That means the most matches are being played on the most courts with the most chair umpires being used, including none other than the man of the hour, Lucas Montgomery.

Lucas is a very tall, lanky Australian in his late fifties who doesn't so much sit in his umpire chair as fold himself into it, contorting his body so his bended knees are nearly as high as his chest. Perched above midcourt, he looks like a human accordion. I absolutely love Lucas. I'd follow him anywhere, and this summer, after graduating college, I literally have. The Mallorca Championships, Wimbledon, the Swiss Open Gstaad. What a great way to see the world, and all of it paid for with wagers placed and won in split seconds.

courtsiding

verb

Transmitting real-time information from a sports event (especially a tennis match) for the purpose of gaining a betting advantage

In other words, if we can place a bet online before the bookmakers adjust their real-time odds, we have the upper hand. Advantage us. All it takes is that certain chair umpire who officially

updates the score after each point a teeny bit slower than I update Skip on his laptop at the hotel. Someone like Lucas Montgomery, aka Slow Hand Luke.

Is courtsiding against the law? Technically, no. Just don't try telling that to the guys who run the online betting site offering the highest limits for live, in-match betting. That crew tends to have a slightly different opinion about courtsiding, one that they'd be more than happy to make me painfully aware of—and I do mean *painfully*—should they ever get the chance. Like today, for instance.

Because today I'm going to make a mistake. A big mistake. Huge. The kind that will forever change the rest of my life.

I'm going to get caught.

CHAPTER 2

“FIVE, RED,” I whisper just loud enough so Skip can hear me over the cheering crowd.

Five as in *five hundred dollars*. *Red* as in *the Russian*. I never bet during the first few games of a match when the two players are feeling each other out. But once they settle into the first set, I pounce.

Red’s opponent is Green, a Brazilian. Flag colors are faster than names.

Lucas, snug in his umpire chair, maneuvers his long arm like a crane and taps his touch screen right as I relay the bet, but I’ve beat him by a breath. As he announces the score I hear back from Skip. “In,” says my brother. He got the bet in before the odds changed.

We’ve got five hundred bucks on Red, the Russian player, to win the game. He’s now ahead, 40–30, but our payoff reflects the longer odds of 30–30. Just like that, we’ve got a better chance of winning with a bigger payout.

Is it guaranteed? No. Green could win the next point, taking it to deuce, then win two more points in a row after that to take the game. But the chances of that happening are not nearly as good as the chances of Red prevailing. Gambling is about one thing and one thing only: Leverage. You have it or you don’t.

We have it. Red wins the game and our account gets credited \$1,060—\$500 back for the initial wager, plus \$560 profit. And now it’s on to the next game and the next bet. That is, until I hear the voice to my right.

“Good match so far,” the man says, leaning slightly toward me. “Very entertaining, no?” He’s got a thick Eastern European accent. His breath reeks of cigarettes, two packs a day.

I know he wasn't sitting there a minute ago. Now he is. That's what I get for being so focused on placing my bet in time.

"Yeah. It's pretty good tennis," I answer, staring straight ahead. I don't look at him.

"Who are you rooting for?" he asks.

It's a harmless question but I know this guy's anything but harmless. He's not trying to be menacing. He doesn't have to try. It clearly comes naturally. *Keep it together now, Halston. Breathe in, breathe out...*

"I don't know who I'm rooting for," I say. "I guess I don't really care who wins."

I can feel and smell him leaning in even closer. "Yeah, but if you had to bet," he whispers, "who would you bet on?"

For the first time, I turn to him. He's got greasy dark hair combed across his forehead in a guillotine-like slant. He's smiling. He's also big. No, *thick* is a better word. His forearms, folded tight against his chest, look to be the size of ham hocks. I'm guessing they're covered in tattoos, but I can't see them because he's wearing a tragically ugly teal windbreaker. Never mind there's not a cloud in the sky, we're in late August, and it's pushing ninety degrees.

"What do you want?" I ask.

What he wants first is to show me the gun he's got tucked in his waistband underneath the windbreaker. The second thing he wants is my earpiece. He sticks out his palm. "Hand it over," he says. "Along with your phone."

The next game in the match has just gone to deuce on Green's serve. I would've been placing another bet after the following point. *How much of this are you hearing, Skip?*

I glance down again at the gun the guy's got tucked into his waistband and then back up at his eyes. I'm wearing sunglasses; he's not. He wants me to be able to see his eyes. I could play stupid and ask, *What earpiece?* But stupid won't get me anywhere. Coy is a different story, though. Coy buys me a little time.

"We both know you're not about to shoot me in front of all these people, and you're not going to throw me over your shoulder or drag me out of here kicking and screaming," I say. "So what's to stop me

from standing up and heading for the first cop I see? There's lots of them around here, in case you haven't noticed."

He laughs. "Such a clever girl, huh? But we also both know you're not going to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we found you, that's why. Now we'll always be able to find you, Halston." He really enjoys saying my name, showing me that he knows it. "Come with me now and we won't hurt you," he says. "But if you don't come with me now? We'll definitely hurt you."

I think it over for a few seconds, or at least I act as if that's what I'm doing. My mind's been made up since the very second this guy sat down. Meanwhile, Red wins the next point with an overhead slam, the ball careening into the stands. I look up at Lucas, crammed in his umpire chair, as he methodically inputs the score change. Damn; I could've placed ten bets in the time that took.

But my courtsiding days are over for now. I've officially been caught.

I take out my earpiece and hand it and my phone over to my new friend in the ugly teal windbreaker.

"Okay, you win," I say. "Let's go."