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CENTRAL PARK WEST

A CRIME NOVEL

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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.

CHAPTER TWO

Pomander Walk was a hard street to find, and even harder to get into, which is why Kyra Burke's lawyer, Matthew Parker, wanted to meet her there. The paparazzi who were stalking Kyra's every move were stuck at the gates that blocked the entrance to the secret little block between Ninety-Fourth and Ninety-Fifth Streets on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The press could stand at either end, but could see nothing through the tight metal mesh. Since separating from her now-deceased husband, former governor Tony Burke, Kyra had lived quietly in one of the attached two-story Tudor-style homes in the tiny make-believe-looking development, which had somehow survived the onslaught of high-rise apartment buildings for a hundred years.

Now settled into a quiet academic life as a law professor, Kyra cherished the walk uphill along West End Avenue and then Broadway to her office at Columbia Law School. She even loved the faculty lunches, although it took focus not to roll her eyes at colleagues asking endlessly long questions that were always about themselves and not about the paper under discussion. Good times. But no more. She was the accused murderer known as Killer Kyra, at least according to the screaming tabloids. Quiet walks and academic reflection were gone. People with cameras stalked her every move.

"These people really need to get a life," Kyra vented, looking across her butcher-block kitchen table at her lawyer. She was a strikingly beautiful thirty-nine-year-old woman, her high cheekbones framed by a long honey-blond Jennifer Anniston bob cut. Not old enough yet to be tempted by the plastic surgery and Botox that were epidemic in her circles.

At the other end of the rectangular table, Matthew Parker looked pained, rubbing his face from top to bottom with an open palm. He also looked tired, but only his combed-back silver hair betrayed his sixty years; the rest of his six-foot-two frame was toned by hours on a Peloton bike and in the pool, and somehow his skin was smooth and his blue eyes unclouded. Now he blinked those eyes slowly, silently recalling a prayer—*grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change*—as he stared at Kyra. He had spent a career in federal law enforcement and then the past fifteen years as a defense attorney. Despite all the bullshit about Martha Stewart flourishing in jail, women like Kyra Burke didn't do well in prison. And Martha had done five months in a minimum-security Club Fed; Kyra was staring at life in a New York state prison. It was to be

avoided at all costs; well, at least at the cost of his \$3 million retainer.

He had never met Kyra Burke until two weeks earlier, inside the 24th Precinct. At dawn that day, the NYPD had executed an arrest warrant at her Pomander Walk home and also searched the place. Parker had been sound asleep in Brooklyn Heights when he got a call from Conor McCarthy, longtime aide to former governor Burke, recently deceased. It seemed the Manhattan DA had decided Kyra was responsible for that death and had charged her with murder. She was walked in handcuffs from a squad car into the police precinct in front of dozens of photographers, who all somehow knew to gather on One Hundredth Street in Manhattan as the sun came up. *The mysteries of New York law enforcement*, Parker thought. Once inside the 24th Precinct—known in the NYPD as the “Two-Four”—Kyra had used her one phone call to reach her dead husband’s closest aide, Conor McCarthy, who in turn had called Parker, woke him up, and assured him that the funds would be available for a robust defense and to secure her release on bail before trial.

He had found her lying on a bench in the Two-Four precinct’s holding cell. Parker had helped Kyra sit up and introduced himself. It had been a media circus ever since, a fact that didn’t thrill Parker’s partners at his Wall Street law firm, who were more accustomed to representing corporations accused of financial crimes than estranged spouses accused of murder.

There had been no time at the beginning to really review the case with his client but, with the arraignment behind them and discovery received from the prosecution, they now had the chance to come to know each other and what she faced.

Like any good investigator, Parker began with open-ended questions, letting the witness—in this case, his client—decide where to go.

“Okay,” he began, “tell me your story.”

“My story?”

“Yeah, your story. Tell it to me, as if you were introducing yourself to a class, or a jury.” He looked down at his notepad, a technique he knew made it easier for the witness to speak freely.

She stared at his bowed head for a moment. “Okay, weird, but okay. My name is Kyra Burke, and I’m thirty-nine years old. My maiden name is Podolski. I was born and raised in Easton, Pennsylvania, by my grandparents—my father was never in the picture and my mother was dead from an overdose before I was five.”

Kyra took a deep breath and seemed to reset. “Anyhow, my grandparents raised me and I went to public high school in Easton and then

to Yale for college, which I paid for through some financial aid but mostly loans and campus jobs. I'm a lawyer. I went to Columbia Law School, where I now teach gender and employment law classes. I started mentoring programs for at-risk girls in Easton, in New Haven, and in the South Bronx. We have to do more than just get them through high school. They need role models and mentors who empower them to build careers and be leaders. I've always been interested in public policy and politics. When I was thirty, I met the then-governor, Tony Burke—he was in his first term—at a charity event and we hit it off; we seemed to care about the same things and started dating—he was recently divorced—and we fell in love.

“Maybe I was naive—no, I *was* naive—but he seemed the kind of leader we need in this country. He was a leader who believed in the power of the free market, but he also cared deeply—or said he did—about things I cared about: a strong social safety net, constitutional policing, women's rights, progressive taxation, and protection of the environment. It seems silly now, but he gave off a *Camelot* vibe and said he wanted me to be his partner in it. Guinevere to his Arthur, I guess. I told my friends he was JFK but without the zipper problem. Jesus, was I wrong.

“He told me he was a feminist and advocated for women, but I discovered he was a lying, vicious predator, who tried to screw everything he could get his hands on, whether they consented or not. A total fraud. Honestly, I was relieved to get away from him, to have my own life back, here”—she gestured around the kitchen—“in this little place. And then he goes and dies and, poof, my new life is gone. It's almost enough to make me sorry he's dead. Almost. Not quite.”

Kyra paused before adding, “So how's that, story-wise?”

Parker stopped writing and looked up. “Perfect, exactly what I was looking for. More to come, but now let's talk about the case.”

He briefed her on the research their jury consultant had already done. It was an ugly picture. Everybody seemed to have a view—that she was guilty. Kyra exhaled through pursed lips. “So I'm still waiting for a potential juror who has formed a view that I actually *didn't* kill Tony. Everybody just believes all the tabloid crap?”

“Look, we're gonna get a jury,” he answered. “There are lots of people in Manhattan who don't read and have no idea what's going on in the world. Which, as a citizen, I'm not sure is a blessing, by the way. But we will get twelve people who say they can be fair and impartial. I'm not worried about that. I'm more worried about the evidence the jury is gonna hear and how we deal with it.”

Kyra leaned forward in her ladder-back farmhouse chair, putting both

forearms on the kitchen table. “Tell me.”

“Well, they got the doorman, for starters. He’s known you for years and says you walked in and out of the building at the time Tony was killed. Video backs him up. The stuff you were wearing is stuff they found during the search here at your house: scarf, glasses, fancy raincoat . . .”

“That’s silly. Anybody could have an Hermès scarf.”

“Right, course. Then there’s the fact that the fake you, which looks on tape just like the real you, used the family code in the elevator to get up to the penthouse.”

“Lots of people have that code. Tony’s entire staff and all the women he screwed probably know it.”

“Look, I’m not saying we don’t have arguments here. I’m just tryin’ to lay out what they have. No struggle at the scene, so it was somebody your husband knew. Oh, and your phone was turned off during the time window around his death. Came back on an hour later.”

“That is some . . .” Kyra began.

“So they have some decent opportunity proof, with the doorman and video and all, and we’re gonna have a hard time undercutting it, what with you being here alone and reading during that time. But I digress.”

“Yeah, but no video of me leaving here, right?”

“True, in a sense,” Parker answered. “Only shitty, blurred video of lots of figures coming and going through the gates from this weird little block in the dark. So our alibi kinda sucks.”

He exhaled before continuing. “And they got motive proof comin’ out the ass. Seems you really did bad-mouth the deceased to your Columbia colleagues before his untimely demise. Bunch of them are on the witness list to lay out what a womanizing, abusive, lying, evil piece of shit you said he was.”

“All true,” Kyra answered, “both in the sense that I said it and in the sense that he was a womanizing, abusive, lying, evil piece of garbage. But I didn’t kill him and if I’d wanted to, I sure as hell wouldn’t get caught.”

Parker grimaced and leaned back in his chair, looping his thumbs behind his suspenders and stretching them forward, hands sliding up and down, up and down. “No doubt, no doubt, but, uh, not great evidence for us, right?”

“Not great,” she agreed.

“Then they’re gonna call his lawyers to tell the jury about the divorce proceedings, and that, with the prenup kicking in, you were gonna get next to nothing. Oh, unless he died first. In that case, you’d get it all.”

Releasing the suspenders, he added, “So there’s that.”

Parker's sarcasm was wearing on Kyra. "You enjoying this?" she asked sharply, leaning back in her own chair.

He looked pained. "I most definitely am not." Pointing to her, he added, "I believe my client is actually innocent, which doesn't happen to me a lot, and that's good because it scares the shit out of me. Much rather represent guilty people. Less pressure on me. So, no, I'm not enjoying this."

He leaned forward, putting both forearms on the table. "But I just want you to see clearly what we're up against. You hated this guy, you were gonna lose a ton of dough if you two got divorced, and the doorman and a video say you came and left when the killer did."

Kyra didn't hesitate. "I still think we argue it was a real suicide."

Parker offered a tight smile. "Yeah, we've been through that and, look, it's your life and I'm your lawyer, so I will do what you want, within reason. But the visitor and the dinner make it a really steep hill to climb. If it was a real suicide, what were you doing there? And if it wasn't you, what was a look-alike doing there? And the steak. Nobody orders their favorite dinner in the world and then kills himself before the food gets there. Oh, and the forensics are bad for the real-suicide theory. They found a small hole in his shirt and cotton fibers from the shirt on the needle."

"And so?" Kyra asked, confused.

"Well, that means he injected himself through his shirt and then rolled up his sleeve after he was dead. Seems unlikely, although I'm no doctor."

Kyra studied the stripes of the wood table. "And the note. No way that jerk felt bad about anything."

She exhaled audibly. "Yup, somebody killed him. Which was a public service, but I didn't do it."

"Yup," Parker echoed. "It's gonna come down to your testimony creating a reasonable doubt. We don't have many handholds to pull down the DA's proof. You just gotta convince the jury—or at least one of them, anyway—that you didn't do it. And that's gotta start with you not celebrating his death. This 'public service' stuff is out, 'kay? You gotta be more disciplined than that."

Kyra flinched, but then slowly nodded. "So, Mr. Defense Lawyer, let's write a statement for the press about how sad I am that my husband was murdered and that one of his many enemies is trying to get away with it by framing sweet innocent me. Anything to get a new narrative out there."

"Okay," Parker answered wearily, flipping his legal pad to a clean page. "So who are the suspects?"

"His first wife, Marian, hates him—sorry, hated him. She gave up her

life for his career, had a kid with the bastard, and he still screwed her over, worse than with me. The gaslighting, the humiliation. Thirty years of it, and she put up with it because—well, I don't know why, probably for her son, who she thinks is the anointed one. And after putting up with all that, he still dumps her, and has his people stab her to the press: unstable, mentally ill, a burden he could no longer carry and still serve the voters. Really sick stuff.”

“And so why would she kill him now, after so long?”

“For the golden child, would be my guess. She thinks Edward should be president. He's the picture of a modern major conservative: married to his high school sweetheart, bunch of kids, born-again, pro-life, tough on borders, blah, blah, blah. Always wearing the new team uniform—red vest that says, ‘I may be a hedge-fund millionaire but I will fight for you and the other deplorables.’ She lies awake at night imagining her room at the White House, wherever it was the Obamas let Michelle's mother sleep. Course, Tony was not gonna let that happen; he was too sick a guy to let his son get what he couldn't. Hard to blame her for killing him.”

“Okay, maybe Marian. Who else?”

“Edward would have the same motive, I suppose. And I should have started with this one, but the mob. I don't know who or how, but Tony Burke was covered in the stink of that world. I never knew details but I heard enough echoes to know he'd been doing favors for some bad people for a long time. Contracts, bids, union issues, zoning problems. He would say it was ‘constituent service,’ but these weren't the ordinary constituents. They had some hold over the guy that I never understood. Who knows how he screwed them over, but with him out of office—and unlikely to get back in now that the world knew he was a sexual predator—they'd have very little patience for getting screwed over.”

“Got it. Who else?”

“Well, any of the girls he laid hands on, or people close to them. I mean, this guy was the Harvey Weinstein of politics. Think of how many girls—well, women, but he liked them young—he hurt and threw away. Not a shocker that they would want him to pay for that.”

“Got it. So what is it you think we should tell the press about all this?”

Kyra paused for a few seconds, then began dictating. “Okay, here's the theme I think you start putting out, all on background . . .”

Parker sighed and flipped to another clean page. *Why can't my clients ever just shut up and do what I say? Why am I even still taking this tabloid shit?*

“. . . Kyra Burke is innocent, and a victim of our obsessive media