

JAMES PATTERSON

#1

BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
KISS THE GIRLS
AND
CAT & MOUSE

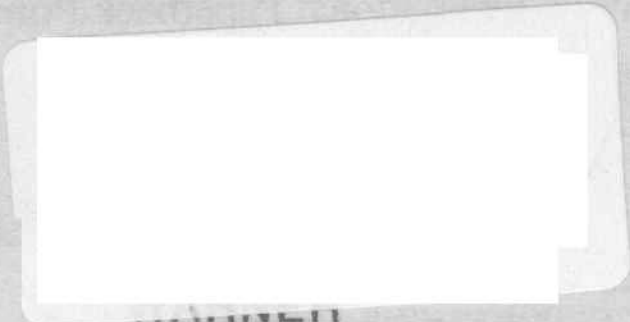
THE

MIDNIGHT CLUB

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JAMES PATTERSON

**THE MID-
NIGHT
CLUB**



**VISION
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NEW YORK BOSTON

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Cover illustration by Gabriel Molano

Warner Books, Inc.
1271 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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An AOL Time Warner Company

Printed in the United States of America

Originally published in hardcover by Little, Brown and Company
First Warner Books International Paperback Printing: August 1998
First Warner Books U.S. Paperback Printing: June 1999

20 19 18

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This is for J., for P., and for N.,
who told me what it's like to be in the Chair

It's for my father and mother,
Charles and Isabelle

PROLOGUE

Night of the Detective

1

Long Beach, New York, March 1986

THE NIGHT THAT John Stefanovitch was shot couldn't have been colder, or the stars more dazzling in high winter skies.

Shortly past midnight, Stefanovitch tramped down the creaking, solidly frozen boardwalk at Long Beach. He was humming "Surfer Girl," one of those awful beach-town ditties that could usually bring a smile to his lips.

Stefanovitch's eyes stayed sharply focused. They very carefully swept the silent, gritty beachfront neighborhood.

The Grave Dancer was nearby. Stefanovitch felt it all through his body. It was a second sense he had sometimes, almost a paranormal gift. The scumbucket he had been tracking for almost two years was so close it made his skin crawl.

He finally arrived back on Florida Street, the desolate side lane where he and his detectives had agreed to gather. Actually, he'd been there ten minutes ago, then walked down to New York Avenue and the funkytown boardwalk to clear his head.

The full team of fourteen Narcotics detectives was assembled. This was a joint Nassau County and N.Y.P.D. strike force, each of them handpicked to go after the Grave Dancer.

Stefanovitch said his hellos, patting the backs of down parkas, playing the crowd.

Stefanovitch fit in, which was unusual for a lieutenant. Maybe it was because he'd never seemed overly impressed with himself, never felt making "Loo" meant that much anyway. Or maybe it was because he was more cynical, and funnier about his perspective on the world, than any of the detectives working under him.

True to form, he was wearing a weathered black leather coat, over a hooded gray sweatshirt. The outfit made his six feet two inches seem more compact, more physically impressive. Underneath a crushed black fedora, his hair was long and brown, and unruly. His eyes were a cool, dark brown, but could warm up once he got comfortable with someone. People said Stefanovitch looked like some kind of flaky film star, and he thought that wasn't all bad. Flaky film stars seemed to be running the world these days.

In the electrified darkness of Florida Street, car trunks sprung open with almost no sound. Out came .357 Magnums, twelve-gauge shotguns, N.Y.P.D.- and Nassau County-issue guns. Also, full ammo pouches.

The beachfront neighborhood felt as if it were about to explode.

The dope raid was going to be bigger than the celebrated French Connection. As much as two hundred kilograms; over a million and a half fixes for New York's 250,000 addicts.

They were closing in on Alexandre St.-Germain, the animal called the Grave Dancer; the man who had been Stefanovitch's obsession during the past twenty-two months. That was no accident either. Stefanovitch regularly got the most important narcotics cases in the N.Y.P.D. He was talented, and he thrived on challenges. For the past few years he'd been the department's "big play man." Nothing but the fast track for him.

Stefanovitch finally turned to his second in command, a 260-pound detective named Bear Kupchek. "You all ready, Charlie Chan?" he asked.

"Ah. Wise man never ready to walk down dark alleyway at night." Kupchek grinned like the portly Chinese detective. "Fuck you, Charlie," said Stefanovitch.

2

John and Anna Stefanovitch; Brooklyn Heights

HOURS BEFORE, Stefanovitch and his wife, Anna, had gone out to dinner. He had taken her to the glittery River Cafe, tucked like an expensive tiara beneath the Brooklyn Bridge.

After dinner, they had gone back to their apartment in Brooklyn and snuck up to the indoor pool on the roof. It was closed after nine, but Stefanovitch had a key. He brought a tape deck, and they danced on the rooftop, first to Robert Cray and his blues, then to the romantic Brazilian Laurindo Almeida.

"We're breaking the law that you're sworn to uphold," Anna whispered against his cheek. She was so soft and fine to hold; a great slow dancer, too. Elegant and totally desirable.

"Bad law. Unenforceable," Stefanovitch whispered back.

"Some policeman you are. No respect for authority."

"You bet. I know too many authority figures."

He started to unbutton Anna's dress, which picked up the green of her eyes, the gold of her hair, and which felt like the smoothest silk under his fingers.

"You going to try for indecent exposure now?" Anna smiled softly.

“For starters maybe. I have some other felonies in mind, too.”

After they slipped out of their dinner clothes, they did a few slow laps; then they floated languorously in the moonlit pool, under the glass rooftop, the twinkling stars.

With Anna, Stefanovitch had a way of doing wonderfully romantic things. He'd become a master of the unexpected: a dozen American roses arriving at the grade school where Anna taught fourth grade; a weekend ski trip to Stowe, in Vermont; gold shell earrings he spent an hour at Saks picking out himself.

He reached out and pulled her body closer in the deep end of the pool. Her green eyes were warm and wise—spectacular eyes. Her body seemed glazed in the moonlight. She was a fantasy he'd had since he'd been a kid in school. The two of them fit together perfectly.

“Sometimes I can't believe how much I love you,” he whispered, his breath catching slightly on the words. “Anna, I love you more than all the rest of my life put together. I'd be lost without you. Sad but true.”

“Not so sad, Stef.”

They made tender, then passionate love in the still, blue-green water of the swimming pool. In the middle of the coldest March in years.

At the moment, John Stefanovitch was sure he had everything he had ever wanted out of life. Getting St.-Germain would be the icing on his cake.