

THE NEW WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB BESTSELLER

How do you
catch a deadly
fire-starter
when the trail
has gone cold?

7TH HEAVEN

James
Patterson

WITH MAXINE PAETRO

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arrow books

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7TH HEAVEN

James Patterson is one of the best-known and biggest selling writers of all time. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past decade: the Women's Murder Club, the Alex Cross novels and Maximum Ride, and he has written many other number one bestsellers including romance novels and stand alone thrillers. He has won an Edgar award, the mystery world's highest honour. He lives in Florida with his wife and son.

Maxine Paetro is a novelist and journalist. She lives with her husband in New York.

Also by James Patterson

The Women's Murder Club series

1st to Die
2nd Chance (with Andrew Gross)
3rd Degree (with Andrew Gross)
4th of July (with Maxine Paetro)
The 5th Horseman
(with Maxine Paetro)
The 6th Target
(with Maxine Paetro)
7th Heaven (with Maxine Paetro)
8th Confession
(with Maxine Paetro to be
published January 2009)

Maximum Ride series

Maximum Ride: The Angel
Experiment
Maximum Ride: School's Out
Forever
Maximum Ride: Saving the
World and Other Extreme
Sports
The Final Warning

Daniel X series

The Dangerous Days of Daniel X
Daniel X: Alien Hunter
Graphic Novel
(published October 2008)

Alex Cross novels

Kiss The Girls
Along Came a Spider
Cat and Mouse
Pop Goes the Weasel
Roses are Red
Violets are Blue
Four Blind Mice
The Big Bad Wolf
London Bridges
Mary, Mary
Cross
Double Cross
Cross Country (published
November 2008)

Detective Michael Bennett series

Step on a Crack
(with Michael Ledwidge)
Run for Your Life
(published March 2009)

Romance

Sundays at Tiffany's

Stand-alone thrillers
Sail

Non-fiction

Torn Apart
(with Hal and Cory Friedman)

To our spouses and children
Susie and Jack, John and Brendan

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Prologue

THE CHRISTMAS SONG

One

TINY LIGHTS WINKED on the Douglas fir standing tall and full in front of the picture window. Swags of Christmas greenery and dozens of cards decked the well-appointed living room, and apple logs crackled in the fireplace, scenting the air as they burned.

A digitized Bing Crosby crooned 'The Christmas Song.'

'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Jack Frost nipping at your nose . . .'

Henry Jablonsky couldn't see the boys clearly. The one called Hawk had snatched off his glasses and put them a mile away on the fireplace mantel, a good thing, Jablonsky had reasoned at the time.

It meant that the boys didn't want to be

identified, that they were planning to let them go. *Please, God, please let us live and I'll serve you all the days of my life.*

Jablonsky watched the two shapes moving around the tree, knew that the gun was in Hawk's waistband. He heard wrapping paper tear, saw the one called Pidge dangling a bow for the new kitten.

They'd said they weren't going to hurt them.

They said this was only a robbery.

Jablonsky had memorized their faces well enough to describe to a police sketch artist, which he would be doing as soon as they got the hell out of his home.

Both boys looked as though they'd stepped from the pages of a Ralph Lauren ad.

Hawk. Clean-cut. Well-spoken. Blond, with side-parted hair. Pidge, bigger. Probably six two. Long brown hair. Strong as a horse. Meaty hands. Ivy League types. Both of them.

Maybe there really was some goodness in them.

As Jablonsky watched, the blond one, Hawk, walked over to the bookshelf, dragged his long fingers across the spines of the books, calling out

titles, his voice warm, as though he were a friend of the family.

He said to Henry Jablonsky, 'Wow, Mr J, you've got *Fahrenheit 451*. This is a classic.'

Hawk pulled the book from the shelf, opened it to the first page. Then he stooped down to where Jablonsky was hog-tied on the floor with a sock in his mouth.

'You can't beat Bradbury for an opening,' Hawk said. And then he read aloud with a clear, dramatic voice.

"It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*."

As Hawk read, Pidge hauled a large package out from under the tree. It was wrapped in gold foil, tied with gold ribbon. Something Peggy had always wanted and had waited for, for years.

'To Peggy, from Santa,' Pidge read from the gift tag. He sliced through the wrappings with a knife.

He had a knife!

Pidge opened the box, peeled back the layers of tissue.

'A Birkin bag, Peggy. Santa brought you a

nine-thousand-dollar purse! I'd call that a no, Peg. A definite no.'

Pidge reached for another wrapped gift, shook the box, while Hawk turned his attention to Peggy Jablonsky. Peggy pleaded with Hawk, her actual words muffled by the wad of sock in her mouth. It broke Henry's heavy heart to see how hard she tried to communicate with her eyes.

Hawk reached out and stroked Peggy's baby-blond hair, then patted her damp cheek. 'We're going to open all your presents now, Mrs J. Yours too, Mr J,' he said. 'Then we'll decide if we're going to let you live.'

Two

HENRY JABLONSKY'S STOMACH HEAVED. He gagged against the thick wool of the sock, pulled against his restraints, smelled the sour odor of urine. Heat puddled under his clothes. Christ. He'd wet himself. But it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was to get out alive.

He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. But he could reason.

What could he do?

Jablonsky looked around from his place on the floor, took in the fire poker only yards away. He fixed his vision on that poker.

'Mrs J,' Pidge called out to Peggy, shaking a small turquoise box. 'This is from Henry. A

Peretti necklace. Very nice. What? You have something to say?’

Pidge went over to Peggy Jablonsky and took the sock out of her mouth.

‘You don’t really know Dougie, do you?’ she said.

‘Dougie who?’ Pidge laughed.

‘*Don’t hurt us –*’

‘No, *no*, Mrs J,’ Pidge said, stuffing the sock back into his captive’s mouth. ‘No don’ts. This is *our* game. *Our* rules.’

The kitten pounced into the heap of wrapping paper as the gifts were opened; the diamond earrings, the Hermès tie, and the Jensen salad tongs, Jablonsky praying that they would just take the stuff and leave. Then he heard Pidge speak to Hawk, his voice more subdued than before, so that Jablonsky had to strain to hear over the blood pounding in his ears.

‘Well? Guilty or not guilty?’ Pidge asked.

Hawk’s voice was thoughtful. ‘The J’s are living well, and if that’s the best revenge . . .’

‘You’re kidding me, dude. That’s totally bogus.’

Pidge stepped over the pillowcase filled with

the contents of the Jablonskys' safe. He spread the Bradbury book open on the lamp table with the span of his hand, then picked up a pen and carefully printed on the title page.

Pidge read it back. 'Sic erat in fatis, man. It is fated. Get the kit-cat and let's go.'

Hawk bent over, said, 'Sorry, dude. Mrs Dude.' He took the sock out of Jablonsky's mouth. 'Say good-bye to Peggy.'

Henry Jablonsky's mind scrambled. *What? What was happening?* And then he realized. He could speak! He screamed 'Pegg-yyyyy' as the Christmas tree bloomed with a bright yellow glare, then went up in a great exhalation of flame.

VOOOOOOOM.

Heat rose and the skin of Henry Jablonsky's cheeks dried like paper. Smoke unfurled in fat plumes and flattened against the ceiling before curling over and soaking up the light.

'Don't leave us!'

He saw the flames climbing the curtains, heard his dear love's muffled screams as the front door slammed shut.



Part One

BLUE MOON