

JAMES  
PATTERSON

with Andrew Gross

2ND  
CHANCE



# 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance

A NOVEL BY

JAMES  
PATTERSON

WITH ANDREW GROSS



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## Prologue

# THE CHOIR KIDS



AARON WINSLOW WOULD NEVER FORGET the next few minutes. He recognized the terrifying sounds the instant they *cracked* through the night. His body went cold all over. He couldn't believe that someone was shooting a high-powered rifle in this neighborhood.

*K-pow, k-pow, k-pow . . . k-pow, k-pow, k-pow.*

His choir was just leaving the La Salle Heights Church. Forty-eight young kids were streaming past him toward the sidewalk. They had just finished their final rehearsal before the San Francisco Sing-Off, and they had been excellent.

Then came the gunfire. Lots of it. Not just a single shot. A strafing. An *attack*.

*K-pow, k-pow, k-pow . . . k-pow, k-pow, k-pow.*

"Get down!" he screamed at the top of his voice. "Everybody down on the ground! Cover your heads. Cover up!" He almost couldn't believe the words as they left his mouth.

At first, no one seemed to hear him. To the kids, in their dress white blouses and shirts, the shots must have sounded like firecrackers. Then a volley of shots rained through the church's beautiful stained-glass window. The depiction of Christ's blessing over a child at Capernaum shattered, glass splintering everywhere, some of it falling on the heads of the children.

"Someone's shooting!" Winslow screamed. Maybe more than one person. *How could that be?* He ran wildly through the kids, shouting, waving his arms, pushing as many as he could down to the grass.

As the kids finally crouched low or dove for the ground, Winslow spotted two of his choir girls, Chantal and Tamara, frozen on the lawn as bullets streaked past them. "Get down, Chantal, Tamara!" he yelled, but they remained there, hugging each other, emitting frantic wails. They were best friends. He had known them since they were little kids, playing four-square on blacktop.

There was never any doubt in his mind. He sprinted toward the two girls, grasped their arms firmly, and tumbled them to the ground. Then he lay on top of them, pressing their bodies tightly.

Bullets whined over his head, just inches away. His eardrums hurt. His body was trembling and so were the girls shielded beneath him. He was almost sure he was about to die. "It's all right, babies," he whispered.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the firing stopped. A hush of silence hung in the air. So strange and eerie, as if the whole world had stopped to listen.

As he raised himself, his eyes fell on an incredible sight. Slowly, everywhere, the children struggled to their feet.



There was some crying, but he didn't see any blood, no one seemed to be hurt.

"Everyone okay?" Winslow called out. He made his way through the crowd. "Is anyone hurt?"

"I'm okay. . . . I'm okay" came back to him. He looked around in disbelief. This was a miracle.

Then he heard the sound of a single child whimpering.

He turned and spotted Maria Parker, only twelve years old. Maria was standing on the whitewashed wooden steps of the church entrance. She seemed lost. Choking sobs poured from her open mouth.

Then Aaron Winslow's eyes came to rest on what had made the girl hysterical. He felt his heart sink. Even in war, even growing up on the streets of Oakland, he had never felt anything so horrible, so sad and senseless.

"Oh, God. Oh, no. How could you let this happen?"

Tasha Catchings, just eleven years old, lay in a heap in a flowerbed near the foundation of the church. Her white school blouse was soaked with blood.

Finally, Reverend Aaron Winslow began to cry himself.



## Part I

# THE WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB — AGAIN



# Chapter 1

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ON A TUESDAY NIGHT, I found myself playing a game of crazy eights with three residents of the Hope Street Teen House. I was loving it.

On the beat-up couch across from me sat Hector, a barrio kid two days out of Juvenile; Alysha, quiet and pretty, but with a family history you wouldn't want to know; and Michelle, who at fourteen had already spent a year selling herself on the streets of San Francisco.

"Hearts," I declared, flipping down an eight and changing the suit just as Hector was about to lay out.

"Damn, badge lady," he whined. "How come each time I'm 'bout to go down, you stick your knife in me?"

"Teach you to ever trust a cop, fool." Michelle laughed, tossing a conspiratorial smile my way.

For the past month, I'd been spending a night or two a week at the Hope Street House. For so long after the terrible bride and groom case that summer, I'd felt completely lost. I

took a month off from Homicide, ran down by the marina, gazed out at the bay from the safety of my Potrero Hill flat.

Nothing helped. Not counseling, not the total support of my girls — Claire, Cindy, Jill. Not even going back to the job. I had watched, unable to help, as the life leaked out of the person I loved. I still felt responsible for my partner's death in the line of duty. Nothing seemed to fill the void.

*So I came here . . . to Hope Street.*

And the good news was, it was working a little.

I peered up from my cards at Angela, a new arrival who sat in a metal chair across the room cuddling her three-month-old daughter. The poor kid, maybe sixteen, hadn't said much all night. I would try to talk to Angela before I left.

The door opened and Dee Collins, one of the house's head counselors, came in. She was followed by a stiff-looking black woman in a conservative gray suit. She had Department of Children and Families written all over her.

"Angela, your social worker's here." Dee knelt down beside her.

"I ain't blind," the teenager said.

"We're going to have to take the baby now," the social worker interrupted, as if completing this assignment was all that kept her from catching the next Caltrain.

"No!" Angela pulled the infant even closer. "You can keep me in this hole, you can send me back to Claymore, but you're not taking my baby."

"Please, honey, only for a few days," Dee Collins tried to assure her.

The teenage girl drew her arms protectively around her baby, who, sensing some harm, began to cry.

"Don't you make a scene, Angela," the social worker warned. "You know how this is done."

As she came toward her, I watched as Angela jumped out of the chair. She was clutching the baby in one arm and a glass of juice she'd been drinking in the opposite hand.

In one swift motion, she cracked the glass against a table. It created a jagged shard.

"Angela." I jumped up from the card table. "Put that down. No one's going to take your baby anywhere unless you let her go."

"*This bitch* is trying to ruin my life." She glared. "First she lets me sit in Claymore three days past my date, then she won't let me go home to my mom. Now she's trying to take my baby girl."

I nodded, peering into the teenager's eyes. "First, you gotta lay down the glass," I said. "You *know* that, Angela."

The DCF worker took a step, but I held her back. I moved slowly toward Angela. I took hold of the glass, then I gently eased the child out of her arms.

"She's all I have," the girl whispered, and then she started to sob.

"I *know*." I nodded. "That's why you'll change some things in your life and get her back."

Dee Collins had her arms around Angela, a cloth wrapped around the girl's bleeding hand. The DCF worker was trying unsuccessfully to hush the crying infant.

I went up and said to her, "That baby gets placed somewhere nearby with daily visitation rights. And by the way, I didn't see anything going on here that was worth putting on file. . . . *You?*" The caseworker gave me a disgruntled look and turned away.

Suddenly, my beeper sounded, three dissonant beeps punctuating the tense air. I pulled it out and read the number. *Jacobi*, my ex-partner in *Homicide*. What did he want?

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I excused myself and moved into the staff office. I was able to reach him in his car.

"Something bad's happened, Lindsay," he said glumly. "I thought you'd want to know."

He clued me in about a horrible drive-by shooting at the La Salle Heights Church. An eleven-year-old girl had been killed.

"Jesus . . ." I sighed as my heart sank.

"I thought you might want in on it," Jacobi said.

I took in a breath. It had been over three months since I'd been on the scene at a homicide. Not since the day the bride and groom case ended.

"So, I didn't hear," Jacobi pressed. "You want in, *Lieutenant*?" It was the first time he had called me by my new rank.

I realized my honeymoon had come to an end. "Yeah," I muttered. "I want in."



## Chapter 2

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A COLD RAIN STARTED TO FALL as I pulled my Explorer up to the La Salle Heights Church on Harrow Street, in the predominantly black section of Bay View. An angry, anxious crowd had formed — a combination of saddened neighborhood mothers and the usual sullen homeboys huddled in their bright Tommys — all pushing against a handful of uniformed cops.

“This ain’t goddamn Mississippi,” someone shouted as I forced my way through the throng.

“How many more?” an older woman wailed. “*How many more?*”

I badged my way past a couple of nervous patrolmen to the front. What I saw next absolutely took my breath away.

The facade of the white clapboard church was slashed with a grotesque pattern of bullet holes and lead-colored chinks. A huge hole gaped in a wall where a large stained-glass window had been shot out. Jagged edges of colored