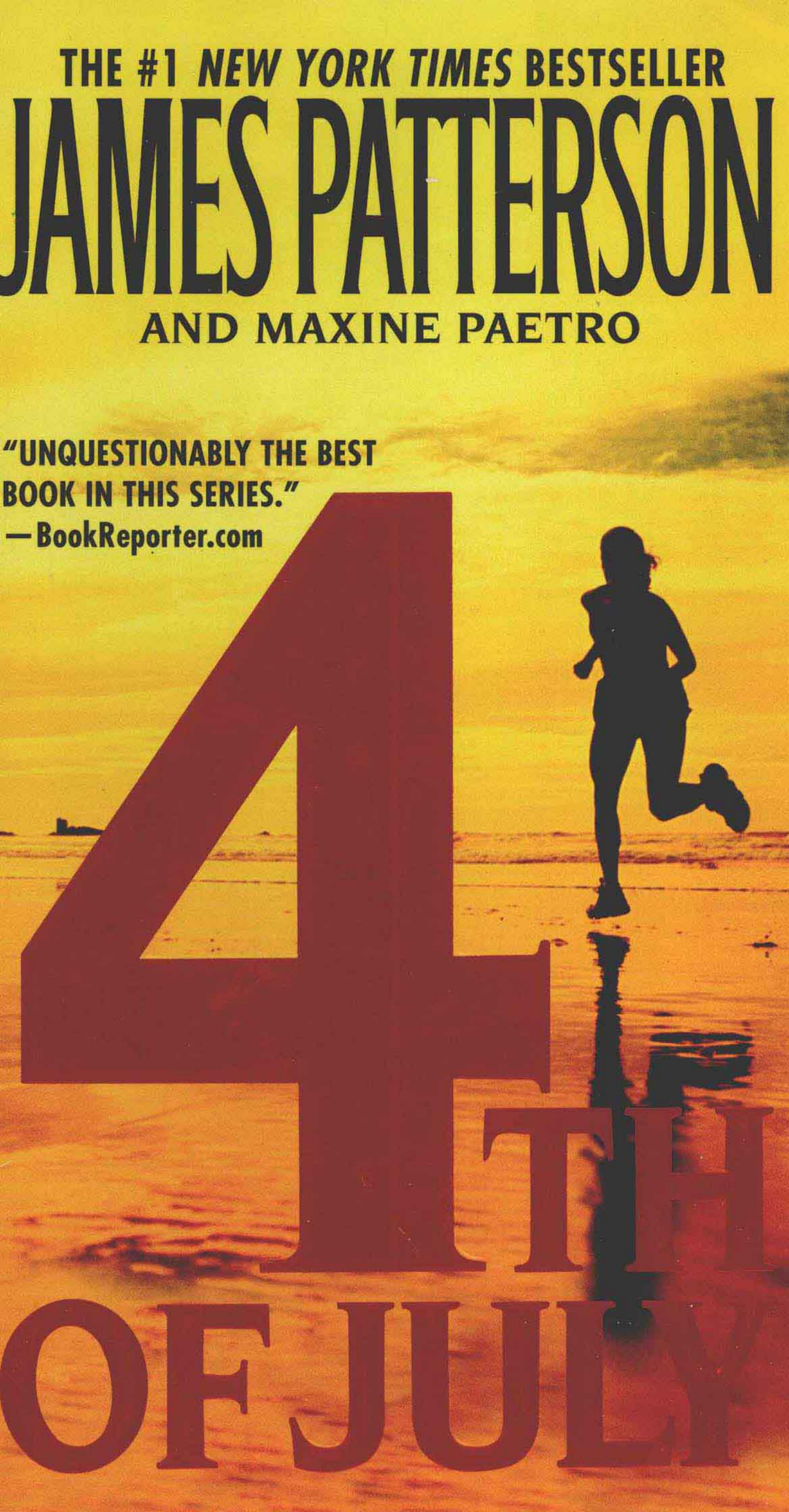


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# Part One

## NOBODY CARES





# Chapter 1

IT WAS JUST BEFORE 4:00 a.m. on a weekday. My mind was racing even before Jacobi nosed our car up in front of the Lorenzo, a grungy rent-by-the-hour "tourist hotel" on a block in San Francisco's Tenderloin District that's so forbidding even the sun won't cross the street.

Three black-and-whites were at the curb, and Conklin, the first officer at the scene, was taping off the area. So was another officer, Les Arou.

"What have we got?" I asked Conklin and Arou.

"White male, Lieutenant. Late teens, bug-eyed and done to a turn," Conklin told me. "Room twenty-one. No signs of forced entry. Vic's in the bathtub, just like the last one."

The stink of piss and vomit washed over us as Jacobi and I entered the hotel. No bellhops in this place. No elevators or room service, either. Night people faded back into the shadows, except for

one gray-skinned young prostitute who pulled Jacobi aside.

"Give me twenty dollars," I heard her say. "I got a license plate."

Jacobi peeled off a ten in exchange for a slip of paper, then turned to the desk clerk and asked him about the victim: Did he have a roommate, a credit card, a habit?

I stepped around a junkie in the stairwell and climbed to the second floor. The door to room 21 was open, and a rookie was standing guard at the doorway.

"Evening, Lieutenant Boxer."

"It's morning, Keresty."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, logging me in, turning his clipboard to collect my signature.

It was darker inside the twelve-by-twelve-foot room than it was in the hallway. The fuse had blown, and thin curtains hung like wraiths in front of the streetlit windows. I was working the puzzle, trying to figure out what was evidence, what was not, trying not to step on anything. There was too damned much of everything and too little light.

I flicked my flashlight beam over the crack vials on the floor, the mattress stained with old blood, the rank piles of garbage and clothing everywhere. There was a kitchenette of sorts in the corner, the hot plate still warm, drug paraphernalia in the sink.

The air in the bathroom was thick, almost soupy. I swept my light along the extension cord

that snaked from the socket by the sink, past the clogged toilet bowl to the bathtub.

My guts clenched as I caught the dead boy in my beam. He was naked, a skinny blond with a hairless chest, half sitting up in the tub, eyes bulging, foam at his lips and nostrils. The electric cord ended at an old-fashioned two-slice toaster that glinted up through the bathwater.

"Shit," I said as Jacobi entered the bathroom. "Here we go again."

"He's toast, all right," said Jacobi.

As commanding officer of the Homicide detail, I wasn't supposed to do hands-on detective work anymore. But at times like this, I just couldn't stay away.

Another kid had been electrocuted, but why? Was he a random victim of violence or was it personal? In my mind's eye, I saw the boy flailing in pain as the juice shot through him and shut his heart down.

The standing water on the cracked tile floor was creeping up the legs of my trousers. I lifted a foot and toed the bathroom door closed, knowing full well what I was going to see. The door whined with the nasal squeal of hinges that had probably never been oiled.

Two words were spray-painted on the door. For the second time in a couple of weeks, I wondered what the hell they meant.

"NOBODY CARES."

## Chapter 2

IT LOOKED LIKE A particularly grisly suicide, except that the spray paint can was nowhere around. I heard Charlie Clapper and his CSU team arrive and begin to unpack forensic equipment in the outer room. I stood aside as the photographer took his shots of the victim, then I yanked the extension cord out of the wall.

Charlie changed the fuse. "Thank you, Jesus," he said as light flooded the god-awful place.

I was rifling through the victim's clothes, finding not a scrap of ID, when Claire Washburn, my closest friend and San Francisco's chief medical examiner, walked through the door.

"It's pretty nasty," I told Claire as we went into the bathroom. Claire is a center of warmth in my life, more of a sister to me than my own. "I've been having an impulse."

"To do what?" Claire asked me mildly.

I swallowed hard, forcing down the gorge that



kept rising in my throat. I'd gotten used to a lot of things, but I would never get used to the murder of children.

"I just want to reach in and pull out the stopper."

The victim looked even more stricken in the bright light. Claire crouched beside the tub, squeezing her size-sixteen body into a size-six space.

"Pulmonary edema," she said of the pink foam in the dead boy's nasal and oral orifices. She traced the faint bruising on the lips, around the eyes. "He was tuned up a bit before they threw the switch on him."

I pointed to the vertical gash on his cheekbone. "What do you make of that?"

"My guess? It's going to match the push-down lever on the toaster. Looks like they clocked this child with that Sunbeam *before* they chucked it into the tub."

The boy's hand was resting on the bathtub's rim. Claire lifted it tenderly, turned it over. "No rigor. Body's still warm and lividity is blanching. He's been dead less than twelve hours, probably less than six. No visible track marks." She ran her hands through the boy's matted hair, lifted his bruised top lip with her gloved fingers. "He hadn't seen a dentist in a while. Could be a runaway."

"Yeah," I said. Then I must've gotten quiet for a minute or so.

"Whatcha thinking, honey?"

"That I've got another John Doe on my hands."

I was remembering another teenage John Doe,