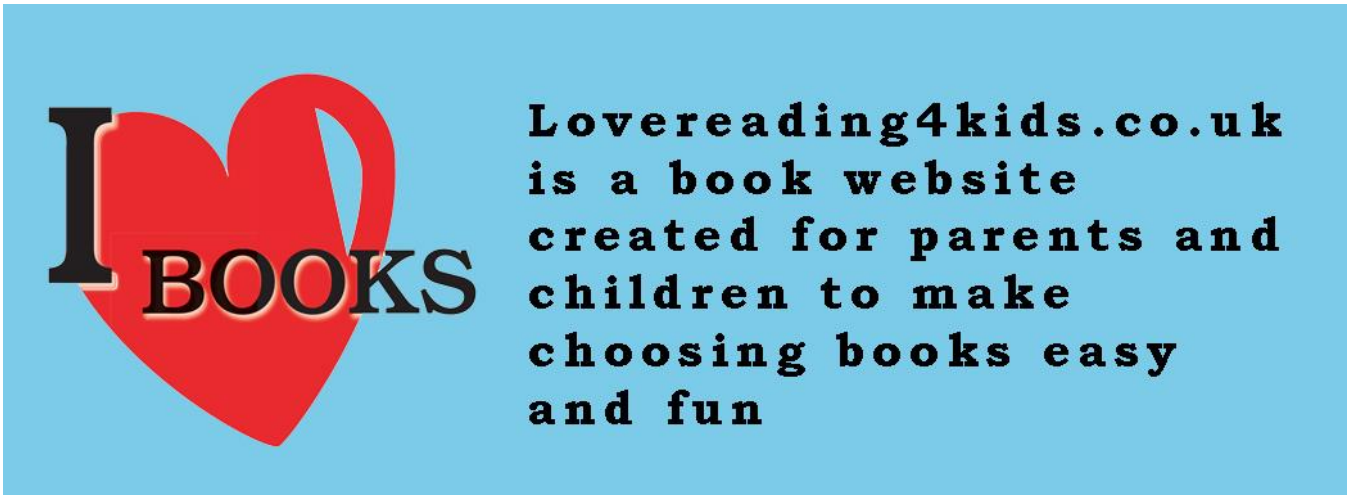


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James Patterson

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PROLOGUE

THE WOMEN'S MEDICAL CENTER

One

Sundown had bloodied the horizon over the uneven rooftops of South Boston. Birds were perched on every roof, and they seemed to be watching the girl walking slowly below.

Kathleen Beavier made her way down a shadowy side street that was as alien to her as the surface of the moon. She hunched her shoulders and pulled up the collar on her vintage peacoat. Her black Frye boots had rubbed raw circles into her heels, but she welcomed the pain. It was a distraction from the unthinkable thing she had come to do.

This is so unreal, so impossible, she thought. *So completely insane.*

The seventeen-year-old girl paused to catch her breath at the intersection of Dorchester and Broadway. South Boston wasn't really rough anymore, not the way it used to be, but she still didn't look as if she belonged here. She was too preppy, despite the tough boots. Just a bit too pretty and golden and polished.

That was her plan, though. She'd never bump into anyone she knew in Southie.

With badly shaking hands, Kathleen pushed the tortoiseshell sunglasses she didn't need anymore back into her blond hair. She'd washed it earlier with Bumble and bumble shampoo and rinsed it with conditioner. But why, really? How ridiculous to have worried about how her damn hair would look.

She squeezed her eyes shut and uttered a long, hopeless moan of confusion and despair.

When Kathleen finally forced open her eyes, she blinked into the slashing red rays of the setting sun. Then she checked the time on her iPhone for the millionth time in the past hour.

God, no. It's already past five!

She was late for her doctor's appointment.

She started to run. She hurried past the imposing brick face of St. Augustine's parish church, past a neon-lit dive bar and a dusty florist's shop. A man on a motorcycle called out, "Blondie, what's the rush? Can I get a smile?"

She whipped herself forward, as she often did to protect herself against the New England winter. Tears ran down her cheeks, warm trails that soon turned cold.

Hurry, hurry. You have to do this terrible thing. You've come this far.

It was already twenty after the hour when she finally found what she was looking for. The gray brick building was wedged in between a twenty-four-hour laundromat and a diner with steamed-up windows.

This is the place. This . . . hellhole.

The walls were smeared with lipstick-red and black graffiti: *Abortion = Murder. Abortion Is the Unforgivable Sin*. There was a glass door and beside it a tarnished brass plaque: WOMEN'S MEDICAL CENTER, it read.

Sorrow washed over her and she felt faint. She didn't want to go through with it. She wasn't sure she could.

But she made herself walk through the front door. Inside, the reception room was calming, almost reassuring. Pastel-colored plastic chairs ringed the perimeter, and posters of sweet-faced mothers and chubby babies hung on the walls. Best of all, no one was here.

Kathleen took a clipboard left out on a countertop. A sign instructed her to fill out the form as best she could.

She sat in a powder-blue chair and began writing down her medical history in block letters. Her hands were shaking harder now. Her foot wouldn't stop tapping.

What is the reason for today's visit? the form asked.

Kathleen probed her memory for something—anything—that would help her make sense of her situation. She came up with nothing.

This can't be happening to me, she thought. *I shouldn't be in the Women's Medical Center.*

She'd made out with guys, but damn it, damn it, *damn it,* she knew the difference between kissing and . . . fucking.

She'd never gone all the way with anyone. She hadn't wanted to.

Not that she'd signed a purity pledge or anything like that. She just . . . hadn't found someone she liked enough. Trusted enough. Did that make her a prude? No, it made her *discerning.*

She'd never even let a guy touch her down there.

The tests must have been wrong, because it wasn't physically possible for them to be right. Like her dad always said, Kathleen Beavier was a good kid, the best. She was popular. She was everybody's friend.

She was a virgin.

But she was pregnant.

Two

A sudden wave of nausea came over Kathleen and nearly knocked her to the floor. She felt dizzy and thought she might throw up in the waiting room.

"Get yourself together," she said softly. *You're not the first one to go through this kind of thing. You won't be the last, either.*

She glanced at the clock over the vacant reception desk. It was nearly six. Where was the receptionist? More important, where was the doctor?

Kathleen wanted to turn around and run out of the women's clinic, but she fought off the powerful instinct. But where *was* everybody?

"You can do this," she said between clenched teeth. "No time like the present."

Kathleen stood and walked to a pinewood door behind the reception desk. She took a deep breath, possibly the deepest of her life. She turned the metal handle, and the door opened.

She heard a soft, mellow voice coming from down the hall. *Thank God, someone's here after all.*

She followed the sound.

"Hello," Kathleen called out tentatively. "Hello? Anybody? I'm Kathleen Beavier. I have an appointment."

The door at the far end of the hall was partially open, and Kathleen heard the pleasing voice inside. She slowly pushed the door open all the way.

"Hello?"

Something was wrong—she sensed it instantly. Kathleen felt she should leave, *right now,* but it had taken so much courage to come here in the first place.

The air seemed thick, almost viscous. There was a smell of alcohol. But something else, too—something metallic and heavy. Kathleen put her hand to her mouth.

It took her a few seconds to take in the full horror of what she saw.

A young, dark-haired woman was hanging from a hook high up on the wall. She wore a white medical coat. Her name tag read DR. HIGGINS. A cord was slipknotted tightly around her neck.

Her once pretty face was a brutal dark red, and her eyes were frozen open in fear. Her brown hair cascaded over her shoulders.

Trembling, Kathleen reached out and touched the woman's hand. It was still warm.

Dr. Higgins. Her doctor.

In a panic, Kathleen jerked her arm away. She wanted to run, but some force held her there. Something so powerful. So awful.

She saw a stethoscope coiled beside a pad of paper. On the pad was written Kathleen's name. Her stomach twisted. Fear and guilt and shame overpowered her in one sickening, wrenching ache.

The idea that came to her next was so strange, so overwhelming, it was almost as if it weren't her own.

Enough, she thought. *I have had enough.*

A tray of instruments glittered near the pad of paper. Kathleen took up a sharp blade. It was ice-cold and menacing in her hand.

She heard a voice—but no one was there. The Voice was deep, commanding. *You know what you have to do, Kathleen. We've talked about it. Go ahead, now. It's the right thing.*

She didn't question it. In the space between the pink sleeve of her Kate Spade oxford shirt and the crease of her left wrist, she sliced. The skin parted.

See how easy it is, Kathleen? It's nothing, really. Just the natural order of things.

Blood welled up and fell in large drops onto the floor. Tears flowed from her eyes, mixing with the blood.

One more cut. Just to be sure.

The second cut was harder for her to do. Her pretty gold cuff bracelet covered the best place on her vein, and her left hand was already weak.

She sliced into the vein again.

She sank to her knees, as if in prayer.

Kathleen managed a third slash before everything jumped to black.

She fell unconscious beneath the feet of the hanging doctor, whose mouth now seemed curved in a knowing smile.



BOOK 1

THE INVESTIGATORS



1

Given everything that happened, it isn't too much of a stretch to say that this is one of the most incredible stories ever, and the strangest I've ever encountered. The weirdest thing of all is that I'm part of it. A big part.

I remember how it began as if it were just moments ago.

I was sitting in my small, cluttered, but comfortable office in the Back Bay section of Boston, staring out the window toward the Hancock and Prudential towers. My day was almost over, and I was bracing myself for the hectic rush-hour commute home. Then the door opened without so much as a tap, and an elderly man stepped inside. With his gray pinstriped suit, crisp white shirt, and dark-blue silk tie, he looked like a Beacon Hill lawyer on his way to the Harvard Club.

He wasn't, though: he was John Cardinal Rooney of the Archdiocese of Boston. Besides being one of the most important religious leaders in the world, he was also a friend of mine.

"Hello, Anne, it's good to see you," he said gently. "Even under the circumstances."

"Nice to be seen, Eminence," I said, and I smiled as I rose from my seat. "But *what* circumstances? Are they the reason for…?" I gestured to his outfit. I'd never seen him in anything but a priest's robes.

Rooney nodded. "I'm traveling incognito. Because of the *circumstances*."

"I see. Well, the power suit looks excellent on you. Come in. Please, sit. It's nearly six. Can I offer you something to drink, Eminence?"

"'John' will do for tonight, my dear. Scotch if you have it. An old man's drink for an old man. And getting older in a hurry."

Aren't we all? I almost joked. But then I stopped myself, because the cardinal, at seventy, was three times my age.

I fixed him a scotch on the rocks, then got a beer out of the minifridge for myself.

I handed him his glass, smiling. "Here's to—the circumstances of your visit," I said, raising my beer.

"The perfect toast," Rooney said. He took a sip of his drink.

I had a rather complicated history with the Archdiocese of Boston, but most recently, I'd worked with certain members as a private investigator. One case involved a teacher in Andover who'd been raped by a priest who taught at the same high school. Another concerned a fifteen-year-old boy who'd shot another boy in their church. None of the cases were happy experiences for either the cardinal or me.

"Do you believe in God, Anne?" Rooney asked as he sat back in one of my soft, slightly tattered armchairs.

It was an odd question to ask me now, I thought. "Yes, I do," I said slowly. "In my own way."

"Do you believe in God the Father, Jesus, and the Blessed Mother?" the cardinal went on. He was making this strange meeting even stranger.

I blinked a few times. "Yes. In my way."

Cardinal Rooney nodded gravely. "As a private investigator," he said, "are you licensed to carry a gun?"

And now things get even stranger still, I thought.

I opened my desk drawer and showed him my Smith & Wesson Bodyguard .380. I didn't tell him that in my three years as a PI, I had never fired it.

"You're hired," he said, and knocked back the rest of his drink. "Can you leave for Los Angeles tonight? There's something there I think you should see."