

IT WAS FOUR nights before Christmas Eve, and the city of San Francisco had decked the halls, houses, and grand public edifices in a sparkling, merry Christmas display.

My husband, Joe, our three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Julie, our aging border collie, Martha, and I had piled into the family car for a tour of the lights.

Julie was wearing a red leotard with a tutu and a blinking tiara. The antlers she had assigned to Martha had been rejected by our doggy, so Joe wore them to keep the peace and Julie approved. I was wearing the sweater my baby fashion coach had picked out of a catalog—Santa and his sleigh sailing over a cheesy grinning moon. It was so tacky it was hilarious.

Joe said to me, “Lindsay, give me a C.”

I did, perfectly pitched.

As we headed down Jackson Street, we sang “Jingle Bells,” and then Martha joined in—definitely off-key.

Dear Joe knew the way to guide our sleigh, and we headed toward Cow Hollow, parked, and walked along Union Street to see the Fantasy of Lights. The Victorian buildings, both shops and homes, were twinkling red, green, and white. Joe carried Julie on his shoulders, and I laughed out loud when she parted his antlers to get a better view of the window displays.

Julie clapped her hands at the sight of the snowmen guarding the entrance to Santaland, and I was elated. This was one of the wonderful things about motherhood, watching Julie make Christmas memories.

“Where to next?” Joe asked Julie. “The fishing boats will be all lit up from the Holiday Lights Boat Parade.”

“Chocolate factory!” she shouted from her top-of-Daddy seat.

And we were off to Ghirardelli Square, near Fisherman’s Wharf, to see the fifty-foot-tall tree decorated with giant chocolate bars, Julie’s idea of the prettiest Christmas tree in the whole wide world.

Yuki Castellano was in the kitchen, and there was not a holiday decoration in sight. She stirred the guacamole and then set a tray of brownies in the oven while her husband, Jackson Brady, mixed up a pitcher of margaritas.

“Ah love to see you giggly,” he teased in his Southern accent.

Yuki giggled just hearing that. From her Japanese mother and her Italian-born American-soldier daddy, she had inherited a ticklish funny bone, no tolerance for alcohol, and a decided weakness for tequila.

“You just want to take advantage of me,” she told her husband.

“I do. My first night off in I don’t know how long, and I think we should trash the bedroom.”

Yuki felt the same way. She’d just finished prosecuting a case from hell, and Brady had been working overtime as a homicide lieutenant and doubling as the acting police chief. They’d barely had time for sleep, let alone each other—and it was almost Christmas.

She said, “No phones, okay? Not a single phone call. And that means both of us, agreed?”

“Say the word and I’ll fill up the sink and drown those dang things in it.”

She said, “The word,” laughed again, and popped open a bag of chips.

“Plate alla that, will you? I’ll grab the liquor.”

They headed for the bedroom with drinks, chips, and dip. They’d chosen to screen an action classic that some considered the greatest Christmas story ever told. Yuki had never seen *Die Hard* and was wondering now if she’d ever get to see it. Odds were she and Brady were going to be naked before the opening credits rolled.

“Don’t start without me,” she said. “I’ll be right there.”

She went back to the kitchen and turned off the oven. Brownies could wait.

Cindy Thomas and her live-in boyfriend, Rich Conklin, stood on the tree-lined path that divided Civic Center Plaza. The attractions of the seasonal Winter Park were in full swing.

Up ahead, centered on the path, City Hall was alight in wide, horizontal red and green bands; the brilliant Christmas tree in front of the impressive old granite building pointed up to the magnificent dome.

Rich squeezed Cindy's hand and she looked up at his dear face.

She said, "Are you going to forgive me?"

"For us not going out to see my family?"

"I wish I could, Richie. Your pops always makes me feel like a movie star. But I've got that interview tomorrow."

"And a deadline," he said. "You think I don't know the drill by now?"

"You. Are. The best."

"Don't I know it," he said. He grinned at her and she stood up on her toes to kiss him. He pulled her in and made a corny thing of it, dipping her for effect, making her laugh between the dramatic rows of trees. People cut around them, taking pictures of the view.

Cindy said, "Hang on."

She ran up ahead to the couple who had just taken a photo of City Hall.

"Sorry," she said to the surprised couple. "I wonder if you might have caught me and my man in your pictures?"

The woman said, "Let's see." She flicked through the photos on her phone and squealed, "Hey. Lookee here."

She showed the phone to Cindy, who beamed and said, "Can you send it to me, please?"

"My pleasure," the woman said. She took Cindy's email address and said, "There you go. Merry Christmas."

Impulsively, Cindy threw her arms around the stranger, who hugged her back.

“Merry Christmas to you, too. Both of you,” Cindy said, and she ran back to her sweetheart.

“Rich, look.” She showed him the photo on her phone.

“Instant Christmas card. Beautiful. I’ll send it to my family. And now let’s go home, Cindy. Home.”

Claire Washburn had slung her carry-on bag over one shoulder and her computer case over the other and was forging ahead toward the gate. She and her husband, Edmund, were at SFO, which was decorated for the season with over three million LED bulbs—not that Claire took any notice. She turned to look for her husband and saw him far behind, gazing out at the light show.

She called, “Edmund, give me one of those bags.”

“I’ve got them, Claire. Just slow down a little so I can keep up.”

“Sorry,” she said, walking back to him. “Why is it you can never find a luggage trolley when you want one?”

He made a face. “You want me to state the obvious?”

The airport was always busy, and it was even busier today, with mobs of people flying out to spend the holidays with relatives in far-flung places.

It was a working holiday for Claire. As San Francisco’s chief medical examiner, she had been asked by National University in San Diego to teach an extra-credit course for students in the master’s program in forensic medicine.

She was glad to do it.

The quick course would be held during Christmas break

and was the perfect amount of time for a case study of a crime Claire had worked years ago. The body of a young boy had been discovered in a suitcase chained to a concrete block in a lake miles from home. Claire's work on that case had helped the police solve the crime.

Along with giving her a nice paycheck, the City of San Diego was putting Claire and Edmund up at the Fairmont Grand Del Mar, a resort-style hotel with a gym and a gorgeous pool. It promised to be a great respite from the somewhat harsher NoCal winter.

Edmund had resisted going with Claire on this trip. He had made plans with friends from the San Diego Symphony to lay down a track for a CD they were working on. But Claire knew the real reason he didn't want to come: Edmund was becoming more introverted by the year, and he just wanted to stay home.

Claire had told him, "Edmund, it's a chance for us to be together with a heated pool and room service. Your mom is dying to babysit her youngest grandchild over Christmas, and Rosie *wants* to be babied. Tell me I'm wrong."

He couldn't honestly do that.

Edmund knew how much Claire loved talking to students, encouraging them and sharing her experience on the Thad Caine case. It would be a needed lift to her spirits, and if Claire wanted his company, he couldn't say no.

Edmund saw a lone luggage trolley by the newsstand and he grabbed it.

He called to Claire, "I got wheels. We are definitely not going to miss our flight."

PART ONE

DECEMBER 21

CHAPTER 1

JULIAN LAMBERT WAS an ex-con in his midthirties, sweet-faced, with thinning, light-colored hair. He was wearing black jeans and a down jacket as red as a Santa Claus suit.

As he sat on a bench in Union Square waiting for his phone call, he took in the view of the Christmas tree at the center of the plaza. The tree was really something, an eighty-three-foot-tall cone of green lights with a star on top. It was ringed by pots of pointy red flowers and surrounded by a red-painted picket fence.

That tree was *secure*. It wasn't going anywhere. But he would be, and soon.

It was lunchtime, and all around him consumers hurried out of stores weighed down with shopping bags, evidence of money pissed away in an orgy of spending. Julian wondered idly how these dummies were going to pay for their commercially fabricated gifting sprees. Take out a

loan on the old credit card and worry about it next month or not worry about debt at all. Julian's phone vibrated, almost catching him by surprise.

He fished it out of his pocket, connected, and said his name, and Mr. Loman, the boss, said, "Hello, Julian. Are we alone?"

"Completely, Mr. Loman." Julian knew that he was meant only to listen, and that was fine with him. He felt both excited and soothed as Loman explained just enough of the plan to allow Julian to salivate at the possibilities.

A heist.

A huge one.

"The plan has many moving parts," Loman said, "but if it goes off as designed, by this time next year, you, Julian, will be living the life you've only dreamed of." Julian dreamed of the Caribbean, or Ipanema, or Saint-Tropez. He was picturing a life of blue skies and sunshine with a side of leggy young things in string bikinis when Loman asked if he had any questions.

"I'm good to go, boss."

"Then get moving. No slipups."

"You can bank on me," said Julian, and he was glad that Loman barked back, "Twenty-two fake dive, slot right long, on one."

Julian cracked up. He had played ball in college, which was a very long time ago, but he still had moves. He clicked off the call, sized up the vehicular and foot traffic, and chose his route.

It was go time.

CHAPTER 2

JULIAN SAW HIS run as a punt return.

He charged into an elderly man in a shearling coat, sending the man sprawling. He snatched up the old guy's shopping bag, said, "Thanks very much, you knucklehead."

What counted was that he had the ball.

With the bag tucked under his arm, Julian streaked across Geary, dodging and weaving through the crowd, heading toward the intersection at Stockton. He sprinted across the street and charged along the broad, windowed side of Neiman Marcus where a Christmas tree laden with lights and ornaments rose forty feet into the rotunda. Revolving glass doors split a crowd of shoppers into long lines of colorful dots going inside or filing out onto the sidewalk accompanied by Christmas music: "I played my drum for him, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum." It was all so crazy.

Julian was still running.

He yelled, "Coming through! No brakes!" He wove

around the merry shoppers, sideswiped the UPS man loading his truck, and, with knees and elbows pumping, bag secured under his arm, dashed up the Geary Street straightaway and veered left.

Another crowd of shoppers loaded with shopping bags spilled out of Valentino. Julian shot his left hand out to stiff-arm a young dude, who fell against a woman in a fake-fur coat. Bags and packages clattered to the sidewalk. Julian high-stepped around and over the obstacles, easy-breezy, then broke into a sprint again and turned left on Grant Avenue.

Julian chortled when the oncoming pedestrians scattered as he headed toward them; he gave the finger to a wiry guy who yelled at him. He ran on, knocking slowpokes out of his way and shouting, “Merry flippin’ Christmas, one and all.” God, this was fun. He couldn’t see the goalposts, but he knew that he was scoring, big-time.

Julian’s long strides ate up the pavement, and despite the blood pounding in his ears, he listened for sirens. He still had the ball, but the clock was ticking. He glanced over his shoulder and saw, finally, two people who looked like cops running up behind him.

He was winded, but he didn’t stop. *Show me what you’ve got, suckers.* He put on another surge of speed as he headed toward Dragon’s Gate and the Chinatown district. He slowed only when a lady cop’s authoritative voice shouted, “Freeze or I’ll shoot!”

He thought, *In this crowd? I don’t think so.* And he kept running.

CHAPTER 3

MY PARTNER, INSPECTOR Richard Conklin, was running out of time, and he needed my help.

He said desperately, “Would be nice if she’d tell you what she wants.”

“Where would the fun be in that?” I said, grinning. “You figuring it out is kind of the point.”

“I guess. Make our own history.”

“Sure. That’s an idea. Romantic, Rich.”

We had slipped out of the Hall of Justice to do some lunchtime Christmas shopping in San Francisco’s Union Square because of its concentration of upscale shops. Richie wanted to get something special for Cindy. He wanted his gift to make her speechless, but when he asked her for a hint about what she wanted, she’d offered practical ideas. A multiport device charger. New cross-trainers. A gel-foam seat for her car. He grinned, thinking about her.

Rich had wanted to marry Cindy from pretty much the moment he met her. And she loved him fiercely. But. There's always a *but*, right?

Rich was from a big family, and while he was still in his thirties, he'd always wanted kids. Lots of them. Cindy was an only child with a hot career—one that took her to murder scenes in bad places in the dead of night. And Rich wasn't the only crime fighter in the relationship; Cindy had solved more than one homicide, had even shot at and been shot by a crafty female serial killer who'd become the subject of Cindy's bestselling true-crime book.

All this to say, Cindy was in no hurry to start a family.

It was a conflict of priorities that in the past had broken up my two great friends, and it was tremendous that they were back together now. But as far as I knew, the conflict remained unresolved.

Rich pointed out an emerald pendant around the neck of a mannequin in the window of a high-end jewelry shop. "Do you like that?"

Just as I said, "Beautiful, Rich. And very Christmasy," I heard a scream behind us.

I whipped around to see a man in a red down jacket running hard, bowling down shoppers. He closed in and then passed us, yelling, "Coming through! No brakes!" He collided with a group of people walking out of Neiman's. They scattered and he just kept going.

An elderly man in a shearling coat was hobbling down the street in pursuit, blood streaming out of his nose. He cried, "Stop, thief! Someone stop him!"

Rich and I are homicide cops, and this was no murder.

But we were there. We took off after the man in the red down jacket who was running with all the power and determination of a pro tailback.

I yelled, "Freeze or I'll shoot!" But the runner kept going.

CHAPTER 4

I DIDN'T TRUST myself to run full out. My doctor had recently benched me for two months because I was anemic. So I slowed to a walk and yelled to my partner, "You go! I'll call it in."

I got on my phone and summed up the situation for dispatch in a few words: There had been a robbery, a grab-and-dash. Conklin was pursuing the suspect on foot, running east on Geary Street between Stockton and Grant Avenue.

"Suspect is wearing a red jacket, dark pants. We need backup and an ambulance," I said and gave my location.

I trotted back to the elderly man with the bloody nose who was panting and leaning against a building.

He said, "Are you the police?"

"Yes. I'm Sergeant Boxer. Tell me what happened," I said.

He said, "I was minding my own business when that guy

in the puffy red coat knocked me down and stole my shopping bag. How could he do that to a senior citizen?”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Maury King.”

“Mr. King, an ambulance will be here in a minute.”

He shook his head. “No, no. I’m okay.”

“We won’t let him get away. My partner is in pursuit. Stay right here,” I said. “I’ll be back with your shopping bag.”

The man in the red jacket had cleared a wide path for Rich, as screaming shoppers had thrown themselves against parked cars and buildings. I took off again, jogging in their wake.

I could see that Rich was keeping up with the runner but not gaining on him. I was following behind them on the wide, shadowed corridor of Grant Avenue, close enough to see someone pop out of a doorway and step right in front of the runner.

The runner stumbled and almost fell. I saw him push off the pavement with his free hand. He regained his footing but he had lost his momentum.

I yelled again, “Freeze or I’ll shoot.”

Just then, Rich fully extended himself, lunged—and tackled the runner. They both went down.

Breathless and dizzy, I caught up in time to hold my gun on the runner as Rich pulled the man to his feet and shouted, “Lace your fingers behind your neck.” Rich kicked the runner’s legs apart and patted him down.

“He’s not packing,” Rich told me.

“Good.”

I unhooked my cuffs and, with shaking hands, linked

the runner's wrists behind his back. A cruiser pulled up to the curb.

I asked the runner for his name as I closed the cuffs.

"Julian Lambert. Still smokin' after all these years," he said, sounding far too pleased with himself.

I arrested Lambert for battery, theft, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest. Conklin read him his rights and stuffed him into the back seat of the cruiser. After my partner slapped the flank of the departing vehicle, I said to him, "Did you notice? That jerk actually looked glad to see us."

CHAPTER 5

THAT DAY YUKI was in sentencing court, standing before the bar.

Across the aisle, defense counsel Allison Junker stood with her client Sandra McDowell. McDowell was a fifty-three-year-old woman who had lost control of her car and plowed into a gang of kids exiting a sports bar on Fillmore Street.

There had been no fatalities, thankfully, but three of the boys she'd hit had been hospitalized with an assortment of injuries to heads and limbs and one had been in a coma since the incident, which had happened weeks before. McDowell had admitted to driving while intoxicated and making an illegal left turn. She had pleaded guilty, been remanded to the court without bail, and been in jail since her arraignment. Yuki expected the sentencing hearing to be swift, smooth, and punishing.

Judge Judie Schlager was on the bench, presiding over

a full courtroom. It wasn't yet the end of the day, and she'd sentenced over two hundred people since nine a.m. She looked unfazed, even chipper. A small pin reading "#1 Nana" sparkled on her collar.

The judge said, "Ms. Castellano. Talk to me."

Yuki looked up at Judge Schlager and said, "Your Honor, Mrs. McDowell was indisputably drunk when she took an illegal left turn and plowed into pedestrians crossing with the light. She injured four young college students, one of whom, a rising football star, is still comatose. First officer on the scene gave Mrs. McDowell a Breathalyzer test. Her blood alcohol was 0.15. In his words, she was severely impaired."

The judge flipped through papers in front of her and asked, "She called the police of her own accord?"

"Yes, Your Honor," said the defendant's counsel, Ms. Junker.

"And she pleaded guilty?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

Yuki said, "Your Honor, this is not Mrs. McDowell's first DUI. We're asking for a sentence of three to five years, time commensurate with the pain and suffering of her victims. It's too soon to tell, but some of their injuries may be permanent."

The defendant was now weeping noisily into her hands.

Judge Judie Schlager addressed the defendant. "Mrs. McDowell, it says here that you're a pharmacist, married, two children in college. And this prior DUI was a one-car accident?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I hit a tree. Came out of nowhere."

The judge said, “Don’t you just hate those jaywalking trees?”

“Your Honor,” said Ms. Junker, “Mrs. McDowell is a good citizen. Her entire family is dependent on her income, including her husband, who has MS and is confined to a wheelchair. She has accepted responsibility for this accident from the time it happened and is unbelievably sorry. She intends to join AA upon her release. We urge the court to show leniency.”

Judge Schlager wrinkled her brow and looked toward the back of the courtroom at a scuffle that had gotten out of control. She banged her gavel and demanded silence in the court even as Sandra McDowell continued to cry.

Yuki would be happy with a three-year sentence. It would get McDowell off the street, and during that time, she hoped that those college boys could recover from their injuries, get PT, and return to the lives they’d had planned before McDowell ran into them with her Buick.

Judge Schlager said, “Mrs. McDowell, before I impose a sentence, do you have anything to say?”

Mrs. McDowell dabbed at her face with a tissue and blew her nose. When she had regained her composure, she said, “Your Honor, I’m more sorry than I can say. I’m only grateful that I didn’t kill anyone, but what I did was inexcusable. Whatever sentence you think fair is acceptable to me.”

Judge Schlager said, “Mrs. McDowell, I’m revoking your driver license and giving you a year of probation, including eight months of community service, twenty hours a week. Do not drive. If one year from now your probation officer reports to me that you’ve attended AA and completed your

community service and automotive abstinence, this court will be done with you.

“I’m releasing you today for time served. Next time there will be no leniency, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Your Honor. Thank you very much.”

“Thank my Christmas spirit. That’s all. Next?”

Allison Junker smirked over her client’s shoulder, and Yuki gave her a *Drop dead* look before leaving the courtroom feeling like she’d been punched in the face by Santa Claus.

CHAPTER 6

CONKLIN AND I faced each other across our abutting desks in the Homicide squad room. The exasperation on his face mirrored my own.

The Robbery Division was overworked in the first degree. Likewise, Booking was packed to the walls. Conklin and I had caught this case, literally, and now we owned it. Julian Lambert was in cuffs, swiveling distractedly in the side chair while we wrote him up for larceny, assault and battery, and, for good measure, resisting arrest.

Lambert handed over his driver license and answered our questions, telling us his full name and address and that he worked in the stockroom at Macy's. Just before I accessed our database to see if the guy Conklin and I had tagged as the Grant Avenue Dasher had a record, he made an announcement.

"I'm on probation," he said.

"For what?" I asked.

“Shoplifting, from Best Buy. I did four months and was let out on good behavior, long as I don’t screw up this year. My parole officer is a hard-ass. If you don’t violate me, I can help you out,” he said.

I asked, “How can you help us out, exactly?”

“I’ve got some information to trade for a get-out-of-jail-free pass.”

I seriously doubted Lambert’s claim, but what the hell. Let him try. I ran his name and found the arrest from three years ago as well as his release for time served and his current ongoing probation.

Conklin had read him his Miranda rights. He knew he could have an attorney present but apparently didn’t want one. We were free to hear what he had to say and use it against him—if there was anything worth using.

We walked Lambert out of the bullpen and down the corridor to Interview 2, entered the small interrogation room, and took seats around the scarred metal table.

Conklin said, “Okay, then. You see that mirror?”

“Two-way. This isn’t my first time in the box.”

Conklin grinned. “You probably think there’s someone back there listening in, watching your body language, right?”

“Yep.” Lambert waved at the glass and said, “*Foyeux* fucking *Noël*, everyone.”

“Well,” said my partner, “you just waved at nobody. We’re short-staffed this week. So lay your cards on the table and there’s a good chance we can move you along with a minimum of red tape. You could be out on bail by New Year’s.”

“Okay, but I’m supposed to go to Florida, to my mom’s place in Vero Beach, the day after Christmas.”

I jumped in.

“Mr. Lambert, your victim is going to have something to say about your traveling across state lines. You threw an old man to the ground, broke his nose, and took about twenty-eight hundred dollars in Prada belts and Hermès ties. Sorry to tell you this, but that’s grand larceny. And your victim is not feeling well disposed toward you. Last thing he said to us was ‘Toss him in a dark cell and leave him there for good.’”

“I thought there was food in that bag. I swear,” Julian Lambert said to the camera in the ceiling. “But he’ll get his property back, right?”

Conklin said, “Yes. But you hurt him and traumatized him. You want us to help you, let’s hear what you’ve got. Make it good. And quick. And truthful.”