FREE PREVIEW

CONFESSIONS
THE PRIVATE SCHOOL MURDERS

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JAMES PATTERSON AND MAXINE PAETRO
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PROLOGUE
It hasn’t been all that long since my last confession, but I already have so much to tell you. Fair warning: Most of it isn’t very pretty.

My story starts with the catastrophic deaths of Malcolm and Maud Angel. They weren’t just those wealthy New York socialites you read about in the New York Times.

They were my parents. Dead. They died in their bed under freakish circumstances three months ago, leaving my brothers and me devastated and bankrupt.

Not to mention under suspicion of murder.

We were eventually cleared of the crime—once I uncovered key evidence in the case. So, my friend, what do you
think are the chances of another shocking, grisly crime happening in my life? Oh, about a hundred percent, and I can say that with total confidence.

Because it’s already happened.

My brother Matthew has been charged with killing his twenty-four-year-old actress girlfriend, Tamara Gee, and her unborn child. Just to make things that much more scandalous, after my parents’ deaths, Tamara announced to the press that she had been sleeping around—with my father.

Good times.

That brings me to today, which really isn’t the best time to be reminiscing about the past. I had to put on a positive face for Matthew, who I had come to visit.

In prison.

Deep inside the infamous New York City jail known (for good reason) as The Tombs, I held my breath as a beefy guard led me down a long gray cinder-block hallway that was pungent with the reek of urine and male sweat and deposited me in a folding chair outside a Plexiglas cell.

“Wait.”

So I did. And immediately began to nervously toy with the buttons on my peacoat. Matthew’s trial was set to begin in just a few days, and I was here to bring him bad news. His so-called airtight alibi for the night of Tamara’s
murder had just completely imploded. I felt sick to my stomach just thinking about what could happen to him and, in turn, what might happen to what was left of our family.

My hands were shaking. I used to be the picture of calm in any and all situations, but these days I was feeling so raw that it was hard to remember how the numbing pills my parents had given me every day of my life kept my emotions in check.

I heard the echo of footsteps approaching from somewhere behind the concrete walls. Still no Matthew. Hinges squealed and metal scraped against stone. A door slammed shut and locked. Each sound was more hopeless than the last.

Finally the door at the back of the Plexiglas cell opened, and Matthew shuffled in with a uniformed guard right behind him.

You might remember when Matthew Angel won the Heisman, how he bounded up onto the stage with a self-satisfied grin and lifted the heavy trophy over his head while camera flashes popped. Maybe you’ve seen him returning kickoffs for the New York Giants, spiking the ball in the end zone and raising his fist to the sky. At the very least, you probably know him as the dude in the soup commercial. Matthew Angel has always been the guy every
Pop Warner grade-schooler wants to be: a heroic rock-star jock, all muscle, smiles, and thoroughbred speed. A football god.

That person was now unrecognizable. Matthew had been transformed into a brooding hulk in an orange jumpsuit, wrists cuffed to a chain around his waist, shackles around his ankles.

My formerly cocky brother was too embarrassed and miserable to even look at me as the guard put a heavy hand on his shoulder and forced him into a chair before uncuffing him.

My eyes filled with tears. It was a feeling I was still getting used to.

Matthew managed a half smile, then leaned close to the grill that was set into the glass wall. “Hey, Tandy. How’re you? How’re the guys?”

Our brothers, Harrison and Hugo. Even in the throes of this misery, Matthew was thinking about them. About me. One tear spilled over. I wiped it away before he could look up and detect any weakness.

I took a deep breath. “Matthew, there’s something I have to tell you.”
“It’s about your friends, Matty,” I said through the grid. “The ones who swore they were playing poker with you when Tamara was killed. They say they lied to protect you, but now they’ve had some kind of crisis of conscience. They told Philippe they’re not going to lie under oath.”

I held my breath and waited for the inevitable explosion. While Matthew had a polished and shiny rep in public, we inside the Angel family knew that at any given moment he could go nuclear. *Prone to violent outbursts* was the clinical phrase.

But today my brother simply blinked. His eyes were heavy with sadness and confusion.
“I might have done it, Tandy,” he finally mumbled. “I don’t know.”

“Matthew, come on!” I blurted, panic burbling up inside my chest. “You did not kill Tamara.”

He leaned in closer to the grid, his hand flattened against the glass so that his palm turned white. “The guys are telling the truth, Tandy. We only played poker for a couple hours. I wasn’t with them at the time when the medical examiner says Tamara was killed.”

I pressed my lips together as hard as I could to hold back my anger. Not to mention my confusion and abject terror. “What? Where did you go?”

He shook his head. “I don’t even know. Some bar? I got hammered and somehow made it home. It’s pretty much a blur.” He pressed the heels of his hands into his temples and sucked in a breath before continuing. “All I know is that I got into bed with her, and when I woke up, she was dead. There was blood all over me, Tandy. Blood everywhere. And I have no memory of what happened before that.”

I stared at him, wide-eyed. For once in my life, I had no idea what to say.

But then, it wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility. Back when Tamara was killed, he was still on Malcolm and Maud’s little Angel Pharma concoctions—
special cocktails whipped up at the drug company my father founded—which made him prone not only to violent outbursts and manic episodes but also to blackouts.

I looked down at my hands. They trembled as I gathered the guts to ask a question I’d needed the answer to for weeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me Tamara was dead, Matty?” I hazarded a glance at his eyes. “You came home that day. You spent the whole afternoon with us. You never once felt the need to say ‘Oh, hey, guys, I kind of found Tamara murdered this morning’?”

Matthew pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “I was in shock,” he said. “And I was terrified, okay? I didn’t know what had happened. And you guys were already being put through the wringer by the DA, thanks to Malcolm and Maud. I thought… I thought…”

Suddenly he slammed his hand against the glass and the whole wall shuddered.

“Watch it!” the guard barked.

“You thought what?” I asked quietly.

He shook his head. “I think I thought that if I just ignored it, somehow it would all go away. I didn’t want more scrutiny placed on us.” His eyes were wet as he finally looked me in the eye. “Maybe I did do it, Tandy. Craziness runs in our veins, right?”
“Not in mine, Matty. Not anymore.” I took a breath. “I don’t do crazy these days.”

“Oh, you do crazy just fine.”

Then, out of nowhere, Matthew burst into tears. I’d never seen him cry once in my entire life.

“I was drunk. I don’t know how else I could have done it,” he said between sobs. “If I could see the apartment again... maybe... if I could go back there, maybe it would come back to me. God, I wish I could just get bail. Have you talked to Uncle Peter? Can’t he find the money somewhere?”

I shook my head, my throat full. “We’re totally broke, remember? And your bail is five million dollars.” I pressed my palm to the glass at roughly the same angle as his, as if the connection brought us closer. “Please don’t keep saying you might be guilty, Matty. It can’t be true.”

The door behind him squealed open. “Time’s up,” the guard said.

“I’m sorry, kiddo.” Matthew shot me what looked like an apologetic smile as he was pulled away. The door slammed behind them and I just sat there, stunned.

“You taking up residence or what?” the guard standing behind me said. I got up and walked briskly down the hall in front of him, pretending I wasn’t completely broken inside.
When I emerged from The Tombs, the bright sunlight hit my eyes and they burned. I squinted as I hailed a cab on Baxter, then slammed the door so hard the whole car rattled.

“Please take me home,” I said to the cabbie.
He drilled me through the rearview mirror with his hard black eyes. “You want me to guess where you live?”
“The Dakota,” I barked, in no mood. “Just go.”
The cab leapt forward, and we headed uptown.
There’s something I’ve been avoiding. Something I haven’t admitted to anyone. I’ve barely even admitted it to myself. But this is a confession, so I’m confessing. Here goes.

I’m not entirely sure how I feel about this whole having-emotions thing.

I know, I know. I’m the one who freaked out when I realized that the multiple pills my parents had been feeding us kids every morning were, in fact, high-test Angel Pharma mood-, mind-, and body-altering drugs. I’m the one who demanded that Harry go cold turkey with me so that we could take back control of our lives, our heads, maybe even our souls.

But those pills tainted our very essence—everything that made us human. I mean, when I saw my parents’ dead bodies
lying twisted in their bed, I didn’t even cry. I didn’t feel anguish or loss, I just felt angry. Anger was the only emotion the Angel kids were occasionally allowed to feel. Probably because anger produces adrenaline and adrenaline can be very useful. Whether you’re tearing down a professional gridiron with two three-hundred-pound defensive ends on your tail, playing Mozart at Carnegie Hall, working complex calc problems at a desk, or navigating the wilds of uncharted jungles, adrenaline is a good thing to have on your side.

And of course, Malcolm and Maud knew that. They formulated our daily uppers and downers for optimal performance. They rewarded excellence with extravagant prizes called Grande Gongos and responded to failure with extreme punishments called Big Chops. And all emotions, like empathy, sadness, evenjoy, were failures. Pointless. Not for their little protégés.

Until Malcolm and Maud were gone. And I started making decisions for myself:

Now it’s three months later, and yeah, I’m feeling things, all right. I’m feeling sorrow and excitement and nervousness. I’m feeling happiness and uncertainty and self-doubt. There’s even a little bit of hopefulness sometimes. It’s all emotion, all the time, and to be honest, sometimes I just want to down a whole mess of those pills again so I can have a little peace.

But the worst of all these new emotions is the fear. I can’t stand feeling fear. And these days I’m afraidall the time. I’m afraid
for my brother Matthew and what will happen to him. I’m afraid for my little brother, Hugo, and my twin brother, Harry, and what it will be like if we’re thrown out of our apartment and tossed into foster homes and public schools. I don’t even want to know what would happen if either one of them was faced with an actual bully. Harry would probably dissolve into a blubbering ball on the floor and get his butt kicked, while Hugo would probably—no, definitely—Hulk Out and tear whoever it was limb from limb. Then I’d have two brothers behind bars.

And of course I’m also terrified that I may never see James again.

James Rampling. The only boy I ever loved, and the one person (besides my older sister, Katherine, who died years ago) I could trust with all these emotions … if I had any idea where to find him.

That might be the worst fear of all—that I’ll never get to experience true love again. The very thought makes my stomach clench, my heart pound, and my mind race.

See? Fear. I can’t stand it. And if things don’t calm down soon, it might be the one emotion that’ll convince me to go back to being Maud and Malcolm’s good little robot. To go back to the drugs.

To go back to being numb.
DEAD RECKONING
The cabdriver used both of his big fat feet when he drove, jamming on the brakes and the gas at the same time, making me sick. As the cab bucked to a stop at the light at Columbus Circle, my iPhone rang. I grabbed it from my bag.

C.P. Thank God.

After a lifetime of other kids thinking I was all robotic and weird, I actually had a friend at school. Claudia Portman, known as C.P., was a tarnished Queen Bee who was dethroned last year when she cheated on her finals and was ratted out by her clique-mates. Because of a massive donation by her parents to our school, she got to stay for our junior year, but she’d dumped her friends and become
a self-defined loner until the day I was cleared of my parents’ murders and she’d sat down with me at lunch. “Move over,” she’d said. “We criminals gotta stick together.”

And even though I wasn’t a criminal, I laughed.

“What?” she said now by way of greeting. “Did you read it?”

“Read what?” I asked, still distracted after my conversation with Matthew. Hordes of people streamed out of the subway and crossed in front of my taxi.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she semi-whined. “Come on, Tandy, get with the program. I need to discuss this atrocity against the written word with someone!”

Right. The novel was another super-sexy purple-prose page-turner that was sweeping the planet in dozens of languages (some of which I’d already mastered). C.P. had downloaded the ebook to my tablet, but I had immediately deleted it, hoping she’d forget to ask what I thought. It wasn’t exactly the kind of thing I enjoyed reading.

Suddenly, the driver stomped on the gas and the cab lurched forward, sending my stomach into my mouth.

“I’ll get to it soon,” I told C.P., “but you know it’s not really my thing.” We took a turn at roughly Mach 20, and I was glad I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “I’m almost home. Can I call you later?”
“Sure! But only if you’ve read at least fifty pages!” she replied.

I rolled my eyes and hung up.

Twelve nauseating blocks later, I paid the driver through the transom and disembarked on the corner of Seventy-Second and Central Park West, where the Dakota reigned. We lived at the top of the infamous co-op—infamous for housing the social elite and for being the site of a few high-profile murders over the last half century or so. Our apartment was nestled right under the intricate Victorian peaks and gables.

Our parents had been anything but Victorian in their decorating choices, though. They’d filled our home with everything from a winged piano to a UFO-shaped chandelier to a coffee table full of pygmy sharks (since freed), and dozens of other priceless—and strange—contemporary art items.

I huddled into my coat with the collar up, my face down, trying to evade the many photographers lined up near the gate so I could slip right through, but I never even got there. Harry blocked my way, his dark curls tossed by the frigid wind.

“Tandy, you’re not going to believe this.” He grabbed my arm and steered me down the sidewalk, holding me close to his side as we automatically matched our strides. “Adele Church. She’s dead.”
I turned to look at him. There wasn’t a trace of mirth on his boyishly handsome face. Not that I was surprised. Harry wasn’t a jokester or a liar. He wasn’t even much of a storyteller.

“She can’t be,” I finally said. “I saw her this morning.”

“She was shot about five minutes ago, Tandy. She’s in the park. Her body, I mean. It’s still there.”

The whole world went fuzzy.

This was not happening. Not again.
“How did you—” I asked my brother, my mouth dry.

“No one told me,” he said, digging around in his pocket. “I took this.”

Harry showed me the picture on his phone. My already weakened stomach clenched, and I grabbed his arm to steady myself.

“Sorry,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Should have warned you it was ugly.”

“It’s okay,” I told him, clearing my throat. I turned and started for the park. “Let’s go.”

We sprinted across the broad expanse of Central Park West against the light and entered the park by a black-top pathway. Harry steered me to the right, just past the
pretzel cart Hugo lived for, and we ran the thirty yards through a tunnel of shade trees to John Lennon’s memorial in Strawberry Fields, darting around strollers, joggers, and Rollerbladers.

It was clear where Adele’s body was. The vultures were already circling. And by *vultures*, I mean press.

I elbowed through a group of Korean tourists wielding their camera phones and wedged open a sight line to the famous mosaic with the word *Imagine* set into the middle of a triangulated path.

Adele Church’s body was right there, at dead center.

The blurry photo on Harry’s phone had in no way prepared me for the reality. Adele was lying on her back as if she’d fallen from the sky. Black bullet holes had punched through her chest and stomach, and her white-and-pink plaid coat was drenched with blood. I was close enough to read Adele’s expression as stark disbelief even as her wide-open blue eyes went dull from death.

Bile rose up in the back of my throat, bringing tears to my eyes. I turned to Harry and pressed my face into his shoulder, biting down hard on my lip as I tried not to cry.

This was one of those moments. One of those moments when I would have given anything not to feel. I couldn’t wrap my brain around why anyone would want to kill sweet, totally innocuous Adele. I wanted to strangle
every member of the growing crowd of tourists who were angling to get a better view of her poor broken body.

Most of all I wanted to scream at her to just get up. That this couldn’t have happened. Not to someone I knew. Not to someone our age.

Not to one of the very few people at school who were occasionally nice to me.

“Take a breath, Tandy,” Harry whispered, which was odd, considering he was usually the one on the verge of a nervous breakdown, not me. “Focus on something else. What do you think happened to her?”

Harry knew me so well. Piecing together evidence would focus me. It would make me feel like there was something I could do. I was all about productivity.

I turned to look at the body, trying to force myself into cool indifference, and drilled down deep into my analytic left brain.

“There’s a lot of blood,” I said under my breath. “She didn’t die instantly. Three shots and her heart was still pumping after at least two of them. She knew what was happening. She knew she was—”

I paused and cleared my throat. I didn’t want to go there.

“I wonder if she saw the shooter.”

Harry frowned ponderously. He was about to ask me
something when police sirens blew in bursts, startling everyone. The crowd separated as cruisers and unmarked cars streamed onto the scene of the crime. When the first cops to arrive got out of their gray Chevy, I froze. It was Sergeant Capricorn Caputo and his partner, Detective Ryan Hayes—the two cops who had been first on the scene of my parents’ deaths.

Sergeant Caputo was tall and gangly, with a severe jawline, slick black hair, and an all-black wardrobe. Plus he was a total ass. He prided himself on being the tough guy, and his behavior could skew anywhere from rude to downright mean. Still, if you were as observant as I was, you might notice the checkered socks showing under the cuffs of his pants, which took the edge off his hard-core persona. While Detective Caputo was a general pain, he was focused. He lived his job.

His partner, Detective Hayes, was the opposite: a solid man, competent and kind, the sort of guy who put you totally at ease. Hayes was a good soul, and I was glad he would be on Adele’s case, too. Even though, technically, he hadn’t solved our parents’ “murders.”

I had.

“Sergeant Caputo!” I called.

He spotted me and narrowed his beady eyes, never tak-
ing them off my face as he picked his way carefully around Adele’s body. “You’re under arrest, Taffy.”

Caputo had no problem remembering my name, but he loved to mess with me.

“Wow. Still going with that joke, huh? It stopped being funny about three months ago.”

His gaze flicked over Harry, then back at me. “Please. You don’t have a single funny bone in your entire skinny body.”

I sighed. “So do you want to know what’s going on here, or do you want to waste some more time coming up with lame nicknames?”

“You know this girl?” he asked, interested.

“Her name is Adele Church,” I told him.

“We went to school with her,” Harry added.

“What else do you know about Miss Church?” Caputo asked, flipping open his notebook and scribbling down her name.

“She was a sweet person,” I said. “She lived up on Seventy-Ninth, I think. Her older brother graduated last year.”

“She played the flute,” said Harry. “And pretty much kicked ass in sociology.”

“Any idea why someone would want to hurt her?” Caputo asked.
We heard more sirens with deeper whooping sounds as the coroner’s van arrived. More cops were getting out of cruisers, stringing a yellow-tape perimeter around the body and shooing the onlookers back.

“Everyone liked her,” I said. “I think she saw her killer, though. Maybe she knew him.”

Caputo’s face flattened with unsuppressed scorn. “I’ve got no time for your amateur-night theories, Tallulah.”

“You know better than that, Caputo.” I gave him my card. “I want to help.”

He glanced at my card and scoffed. “‘Tandy Angel, Detective. Mysteries Solved. Case Closed,’” he read. “I was wrong. You’re actually hilarious, T-bone.” He glanced from me to Harry and pocketed the card. “Nice seeing you.”

“You should call me,” I shouted after him as he turned away. “Consultations are free for all clueless detectives named Caputo!”

He just kept walking.

“That man is going to break into our apartment and kill you in your sleep, you know,” Harry said.

I smirked. “I’d like to see him try.”
I may have seemed confident to Caputo and to Harry while I was handing over my card, but I wasn’t. In fact, the second my card touched Caputo’s chalky, dry fingers, something inside me swooped, like the way your heart feels when you jump off a bridge with nothing but a bungee cord tied to your feet.

Because that was when I realized: Maybe I wasn’t a good detective. Not anymore.

Yes, even Capricorn Caputo would have to admit that without me, the mystery of my parents’ deaths might never have been solved. But that was then. When I was still full of Num, Lazr, Focus, and other secret Angel Pharmaceuticals concoctions. Now that I was off the drugs, I was feeling everything, but did I still have the sharp and rational mind of an ace detective?
My grades seemed to indicate that I did. But anyone could get straight As. Most of the kids I knew were technical geniuses, if you believe in IQ scores. Even C.P. Probably even Adele. But something had been going on lately that was starting to seriously bother me.

I was having these dreams. Dreams about James. And whenever I woke up from one of these dreams, I had a hard time figuring out whether it was really a dream, or if it was actually a memory.

That’s my deepest, darkest secret, my friend. I think my mind was starting to play tricks on me. And I had a feeling I knew who to blame. My parents. And Fern Haven. And that awful Dr. Narmond.

But that’s a story for another time.
I looked at Harry as we walked back to the Dakota. Harry and I were both dark-eyed and dark-haired, and we were fiercely loyal to each other. Two people couldn’t be tighter friends and confidants than we were. Still, I wished we had that twin telepathy thing you always hear about, but we didn’t. Probably because aside from the superficial physical traits and the aforementioned loyalty, we couldn’t have been less alike.

Harry was quiet. He was mopey. He had this tendency to slouch. He was asthmatic, and he slept long and late every day when he could. Harry was also kind.

Yes, much to my parents’ disappointment, Harry was born an emo, and even though he was a world-class
pianist who could bring an audience at Lincoln Center to tears, Malcolm and Maud described him as sensitive, sentimental, and weak. He had never won a Gongo or gotten a chop, and not even a billion emotion-quashing pills had ever dimmed a single ray of his brilliance.

According to me, he got major points for that.

I was Harry’s flip side. I was up at dawn. I sometimes cooked elaborate breakfasts of apricot-and-chai oatmeal and fresh-squeezed orange juice before anyone else was even stretching their arms above their heads. I lived for a complex chemistry experiment and checked over my dad’s financial books for fun—at least I had, back when he let me. I was known for being high-strung, and occasionally my sharpness was interpreted as, well, rudeness. I never danced around anything when I could cut to the chase, and no one had ever called me kind.

My parents gave me major points for that.

I’d also studied forensic science as a hobby since I was about six years old and had solved every mystery I’d ever read or seen on TV since I was eight. Now I just hoped I still had that talent. That quitting the drugs hadn’t taken it from me.

Harry held the gate open for me, and we slipped inside the courtyard, ignoring the camera flashes popping all around us. Instead of thinking about me or Harry or Mat-
the, I thought about Adele. Adele, who listened well and laughed easily. Adele, who played in the orchestra and wore pink constantly and hung photos of composers and film directors in her locker. She could have gone on to do anything, be anyone, have a great big life.

Now she would never have another day. Another minute.

Call me crazy, but I wanted—no, I needed—to do something about it. I just hoped that the new and maybe improved drug-free me still could.
I put my key in the lock of apartment 9G, the duplex where Harry, Hugo, and I had once lived with our parents but now suffered daily with our horrible uncle Peter until the courts decided what was to become of us. But before I turned the knob, the door opened, and a tall, dark, and drop-dead-handsome man of maybe fifty said hello.

My shoulders coiled. Stranger in my apartment equals not good. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jacob Perlman,” he said calmly. “Call me Jacob. Peter has brought me in as your guardian.”

Harry gave Jacob a dubious look. “I thought Uncle Peter was our guardian.”
“He was. Now I am,” Jacob said, his brown eyes free of guile. “Would you like to come in?”

“To our own home?” I snapped. “Sure. Thanks.”

Jacob smiled slowly and stepped back to let us through. Harry, sensing that I’d flipped into set-to-pop mode, quickly disappeared down the hallway and into his room.

“Peter installed a stranger in our house to look after us?” I said, looking up at Jacob and noting the small scar near his ear, the perfect hairline, the razor-sharp shave.

“Is that even legal?”

He smirked. “Tandoori, right?”

He had an accent I couldn’t quite place, which was odd considering I’d been most places and spoke most languages. The wrinkles fanning out from the corners of his eyes looked like squint lines more than laugh lines. He was lean and muscular, but not like he’d been working out in a gym. More like he’d had a physically demanding life.

“Yeah, that’s me,” I replied. “Where’s Uncle Peter?”

Jacob folded his hands in front of him. “He didn’t say.”

Great. So not only had he left a stranger in our house, he’d left him here alone. How was I supposed to know this guy was even who he said he was? There could be a team of ninjas hanging out in the kitchen just waiting to gut me.
Considering my family’s history, it wasn’t much of a stretch.

“You won’t mind if I just…give him a call,” I said, angling one foot toward the still-open door.

“Feel free,” Jacob said. He was so sophisticated and smooth that the UFO chandelier hovering over his head—the one that had decorated our foyer my whole life—looked suddenly out of place.

He was a man of few words. That, at least, I liked. I speed-dialed my uncle, hating with every fiber of my being that I had to consult him on anything.

Uncle Peter was my father’s totally despicable brother. He was intolerant and so rude that he made me seem like Miss Manners. In fact, we all hate him and call him Uncle Pig, sometimes to his face.

Peter had moved into our house when my parents died, had taken over my sister’s room, which had been strictly off-limits up to that point, and had started treating the Angel kids like the dirt under his grubby fingernails.

He picked up on the fourth ring. “Yes, Tandoori, Jacob is your new guardian. Yes, it’s legal. If you’d like to see the paperwork, ask him. I’m busy.”

He hung up before I could even get out a word. Jacob raised an eyebrow. I cleared my throat.
“All right, then,” I said grudgingly. “Looks like you’re legit.”

“I’m glad of that,” Jacob told me. “I’d like to have a family meeting. Shall we gather in the living room in, say, twenty minutes?”

A family meeting was actually in order. I had to report on my awful conversation with Matty. But I wasn’t sure yet that I wanted to include Jacob Perlman in that.

“Where will you be staying?” I asked him as we turned toward the living room.

“I’ll move into Peter’s room.”

“Don’t call it that,” I snapped. “It’s Katherine’s room.”

“I apologize,” Jacob said immediately. “Katherine’s room.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I have some work to do.”

“Twenty minutes,” he reminded me.

“I’ll be there.”

I stalked off to my sky-blue bedroom, with its leafy ninth-floor view of Central Park and shelves of sea coral. If I stood at the windows and got up on my toes, I could just about see where Adele Church’s body had been lying, her dead eyes turned skyward.

I flopped down on my bed and called C.P.

“You read it? Tell me you read it,” she said hungrily.

“Wasn’t it just awful?”
“Actually, I haven’t had time,” I told her. “C.P.… Adele Church is dead. She was shot. They found her body in the park about two seconds before I got home.”

“What?” C.P. demanded. “Are you kidding me?”

“No. I’m sorry. I just figured I should tell you,” I replied.

“Oh my God.” The tears were clear in her voice.

“Tandy… oh my God. Do they know who did it?”

“No yet,” I told her. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“What’s this we stuff?” she asked.

“I’ll explain later,” I told her. “And I promise, at some point, to read your latest favorite book porn.”

C.P. sighed. “Oh, forget it,” she said sadly. “All the fun’s gone out of it now.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I’ll text you later?”

“Sure.”

We hung up, and I rolled over onto my stomach, pulling my laptop across my bed to see what Google might turn up about Jacob Perlman. Uncle Peter had brought him into my house, so there was no way I was about to trust him without a thorough background check.

Turned out Google was full of Jacob.

And nearly every word about him was mind-blowing.
Jacob Perlman was a retired Israeli commando.

Yes, you read that right. A *commando*.

There was a whole *New York Times* profile on the guy. He’d rescued hostages from terrorists, disarmed and killed a suicide bomber he’d caught trying to blow up a marketplace, and evacuated a whole mess of kids from a school mere minutes before it was hit by a rogue Palestinian missile.

So basically, if anyone tried to mess with the Angel kids from now on, they were gonna get a beat-down. That much was comforting.

But why would a man who swatted down terrorists like they were houseflies want to babysit three bratty private
school kids in New York City? And how did Uncle Pig even know someone like him? Most of our uncle’s acquaintances were as sniveling and pointless as he was.

I went next door to Harry’s room, which was spacious and modern, with one of his own amazing paintings of angels adorning the ceiling. He was, of course, passed out facedown on his king-sized bed. Harry needs a lot of downtime to refresh his brilliant mind, but I thought it was odd that he could sleep with the specter of Jacob Perlmutter looming.

I shook him awake, relayed my intel on Jacob, and told him we were having a family meeting. Then I found Hugo in his bedroom, sitting on his mattress on the floor with his laptop on. After Malcolm and Maud died, Hugo trashed just about everything he owned—the vintage toy cars, his four-poster bed—and now only his Xbox, desk, and chair were left standing. Hugo had the strength of a full-grown man and wore his hair in long curls, Samson style. He was upbeat and forgiving, and he exaggerated every time he opened his mouth. He was also fearless. His favorite person in the world, bar none, was our football superstar brother, Matthew. Honestly, Hugo’s behavior when it came to Matty bordered on worship.

“Was Matty wearing one of those hockey masks so he couldn’t bite or spit?” Hugo asked, still typing as he spoke.
“Matthew is not Hannibal Lecter, Hugo.” I sat down next to him on the mattress. “What’re you up to?”

“I’m setting up a website,” he informed me. “I’m going to raise money for his bail.”

That was my ten-year-old brother for you. Always thinking. I reached out to ruffle his hair, then lay back on the mattress next to him and just listened to him type as I went over the bizarre events of the day.

Matthew, possibly a killer. Adele, dead for no apparent reason. A stranger running my household. Could my life get any more dramatic?

A few minutes later, Jacob paged us on the intercom, and we assembled in the living room: Harry and I taking up most of the red leather sofa, Hugo in the Pork Chair—a pink chair with hooves for feet that he loved—and Jacob perched above us on a kitchen stool he’d brought in for the meeting.

I wondered what Jacob thought of Maud’s décor. She had favored huge pieces of artwork and had designed our place so that it looked like a hyperrealism exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. It was all bold colors, life-sized statues, Pop Art canvases, and crazy kitschy furniture. We loved it. But then, it was all we knew. Somehow Jacob seemed like a guy who’d prefer a more minimalist style.

“First, I’ve e-mailed you the court order making me
your legal guardian,” he said, looking directly at me. “And second, there is this.”

He slipped a hand into the inside breast pocket of his khaki jacket and removed a four-by-six photo. He held it along the edges with both hands so we could see the faded color portrait of a woman in her fifties. Her hair was upswept. She wore a blouse with a deep neckline and a necklace of baroque blue pearls the size of melon balls.

I recognized her, of course. She was my father’s mother, elegant and beautiful, a tough-love matriarch who had died before the Angel kids were born. But we still referred to her familiarly as Gram Hilda. A framed note and envelope from Gram Hilda hung on the wall of the staircase that led up to my parents’ master suite. The note was handwritten, stamped by a notary, and was a companion to Gram Hilda’s will. The letter was short and not too sweet.

“I am leaving Malcolm and Maud $100, because I feel that is all that they deserve.”

Our parents had told us that Gram Hilda was very rich but didn’t approve of their marriage for reasons they never explained. Even though she’d died just before their wedding, Gram Hilda’s disapproval had been the inspiration to better themselves financially, and they had done it—without her help.

But wait a minute.
“Why do you have a picture of Gram Hilda?” Hugo asked, voicing my thoughts.

“Hilda expected that your parents would have children one day. She gave this photo to your father, who gave it to your uncle Peter, and he asked me to give it to you.”

He turned the photo over, and I saw that a few lines had been written on the back in blue ink. Jacob read the inscription aloud.

“‘To my grandchildren. Hold yourselves to high standards. Do not disappoint yourselves or me. Hilda Angel.’”

“Yep. That was definitely Dad’s mother,” Harry said bitterly. I’m sure he noticed that she’d left out an important word before her signature: love. Or how about best wishes? We would even have appreciated a sincerely.

“And now,” said Jacob, slipping the picture onto the table in front of us, “on to the real point of this meeting.”
Jacob stood, took off his khaki jacket, and hung it over the high back of his stool.

“There will be house rules. Not too many, but they all must be obeyed.”

Rules from a military commando. Would they include mandatory morning push-ups?

“Number one, you must keep your phones on and charged at all times,” Jacob said. “Number two, if I call, you must answer. Number three, there will be no lying whatsoever. Even if it’s a joke, anyone caught deviation from the truth will be punished.” He paused and looked at us, hard. “Please don’t test me.”
Who the hell did this guy think he was?
“We don’t lie,” I told him.
“Well, Hugo does sometimes embellish,” Harry said.
Hugo and I both shot him looks of betrayal. Harry turned up his palms.
“Here’s why the rules are necessary,” Jacob said, ignoring our aside. “I intend to protect you until you reach your majority. That’s my job. And I can’t do it if I’m misinformed. Understood?”
Silence.
“I’ll take that as a yes.”
Hugo leaned forward eagerly in the Pork Chair, looking up at Jacob. “Arm wrestle with me.”
Jacob’s eyes danced, waiting for a punch line. No one moved. “You’re not kidding?”
“You just said not to kid,” Hugo said. “Let’s do it. Right here, right now.”
To my surprise, Jacob smiled indulgently, got down on the Rothko-patterned carpet, and stretched out on his stomach facing Hugo, who assumed a similar, opposing position. They clasped right hands. Harry and I exchanged looks of mild amusement.
Stranger things have happened in the Angel household.
“Three, two, one, wrestle!” Hugo shouted.
Bam! Hugo’s hand hit the floor, the whole thing over in five seconds. Hugo cursed under his breath. Jacob got up, smoothed the front of his shirt, and sat down on his stool. Hugo rubbed his elbow with stubborn respect in his eyes.

“Moving on,” Jacob said. “You will each have fifty dollars a week for cab fares and lunches. You will have breakfast and dinner at home, where we will take turns preparing meals. So fifty dollars is more than you need—”

Harry sat straight up in his seat. “You must be joking. Have you ever lived in Manhattan, Jake? New York City is not cheap.”

“Effective now, we’re on an austere budget, Harry,” Jacob replied. “Get used to it. You’ll get your allowance every Monday morning, and it’s your job to make it last. And finally, for now, I want you home every night by seven for dinner, in bed every night by twelve.”

“What does any of this have to do with Gram Hilda?” Harry asked, glancing down at the picture.

“When it’s time to tell you, I will do so,” Jacob said. “No further questions? Good. Discussion closed. Feel free to see me if any questions do arise.”

Our new guardian walked down the hall to Katherine’s former bedroom, went inside, and closed the door behind him.
Harry, Hugo, and I shared a silent, impressed, maybe even hopeful look. All in all, Jacob Perlman had been polite and clear. Rules, we could follow. Someone who treated us with respect and dignity, we could handle.

Uncle Pig might have just done us the biggest favor ever.
“I get it. *The rules, I mean,*” Harry said finally. “He needs to keep tabs on us. That’s his job. But I have one question.”

“What?” I prompted.

“What’s in it for him?”

“He gets to live in the Dakota?” I shrugged. “Plus Peter’s paying him, of course.”

Harry said, “He’s going to be here until we’re eighteen. That’s a two-year job, right? But we’ll probably be evicted for nonpayment in a couple of weeks. So when we’re living in a refrigerator box under a bridge, what’s Jake’s plan for that?”

Hugo piped up. “Don’t worry, bro. I’m going to write Matthew’s biography. We’ll get a big advance for the
book, and then big bucks for the movie rights. I’m going to be Matty’s agent, too, so I’m taking a cut for that. In a couple of weeks we’ll be rolling in it.” He kicked back with his feet on the table, his arms crooked behind him. Underneath his shifting weight, the Pork Chair squealed.

“You can’t even spell,” I pointed out.

“That’s what editors are for,” Hugo replied, grinning hugely.

“Does Matty know about all this?” I asked him.

“I’m working it out with Philippe,” Hugo said, referring to our attorney, Philippe Montaigne. “I’m drafting a chapter outline right now.”

“When you’re not working on the website?” I asked, arching my eyebrows.

Hugo sat forward, his feet slamming heavily into the floor. “Man. I got a lot to do. I’ll be in my room.”

“First ten-year-old literary agent slash ghostwriter slash Internet-based freedom fighter in the history of the world,” I said to the empty Pork Chair. “But I almost think he can pull it off.”

“Of course he can,” Harry said. “He’s Hugo.”

I smiled as loud guitar music shook the photos on the walls of the hallway. Hugo at work.

“I’ve got a composition due tomorrow,” Harry said, rising from the sofa. “Are you okay?”
“Sure,” I said, glancing across the room toward the windows that overlooked the park. “What could possibly be bothering me?”

A tiny line appeared in the center of Harry’s forehead. “May I make a suggestion?”

I stood up as well. “All ears.”

“Let Caputo be the cop,” he said. “He’s got a precinct and a forensics lab behind him. You’re just going to get in his way.”

“Do you even realize that if it wasn’t for me the truth behind Malcolm’s and Maud’s deaths might still be a mystery?” I asked him.

“Memo to Tandy,” Harry said, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Adele was not a relative, and she was killed with an actual gun. Murderers? They tend to not like the people who come after them. So I suggest you stay out of it, sis.”

“You’re probably right,” I said with a sigh.

He eyed me shrewdly. “But it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Not really,” I replied.

He shook his head and we parted ways. Him to his room and me to mine. I changed into a pair of my mom’s silk pajamas—yellow with red poppies—and got into my king-sized bed, perfect for the restless thrasher I was. I plumped the pillows, stared out at the canopy of leaves.
across the street, and listened to the variously pitched sounds of traffic.

I thought about Adele, how she would never see another tree or hear traffic or kiss a boy or anything else. Right now she was on a slab in a cooler at the medical examiner’s office waiting for the forensic pathologist to slit her open from clavicle to navel. My empty stomach turned.

What would Adele have done with her life?
Who would she have become?
Why did she have to die?
Since I’ve been so busy listing all the negatives of being off the drugs, I’ve decided to share with you—and only you—one of the positives. I know what you’re thinking. There’s a positive? Then what’s she been whining about all this time? I apologize if I’ve been in a morose frame of mind. But with all the deaths and the jail visits and the random strangers taking over my life, I’m hoping you can forgive me.

So here it is, the positive: I am starting to remember James. And I’m not talking about the weird dreams. I’m talking about actual memories. At least, I think they are. I hope they are. See, there were always little bits and snippets that I could recall, vague feelings, hazy shadows, flashes of a face or a knee or a hand. But now I was starting to see real 3-D images. I was start-
ing to hear his voice, sense his touch, smell his scent. I was starting to remember that I had been in love.

Not only that. I had experienced love at first sight.

There was a party one night about a year ago. A party I, of course, had to sneak out to go to, Malcolm and Maud not believing in fun, as it were. It was exactly what you’d expect from the children of the New York elite. Huge apartment, tons of breakables worth untold thousands, and at least a hundred kids drinking, smoking, and partaking of all kinds of drugs their parents had definitely not formulated especially for them.

I hate to say “our eyes met across a crowded room,” but they did. But it wasn’t just like “Oh, he’s cute,” or even “That’s the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.” It was like I knew him. And he knew me. And we just hadn’t seen each other in a really long time. Locking eyes with James felt like coming home.

We made small talk about travel and school and our families, but what I really remember was all the smiling. All the anticipation. All the skin-tingling uncertainty.

I had loved every minute of it.

And then it had happened. Just as I’d started to get that awful, gut-deadening feeling that nothing could possibly come of this—that it was too good to be true—James had leaned in and kissed me. And I had felt it in every inch of my body.

Me. The girl who never felt anything. The girl who was on so many drugs I’d barely cried when my favorite person in the
world—my sister, Katherine—had died. That was how I knew for certain that I was in love.

After that, sneaking out became a much more common occurrence. But here’s the strangest, most unbelievable part of this: Aside from the clarity of our first meeting, I couldn’t remember most of the time James and I had spent together.

Because when my parents did find out about us—because eventually they always found out about everything—they’d had my memory purged. Chemically purged, electrically rubbed out, scoured down to the bloody nubs.

My parents were rich and powerful and connected enough to know people who could do that. They’d not only taken me away from James physically, but done everything they could to make sure I’d never so much as dream of him again.

But I did now. All the time. Since I’d gone off the drugs, I was finally starting to remember, more and more each day, the details.

After all this time, I had real and tangible hope that one day I’d remember everything. And that once I remembered, I’d find a way to get James back.
The next morning, Jacob was actually up before me and had laid out a huge breakfast of chocolate-chip pancakes, eggs, sausage, and coffee, which resulted in Hugo’s declaring his undying love for the man. I, however, was kind of annoyed that my morning ritual of breakfast making had been brusquely taken from me without my consent. But that didn’t stop me from eating everything in sight. Which made us late.

After thanking Jacob, Harry, Hugo, and I charged up Central Park West and across the avenue at Seventy-Seventh Street to our school, All Saints Academy. All Saints is a privately owned, Gothic-style former church, all massive stone walls, stained-glass windows, and soaring
roof lines. Our tiger parents had loved this school because of its small and very exclusive enrollment, but they’d also been obsessed with its headmaster, Timothy Thibodaux. The man was highly intelligent, even by Angel standards.

I had a like-hate relationship with Mr. Thibodaux. He was sharp, of course, but I didn’t trust him. Not since he’d refused to let us return to school once we were under suspicion for our parents’ deaths. Not charged with their deaths, just under suspicion. Yet he’d turned us away at the front door like a bunch of beggars in a Charles Dickens novel. At least he’d apologized for that slight a couple of weeks later when he’d been forced to take us back.

Even I had to admit that Mr. Thibodaux was good at handling the twenty kids in his class, nearly all of them privileged and untouchable. Harry and I, these days, were the exceptions. Our parents were dead and we were broke. But Mr. Thibodaux hadn’t turned us away again—not yet, at least—because we were paid up through the school year. Next year, of course, I had no idea what would happen.

Harry and I were panting as we left Hugo at the door to the rectory, where the fifth graders had their classroom, and the two of us trotted up the front steps of the large stone church. We took a right turn off the narthex and climbed the stairway to the choir loft under the vaulted
ceiling. This was our classroom, with its stunning long view of the nave and the altar.

Mr. Thibodaux was waiting at the top of the stairs. He wore an impeccably cut brown suit, green-framed glasses, and a mournful expression.

“I’m happy you Angels could make it,” he said. And I actually couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic.

I noticed the grief-shocked faces of our schoolmates as Harry and I took our seats, and I gave C.P. a nod. We stowed our book bags and sat perfectly upright with our hands folded in front of us.

“Due to your incessant texting, I’m sure you all know that Adele Church has been killed,” Mr. Thibodaux said. “I would be grieving at the loss of any of you, but Adele, in particular, was a very promising student, a talented musician, and a generally sterling person.”

A few of the kids sitting behind me began to cry. Mr. Thibodaux noticed but went on.

“You may not know this, but my relationship with my students doesn’t end at graduation. In a way, that’s when it begins. I see all our graduates every year, and I am amazed at how each of them has grown. The brilliant ones don’t always go straight to the top but take a winding and unique path. The slackers sometimes spring into action, and sometimes they turn slacking into a fine art.
“But whatever my students do, whomever they become as adults, I take pride and pleasure in knowing that we all crossed paths here, that we learned from one another here, that we helped one another become…”

He trailed off, and one of the girls behind me gulped back a sob.

“Adele lost her life, and we all lost her. We will never see her become who she was meant to be, but I know we will all always remember our dear, shining Adele.”

Mr. Thibodaux crooked a finger in front of his lips, holding back tears as he looked across the room at an intricate stained-glass crucifixion scene in one of the windows.

“Please pray for Adele, keep her in your thoughts, honor her in whatever way you feel appropriate,” he said finally, clearing his throat. “There will be a service for Adele this Saturday at St. Barnabas. Grief counseling will be provided here immediately. If you will all gather at my office door and form a line along the green wall, a therapist will see you forthwith.

“Class is dismissed.”

Everyone slowly rose from their seats, but I was frozen in place. Harry looked back at me just as I started to shake.

“Tandy?” he said.

_Grief counseling._ The reason my parents had given for
sending me to Fern Haven. At the time I’d believed them, since I couldn’t remember a thing from the months leading up to my incarceration. But they’d actually sent me there to have my memories wiped. To have James and everything we’d seen and done together plucked from my consciousness.

I would never trust a grief counselor again.
C.P. stood at the end of the line outside Mr. Thibodaux’s office as I walked right by my classmates toward the side door. Harry was the only one missing, so I could only assume he was already pouring his guts out to the shrink. There weren’t many things Harry loved to do more than talk about his feelings.

“Tandy? Where’re you going?” C.P. asked me. She was wearing a zebra-print coat over a black dress, her short blond hair pushed forward over her forehead and her blue eyes wide.

“Outside,” I said. “I don’t need grief counseling.” I clenched my fists inside my pockets. “By the way, have the cops interviewed you about Adele?”
C.P.’s brow knit. “No.”

I looked down the line of students. “Have the cops interviewed any of you?” I called out to my classmates. They all stared at me, then at one another, blankly.

I sighed and turned to C.P. “Send them each out to me when they finish in the office, okay?”

She narrowed her eyes. “This was what you meant yesterday when you said we, isn’t it?”

“Someone’s gotta find out what happened to her. And clearly it’s not gonna be the NYPD.”

I waited on a teak bench in the courtyard between the church and the apartment building next door. It was one of those oddly warm winter days, and the sun felt good on my face. Harry was the first to come out, but he didn’t even look in my direction. He just ducked his head and took off for the street, probably planning to go home or to the rehearsal rooms at Lincoln Center to take out his emotions on an unsuspecting piano.

Cliff Anderson was the next to emerge. He was a tall, square-shouldered son of a Wall Street tycoon with an ego bigger than Manhattan. He eyed me warily as he approached.

“C.P. said I’m supposed to talk to you…?”

“Have a seat.”

He did, sitting as far away from me on the bench as possible without hitting the ground.
“I’m working with the NYPD on solving Adele’s murder,” I began.

“Seriously?” I’d piqued his interest. “That’s… kinda cool.”

“So, where were you when Adele was shot?” I asked him.

Cliff’s jaw dropped. “You think I did it?”

“It’s a standard question,” I replied.

He glowered. “I was with my girlfriend at Dylan’s Candy Bar.”

I jotted that down.

“And your girlfriend’s name?”

He gave it, the school she attended, and her phone number.

“Did you notice anything off about Adele lately?” I asked. “Was she worried about anything? Fighting with anyone?”

“She was depressed, actually,” Cliff said, gripping the bench with both hands. “Her brother moved out to go to BU last semester, and the two of them were really close. Adele didn’t exactly love her parents, you know? I think it was like the two of them against Mom and Dad, so once she was alone…”

I could imagine how much that would suck. If Malcolm and Maud had still been alive and all my brothers
had moved out…wow. I wasn’t sure I could have survived that.

“Thanks, Cliff.”

Next up was Kendra Preston. She had transferred to All Saints this year, and I knew she still had friends at the Doyle School across town. I asked about her alibi, then got down to business.

“Do you know anyone who might want to do something like this to Adele?” I asked her.

“No, but did you know that two other girls our age have been shot to death in the last month?” she replied.

“What?” I gasped.

“Yeah.” Her eyes were wide. “Scary, right? This friend of a friend from Doyle, Lena Watkins, died just outside her apartment a couple of weeks ago. They said it was suicide because she’d been depressed about a breakup, but everyone she knew was shocked that she would actually kill herself.”

I wrote everything down as quickly as I could. “And the other girl?”

“Her name was Stacey Something-or-Other…Stacey Brown or Stacey Black or”—she snapped her fingers—“Stacey Blackburn! That’s it. She went to Manhattan Day. There was a holdup at a liquor store in the Sixties and she was apparently in the way as the guy tried to escape.”
“So three girls from three different private schools have all died of gunshot wounds in the past three weeks.”

Kendra shivered inside her black coat. “Kinda makes you not want to leave the apartment anymore, huh?”

“It can’t be a coincidence,” I agreed.

If someone was actually targeting private school girls, then any of us—all of us—could be in danger. Had Caputo linked these three dots together? Or was this connection my very own bolt of lightning?

Either way, I had work to do.
I saved my money, and instead of catching a cab, I walked home from school as quickly as I could, cutting around joggers, bike messengers, jaywalkers, and eddies of lost tourists traveling against the flow.

Three dead private school girls. There had to be a connection. There just had to be. I couldn’t wait to get to my private home office.

I opened the door to our apartment and passed under the UFO chandelier, then stopped in my tracks. Standing in the center of the living room was a tall woman with a sprayed helmet of blond hair, wearing a tight blue suit and very high heels. I could smell her heavy perfume from fifteen feet away.
It was strong enough to knock mosquitoes out of the air.

“Can I help you?” I snapped, getting a bit tired of finding strangers in my house every time I came home.

The blond woman tapped a few notes into an iPad before looking up.

“Oh. Hello,” she said. Then she snapped a picture of Mercurio, our larger-than-life sculpture of a merman, which hung from a hook in the corkscrew opening under the spiral staircase.

“Excuse me,” I said, taking a few steps into the room. That was when I saw that she wasn’t alone. Uncle Pig stood in the corner, sporting his signature baggy Burberry and looking disheveled like always with his flyaway ginger hair.

He turned his tiny pig eyes on me.

“Oh, hello, Tandoori. Magda? This is my least favorite and only niece, Tandoori Angel, a psycho terror who is my late brother’s daughter. Tandoori, this is Ms. Magda Carter. She’s in estates and consignments.”

“How fantastic for you,” I said to the woman. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m pricing your possessions for the estate sale.” She almost smacked her lips. “It’s in two weeks, you know. So much to do, so little time.”

My fingers curled into fists as she ran her gaze covetously over our parents’ things—our things.
“Jumping the gun, aren’t you, Uncle Peter?” I said. “The estate hasn’t been settled yet.”

Uncle Peter ignored me. Shocker. “Any questions about the artwork, Magda?”

“I think I’ve got it all,” she said. “We’re listing the piano, that darling little pig chair, the merman, and… this?”

She placed her palm atop Robert’s head. Robert, the TV-watching Oldenburg sculpture in the living room.

My mouth went dry. As sick as it may have sounded to a normal person, Robert was like part of my twisted family.

“Definitely,” Uncle Peter said with a sneer.

“Hey,” I snapped. “Did you hear me?”

Uncle Peter jerked around as if he’d forgotten I was standing there.

“My apologies, Magda. Clearly my niece is out of sorts,” he said. “You haven’t seen the Aronstein flag in the master suite. Why don’t you go upstairs and I’ll join you in a moment?”

He waited as Magda clacked up the spiral staircase and then turned his beady eyes on me.

“Don’t be so shocked, Tandy,” he said in his most imperious tone. “You know that Royal Rampling is first in line to take over this twenty-million-dollar apartment, and the
estate must document everything of value.” Hearing the name Rampling coming from my uncle’s mouth made me want to puke on his shoes. “Oh, wait. I remember now,” he said in a cloying tone. “Mr. Rampling’s son was a special friend of yours, wasn’t he?”

Suddenly, a memory hit me with such force it almost knocked me off my feet—James and I happily cuddled up in a booth at a roadside McDonald’s upstate. A troop of black-clad henchmen tearing us away from each other. And Uncle Pig. Uncle Pig standing in the parking lot, watching it all with a triumphant smirk.

“You were there,” I breathed.

“I was where?” he asked.

“You were there!” I blurted, rage burbling up inside me. “At the McDonald’s that day! When James and I were taken. When I was dragged to Fern Haven. You were there!”

Uncle Pig’s face was blank. “You’ve never been inside a McDonald’s in your life. Or any of those awful fast-food places, for that matter. If you’d ever consumed that processed poison, your parents would have had simultaneous coronaries.”

I squinted, the memory quickly fading—going sideways, fizzling and shifting. Suddenly, James and I were
on a beach. It was dark. It was dark and windy when the commandoes arrived.

“But I—”

Uncle Peter’s face twisted in disgust. “Your parents really did screw with your awful little mind, didn’t they?”

My throat clenched and I swallowed hard, but my mind had been turned to mush by the conflicting memories, by the confusion, by the humiliation. What really happened, and why did I suddenly remember things differently? There was no comeback to be had. I turned on my heel and swept out, trying to keep my head high.

He was still laughing as I stormed down the hall to my room.
I wished my uncle would wander into a bad neighborhood, never to be heard from again. Or suffer a life-ending aneurysm. Or fall out a ninth-story window. I’d always believed he’d abused Katherine, and maybe even had something to do with her death.

There was no forensic evidence to prove that Uncle Peter had anything to do with either crime. Just my instincts. But my instincts had always been sharp.

He had, after all, moved into Katherine’s room as if it somehow belonged to him.

It made me want to put my fist through a window actually, when I thought about it. That sounds frighteningly like something Matthew Angel would do, I know. So instead, I focused on Katherine.
Katherine Angel was my big sister, my idol, my best and closest friend—an even closer friend than Harry.

Katherine was hilarious, a prankster as well as a brilliant scholar, and if that wasn’t enough, she was beautiful, too. She looked exactly like Maud when she was young. Sometimes, when we put photos of the two of them side by side, the only way to tell the difference was the style of their clothes.

My sister was sixteen when she died. We were told it was an accident, but I’ve never been sure. She was riding on the back of a motorcycle, her arms around the waist of her boyfriend, Dominick—a new boy we hadn’t met, but whom, according to her letters, she was completely, mind-bogglingly in love with—when a bus rear-ended the bike and tossed my sister into oncoming traffic. Just like that, this person who had been so full of life, so adventurous and kind and seemingly untouchable, was dead.

The boy Katherine loved was never found. He simply picked himself up and disappeared. Kind of suspicious, no?

Maybe he was just terrified. Or felt guilty. Or both. Maybe Katherine’s death was just an accident. But maybe, just maybe, her death had been arranged.

Yet another horrible mystery, for another horrible day.

But one thing is absolutely certain: I wished Katherine was here now. I wished I could talk to her about James and my muddled brain. I knew she would have found a way to make me feel better.

To make it all make sense.
It was dinnertime in apartment 9G at the Dakota—the eccentric, luxurious, very cloistered building with a gossip-column present and a sensational past—and I was in the kitchen, preparing tandoori chicken, the Indian dish for which I was named. Yes, I was named after a type of poultry preparation. My parents had been foodies with a weird sense of humor.

Harry had fired up the tandoor oven, and Hugo was vigorously washing the broccoli, his contribution to the rather ambitious five-dollars-a-head austerity dinner.

Jacob finished expertly chopping the carrots for the salad, laid his knife down, and cleared his throat.

“Children, there’s something you should know,” he
“There was a filing today before Judge Warren’s probate court, and all I can tell you is that sometimes when a door closes, another door opens.”

“What does that mean?” Harry asked, looking up from his history text.

“What does it mean, literally?” Jacob asked him.

“No, Jake. I understand the aphorism,” Harry replied sarcastically. “What door is opening?”

Hugo shook the broccoli, creating a little local rainfall, and said, “I hope if a door is opening, it’s not the one to this apartment, because I don’t want to move.”

Jacob took the broccoli from Hugo and put it in a steamer. “I would tell you…”

“But then you’d have to kill us?” I asked, eyeing the knife in front of him, wondering if he’d ever actually used one to kill a man.

“No, Tandoori. I would tell you, but it’s just a filing,” he replied, taking a sip of his sherry. “Let’s wait a little longer and see if we have good news or bad. To tell you more would be cruel.”

I walked over to the counter where Jacob was standing, picked up the bottle of sherry, and took a swig, staring into his eyes the entire time.

“Then why bring it up at all?” I asked. “Trying to let us know you have something over us?”
Jacob blinked and wiped his hands on his apron. “No. Of course not. You’re right, Tandy. I shouldn’t have said anything yet if I wasn’t intending to tell you everything.”

He looked around at the boys. “I apologize.”

I took another sip of sherry, and Jacob removed the bottle from my hand.

“That’s enough.” He set the bottle aside and reached for the knife again.

“Are you a spy, Jacob?” I asked him.

He sighed and smiled, cutting into a cucumber.

“Of course you are,” I continued. “But a spy for whom? Uncle Peter? Or maybe the dead?”

“What a wonderful, vivid imagination you have, Tandy.”

I narrowed my eyes. A vivid imagination or razor-sharp instincts? Only time would tell.
After dinner the four of us scattered like billiard balls, Hugo to his room and his manuscript, Harry to the piano in the living room, Jacob to Katherine’s room. Once everyone was safely tucked away, I headed down the hallway to the room that had at one time been so secret, I hadn’t even known it was there until after my parents died. I used the key I kept on a long chain around my neck to open the door, closed it quietly behind me, and hit the switch.

Light filled the room, illuminating my father’s file cabinets and his glittering chemistry equipment. His graphs still hung on the walls, those colorful bars that had charted the effects of the pills on his guinea pig children. This had once been his lab, but now it was my office.
My very own PI headquarters.

I had kept the charts so that I would never forget what had been done to us, but I’d restocked the lab with my own equipment and books on forensic science.

I booted up my computer and had just typed the name *Stacey Blackburn* into the search engine when there was an urgent knock on the hidden door. I opened the lock, and Hugo barreled in.

“How now, Hugo. I’m working.”

“I’m here to help,” he said. He went to the second computer and logged in.

“I thought you were working on Matty’s biography.”

“I’m taking five,” he replied. “Tell me what you need.”

I blew out a sigh and went back to my workstation.

“Lena Watkins,” I said. “Age about sixteen, lived on the Upper West Side, died last month of a gunshot wound.”

Hugo bent over the keyboard and tapped a few keys. He knew how to hack into the NYPD computer system and get out without getting caught. It was a skill that could come in handy.

Hugo read, “‘Lena Watkins, Ninety-Second and Amsterdam, gunshot to the temple at close range.’ Sound right?”

I nodded. “Witnesses?”

“No. Uh, her mother said Lena had been depressed. She was found dead with a gun in her hand, so…”

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“They think suicide,” I finished. “Send that page to me, okay, Hugo? I’ll go over the rest myself.”

My computer beeped, and I settled in to read. The first oddity that caught my eye was the fact that the gun was unregistered. An unregistered gun was a pretty weird thing for a wealthy sixteen-year-old Manhattanite to have in her possession.

“Lena was on antidepressants, but her parents said the pills were working,” I said to Hugo. “Not only that, but she never talked about killing herself. She had been down but was coming out of it, and it says here that she didn’t leave a suicide note. Which is kind of odd.”

“If I offed myself, I’d leave a note,” Hugo said, glancing at my father’s charts on the walls. “Unlike some people.”

“Tell me about it,” I replied, facing him. “Also, get this: Lena had put a down payment on a new car and had gotten accepted early to Smith College. This doesn’t really add up to suicidal depression. Not as I see it.”

I turned back to the computer, but I could feel Hugo’s eyes still on me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You know I kind of idolize your ability to multitask, Tandy. But why don’t you try saving Matthew before you go figuring out a whole mess of other murders? I mean, at least Matty’s still alive.”
I glanced at him sharply, feeling a thump of guilt and sorrow.

“Please?” he added, looking, for the first time in a long time, like a regular little boy.

Hugo looked up to Matthew the way I’d adored Katherine, so I didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth—that Matthew himself thought he might be guilty. And that I had to focus on as many things as possible right now just to keep myself from focusing on that.

“Hey, I can do both,” I said gently. “I promise.”

Hugo rolled his eyes and started rummaging through a file drawer at the bottom of a cabinet. “Whatever.”

Then, out of nowhere, he suddenly fell back and screamed.

“Tandy!” he shouted, scuttling back on his hands and feet like a crab, a look of sheer terror on his face. “Run!”
Hugo knocked over the computer stand, which crashed to the floor. I was already running to my brother’s side, but something stopped me cold. It was oily and slick and was pouring onto the floor in a slithering black tube. Suddenly it stopped and reared up, a good twelve inches off the floor.

The thing unfurled a hood at the back of its neck. Hugo flinched. It was a snake. A cobra, to be more precise. And this cobra was pissed off.

“Don’t. Move,” I said through my teeth.

I knew a lot about snakes. For instance, I knew that any movement was guaranteed to agitate the cobra. I also knew that if it struck Hugo, neurotoxins would likely kill him before an antivenom could be found.
“Tannnnnnndy!” he cried. “Help meeewwww!”

“I’m thinking,” I replied, my heart slamming against my ribs. “Just don’t move.”

“You said that already,” he replied.

The snake began to sway. A very bad sign. I grabbed my phone from my pocket and called Jacob. He answered on the first ring. I tried to stay calm, but my voice was in its highest register.

“Jacob, there’s a snake in the apartment. A venomous snake.”

“Where are you?” Jacob was all business. The cobra eyed Hugo like he was a piece of meat.

“In my office.”

I heard fumbling. The sound of a door opening. “Your room?”

“No. My office. It’s past my room on the other side of the hall. I’ll open the door.”

“TandyTandyTandyTandyTandy.” My fearless little brother was keening in terror.

“Hugo, I’m right here. Just stay still.”

I dropped to all fours, keeping my eyes on the snake. It was only four feet from Hugo’s right foot. He was wearing shoes, but his naked ankle was within striking distance. I knew the snake wouldn’t attack unless it felt threatened, but that inch of bare skin still looked like a bull’s-eye.
“Don’t move, Hugo. Don’t even blink. I’m going to drag you out of here,” I said in a wobbly voice.

I moved toward Hugo, directly into the snake’s sight line. My plan was to pull Hugo around the fallen computer stand and put that between us and the snake. As if the cobra could read my mind, it flattened and started to slither against the wall in my direction.

I heard Jacob coming along the hallway.

“Tandy!” he shouted, pounding the wall with his fist.

“Tandy! Where are you?”

I glanced at the snake, terrified. All that noise couldn’t be good. “Jacob!” Hugo screeched. “We’re in here.”

The door frame in the hallway was so well concealed, you could miss it even when you knew where to look. I crawled to Hugo and got right behind him, then rose to a crouch.

“Very slowly raise your hands up,” I told him.

He reached back and I clasped his hands.

“It’s looking right at me,” Hugo whimpered. “Look at its tongue.”

“Just don’t look at it,” I told him. “Pretend it’s not there. We’re just playing a game.”

“Yeah, right.”

I had begun backing up slowly, sliding Hugo with me toward the doorway, when suddenly it jerked open. Jacob
hovered over us, and he was holding a very heavy-duty handgun.

“Where is it?” Jacob asked.

I pried one hand loose from Hugo’s and pointed to the snake.

“You two get out of here,” he said. “I’ll handle this.”

“You’re going to shoot it?” Hugo shouted, scrambling to his feet. “Cool! There’s no way I’m leaving now.”
Jacob scowled. Yep. There was the commando I’d read about. Hugo’s mouth snapped shut instantly.

“Go.” Jacob directed his fierce gaze at us and said, “And, Tandy, call Pest Control. Now.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” I replied.

Then I yanked Hugo into the hall.

“When I’m an adult, you can expect payback,” Hugo said to Jacob. “And believe me, karma is a peach.”

Jacob cracked a smile at Hugo, checked his gun, and slammed the door on us. I found the number for the New York City Department of Health and Pest Control, and after numerous rings, a woman with a languid voice answered.
“This is Officer Blum. How may I help you?”
“There’s a venomous snake loose in our apartment.”
I jumped at the sound of gunfire followed by breaking glass.
“Oh, man!” Hugo pouted, disappointed. I ran a hand over his hair in what I hoped was a conciliatory gesture. Crazy kid.
“Where should we send the unit?” the woman asked.
I gave our address. “How fast can you get here?”
“Say again?” said Officer Blum, alarmed. “You’re in the Dakota?”
“Yes, we’re in the Dakota.” I gripped the phone and said, “I’ve ID’d the snake. It’s a cobra. Maybe a forest cobra. Definitely deadly.”
“I hope you’ve got nerves of steel, then, young lady. Don’t make any sudden movements. You don’t want to make that snake angry.”

My office door opened, and Jacob came out holding four and a half feet of inky-black cobra. Its head was gone, but its body still twisted in Jacob’s hand. My throat pretty much closed up.

Jacob brought the snake over to Hugo.
“Here’s your snake, young man. Take a good look. I hope you never see one of these again. Now, bring me a bag, a broom, some rags, and the vacuum cleaner, please.”
“Hello?” Officer Blum said. “Are you still there? Was this your snake? Was it your pet?”

“No way. Why would you think that?” I asked.

“I hate to tell you,” she said, “but this is not the first snake loose in the Dakota today. In fact, it’s the third. Pest Control is in your building right now.”

I gripped the phone more tightly. “Are you kidding me?”

Jacob eyed me curiously.

“Do I sound like I’m kidding?”

“What the hell is going on?” I asked Officer Blum.

“No idea, but I’ll tell the guys to come to your apartment next.”

I grimaced as Hugo held out an open garbage bag and Jacob deposited the gory body in it.

“Actually, that’s not necessary. This one is officially dead,” I said to Officer Blum. “Maybe I should just bring it to them.”

“Well, okay, then.”

She told me the Pest Control officers were on the second floor and I hung up.

“Where are we going?” Hugo asked me as we headed toward the front of the apartment with the heavy bag full of dead snake.

“To find the Pest Control guys,” I answered, slinging the bag over my shoulder. “Hugo, what were you actually looking for in Malcolm’s file drawer?”
“Cigarettes,” he said matter-of-factly.
“What?”
He lifted his shoulders. “I was looking for his stash.”
Before I could demand why he would do such a thing, he added, “In movies about writers, they all smoke. I’m getting into character.”
“Geez, Hugo.” We paused in the foyer. “You want to stay four-foot-eight forever?”
“That’s a myth about cigarettes stunting your growth,” he said as I opened the front door. Then he shouted out to Jacob, “We’ll be right back.”
“Be back in five minutes,” Jacob shouted back. “Five.”
Hugo dashed across the hall and thumbed the call button until the elevator arrived. As we piled in, I turned over our latest drama in my mind. We didn’t live near a zoo. And there were no indigenous snakes in New York City.
So why were there snakes loose in the Dakota?
Remember when I said my greatest fear is that I might not experience true love again? Well, this might be an opportune moment to confess another pretty big fear.

I know a lot about snakes, vipers, and adders from all over the world. Why have I committed a snake encyclopedia to memory? Know thy enemy, that’s why.

Snakes are the opposite of warm and fuzzy. They slither, they’re sneaky by design, and, in case we weren’t clear on this fact, they can kill you. Some snakes eliminate you so stealthily you don’t even know you’re dead until your blood coagulates and your heart stops cold.

Some snakes shoot you full of neurotoxins, wrap themselves around you, and squeeze out your life before consuming you.
whole, clothes, shoes, laptop, and smartphone, in one big package.

Most snakes eat only mice and voles and are the gardener’s friend, but how do you know the difference in the space of a heartbeat? And that, I believe, is at the root of one’s fear of snakes. It’s a survival mechanism.

Some people are not just afraid of snakes, they’re phobic. The technical term for a snake phobia is *ophidiophobia*, and people who have it dream of snakes, see snakes under every rock or rumple in the carpet, and freak out when they see snakes on TV.

When I see a snake, I automatically think of my uncle Peter, which makes me hate them even more. Because I imagine he could kill and feel about the same amount of remorse as a snake would.

Zero.
I tried not to think about the fact that the heavy plastic garbage bag in my left hand was packed with the fluid coils of a four-foot-long decapitated cobra.

Nothing to be afraid of, Tandy. Thanks to Jacob, it no longer has fangs.

When the elevator door slid open on the second floor, chaos greeted us. At least eight men and women in green jumpsuits were coming and going from open apartments while co-op owners clustered in small groups between the doorways.

I saw the elderly sitcom stars, Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn Berrigan, in their matching striped pj’s. The spectacular trombone player Boris Friedman, wearing tuxedo pants
and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. And the long-divorced multimillionaire Ms. Ernes t Foxwell, draped in a sheer yellow nightgown covered with a short mink coat and wearing ostrich-feather mules. Definitely gape-worthy.

Ms. Foxwell did not look amused. Neither did the opera singer Glorianne Pulaski, who was in aqua chenille and hair curlers, standing in her doorway, crying into her bedazzled iPhone.

Frightened and discommoded rich people can be pretty hilarious, I have to admit. In fact, Hugo cracked up at the sight of Mrs. Pulaski, but no one seemed to notice us. Not that I could blame them. There were venomous snakes loose in the building.

Jacob had said to be back in five minutes. As inclined as I was to follow his rules before, I was even more inclined now that I’d seen his gun—not to mention what he could do with it. So I just wanted to hand off the snake corpse to the proper official, ask several pointed questions about where they were in their investigations, and then get the hell home.

Finally, a man caught a glimpse of me and Hugo and did a double take. Baseball cap. Green jumpsuit. Badge. Snake-catching hook in hand.

“Please step out of the elevator car,” he said. “We’re shutting down the system.”
“Oh my God. Snakes on an elevator,” Hugo said in awe.

“Officer Blum from Pest Control said to find someone to give this to,” I said, holding out the garbage bag. I swear it rustled. It moved.

“You’re Tandy?” the man in a jumpsuit said. “I’m Officer Frank. Let’s see what you’ve got there.” He peeked inside the bag. “Whoa. Who shot this?”

“Our guardian,” I replied. “He’s got a license to carry weapons, of course. So what’s going on?”

The guy eyed me shrewdly. “Why don’t you tell me where you found this snake?”

Oh, so he was going to answer questions with questions, was he? I cleared my throat and put my game face on.

“My brother found it in a file cabinet in an interior room,” I said, adopting a businesslike tone. “I believe he disturbed it.”

Officer Frank’s eyes flicked to Hugo. “You’re lucky to be alive, kid.”

Hugo was too busy staring at Mrs. Pulaski’s hammer-toes in her sequined slippers to reply.

“As to what’s going on, we’ve found three poisonous snakes, counting yours, and no reason to believe we’ve got them all.”

“May I see the other two?” I asked.

“Why?” Officer Frank asked curiously.
“Know thy enemy,” I replied simply.

He frowned as if impressed with my logic. “I’ve got pictures of one of them,” he said, pulling an iPhone out of his pocket. “Here you go.”

The first snake was yellow, with scales standing up around its face. A beautiful eyelash palm pit viper.

“So many dark, warm places in this castle you live in,” Officer Frank mused. “We’re going down to the basement next and will set up some funnel traps. Uh, thanks for the snake, Tandy. And you, young man,” he said to Hugo, “don’t put your hands into dark places. That goes for your feet, too. Check your shoes before you put them on. Okay?”

“I’m never taking these off,” Hugo said, gesturing at his feet.

It was clear that Pest Control had zero control over this snake infestation. There were ninety-three units in the Dakota, an idiosyncratic building with secret rooms, back staircases, tunnels, and mouse holes that were unchanged since the 1880s.

If snakes could hide inside our shoes, there were about ten million lovely little places for them to take up residence inside the walls.

Had someone decided to sic a pack of murderous snakes on the eccentric denizens at the Dakota? Or had
our cobra been placed in 9G on purpose, with the other snakes merely a diversion?

Maybe I’m paranoid, my friend, but still, as you well know, my family has enemies. I couldn’t dismiss the possibility that a deadly poisonous snake might have been planted in my office on purpose. That someone was out to kill me.
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