

# Private

Los Angeles • New York • San Diego • London  
Chicago • Paris • Frankfurt • Tokyo • Rome

# James Patterson

AND

# Maxine Paetro



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON

Copyright © 2010 by James Patterson

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Little, Brown and Company  
Hachette Book Group  
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017  
www.hachettebookgroup.com

First Edition: June 2010

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Patterson, James.

Private / James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-316-09615-7

I. Private investigators—California—Fiction. I. Paetro, Maxine.  
II. Title.

PS3566.A822P75 2010

813'.54—dc22

2009052188

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

RRD-IN

Printed in the United States of America

To Suzie and John, Brendan and Jack



## Prologue

**"YOU'RE DEAD, JACK"**



# One

---

TO THE BEST OF my understandably shaky recollection, the first time I died it went something like this.

Mortar rounds were thumping all around me, releasing what sounded like a shower of razor blades. I was carrying Marine Corporal Danny Young over my shoulder, and I loved this guy. He was the toughest soldier I'd ever fought beside, funny as hell, and best of all, he was *hopeful*—his wife back in West Texas was pregnant with their fourth kid.

Now his blood bubbled down my flight suit, splashing on my boots like water from a drainpipe.

I ran across rocky ground in the dark, and I choked out to Danny, "I've got you; I've got you. Just stay with me, *you hear me?*"

I lowered him to the ground a few yards away from the helicopter, and suddenly there was a concussive explosion,

## James Patterson

as though the ground had blown up around me. I felt a stunning hammer strike to my chest, and that was the end.

*I died.* I passed to the other side. I don't even know how long I was gone.

Del Rio told me later that my heart had stopped.

I just remember swimming up to the light, and the pain, and the awful reek of aviation fuel.

My eyes flashed open and there was Del Rio in my face, his hands pressing down on my chest. He laughed when my eyes opened—and at the same time tears ran down his cheeks. He said, “Jack, you son of a bitch, you're back.”

A dense curtain of oily black smoke rolled over us. Danny Young lay right there beside me, his legs splayed at weird angles, and behind Del Rio was the helicopter, burning bright white, getting ready to blow.

My buddies were still in there. My friends. Guys who had risked their lives for me.

I choked out a few words. “We've got to get them out of there.”

Del Rio tried his best to hold me down, but I used an elbow to swing at his jaw, and connected. He fell back and I got away from him, started running toward the fallen bird just as its magnesium skin caught fire.

There were Marines in there, and I had to get them out.

The fearsome *chunk-a chunk-a chunk* of fifty-caliber machine gun ammo hammered. Ordnance exploded inside the aircraft. Del Rio shouted, “*Get down, asshole. Jack, get the hell down!*”

I felt all of his hundred and ninety pounds as he tackled me to the ground, and the helicopter disappeared in white-

## Private

hot flames. I wasn't dead, but a lot of my friends were. I swear to God, I would have traded myself for them.

I guess that says a lot about me, and I'm not so sure that all of it is good. You'll see, and you can be the judge.

Sit back; it's a long story but a good one.

## Two

IT WAS TWO YEARS after I got back from Afghanistan and the war. I hadn't seen my father in over a year, had no reason or desire to see him again. But when he called, he said he had something important to tell me. He said it was urgent and that it was going to change my life.

My father was a manipulative, lying bastard, but he'd hooked me, so there I was, walking through the forbidding visitors' gate of California State Prison at Corcoran.

Ten minutes later, I took a seat at the Plexiglas partition as he came into the cubicle on the other side and grinned at me, showing his gappy teeth. He had been handsome once; now he looked like Harrison Ford on meth.

He grabbed the phone, and I did the same on my side of the partition.

"You're looking good, Jack. Life must be agreeing with you."

## Private

I said, “You’ve lost weight.”

“The food here is for rats, son.”

My father picked up where he had left off the last time I’d seen him. Telling me how there were no gentleman crooks anymore, just punks. “They kill a clerk at a Stop-N-Go. Turn a robbery into a life sentence—for what? A hundred bucks?”

Listening to him made my head hurt and my back and neck stiffen. He ragged on blacks and Hispanics for being stupid, and here he was, serving life for extortion and murder. Same time, same place as the punks. I felt ashamed for all of the years I’d spent looking up to him, turning myself inside out to get an “Atta boy, Jack” instead of the back of his hand.

“Tell you what, Tom,” I said. “I’ll have a chat with the warden. See if I can get you transferred to the Bel-Air or the Beverly Wilshire.”

He laughed. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

I finally smiled. “You never change.”

He shrugged and grinned back at me. “Why should I, Jack?”

I noticed new tats on my father’s knuckles. My name was on his left hand, my brother’s name on the right. He used to knock us around with those fists, what he called “the old one-two.” I drummed my fingers on the ledge.

“Am I boring you?” he asked.

“Hell, no. I parked my car in front of a hydrant.”

My father laughed again, said, “I look at you, I see myself. When I was an idealist.”

Narcissistic SOB. He still thought he was my idol, which couldn’t have been further from the truth.

## James Patterson

“Jack, let me ask you a serious question. You like working for that useless, pathetic hack Pinkus PI?”

“Prentiss. I’ve learned a lot from him. I’m happy. It’s a job I’m good at.”

“You’re wasting your time, Jack. And I’ve got a better offer.” He made sure he had my attention, then said, “I want you to take over Private.”

I guess he’d gotten to the part that was supposed to change my life.

“Dad. Remember? All that’s left of Private are a lot of file cabinets in a storage unit.”

“You’re going to get a package tomorrow,” my father continued, as if I hadn’t spoken. “It’s a list of all my clients—and the dirt I had on them. There’s also a document putting your name on my bank account in the Caymans,” he said. “Fifteen million dollars, Jack. All yours. Do with it what you will.”

I raised my eyebrows. Private had once done first-class investigation for movie stars, politicians, multimillionaires, even the White House. My dad had charged the maximum for his services. But fifteen *million*? How had he earned that much, and did I really want to know?

“What’s the catch, right?” he said. “Simple. Don’t tell your twin about the money. Anything I ever gave him he snorted or gambled. This is your birthright, Jack. I’m trying to do the right thing for once in my life.”

“Did you hear me say that I’m happy at Prentiss?” I said.

“I wish you could see your face, Jack. Listen to me. Stop being the ‘good twin’ for half a frickin’ second and think this through. There’s no such thing as good money and bad money. It’s all the same. Just a medium of exchange. And this

## Private

is an opportunity, a big one. Fifteen million dollars' worth of opportunity.

“I want Private to be remembered as the best. You're a smart, good-looking kid, and on top of that, you're a frickin' war hero. Bring Private back to life. Do it for me, and more important, do it for yourself. Don't talk yourself out of a really good thing. Make Private the best in the world. You have the money, the talent—and the compassion—so do it.”

A guard put a hand on my dad's shoulder. He hung on to the phone, looked at me with a kind of tenderness I hadn't seen since I was five or six, and said, “Have the life you deserve, Jack. Do great things.” He touched the glass with his palm, then turned away.

A week after my visit to Corcoran, Tom Morgan took a shank to the liver. Three days later, my father was dead.



## Part One

FIVE YEARS LATER,  
AND ALL GOING  
ACCORDING TO PLAN



# Chapter 1

---

PEOPLE TRUST ME with their secrets, and I'm not exactly sure why. It must be something in my face, probably my eyes. Guinevere Scott-Evans had taken a chance and trusted me with her life and career a couple of months back.

Now she gripped my hand as I helped her out of my dark blue Lamborghini. She moved her narrow hips demurely, straightening out the black dress that fit her perfectly. She was gorgeous, an A-list movie star who was also genuinely funny and smart enough to have graduated from Vanderbilt.

I was Guin's date tonight for the Golden Globe Awards, her way of thanking me for tailing her rocker husband, who, it turned out, had been cheating on her with another man.

Guin was grieving, I knew, but she had her game face on for the Globes. She wanted to be seen tonight with a *hunk*—her word—and I could tell she also wanted to feel desirable.

## James Patterson

“This’ll be fun, Jack,” she said, squeezing my fingers. “We’re at a great table. Everybody from Columbia Pictures, plus Matt, of course.”

Guin was up for best supporting actress for a love story she’d made with Matt Damon. I thought she had a chance to win; I certainly hoped so. I liked Guin a lot.

The fans out front of the Beverly Hilton were enjoying the pregame warm-up, calling out Guin’s name as we headed up the rope line, cameras snapping away. A fan pointed her phone at me, asking me if I was somebody.

I laughed. “Are you kidding? I’m just arm candy.”

Guin let go of my hand to embrace Ryan Seacrest, who pulled her into the spotlight. The fans wanted *her*, but she put her arm around my waist and brought me into the shot at her side.

Seacrest went with it, admired the cut of my tux and asked my name. His brow wrinkled as he tried to figure out if he knew me—and then Scarlett Johansson arrived, said “Hi, Jack”—and Guin and I were shooed along the red carpet that ran through the gauntlet of bleachers up to the entrance of the Beverly Hilton.

Wrong time for my cell phone to ring.

“Don’t take it, Jack,” Guin said. “You’re off duty. You’re mine for tonight, okay?” Her smile dimmed, and worry shadowed her beautiful features. “Okay, Jack?”

I glanced at the caller ID. “This’ll just take a second.”

The caller was Andy Cushman, and I couldn’t believe it. Andy was a rock, but the voice on the phone was strained to breaking with tears.

## Private

“Jack. I need you to come to the house. I need you here right now.”

“Andy, this is not a good time. Trust me, it isn't. What's wrong?”

“It's Shelby. *She's dead, Jack.*”

## Chapter 2

DEAD? HOW COULD Shelby be dead? There had to be some mistake. But how could there be?

I was the one who had introduced Shelby to Andy. I was best man at their wedding less than six months ago. I'd had dinner with them last week at Musso and Frank. Andy told me they were going to name their first kid Jack. Not John or Jackson, just Jack.

Had Shelby suffered a heart attack—at her age? Had there been a car accident? Andy hadn't said, but he was devastated. And what hurt Andy hurt me.

I stuffed a wad of bills into the valet's hand, escorted a visibly upset Guin to the ballroom with apologies, and handed her over to Matt Damon. When I got back out to the street, my car was waiting.

I was in shock as I sped toward the Cushmans' home in my over-the-top sports car. The car was a gift from a client

## Private

whose terrible secret I kept. When it wasn't in the shop for repairs, it was a cop magnet.

I slowed as I entered the Bluffs section of Pacific Palisades, the heavily patrolled village of small shops and homes within walking distance of the ocean. Ten minutes later, I braked in Andy's circular driveway.

Dusk was coming on. There were no lights on in the house, and the front door was wide open, the frame splintered.

Was an intruder in the house? I doubted it, but I took my gun out of the glove box before I went in through the open door.

Three years in the pilot's seat of a CH-46 during wartime had sharpened my visual acuity. I was adept at doing vigilant instrument scans, and then, in the next second, checking the ground for movement, dust, smoke, reflections, human outlines, or flashes of light.

As an investigator, I had another practical application for my somewhat unusual ability to pick out anomalies. I could look at a scene and almost instantly see what was out of place: a random speck of blood, a ding on a painted wall, a hair on a shag carpet.

As I entered the Cushmans' house, I scanned the living room for any signs of disturbance. The cushions were neat. Rugs were straight. Books and paintings were all in place.

I called Andy's name and he answered, "Jack? *Jack*. I'm in the bedroom. Please come."

I kept my gun, a custom Kimber .45, drawn as I went through the airy rooms to the master bedroom in its own wing in back.

## James Patterson

I felt for the switches by the doorway and threw on the lights. Andy was sitting on the side of the bed, hunched over, holding his head in bloodstained hands.

*Jesus Christ! What had happened here?*

Unlike the living room, the bedroom looked as though it had been tossed by a tornado. Lamps and picture frames were smashed. The television had been ripped from the wall, but the cord was still plugged in.

Shelby's clothes, shoes, and underwear had been flung haphazardly around the room. *Oh, Jesus. Jesus Christ!*

Shelby was lying naked and very dead, face-up, in the center of the bed.

I tried to take it all in, but it was impossible to comprehend. Shelby had been shot through the forehead. From where her blood had pooled on the pale satin sheets, it looked like she'd taken a second shot in the chest.

Shock made my knees weak. I fought my impulse to go to Andy, to go to *Shelby*. I couldn't, mustn't do that. Stepping foot into that room would contaminate the crime scene.

So I called out to my friend, "Andy. What happened here?"

Andy looked up at me, his round face pasty white, his eyes bloodshot, his wire glasses askew. His face and hands were bloody. His voice was tremulous when he said, "Someone killed Shelby. Shot her just like that. You've got to find out who did this, Jack. You've got to find the bastard who killed Shelby."

With that, my best friend broke down and cried like a little boy. The tough thing—I'd seen Andy cry as a little boy too.

## Chapter 3

---

I FELT THE floor shifting under me, but I knew Andy was counting on me to think straight for both of us. Having a clear head in an emergency, that was supposed to be my calling card. I was Jack Morgan, right?

I told Andy to stay put, made my way back out to the car, and returned with an MD 80, the best camera ever made for shooting crime scenes. It had night vision, GPS, and spoke in a dozen languages—should I ever need to be told I'd left my lens cap on in Farsi or Mandarin.

I snapped off a dozen shots from the bedroom doorway, captured every detail I could think to cover.

While I took the photos, I tried to imagine what could have gone on here during the actual murder.

Apart from the blood on the bed and on Shelby, there was no other obvious trace around: no spray or prints on the walls, or drag marks or drips on the floor. She had almost

## James Patterson

definitely been killed in her bed. I pictured Shelby cowering against the headboard as the intruder busted up the room. He'd forced her to lie still, hadn't he? Then he shot her twice—in the chest and forehead. She had bled profusely from the terrible wounds, and then she had died.

Whatever the intruder's twisted motive, it clearly couldn't have been robbery. Shelby was still wearing her engagement ring, and an even bigger diamond was hanging from a chain around her neck. Her Hermès handbag was on the dresser, clipped shut.

So if this wasn't a burglary, what was it?

A thought occurred to me, the same one a homicide detective would have. Had Andy killed his wife? Was that why he had called me here? Because I was probably the best person in LA to handle this, to make it go away.

I talked calmly to my friend, telling him how sorry I was and how shocked. Then I asked him to leave Shelby where she was and come with me.

"We have to talk this through, Andy. We need to do it right now."

He came to the doorway, moaned, and sagged against me.

I held Andy up as I guided him to a chair in the living room. I took a seat on the sofa, separating myself from Andy on purpose. The next ten minutes or so were going to be bad—for both of us.

I asked the easy questions first. "Did you call nine one one?"

"I—I didn't want the cops here until I called you. No, I didn't call the police."

## Private

“Andy, do you own a gun? Do you have a gun in the house?”

He shook his head. “No. And I never have. Guns scare the crap out of me. You know that.”

“Okay. Good. Did you notice—was anything taken?”

“The safe is in my study. I came in through the garage. I’d been at the office, and I put my briefcase in the study before I went into the bedroom. . . . Everything looked okay. I don’t know, Jack. I wasn’t thinking about a robbery. I can’t concentrate right now. . . .”

I peppered Andy with more questions, and he answered them while looking at me as though I were a lifeboat and he a man overboard in a turbulent sea. He said he’d last seen Shelby that morning when he left for work, that he’d spoken to her from the car an hour ago. She’d sounded great.

“This is a tough question,” I said. “Was she seeing anyone? Or were you?”

Andy looked at me as if I’d lost my mind and said, “Me, Jack? No. Her? She loved me. There was no reason to do that. We were both in love, totally in love. I never thought I could feel the way I felt about Shelby. We were trying to have a baby.”

I took a controlled breath, then I pushed on. “Has anyone threatened your life, or Shelby’s?”

“C’mon, I’m basically a glorified bean counter, Jack. And who’d want to kill Shelby? She’s a sweetie. Everyone loved her. . . .”

Apparently not.

I had to ask him. “You have to tell me the truth, Andy. Did you have anything to do with this?”

## James Patterson

In about five seconds, Andy's expression went from grief to shock to fury.

"You're asking me *that*? You *know* how much I loved her. I'm telling you now and I never want to have to say it again. *I didn't kill her, Jack.* And I don't know who did. I can't imagine this happening. I can't, Jack."

Night was falling. I reached up and turned on a light. Andy was looking at me as though I'd punched him in the face.

Christ, I was his best friend.

"I believe you," I said. "The cops are going to grill you, though. Do you understand? The husband is always suspect number one."

He nodded his head and started crying again.

I got up and went into the foyer. I called Chief of Police Michael Fescoc at his home. Fescoc and I had become friends in the past couple of years. He was depressed due to his crap job, but he was a good man, and I trusted him.

I gave Fescoc the rundown, told him that Andy and I had been childhood friends and frat brothers at Brown and that I could vouch for his character a hundred percent.

I stayed with Andy as the cops and the CSU arrived. I heard him tell a detective that Shelby didn't have an enemy in the world.

And yet, whoever killed her had made a point.

This was not only an execution.

It was personal.

## Chapter 4

---

JUSTINE SMITH was an elegant, serious-minded, academically brilliant brunette in her midthirties. She was a shrink by trade, a forensic profiler, and Jack Morgan's number two at Private. Clients trusted her almost as much as they trusted Jack. They also adored her; everyone did.

That evening, she was having dinner with LA's district attorney, Bobby Petino. Bobby was her best friend and her lover. He was a transplanted New Yorker, a connoisseur of Italian food. He had surprised Justine by picking her up as she was leaving work and driving her to one of their favorite places, Giorgio Baldi's in Santa Monica.

The restaurant was cozy, casual, family owned; the candlelit tables were close together, comfortably intimate. Several of the customers in the dining room were A-list celebrities, but Bobby's eyes were on Justine and no one else. Not even Johnny Depp and Denzel Washington, when they

## James Patterson

walked in laughing and joking as though life were just a big fun movie for them.

Bobby touched his wineglass to hers as Giorgio brought the steaming homemade pasta to the table. *There was nobody here but the two of them.*

“You know what?” Justine said. “I just love a surprise that puts a truly awful day into reverse. This is perfect. Thank you.”

“All work, no play makes Justine a sad girl,” he said. “And that just won’t do.”

“It’s official. My awful day is in the rearview mirror. I’ve been helping out on a nasty case out of our San Diego office, but it’s done for the day. Yahoo.”

Justine smiled, but Bobby ducked her gaze a little. As if there was something he didn’t want to tell her. They were usually good at reading each other’s minds, but right now Justine didn’t have a clue.

“What is it? Please. Don’t make me guess.”

“I got a call from the chief of police. I was going to tell you *after* dinner, I swear. Another schoolgirl was killed. They just found her.”

Justine’s mind skidded and spun out of control. She knocked over her wineglass and didn’t move to stop the flow. Her glow was gone, her thoughts shooting back to very bad days in the recent past.

Morgue shots flooded her mind: teenage girls who’d been murdered over the past two years. The poor girls had all been in high school, lived throughout Los Angeles, but most had been from the neighborhoods of East LA. The last girl had been found dead just a month ago.

## Private

There had been so much police and media attention on that girl's death, Justine had almost come to believe that the killer had retreated or even quit. Maybe he was in jail. Or maybe he had died. Wouldn't that be nice?

But now Bobby had shattered that fantasy, and at least one other she had had about tonight and the possibilities it held for the two of them.

## Chapter 5

---

“I HAVE TO call Jack right now,” Justine said to Bobby. “I have to. Damn it. *Damn it!*”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I already called him. Your ride will be here in twenty minutes. You’re going to be up most of the night, Justine. Have some pasta. Please, honey? You’re going to thank me for making you eat.”

A waiter put a clean cloth on the table and refilled Justine’s wineglass, but she was no longer aware of her surroundings. She picked up her fork and stabbed a tortellini to satisfy Bobby and so she wouldn’t have to speak while she mentally reviewed the case.

All eleven of the girls had been killed by different methods. That was *highly* unusual. The murder weapons had been removed from the crime scenes as had the victims’ handbags and backpacks. The killer had always taken trophies: a hank

## Private

of hair, a contact lens, a pair of panties, a class ring. What law enforcement people called “murderabilia.”

Then, in a bizarre and audacious twist, the killer had claimed credit for one of the murders in an untraceable e-mail to the mayor.

He wrote that he had buried his trophies from the most recent murder in a planter outside an office building on the corner of Sunset and Doheny. He signed the note “Steemcleena,” a name that revealed nothing, then or now.

It took time for the e-mail to work its way through the system, and more time before it was taken seriously.

But three days after that encrypted e-mail was sent, the planter was dug up. A plastic bag was recovered. Inside were items taken from the latest victim. There was no DNA on the objects, no prints, no trace; the police were left with nothing but the humiliation of the killer’s last laugh.

Justine had volunteered to consult with the LAPD, and they invited her in. She remembered now how seeing the girl’s personal effects made her physically ill. The killer had handled them, buffed them up, and sent them back to the police with a meaningless signature and a dare.

Then Justine had come up with a plan. To make it work, she got Jack Morgan and Bobby Petino together.

And in a controversial arrangement that had outraged the homicide division of the LAPD, the district attorney’s office approved Private Investigations to work the case as a public service — pro bono.

And now another girl was dead.

Bobby was answering his cell phone, trying to get her attention. “Justine. *Justine*. Your ride is here.”

## Chapter 6

---

*DAMN IT!* JUSTINE gripped the armrest of the sleek black, ridiculously fast Mercedes S65 as Emilio Cruz, her “ride” and fellow investigator at Private, took a hard right turn onto Hyperion Avenue in the Silver Lake area of East LA.

The four-lane road was lined with strip malls and fast-food restaurants of every kind, all within easy walking distance of the John Marshall High School, which two of the murdered girls had attended.

“What do you know about the victim?” Justine finally asked Emilio, glancing his way.

Emilio Cruz didn’t even have to try to look good. He bunched his black hair back with a rubber band, put his ancient leather jacket over anything, and generally looked like a movie star just waiting to break out.

Cruz’s voice was as soft as butter. “Her name is Connie

## Private

Yu. She was a bright light. In the eleventh grade, only sixteen years old.”

“She’s so smart,” said Justine, “why was she walking on this street alone?”

“These girls, Justine, are being killed in my neighborhood. They’re too tough to act scared.”

“Sorry, Emilio. That’s my frustration talking. I feel desperate and even guilty. Why can’t I get a decent handle on this fucker?”

“Tell me about it. I’m here with you, right? *Pro bono*. I hate pro bono.”

Cruz hated to lose too, really hated it. Maybe even more than Jack did. He had once been a ranked prizefighter, then a cop, then a special investigator for the DA’s office under Bobby Petino. Three years later, Bobby Petino introduced him to Jack, who hired him as a Private investigator. Justine was in awe of Cruz’s bulldog-like tenacity when it came to getting to the truth. This and his natural charm made Cruz a gifted investigator. Only the gifted made it at Private.

“What else, if anything, do we know about Connie Yu?” Justine asked.

“Hey, listen, I apologize, Justine. You’re right. The girl was smart, so what’s wrong with this fucked-up picture? Especially after you went to all these schools to warn the kids. You shouldn’t feel guilty—you’re doing more than anybody.”

Cruz slowed the powerful car and pulled up to the curb between cruisers blocking off an alley a couple of blocks from the Hyperion Bridge.

## James Patterson

Justine got out, shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, and headed toward the crime scene tape that cordoned off the alley. Ahead she saw the LAPD's lead investigator on the Schoolgirl case, Lieutenant Nora Cronin.

Cronin was feisty, a smart cop with maybe too much attitude. She had a crazy crush on Cruz and glowered at Justine. Her entire body, all two hundred pounds, radiated with just how much she hated Private's involvement in her case.

"The DA sent us," Justine said, biting off the line.

"Uh-huh. Your boyfriend calls, you go to a murder scene. That's kinky."

Justine walked away from the pissy lieutenant, signed the log for herself and for Cruz. Then she ducked under the tape and called out to the medical examiner, Dr. Madeleine Calder, a good friend.

"Hey, Madeleine. We need to take a look at the victim."

"Howya doin', Justine? Cruz?" said Calder. The ME was small boned and petite, but strong enough to flip the body of a homicide victim when necessary. She stepped aside, giving Justine a full-on view of the girl lying between bags of trash and the cruddy back door of a Taco Bell restaurant.

Justine stooped beside Connie Yu, saw the dark pool of blood around the girl's head. And also a gold stud glinting from the girl's left ear.

Madeleine Calder said, "Justine, check this out."

There was no earring in the victim's right ear.

There wasn't even an ear.

Dr. Calder said, "The ear's gone, Justine. Restaurant Dumpsters have been tossed. The crew has been up and

## Private

down the street looking for it. Nowhere to be found. I guess the perp will tell us where it is in a couple of days.”

Agonized screams at the police cordon caught Justine’s attention. She looked up at Cruz. “Connie Yu’s family has arrived. Let’s get out of here, Emilio. We can’t help those poor people. Not here, anyway.”

## Chapter 7

---

JUSTINE HAD GONE to the morgue with the girl's body, and it was past two a.m. when she called Private's chief criminalist, Seymour Kloppenberg, nicknamed Dr. Science—Sci for short—and said she needed him right away.

Sci told his girlfriend, Kit-Kat, he had to go in to the Private offices, made a snack for his rather unusual pet, Trixie, and left the apartment with his helmet under one arm.

His lovingly restored World War II courier bike with sidecar was in the garage under Sci's apartment building. He kick-started the motor and floored it up the ramp onto Hauser, then took Sixth all the way to Private's offices in downtown LA.

Flashing his ID at security, he took the elevator to the basement level, where his lab was located.

Justine was already waiting for him.

"This is about schoolgirl number twelve?" he asked,

## Private

unlocking his door, immediately switching on music—the theme from *Sweeney Todd*.

“Yes,” Justine said. “And it’s enough to turn your stomach. Well, maybe not yours.”

Sci gave her a jokey fanged-monster face. Then he escorted Justine through the negative-pressure chamber into the lab, his “playground.”

Accredited by the International Organization for Standardization, Sci’s multimillion-dollar lab was the heart of Private’s operations, as well as a profit center. It was used by several West Coast law enforcement agencies, since it was better equipped and faster than anything at the LAPD or the FBI.

Sci’s crew of twelve technicians worked in several areas of forensic science: analysis, serology, forensic identification, and print and latent-print identification. Sci’s latest pride and joy was the new holographic-manipulation technology that he used to tease apart cells with a microlaser under a high-powered microscope.

His people had been the first to test real-time use of a satellite, a method called teleforensics. Using a tiny camera, Private’s investigators could bounce streaming images from a crime scene straight back to the lab, saving time and resources, preventing scene contamination.

Justine followed Sci across the vast underground space to his hub of an office and personal control center. Horror movie posters adorned the walls: *Shaun of the Dead*, *Carrie*, *Hostel*, *Zombieland*.

Sci dragged up a stool for Justine, then dropped into his chair and swiveled around like a little kid in an ice cream store.

## James Patterson

“Sorry to take you away from Kit-Kat,” Justine said, smiling, “but I need you to look at what we’ve got *before* I turn it over to the LAPD in the morning.”

She brought Sci up to date on the details of the crime as she knew them: the location, the mutilation, the cause of death.

She handed him Connie Yu’s backpack. “Found not too far from the crime scene by Emilio. The sonofabitch finally made a mistake . . . unless he *wanted* us to find this.”

“You’ve got the victim’s blood and tissue?” Sci asked.

“In the bag, along with her personal items. You’ll see.”

Sci opened the bag. Looked at the articles inside. He’d already started thinking about running the blood, deconstructing the wallet, frisking the phone. If there was anything there, he would have it in time for the staff meeting at nine.

“I’m on it,” he said, and turned up the *Sweeney Todd* soundtrack to an almost deafening level.

## Chapter 8

---

JUSTINE WALKED ACROSS the vast clipped lawn with its stunning canyon view—a very pretty picture in pearly light and sharp shadow *at 5:15 in the goddamn morning*.

She stripped down to her bra and panties, then quietly opened the gate to the tennis court.

She picked a racket off the bench and practiced her serve, powering balls over the net, taking out most of her frustration on the lime green hairballs.

Ten minutes into her workout she did a double take. She spun around and saw Bobby's silhouetted form standing at the fence, his fingers laced into the chain links.

"You okay, Justine? It's, like, five in the morning. What's going on, sweetie?"

"I'm working off my aggression so I don't act out," she said to Bobby, hauling back, grunting as she tossed up another ball and smacked it hard.

## James Patterson

“Put the racket down and come over here. Please.”

Justine did, walking through the gate into Bobby’s arms. He held her for a good long few minutes, the feel of his strong hands on her back almost putting her into a trance.

Then Bobby said, “What would you like? Hot tub, breakfast, or bed?”

“All three—in that order.”

Bobby took off his robe, draped it around Justine’s shoulders, and walked with her toward the lanai. “Did you find anything interesting?”

“Apart from this murder being another freakin’ *tragedy*?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing I can tell you. Not yet.”

“Let me put it this way, then, Justine. Have you got a new theory? Anything at all? Where are you on the case?”

Justine walked up the teak steps to the hot tub, dropped the robe and her underthings. Then she took Bobby’s hand as she stepped into the steaming water.

She sat down on the seat and leaned back as his arm went around her. She closed her eyes and exhaled, letting the water do its work.

“You must have a theory,” Bobby said.

“Here it is. The killer has multiple personality disorder.” Justine sighed. “And every one of his personalities is psychopathic.”

## Chapter 9

---

MY DREAMS WEREN'T exactly identical, but they were all variations on the same disturbing theme. There was an explosion: sometimes a house blew up, or a car, or a helicopter. I was always carrying someone away from the fire toward safety: Danny Young, or Rick Del Rio, or my father, or my twin brother—or maybe the person in my arms was myself.

*I never made it out of the fire zone alive. Not once.*

My cell phone vibrating on the night table woke me from this morning's nightmare, as it had done almost daily for about three years.

Already, I was swamped with dread, that sickening falling sensation that hits you before you even know why.

And then my brain caught up with my gut, and I knew if I didn't pick up the phone, it would ring again and again until I answered.

This was my real-life nightmare.

## James Patterson

I opened the clamshell, put it to my ear.

“You’re *dead*,” he said.

The voice came through an electronic filter. I called it “he,” but it could have been a she or even an it. Sometimes he called in the morning: a wake-up call. Sometimes he called in the middle of the night, or he might skip a day just to keep me off balance, which he, she, or it did.

Every time my cell phone rang, I was shocked by a fresh jolt of anxiety. When it was my hate caller, I sometimes asked, “What the fuck do you want?” Sometimes I tried reason and said calmly, “Just tell me what you want.”

This morning when the voice said “You’re dead,” I said “*Not yet.*”

I snapped the phone closed.

I’d narrowed the list of my enemies to about a hundred, maybe a hundred and ten.

Whoever my caller was, he reached me from pay phones. That’s right. *Pay phones*. They’re still in hotel lobbies and train stations and on just about every block in every city. Each year or so, I’d change my phone number, but I couldn’t keep my cell phone number a secret. My staff, my friends, my clients at Private, all had to be able to reach me. Especially the clients. I was always there for them.

I wondered again who my death threat caller was.

Did I know him? Was he in my inner circle? Or was he one of the crooks or deadbeats I’d brought down in my career as a PI?

I wondered if the threat was even *real*.

Was he watching me, tailing me, planning to kill me someday? Or was he just laughing his ass off at my expense?

## Private

Of course I had called the cops, but they'd lost interest years ago. After all, I'd never been physically attacked, never even seen my tormentor.

And then my thoughts went to Shelby Cushman again.

I imagined the horror of her last moments and pressed my palms to my eyes. I wanted to remember Shelby alive. I'd once dated her. I used to spend late nights in grungy little improv theaters where she did stand-up, then leave with Shelby by the back door. We broke up because I was me—and Shelby was getting closer to forty. She wanted a family and kids. And so did Andy. To hear them tell it, they were in love from their first date.

Now Shelby was dead and Andy was bereft and alone, and soon to be a murder suspect in the eyes of the LAPD.

I sat up in bed. *What the hell was this? Where was I?*

The sheets were flowered; there was a fluffy rug beside the bed, and the walls were painted a leafy green. Okay, I got it. I was fine.

I was at Colleen Molloy's house.

It was a good place to be.

## Chapter 10

---

I WALKED OUT of the bedroom. Colleen was sitting at the kitchen table, her back to me, her head bent over her laptop, studying for her citizenship exam. She'd already drained her mug of tea down to the dregs. *Yep, this was a good place to be.*

I moved her long, dark, very lovely braid aside and kissed the nape of her neck. She turned, closed her morning glory blue eyes, and lifted her face. I kissed her again. I loved kissing Colleen Molloy, never tired of it.

But did I love Colleen? Truly love her? Sometimes I was sure that I did. But then I wondered if I could love anyone, really love them. Or was I too self-centered, too bruised and battered by my father?

She said, "You could get another hour's beauty sleep, boy-o."

I took in the Irish lilt in her voice, the black Irish coloring, and how she smelled of rosewater.

## Private

"I'm going to be late for my power coffee with Chief Fescoe." I gave Colleen another kiss and took her mug to the sink. I rinsed it out with hot water and poured her a fresh "cuppa" from the teapot. I hadn't completely put the murder out of my mind. But I needed to.

"Watch that someone doesn't knock seven kinds of lightning out of you," she said.

"And why would they do that?"

"Because a' you standing there as naked as a miley goat, telling me you're leaving to go to work, work, work."

I laughed, and Colleen finally came into my arms, put her small hands on my ass. I wanted to try and go with it.

"I'm going to bar the door," she said, giving my cheeks a squeeze. "Seriously, Jack."

She'd gotten to me already. How did she do that? Zero to rock hard in five seconds.

"You're a witch," I said, pulling her robe down from her shoulders. I hoisted her into my arms so that her legs wrapped around my waist, and I pressed her back against the refrigerator door. She squealed at the touch of the cold metal.

Colleen had once told me a joke: "What's Irish foreplay?"

I gave her the punch line now. "Brace yourself, darlin'."

She sucked in her breath, the two of us panting as the limited contents of the refrigerator rattled and danced to our beat.

"Sorry I made you late," she said when we were done. Her sweet, toothy grin said she wasn't sorry at all.

I smacked her bottom. "As long as I didn't make *you* late."

I left her standing under a hot shower, rosy cheeked

## James Patterson

and humming an old rock song she loved, “Come on, Eileen.”

I set her burglar alarm, locked the door behind me, and ran down the stairs. Getting seven kinds of lightning knocked out of me hadn't felt too bad, actually. But now I needed to work, work, work.

# Chapter 11

---

I STOPPED AT police headquarters on my way to Private. So far, there were no charges against Andy Cushman. I was already behind schedule, so I hurried to the office.

The “war room” at Private is octagonal in shape and features a round ink-black lacquered table, the only item there that once belonged to my father and the *old* Private. Padded swivel chairs are clustered around the table and jumbo flat-screens are mounted wall to wall.

Everyone was waiting for me when I walked in twenty minutes late. I was met with a stunned hush, pretty much what I expected.

“Sorry about Shelby,” said Del Rio. “She was such a sweetheart. I just can’t fucking believe it, Jack. None of us can.”

Condolences were echoed by the others at the table as Colleen Molloy came in with a Red Bull for me and my call sheet. I’m not sure what it says about me, but apart from

## James Patterson

Andy, the people I cared about most in the world were all there. They included half a dozen of my investigators, plus our criminalist, Sci, and a fiftyish computer genius, Maureen Roth, whom everybody called Mo-bot.

“Need me for anything else?” Colleen asked. She’d been my assistant for two years, which was how we met, and then it got more complicated than that, a lot more complicated.

“No, thanks, Molloy. I’m good.”

I scanned the call sheet and saw that Andy had phoned twice since I’d left LAPD headquarters a half hour ago. Andy was worried, and for good reason. The cops had only one suspect, and he was it.

I booted up my laptop and punched in the photos I’d taken of the Cushman crime scene. They filled the screens wrapping around the conference room. “I took these last night.”

There were extreme close-ups of the splintered door frame, the trashed bedroom, Shelby’s wounds, and even a shot of Andy sobbing into his bloody hands that was worthy of a newspaper front page.

“I’ve got to tell you all something,” I said to the group. “Shelby and I were once close. This was before she and Andy met. So, whatever you hear out there, Shelby was my friend, a good one.”

The room stayed very somber and silent. Justine stared at me and through me. I knew she was trying to fit Shelby into the time sequence of my checkered past. She had good reason to.

“Take a look at these photos,” I went on. “I’ve studied the images myself, but I’m not seeing much but the obvious so far.”

## Private

Justine spoke up. “I assume *not*, but was anything taken from the house?”

“Only Shelby’s life.”

“Were either of them dealing?” Del Rio asked. “Sorry, Jack. The questions have to be asked. You know that.”

I told him no. The Cushmans didn’t use drugs and they certainly didn’t sell. I knew that Andy made enough money as a hedge fund manager to keep him and Shelby very comfortable. I was certain of that much. Andy ran some of my money, and his investing had helped me open offices all around the world, including New York and, most recently, our shop in San Diego.

“Okay, assuming Shelby’s jewelry is real, the room was trashed for effect,” Justine said. “The shot to the breasts would appear to be the mark of a sexual sadist. The other shot says ‘execution.’ So why was Shelby a target?”

“Maybe the whole point was to set Andy up as the killer,” Emilio Cruz said.

I nodded. “If that’s what the killer was trying to do, it worked.”

I told the group what Chief Fescue had told me. The LAPD’s working theory was that Shelby’s death was a crime of passion, that Andy shot her and then called me as a cover story—a pretty good one, I had to admit.

“You’re sure he didn’t do it?” Emilio asked.

“I’m sure. I know some of you have no sympathy for Andy, but he was in love with Shelby. And now he’s our client. LAPD says there’s no match to the slugs the ME removed from Shelby’s body, and before the killer left the premises he polished the surfaces to a high shine.”

## James Patterson

I asked Sci to reach out to the LAPD crime lab and report back on anything he could get out of them. I told Cruz to take another investigator with him to the Cushman house, canvass the neighbors, see if anything had been overlooked by the police. We were a lot better than they were, and we didn't have to follow their procedures and rules. Plus, I could put more people on the case.

I turned to Rick Del Rio, my blood brother. After he came back from Afghanistan, Rick had made some bad decisions. He paid for them with four years at Chino—which made him very valuable to Private. While doing his stretch, Del Rio had become a student of criminal law, first to help himself, but then he became a jailhouse lawyer, made friends in low places.

“Tap your sources,” I said. “I’m pretty sure the shooter knew the Cushmans’ habits. For one thing, he kicked in the door *knowing* that Shelby never set the alarm. He probably knew when Andy was due home too. And he wiped that place clean.

“As of right now, finding Shelby Cushman’s killer is our most important case,” I said. “Everyone’s on it. That’s all I’ve got at the moment.”

I stood up and closed the lid on my laptop.

“Hang on, Jack,” Justine said. “I’ve got news on Schoolgirl.”

## Chapter 12

---

JUSTINE KNOWS ME better than anyone, including Del Rio and even my brother. She and I lived together for two years, and after we broke up, we stayed close. Confidants, best friends. I've told Justine about my daily hate calls. She's the only one who knows. *You're dead, Jack.*

Now she reached under her chair, pulled out a blue knapsack, and put it on the conference table.

I asked, "Is that Connie Yu's bag?"

Justine nodded and said, "I'm handing it over to LAPD as soon as we're done with it here. We can do more with it than they can. We don't know if the killer made a mistake or if he's baiting us."

Then she described the young victim and the crime scene in excruciating detail, getting more worked up with every word. She stopped speaking as her throat tightened. She

## James Patterson

shook her head and swallowed hard, apologized before going on.

But on she went.

It killed me to see how much this case hurt her, and for that reason alone, I wanted to nail the killer almost as badly as she did. We all did.

“Jack, to repeat, whoever this psycho-killer is, he’s not the first to use ‘different means,’ but it’s rare. Most killers of this type have a pattern and stick with it. The pattern describes the killer’s mood and maybe their personality too. These murders are all different. That’s wacked out, and it’s something I haven’t seen before.

“Shooting someone is remote. Setting fire is a sexual crime. Strangling is personal. We’ve got those three methods and more.

“I don’t see this killer evolving, and I still can’t picture him. He doesn’t fit any profile I know. The only good news,” she continued, “is that Cruz found this sad little bag.”

“It was lying on the riverbank in the shadows under the bridge,” said Cruz. “Maybe the killer panicked for some reason and threw it away. Maybe there’s a witness we haven’t heard about yet.”

Dr. Sci picked up where Cruz left off. He was wearing a red Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops, one of his standard outfits.

“I printed every fricking item in the girl’s bag,” Sci said. “There were smudges on Connie’s wallet and a clear partial print, but it didn’t ring any bells in the database. That print could belong to anyone, a friend of Connie’s or her killer, but

## Private

whoever left it for us has never been arrested, or taught school, or been in law enforcement or the military.”

“Too bad,” said Cruz. “I was hoping for something better than that.”

Sci went on. “All is not lost. The cell phone is the jackpot, my friends. Mo-bot came in at four a.m.,” he said, “and she pulled the data.”

“Mo, you found something?” Justine asked.

“There were a slew of text messages,” said Maureen Roth, aka Mo-bot, computer geek extraordinaire, self-appointed mom to the Private family. She was fifty-something but didn’t look it, with her tattoos, ultrahip clothes, spiky hair—and then there were *the bifocals*, which looked like they ought to belong to somebody’s grandmother in Boca Raton, Florida.

“I found hundreds of messages, all traceable to IP addresses and cell phones except for the last one, which came from a prepaid phone. I know. What a shock. But still, you’ll all want to see this.”

Mo-bot inserted a flash drive into a laptop and poked some keys. Messages scrolled up on the center wall screen.

I read the text message at the top of the list, time dated yesterday afternoon.

*connie, it's linda. my mom took away my cell. i'm in massive trouble and i have to talk to you. meet me behind the taco bell? pleeeeee. don't tell anyone!*

Mo said, “Let’s assume that Connie gets the message that her friend Linda is in trouble. She has no reason to be cautious so far. She goes to meet Linda. Just like that, the trap is sprung.”

“So the text message was a fake? A lure?”

## James Patterson

“Exactly. Anyone could have known the name of one of Connie’s friends, bought a no-name phone, and lured her to her death. But twelve girls have been killed now. They went to different schools, and none of the victims knew one another. That’s why I find it probable, even a certainty, that each dead girl was tricked by a fake text. It’s simple, even ingenious.”

Justine said, “So a hacker gets into the girl’s phone, figures out who she trusts, and takes on a friend’s identity by texting from a no-name phone.”

Sci said, “That’s what I’m thinking. A ghost in the machine. But that still doesn’t lead us to the killer. We hit a wall after that.”

## Chapter 13

---

JUSTINE GOT TO her feet, quickly changed places with Mo-bot, and put her fingers on the computer keyboard. “*I don’t believe in ghosts,*” she said. “If the Schoolgirl psycho walks and breathes, he’s got fingerprints and hair and skin cells. The more times he kills, the more likely he is to make a mistake.”

She hit a couple of keys and projected a summary of the Schoolgirl case up on the flat-screens.

The time line placed the murders at roughly every two months for the past two years, except that recently the pace was accelerating. Next to the time line was a map of East LA with electronic flags representing the victims’ locations.

The faces of the victims took up another screen.

The girls were of all descriptions. Light. Dark. Some pretty. Some fairly plain. Scholars. Athletes. Some thin. Some not. All high school girls. All unreasonably, tragically dead.

## James Patterson

“We should put out the word about these no-name phone calls,” said Mo. “Talk to the school principals again. Do a TV campaign about fake text messages with personal info.”

“Saying we’re right about this,” Justine countered, “as soon as we broadcast a warning about texts from unlisted phones, the killer is going to change his pattern. And then we’ll be nowhere again. He might even accelerate the murders further. We know he likes publicity.”

“About what you said, Justine,” Sci said in his usual nasal monotone. “The different profiles. How could a man who would set a girl on fire do it only once? How could that same person shoot someone from fifty yards away?”

“What are you thinking, Sci?”

“What if it’s more than one piece of shit? What if it’s more than one killer?”

## Chapter 14

---

RUDOLPH CROCKER was hiding out in a toilet stall in the eighth-floor men's room at Wilshire Pacific Partners, a private equity firm, when his cell phone vibrated. He had been fantasizing about a new temp, Carmen Rodriguez, who had a perfect rack, beautiful brown eyes, and was practically brain-dead. He was thinking about asking her out on a date, preferably an all-nighter.

He fished the phone out of his jacket pocket, saw that the call was being forwarded from his direct line. It was Franklin Dale, senior partner, one of "the ancients." Crocker answered, and Dale invited him to have a drink after work.

Crocker had been an equities analyst for over a year. He'd done his work diligently while at the same time keeping his head down. His concept was to be one of those bright young men with a huge future in number crunching, a dull and

## James Patterson

steady sort of worker who kept the portfolio safe, the profits flowing, and his light hidden safely under a bushel.

Now he had to have a drink with pesky Franklin Dale.

At seven p.m., Crocker locked his office door and met Dale at the elevator bank. They took the car downstairs together, and Crocker wondered if maybe the old fuck was gay and going to make a move on him.

Two drinks and a bowl of cashews later, Crocker had been told that he was doing extremely well, and that dinosaur Franklin Dale was highly impressed with his work. Dale said that he thought Crocker was an outlier, a guy with hidden talents who would be rewarded the longer he stayed at this fine old firm.

As if that would bake his fucking cake. As if he cared what Franklin Dale thought about him or his work.

By the time Crocker got home, it was half past nine. The rest of the night was his, and this was going to be great.

He dressed for his run, and ten minutes later he was jogging around the Marina del Rey, his mind on the recent outing when his group had taken Connie Yu down for the count.

Sweating and panting, Crocker slowed outside one of the slips in the marina. He put his hands on his knees and caught his breath.

When he was sure he was alone, he took a pint-sized ziplock bag out of his pocket and began to bury it under a heavy coil of rope.

When he was done, he calmly finished his run. He came through the entrance to his apartment building, waved to the doorman, and went upstairs.

## Private

After his shower he took a prepaid phone from the charger base.

He texted a message to LA's mayor, Thomas Hefferon, telling him where he could find Connie Yu's ear.

He signed it "Steemcleena."

## Chapter 15

---

THREE DAYS HAD passed since Shelby Cushman had been murdered. Still no charges had been filed, and I couldn't get a peep one way or the other out of the DA's office.

I had breakfast with Andy in his office, a corner in a smart new office building on Avenue of the Stars.

Andy told his assistant not to put through any calls. Then he eased shut his office door. I could barely recognize his drawn face. There were bags under his eyes, and he'd obviously stopped shaving.

"I'm not sleeping," he said. "In case you missed that, Jack."

He gulped down his coffee as he unlocked his file cabinets, pulled folders, and explained to me what a very successful hedge fund manager did to keep his edge in Los Angeles.

"These people out here, actors, agents, studio heads, law-

## Private

yers to the stars,” he said, waving his arm so it took in the whole of Hollywood, “they make tens of millions. They don’t know what to do with it, so they give it to me. I invest it for them. I get a percentage of whatever I invest for my clients,” he said. “Five percent, usually.”

“And if the investments tank?” I said, thinking of the housing meltdown, the credit crunch, money swirling down the drain, taking with it the well-heeled and struggling alike.

“People hold it against you if you lose their money, even if it’s not your fault.”

“So you’ve got disgruntled clients.”

Andy sighed.

“You want the truth, Jack?”

“No, for Christ’s sake. Please lie to me, Andy. The more you lie, the more likely it is that you’re going to go to trial. I know the DA. He’s going to sic one of his young sharks on you, and they’re going to tear you into great bloody chunks—”

“Stop,” he said.

“If someone wants to hurt you, I have to know about it. C’mon, Andy. You have to tell me everything. This is Jack.”

“I was skimming,” Andy said. It came out just like that— with no preface or warning. “I’m no Bernie Madoff, so don’t look at me like that. I’d charge a fee, then I’d take a little of the principal off the top and ride the investment for myself. I was careful. But shit happens, and you can’t let the clients know, of course.”

“I’m listening.”

“My investments dove in the first wave. You remember

## James Patterson

when Lehman went under? I doubled down, tried to recoup my losses, and lost even more. A couple of my clients got burned to the ground.”

“Give me the files, Andy. I want to see your biggest losers. I want to know exactly who they are. No more secrets.”

## Chapter 16

---

WHEN A DOOR says *Private*, you want to know what's on the other side.

When an envelope says *Private*, you immediately want to open it.

I entered *Private* through the reception area, waved to Joanie behind the desk, and climbed the grand spiral staircase that wraps around the open core of the atrium. The staircase always gives me a lift. Reminds me of the cross section of a nautilus shell.

I was on my way into my office on the fifth floor when Colleen stopped me.

“You’ve got company,” she said. “Lots of it. Suits. Expensive ones.”

I went to the threshold and saw three men lounging in my seating area, a corner furnished with upholstered armchairs, a deep blue sofa, and a chunk of polished sequoia I use as a

## James Patterson

coffee table. *This was where people came with their secrets, and where those secrets were always kept in confidence.*

Two of my unscheduled visitors were smoking like tobacco company CEOs. Colleen said, “The gentlemen said they didn’t want to be seen in reception. What a surprise.”

The third man turned to face us, and with a start, I realized I was looking at my uncle Fred. Fred Kreutzer is my mom’s brother, the one who always told me to call him any time I needed an ear. He taught Tommy and me to play football when we were kids and encouraged me to play in high school and then college.

In short, Uncle Fred was the stand-in good dad for the man who’d sired me. Fred had gone further in football than I had—much further. He was a general partner of the Oakland Raiders.

The big florid-faced man stood, gave me a crushing bear hug, then introduced me to his associates, men I now recognized.

Evan Newman was as refined as Fred Kreutzer was rough. His suit was hand tailored. His hair had been sprayed into place, and his fingernails were as gleaming as his handmade shoes. He owned the San Francisco 49ers.

The third man was David Dix, a legendary entrepreneur, the kind of guy they write about in business school. Dix had made a killing in Detroit during the eighties, got out of auto parts before the meltdown in ’08, and bought the Minnesota Vikings. I remembered something I’d read about him, that his apparent happiness masked his fundamental heartlessness. Sounded like an epitaph to me.

Evan Newman stood up and came toward me with a con-

## Private

vincing smile and outstretched hand. “Sorry to barge in like this,” he said. “Fred said you would see us.”

“We have a problem,” Uncle Fred said. “It’s urgent, Jack. A screaming five-alarm emergency, actually.”

“We’d like to be wrong,” said Dix. “In fact, I have to say, if we’re right, this could cripple the game of professional football.”

Dix beckoned to me to sit. “We’ve got money,” he said. “You’ve got the best people for this. Sit down so we can lay out a nightmare for you.”

## Chapter 17

---

EVAN NEWMAN BRUSHED invisible ashes off his trousers and said, “We have reason to suspect a gambling fix in our league, Jack, something that could be as bad for football as the Black Sox scandal was for baseball.”

I was bothered by this intrusion into my office, but also intrigued. Andy’s inventory of former clients was calling to me from my briefcase, Justine needed me on the Schoolgirl murders, and I had a conference call meeting with our London office in twenty minutes—a scandal in the House of Lords no one knew about yet.

I looked at my watch and said, “Give me the highlights. Please. I’ll help if I can.”

Fred spoke up. “Jack, we think this thing may have started about two years ago—in a wildcard play-off game. On paper, winning should have been no problem for the Giants. Their opponent, Carolina, was good, but a couple of defensive

## Private

backs were out. Their quarterback had a hairline fracture in the index finger on his throwing hand. This game shouldn't have been close. But you may remember this, Tommy—”

“Jack.”

“Jack, I'm sorry. *Jesus*. Anyway, in the third quarter, Cartwright's touchdown run, into a hole you could've driven a Brinks truck through, was called back. The ref said it was a holding penalty, and in the fourth quarter, as New York was trying for the kick that would've sent the game into overtime, there was another penalty that took them out of field goal range.”

Fred went on, his face getting redder. “New York lost by three. At the time, the calls just looked bad. There was the usual talk in the sports press that eventually faded as the play-offs moved ahead.”

“Okay, Jack.” Dix spoke next. “Fast-forward to the third game of last season between the Vikings and the Cowboys. Different set of circumstances but basically the same scenario.”

My uncle jumped in again. He wanted to tell the story play-by-play. “This time the Vikings get a forty-yard pass called back at the end of the second quarter that would've sent them into the locker room ahead by seventeen points.”

Fred was gesticulating angrily, telling me that another questionable holding penalty wiped the pass off the board. “As they lined up at the end of the fourth quarter for what would've been the winning field goal, the Vikings get called for an illegal shift which nobody, *nobody* saw except the referee.

“Again it takes them out of field goal range, the game goes into overtime, and they lose.”

## James Patterson

I saw where these stories were going, of course. Bad calls happen in football and people scream about the officials and then they get over it. For Fred Kreutzer, Evan Newman, and David Dix to come to me, it meant they had more to go on than alleged bad calls in a couple of games.

Newman said, “We’ve looked at the tapes ad nauseam, Jack, including last Sunday’s game in San Francisco. We see a pattern. All told, eleven games stink badly over two and a half years. Nine of the losing teams had winning records and seven of them made the play-offs.”

My uncle said, “A lot of people lost a lot of money on these games. They’re starting to wonder if there’s something funny going on.”

“Why come to me?” I asked. “Why not take this to the commissioner first?”

“We don’t have any proof,” said Dix. “And frankly, Jack, if something *did* happen, we don’t want the commissioner and the press *and the public* to hear about it. *Ever.*”

## Chapter 18

---

EMILIO CRUZ CAME through my office door first, and Del Rio arrived maybe five minutes after the owners had left. I waved them both into chairs. “We’ve been tapped by three NFL team owners,” I said, “and they could be representing a dozen more. One of them is Fred Kreutzer. Fred is my mother’s brother.”

Cruz lifted his eyebrows. “Fred Kreutzer is your uncle?”

“He is. He and some other owners think that games are being fixed. They see a pattern of long-odds underdogs winning too often, and based on questionable calls.”

“That’s nuts.” Cruz frowned. “You can’t cheat at football. You can’t predict a game-changing play, and even if you could, there are cameras on every move. Every second is under a microscope.”

“If that turns out to be the case, we’ve got happy clients,” I

## James Patterson

said, “and nice paychecks. We’ve been guaranteed double our rate for fast, thorough, and very confidential work.”

“They’re saying the players are rigging the games?” Del Rio asked.

Del Rio is my age, but the years he spent at Chino aged his face and shattered his faith in people. I think the sanctity of football is one of the few things he still believes in.

“Fred says that they didn’t find any player infractions, just calls that may have been crooked. Or else the refs were seeing optical illusions.

“Before we make any decisions on this, let’s talk about the Cushmans. I saw Andy this morning,” I said. “The press is all over him. He hasn’t been charged, and he wants to get out of town. I told him to check in to a hotel and not tell anyone but me where he’s staying.”

“He’s got good reason to worry,” said Del Rio. “Whoever killed Shelby got in and out of the house with the skill of a Beverly Hills proctologist. I’m looking into contract killers. I’ve got a couple of leads. We’re going to break this one, Jack.”

I asked Cruz and Del Rio if they could work both cases, and they said they could. That was the usual response at Private—we hired the best, at very high pay, and they expected long days and challenging cases.

“I want you to do thorough background checks on Shelby *and* Andy,” I said.

“What are we looking for that you don’t already know, Jack?”

“The answer to one simple question: Why would anyone kill Shelby Cushman?”

## Private

“No problem,” said Del Rio. “Two cases for the price of three? I can go with that.” We all laughed, then Cruz and Del Rio left and went to work.

I had been alone in my office for about sixty seconds when Colleen stepped in and closed the door.

“Your eleven o’clocks are here, Jack. I don’t like the looks a’ them.”

“No? They’re just lawyers,” I said.

Colleen grinned. “Just lawyers. Sure thing. Smirky lawyers. Sweaty lawyers.”

A minute later, she showed the two men in. I knew them by reputation.

Their names were Ferrara and Reilly, and they represented Ray Noccia, head of the Noccia crime family.

## Chapter 19

---

I SHOOK HANDS with the men coming through the door and offered them seats.

Attorney Ed Ferrara was wearing a dark three-piece suit. His associate, John Reilly, wore black jeans and a black cashmere sweater. Reilly searched my office with his eyes, checking for hidden cameras in the bookshelves. *I don't think he spotted them.*

Ferrara said, "It's nice to meet you, Jack. You come highly recommended by several sources."

"Always good to hear," I said. "How can I help you?"

Reilly dug into a pocket and pulled out a photograph of a very pretty blond woman in her early twenties. I thought I recognized her, Elizabeth something, an actress. I'd seen her on Craig Ferguson once or twice.

"This is a picture of Beth Anderson. She's a film actress," Ferrara said, "and she's also Mr. Noccia's good friend."

## Private

Ray Noccia was at least seventy years old. After waiting for two generations, he had just taken over the top job from his uncle Antonio, deceased. And he was “good friends” with twenty-something Beth Anderson.

Reilly was saying, “Beth hasn’t been seen in a week. She doesn’t return Mr. Noccia’s calls. He wants to make sure nothing untoward happened to her.”

“Sounds like a job for LAPD,” I said. “You should give them a shout. I highly recommend them.”

Ferrara smiled and said, “We want to keep this quiet. We don’t want publicity that could hurt Beth’s career. Which brings us to you, Jack. We’d like a quote with a ceiling.”

I wondered if Beth Anderson had left town or if she was dead. Either way, I didn’t want Noccia’s business at Private.

“Sorry, I don’t do quotes,” I said. “I don’t do ceilings either. And I don’t do business with the Mob.”

There was a moment of thick silence, then Reilly and Ferrara got to their feet as one.

“You’re doing Andy Cushman,” said Ferrara. “And if I’m any judge of degenerate womanizers, you’re doing the little piece of Killarney sitting outside your office too.”

Reilly paused on the threshold to launch his parting shot. “And let’s not forget your father was doing life for murder when he passed. You’ve got a lot of nerve, Jack-off.”

I guess I did, but that was part of the reason Private was doing so well.

## Chapter 20

---

AT THREE THAT afternoon, Jason Pilsner was in his office at Howard Public Relations, waiting for the advisory board meeting to start, when he got a text message that catapulted his mood.

The message was from Steemcleena himself, posting particulars of the next “night on the town.” The notice addressed him by his screen name, “Scylla,” and said, “Get ready. You’re IT.”

Holy crap, it was actually happening, his baptism by fire. He’d been thinking about this night for weeks. In fact, he’d thought of little else. He’d originally met “Morbid” on *Commandos of Doom*, an online real-time war game. As allies, they had fought dozens of successful battles over the past two years.

But when Morbid recruited him into a much more select group of gamers, it had floored him. His introduction to

## Private

Steemcleena had been virtual, and he'd had to wait until Morbid locked it up. Now Steemcleena was on board. And soon Jason as Scylla would step out from behind the computer screen and see some real-life action.

Pilsner worked like a robot for the next three hours. He didn't flinch when the head bitch blamed him for screwing up a proposal he hadn't even compiled. Screw her. At six, he put on his jacket and left for the day.

He drove straight to a hardware store in West Hollywood.

He walked the narrow stocked-to-the-ceiling aisles and picked out a six-foot-long extension cord, a roll of duct tape, and a pair of cotton jersey gloves. Nothing very unusual. He paid cash for his purchases, keeping his head down so the security camera over the cash register didn't catch his face.

He was so pumped that his hands were sweating.

The big night was only three days away. And he was "it." On Saturday he was going to kill a girl somewhere in LA.

## Chapter 21

---

*THIS WASN'T REALLY sleep, was it?* It was more like going to war every night and getting bombed back into reality in the morning.

In my dream this time, I ran across the burning battlefield, Colleen in my arms, blood splashing on my shoes. My heart hammered against my rib cage as she said, “Save me, Jack. I’m the mother of your children.”

The thumping explosion of mortar rounds threw me to the ground. My eyes flew open, and for an instant I had a strong sense that I was still on the battlefield on my last day in Afghanistan.

I remembered most of it, but some crucial recollection was missing, a gap in my memory from the time the helicopter went down and the moment when I died.

I had pushed the missing memory so far into my subconscious, it was subterranean.

## Private

I had to dig it up. Had to find out the truth about that day.

If I could retrieve the memory, maybe I could finally sleep.

I was still grasping at wisps of dream and memory when my cell phone vibrated on the nightstand.

I looked at the caller ID, read “out of area.”

I left the phone on the table, sprang out of bed, and flipped on the house security monitors.

I scrutinized the six monitors and saw nothing out of place, so I left them and did an eyeball check of the grounds. Cars streamed by on the Pacific Coast Highway beyond my front gate. There are high fences between my house and my neighbors’ on both sides. The beach was empty at the back of my house.

I was alone.

The phone finally stopped ringing. Light streamed through the glass, and the Pacific crashed outside my bedroom window.

This was the house I’d bought with Justine.

Talk about memories that can haunt you. I still saw Justine in this room, her dark hair fanned out on the white pillow, looking at me with love in her eyes. And you know what? I looked back at her the same way.

I showered and dressed in chinos and a blue oxford shirt, and then the phone started ringing again. I took the damned thing to the dining table I used as a desk and opened it.

“You’re *dead*,” said the mechanical voice.

“Not *yet*,” I said.

## James Patterson

I made very strong coffee, then spent the next hour and a half making phone calls, confirming appointments.

By the time I met Del Rio at Santa Monica Airport, it was almost ten.

Time to fly.

## Chapter 22

---

WE BOARDED a Cessna Skyhawk SP, a spiffy and reliable single-engine aircraft, and Del Rio took his place beside me. Just like old times.

I looked at Rick. He looked back, our thoughts on the same track: Afghanistan, our friends who'd been killed in the helicopter, the fact that Del Rio had jump-started my heart and I owed him my life.

I wondered if he could tell me more about what happened that last day in Gardez. I'd gotten a medal for carrying Danny Young out of that burning helicopter. But I couldn't ignore the nagging dreams. Was my mind doing a head-fake: protecting me from an unbearable memory and at the same time prodding me to remember?

"Rick, that last day in Gardez?"

"The helicopter? *Why*, Jack?"

"Tell me about it again."

## James Patterson

“I’ve told you everything I can remember.”

“It still isn’t clear for me. Something is missing, something I’m forgetting.”

Del Rio sighed. “We were moving troops to Kandahar. It was night. You were the section leader and I was copilot. We couldn’t see some raghead with his ground-to-air missile in the back of a truck. No one saw him. We took a hit to the belly. Nobody’s fault, Jack.

“You brought the Phrog down,” Del Rio said. “The bird was burning from the inside out—remember that? I got out the side door, and you went through the back. Guys from the dash two were running all over the field. I started looking for you. I found you with Danny Young in your arms. Always the hero, Jack, always the stand-up guy. Then the mortar hit.”

“I see snapshots, not the whole movie.”

“*You were dead*, that’s why. I pounded on your chest until you came back. That’s all I’ve got for you.”

The pictures just didn’t flow in consecutive order and wouldn’t make a whole. I saw the crash. I remembered running with Danny Young over my shoulder. I woke up.

Something was missing.

What didn’t I know? What else had happened on that battlefield?

I was still staring at Del Rio. He grinned at me. “Sweetheart. You gonna tell me you love me?”

“I do, asshole. I do love you.”

Del Rio laughed like hell and pulled his sunglasses down from the top of his cap. I busied myself with the checklist.

I got clearance from the tower, advanced the throttle, and taxied the Cessna down the runway. Gave it some right rud-

## Private

der to keep it rolling along the center line. When the airspeed indicator read sixty, I came back a touch on the yoke and the plane gently lifted, practically flew itself into the blue and sunny skies over Los Angeles.

Smooth as cream.

For the next hundred minutes I flew the plane as if it were a part of my body. Flying is procedure, procedure, procedure, and I knew it all by heart. I listened to the radio chatter in my headset, and it erased my tormenting thoughts.

I forgot the dream and lost myself in the wonder of flight.

## Chapter 23

---

JUST AFTER NOON, we landed at Metropolitan Airport on San Francisco Bay.

We rented a car and hit some heavy traffic on the Harbor Bay Parkway, arriving at the Oakland Raiders' practice field half an hour late for our appointment with Fred.

I gave my card to the security guard at the main gate, and Del Rio and I were waved through to the natural-grass practice field where professional football players were running pass patterns and pursuit drills. On the far end, two place-kickers took turns booting field goal tries from the forty-yard line.

Fred was standing on the sideline at midfield and came over to greet us. I introduced Del Rio, saying that he would be working with me on the case.

My uncle waved in a few of the Raiders' high-profile

## Private

players—Brancusi, Lipscomb, and tailback Muhammed Ruggins—guys who were earning millions a year. Jeez, were they big. We talked about the upcoming game with Seattle and then turned our attention to the Raiders' talented quarterback Jermayne Jarvis, who was out there taking snaps.

I said, "I can't get over his timing on those square outs. It's like he knows precisely when the receiver will turn."

Fred said, "You did good at Brown, Jack. You could throw it on a rope. You're better off that you didn't try and go pro, though."

I couldn't have. I didn't have the size for it, or probably the arm. Plus the Ivy League isn't exactly the Big Ten or the SEC.

I saw a light go on behind Fred's eyes. "So, Jack, maybe you and Rick want to toss the ball around with some of my guys?"

I protested, said, "Are you crazy? I thought you cared about me." But Del Rio looked like a kid who'd just won a video store sweepstakes.

He and I went out to the field and took turns running ten-yard crossing patterns as Jermayne Jarvis fired strikes at us.

Having warmed up, I found myself getting into it. But as I reached for one of Jarvis's precision darts, I ran into Del Rio, knocking us both down. Fred trotted over, put his hands on his knees, and while laughing at me, said, "That was beautiful, Jack. Poetry in motion. Now I've got something to show you that's not so funny."

We walked off the field through a long concrete hallway and a series of locked doors until we got to Fred's office. He

## James Patterson

opened a locked cabinet and took out a banker's box full of what he said were DVDs of the past twenty-eight months of NFL games.

"I flagged those eleven games that raised real questions. Check them out, and let's compare notes."

Then he told me where I should start looking for the crooks who were threatening to shut down professional football.

"I've never asked you for anything before, Jack, but this time I'm asking. I need your help."

## Chapter 24

---

IT WAS DARK when I got back to my house. A waxing moon spotlighted the roof, which was just visible over the high steel-reinforced gate.

I was pulling the Lamborghini into my garage when I saw headlights in the rearview mirror.

The lights followed right on my tail, flashing, someone signaling to me. I braked, turned off the engine, and got out. I saw a black sedan easing into my driveway. Who the hell was it?

I waited by the side of my car until a front door of the sedan opened. The driver got out. He unbuttoned his jacket as he came striding toward me. “Mr. Jack Morgan?”

When I said that I was, he said, “Mr. Noccia wants to speak to you. It’s important.”

“I don’t want to talk to anybody right now,” I said without

## James Patterson

pause. "Please be careful backing out. You don't want to get T-boned on the highway."

"You're sure that's what you want me to tell him?"

I was pretty sure. I stood my ground as the driver went back to the Town Car. I waited for it to leave, but instead the passenger-side door opened. A second man got out, and he opened the rear door for a third man. And then the three of them closed the distance between us.

I recognized Ray Noccia.

He was wearing a gray sport jacket and had gray hair, gray skin, and a nose that cast a shadow on his cheek. Reality hit me. A Mafia don, a made man who had ordered dozens of executions, was standing in my driveway. It was nighttime. Nobody had seen him come. Nobody would see him leave.

He stuck out his hand. "Ray Noccia," he said. "Good to meet you."

I kept my hand in my jacket until he put his down. A dark look passed over his face, as though I'd slapped him or pissed on his shoes.

Then Noccia smiled. "Your father and I did some business," he said. "That's why I sent my attorneys to talk with you. Apparently they offended you in some way. I owe you an apology, and I make my apologies in person."

"No apology needed," I said.

There was no humor in his smile.

"Good. So you'll look for Beth for me? I understand the rules. No quote. No ceiling. I'll pay your rate plus a bonus when you find her. That's because you're the best."

It was time that I ended this, now and for the future.

## Private

“Your men know where they buried her. Save your money. Drill down on them.”

There was a leaden pause. Noccia didn't take his eyes away from mine, and when he spoke, his words were almost drowned out by the rush of traffic and the Pacific surf.

“You're much better educated than your father, but you're not half as smart,” said Noccia. “And look how he ended up.” He turned and walked back to his car.

I had probably gone beyond the realm of bravado, but I didn't care. Ray Noccia had already said the worst thing he could to me — that he and my father had worked together.

My hand was shaking when I put my key in the lock of the front door. I hoped I'd never see or hear from Ray Noccia again.

Fat chance.