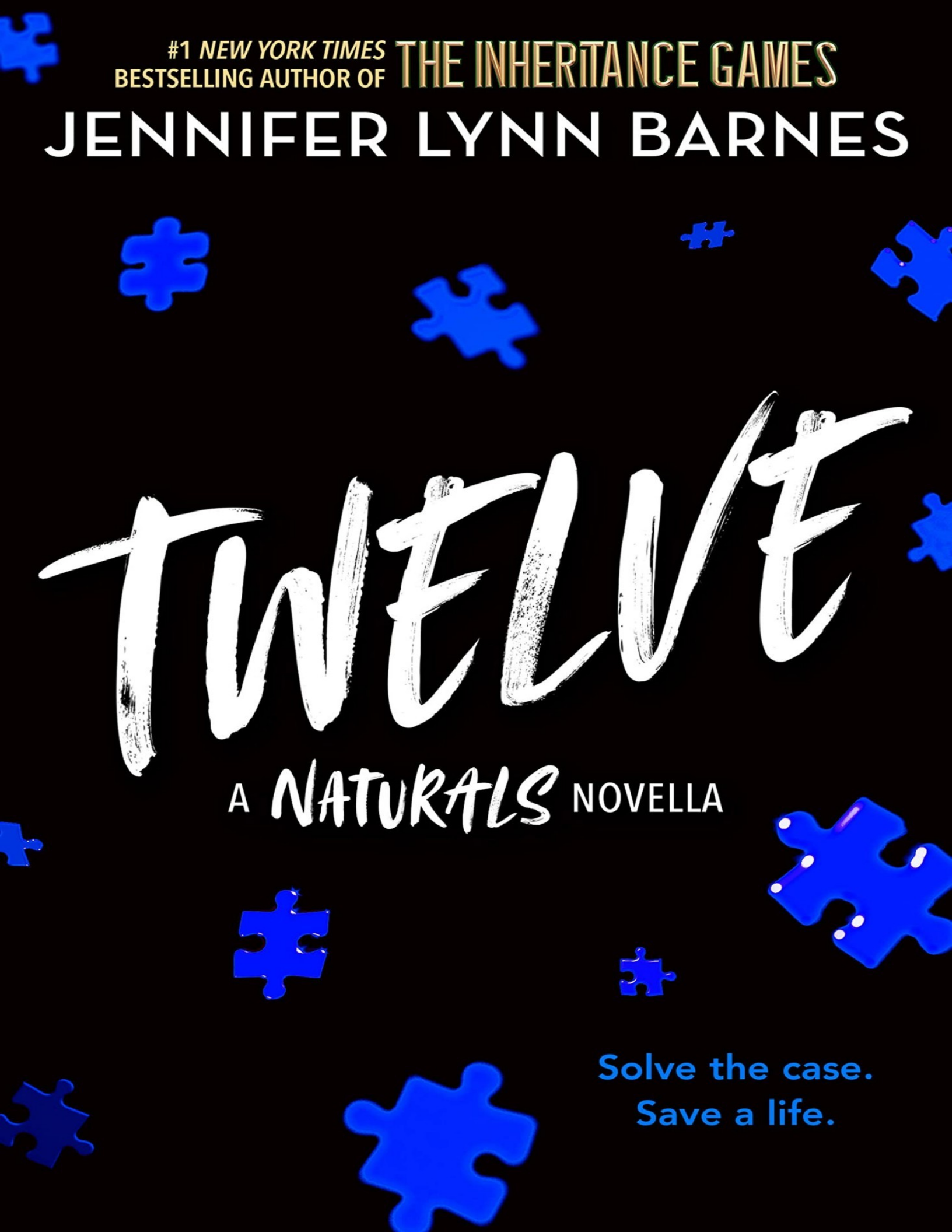




#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

THE INHERITANCE GAMES

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

TWELVE

A *NATURALS* NOVELLA

Solve the case.
Save a life.

TWELVE

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

A **NATURALS** NOVELLA

HYPERION
Los Angeles New York

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Cover design by Jamie Alloy

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First Edition, November 2017

ISBN 978-1-368-02130-2

Visit www.DisneyBooks.com

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Preview of Jennifer Lynn Barnes' new series

About the Author

YOU

There are names for what you do.

They cycle through your head as you stare at her body. The angle of her broken neck. The blood staining the ground beneath. There's something about the moment after impact that sticks with you.

Has always stuck with you.

It shouldn't be beautiful, but it is. You shouldn't linger, but you do. You press your index and middle fingers to your lips.

There are names for what you do. But only one matters.

Release.

CHAPTER 1

“**B**est, Worst, Most Improbable.” Sloane paused half of a half of a beat.

“Go!”

Based on her energy level—and the fact that she’d spent the first thirty-two seconds of this phone call verbally calculating the incidence of poodle-related deaths in the southwestern United States—I inferred that Michael and Dean had failed to intercept Sloane’s coffee delivery that morning.

At the ripe old age of twenty-three, my former roommate still couldn’t hold her caffeine.

“Somebody start,” she said cheerfully, “or I will be forced to tell you the twelve most exciting wallaby statistics I know.”

This was Week 10 for my fellow Naturals at the FBI Academy. *Not that I’m counting.* Sometime around Week 7, a competition had developed between the NATs—New Agent Trainees—and the NIATs—New Intelligence Analyst Trainees—to see who could sneak “Sloane the Statistical Genius” the most coffee.

I was under the impression the NIATs were winning.

“You first, Colorado.” Michael Townsend sounded exactly the same on speakerphone as he did in person.

Dean sounded different. “Start with the best part of your week.” My boyfriend’s Southern accent had mellowed over the years, but in the past two months, I’d heard his drawl creeping back.

Quantico was home once. I fell back on an old habit, profiling Dean when I couldn’t read the expression on his face. *It’s also too close to your father’s old hunting grounds for comfort.*

“Best part of my week.” I focused on the task at hand. Phone calls didn’t last long these days, and I needed this as much or more than Dean did. “I found a pair of brothers in Texas.”

“Cover your ears, Redding,” Michael quipped. “Cassie is going to tell us more about these brothers.” I could practically *hear* him winking on the other end of the line. “Are they more handsome than Dean? Less broody? More favorable to incorporating colors into their wardrobe?”

I rolled my eyes. Dean and I had been together since we were teenagers, and Michael had taken great joy in singing the same song nearly the whole time.

“One of the brothers fits our criteria,” I continued, pointedly ignoring him. “There’s definitely evidence of Natural-level ability there.”

In the past five years, we’d succeeded at identifying a handful of Naturals, but most had been adults. I’d sent a dozen or more to the FBI Academy, but only three had come to Colorado to be trained the way that Michael, Dean, Sloane, Lia, and I had been.

Off the books.

“The worst thing about my week,” I went on, leaning my back against the wall, “is that we’re still not sure *which* of the brothers is the Natural.”

Every ability exists along a spectrum. That was how I’d start the conversation if we identified which brother had raised the flags in our system—and if my final analysis suggested that I could bring the kid in without doing him more harm than good. *Every spectrum has two extremes: one with very low levels of that ability and one with very high. Naturals are one in a billion. I should know.*

I was a Natural profiler.

“Are we playing Best, Worst, Most Improbable?” Lia Zhang, civilian FBI consultant, long-term thorn in my side, Natural, and—against all odds—one of my closest confidantes, appeared in the kitchen of our Colorado house.

Or, more specifically, our base of operations.

Lia plucked my cell phone from my hand, and set it to speaker. “I’m guessing Cassie told you guys about the boys in Texas.”

“Best part of her week,” Sloane confirmed. “And the worst.”

Lia arched an eyebrow at me. She was our resident deception detector, a Natural at picking out lies *and* telling them.

“Care to try again?” she asked me.

The best part of my week really had been the development in Texas. *But the worst...*

“I’m having the dreams again.” I should have hated Lia for making me admit that, but what was the point? Like me, Dean was a profiler. Michael was a Natural at reading emotions. Even if I hadn’t said anything, they would have clued into the fact that something was up.

Eventually.

“You can call me, you know,” Dean said on the other end of the phone line. “Any time.”

I *did* know that, but I wasn’t a teenager anymore. It had been five years since I’d been captured by the Masters. Five years since my mother’s death. As much as I knew about the ins and outs of the human mind, I couldn’t help wanting my own to work differently.

I could deal with being wounded. I didn’t like feeling scarred.

“Most Improbable is next!” Sloane interjected brightly. People were harder for her to understand than numbers, but I was fairly certain she knew that I needed the distraction.

“The most improbable part of my week...” I allowed myself to be distracted and felt a grin nudging the edges of my lips upward. “Laurel made a friend.”

My sister was nine years old. She’d spent the first four years of her life being raised by a cult of serial killers. To say that she was *different* would have been an understatement. Friendship didn’t come easily to her. Neither did “not creeping people out.”

“Her new friend,” I added, “has a pony.”

The idea of my morbid, introspective, too-quiet little sister with a perky, pony-riding best friend was almost unfathomable—and such a relief that I

could physically feel the muscles in my stomach relaxing when I pictured the way Laurel had *almost* smiled after delivering the news in an utter deadpan.

“Did you know there’s an ongoing debate about what constitutes a pony?” Sloane couldn’t help herself, in part because of the caffeine and in part because she was Sloane. “Depending on who you believe, the maximum qualifying height varies between one-hundred-and-forty-two centimeters and one-hundred-and-fifty centimeters, which is also the height of one-point-four-four very tall wallabies.”

There was a single beat of silence.

“The guys fall down on coffee-interception duty again?” Lia asked me.

I nodded.

“As much as I love the criticism strongly implied in that question,” Michael cut in, “I’ll completely ignore it and go next. Best part of my week: I annoyed six out of seven of our instructors. Worst part of my week: the seventh is proving a deceptively hard nut to crack. Most improbable...” He paused. “Lia doesn’t hate me this week.”

The term *on-again, off-again* had been invented for a reason. Michael and Lia were that reason.

“Best part of my week: hating Michael.” Lia shot a sly smile at the phone. “Given that all of our communications are currently of the long-distance variety, expressing my distaste for his person was far more emotionally gratifying than I’d expected.”

I stifled a snort.

“Worst,” Lia proceeded, “the Naturals program has been assigned a new FBI liaison. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s breaking in a new special agent.”

That was part of the reason that Michael, Dean, and Sloane had gone to Quantico. Once we’d hit eighteen, the five of us had been classified as “civilian consultants.” But to work Bureau cases, we needed a Bureau team.

This was the first year any of us were old enough to attend the Academy.

“Most improbably, however,” Lia continued, rounding out her trio, “our new liaison is Celine.”

Celine Delacroix was Michael's half sister, just enough older that she'd already made it through new agent training. That made her Special Agent Delacroix now.

"Speaking of Celine..." Lia trailed off meaningfully. "Sloane, perhaps you'd like to go next?"

Sloane had never been one for teenage crushes, but she and Celine shared *something*. And whatever it was—lately, it had gotten more intense.

Celine had just gotten back from Quantico.

"I can't share the best part of my week or the most improbable part," Sloane said. "Due to the fact that they are both classified."

"Classified by the Bureau, or classified by Celine?" I asked.

There was a long, suspicious pause.

"The worst part of my week," Sloane replied brightly, "was blowing up Hogan's Alley. But in my defense, a person cannot, by definition, defuse a bomb unless it's operational to begin with."

And that, I thought, is why the FBI Academy might not survive the Naturals.

"Hogan's Alley," Lia repeated. "As in the fake town the FBI uses for training purposes?"

Sloane was quiet for a second or two. "I only blew up seventeen percent of it."

That seemed like as good a time for a subject change as any. "Your turn, Dean."

I imagined the way he would look in an FBI Academy dorm room. He'd be sitting on the end of the bed—hospital corners, if he was the one who'd made it. Getting inside his head was a matter of instinct as much as training.

You're looking at the phone and thinking about me.

"This." Dean had always been a person of few words. It took the others a moment to catch on, so I translated.

"The best part of your week," I said. "It's this."

Being separated was tough on us—all of us. Their training schedules didn't allow for much downtime, let alone regular visitation. Knowing it was

temporary—measured in weeks, like an elongated summer camp—made it easier, but only just.

I closed my eyes briefly and pictured Dean again. *You're looking away from the phone now, down at your own hands, thinking of mine.*

"I'm not going to tell the two of you to get a room," Michael announced, "because that is geographically impossible. So instead, I will suggest, quite delicately, that the two of you get a *metaphorical* room."

Dean remained unruffled. After years of exposure, he was pretty much Michael-immune. "I don't think Townsend would like it if I said the worst part of my week is not being there to wake you up from the dreams, Cassie."

There had been a time when I'd been the one who'd woken Dean up from memory-ridden nightmares, instead of the reverse.

"Come now, Redding," Michael enunciated, "the worst part of your week was *clearly* losing a bet and being forced to carry a man-purse to training activities for forty-eight hours." He paused dramatically. "Some of our classmates call him Agent Man-Purse now."

"You're the only one who calls me Agent Man-Purse."

"So far."

"Most Improbable?" I asked Dean. Sloane was the one who'd invented this game, and that was her favorite question.

Dean took his time with a reply. "Townsend, hand me the phone."

The sound of scuffling was audible in the background, but Dean must have come out on top, because a few seconds later, his voice came through with no background noise. "You're not on speaker anymore, Cass."

I glanced at Lia. She gave an elaborate roll of her dark brown eyes, but handed over my phone. I took it off speaker and held it to my ear.

"What was the most improbable part of your week?" I asked again. My voice was low, but not low enough to keep Lia from hearing the question.

There was a long pause on Dean's end of the line. *You're leaving the room. You're closing the door. You lean your back against the wall. Are your eyes closed or open?*

“The most improbable part of my week”—Dean echoed my words, as if somehow, that could close the distance between Colorado and Virginia—“is the fact that my appointment with the Bureau psychologist wasn’t the worst.”

The FBI director had pulled strings to get my friends into the Academy. Their participation in the Naturals program was Need To Know, but their general backgrounds were not. Given the information that was out there on Dean—on Dean’s serial killer *father*—even with the director’s personal recommendation, the FBI Academy’s admissions panel had required Dean *Redding* to jump through a handful of extra hoops—the kind of hoops designed to make sure he was psychologically intact.

“I’m glad to hear your session wasn’t torture,” I said. Dean wasn’t much of a sharer—not with anyone but me.

Then again, these days, I wasn’t much of a sharer, either.

“Cassie...” Dean let the undertone in his voice say what he wouldn’t put into words.

You want to tell me that I should have come with you to the Academy. You want to ask if my past—and the hoops they’d make me jump through—is why I did not.

“I stayed here for Laurel.” That was my story, and I was sticking to it. “She’s fine with me leaving on short trips, but four months? I have no idea what that would do to her.” This was a conversation we’d had before. He probably knew my next words as well or better than I did. “Besides, we don’t all need to be agents—or analysts. I’m happy to stay a civilian consultant if the agents I’m consulting for are the three of you.”

“I know,” Dean murmured.

“The program is here,” I continued. “Somebody needs to run it.”

Or, at least, someone would need to if the brothers in Texas panned out. If my analysis said the Naturals program would be for them—or *one* of them, anyway—what it had been for the five of us.

A sanctuary.

An opportunity.

A home.

That was the real reason I'd recruited so few young Naturals since we'd taken over. The Naturals program was designed to provide training and experience to gifted individuals whose brains were still developing—adolescents. But after everything I'd been through as a result of working with the FBI, I couldn't and wouldn't bring any kid here unless I thought they would be better off with us than in the life they were leaving behind.

Given that this was an FBI think tank devoted to using gifted teenagers to profile and catch killers?

Better was a very relative term.

Before I could say any of that out loud, a new call came in. When I saw the caller ID, I glanced back at Lia.

"Don't mind me," she said lightly. "I'm just taking note of your half of this private conversation so that I can mock and/or cross-examine you later."

I gave her a look. "Briggs is calling."

Dean heard me. "Call me later?"

"Will do." I hit a button on the phone, and as the new call picked up, I felt Dean's absence on the other end of the line like a physical thing.

Ten weeks down, ten weeks to go.

"Cassie?" FBI Director Tanner Briggs was closer to family than friend. He was the one who'd founded this program. He'd recruited me when I was seventeen years old.

He was also my boss.

"I have a case in Maine."

I waited for the details to come.

What I got was: "It has to be you."

CHAPTER 2

“**M**ackenzie McBride.” I said the name out loud. It had been years since

I’d so much as thought it, but in the time it had taken to get the assignment from Briggs, grab my go-bag, and get to the plane, it had been playing in my mind on repeat.

Little Mackenzie.

Celine stuck her head into the cockpit to let the pilot know we were ready to go, then took a seat opposite Lia and me. “Who wants to read me in?”

Special Agent Delacroix did more than live up to the title. She embodied it. It was hard to connect her to the poor little rich girl she’d been when we’d first made her acquaintance, but even in a suit, her tone businesslike, I could still see shades of the girl that Celine had been. She was an artist, evident in the calluses on her fingers and the bright print she wore beneath her steel-gray jacket. I gave it fifty-fifty odds that she’d designed the pattern on the silk shirt herself. Her expression was alert—controlled, but with a hint of adrenaline.

She still moved like a dancer or a fighter—or both.

“Mackenzie was a kidnapping victim.” I tried to stick to the facts and not delve down into the emotions I associated with this particular case. “She was six years old when she was taken. By the time we were read in, the case had been cold for months.”

Back in those days, the Naturals program had only allowed us access to cold cases. Mackenzie’s was one of the first we’d solved as a team.

“She wanted to be a veterinarian pop star.” I hadn’t meant to say that, was surprised I even remembered the details after nearly six years and who-knows-how-many cases, active and cold. “Her favorite color was purple.”

“Family lawyer was a lying liar who lied.” Lia picked up where I left off. Back when we’d solved this case, she’d done a good job of pretending that it hadn’t touched her, but nowadays she wasn’t quite so intent on seeming heartless. “He was the one who took Mackenzie, then got off on the press attention surrounding it. He had her for months, hidden away in some back room or godforsaken hole.”

A makeshift shack, I thought, remembering Sloane’s analysis of the property. Four feet by four feet, no windows.

Celine flipped through the file sitting on the table between us. “Mackenzie is how old now?” The plane took off, but I barely felt it. “Twelve?”

When I was twelve years old, my mother had been deemed missing, presumed dead. When Dean was twelve, he’d betrayed his serial killer father, resulting in Daniel Redding’s arrest and the creation of the Naturals program.

When Lia was twelve...

I stopped my thoughts right there. “Mackenzie McBride is twelve years old,” I confirmed. “She lives in Cape Roane, Maine.” If Sloane were here, she would have rattled off every factoid and statistic imaginable about the small coastal town. I cut straight to the chase. “Cape Roane is the home of one of the tallest lighthouses in the United States, and right now...”

You climbed the stairs. You opened the window. You crawled out....

“Right now,” I managed to continue, “Mackenzie is standing on the edge of that lighthouse, threatening to jump.”

“Unless...” Celine said softly.

Lia finished her sentence for her. “She said she’d jump unless someone called in the FBI—specifically, the agent who found her in that shack.”

Agent Briggs. He was the FBI director now. He couldn’t just run off at a twelve-year-old’s call. Agent Sterling, his wife, hadn’t been part of the team during the Mackenzie McBride case—and she was thirty-six weeks pregnant.

With twins.

That left those of us who'd worked the case behind the scenes. It left me, because I was the one who'd crawled inside Mackenzie's brain, way back when.

"If her parents and the local authorities hadn't found her threat credible," I forced myself to admit, "they wouldn't have called us."

"So we've got a potential jumper." Celine was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if she was thinking about the times in her life when she'd taken drastic measures for attention. Because she needed to matter—to be seen and heard.

Is that what this is? I directed my thoughts toward Mackenzie. *Are you just trying to make yourself heard?*

I'd been taught to profile in first person or second—never in third. But right now, I wasn't profiling. I didn't know enough about *this* Mackenzie to say with any degree of certainty what she did or did not want.

I only knew the child she'd been—and what she'd survived.

You demanded they call us in for a reason. If you really wanted to die—if you were sure—you wouldn't be up there issuing demands. That was closer to a reasonable conclusion, but I'd been taught early on how easily what you wanted to see could interfere with a profile's conclusions.

I needed to keep my head clear. I needed to hold off on conclusions. I needed to get to know Mackenzie *now*.

"We'll go straight to the lighthouse when we touch down." Celine wasn't giving orders so much as thinking out loud.

"Briggs said that the local PD already have a crisis negotiator and a child psychologist out there," I said.

Child psychologists. Half of my brain was still trying to get acquainted with Mackenzie's. *How many of those have you seen since the kidnapping? How well do you know what to say—or not to say—to convince the shrink du jour that you're normal?*

How long have you known, deep in the recesses of your mind, that normal is a lie?

“Cassie.” Lia had to say my name twice before I tuned back in. “Aren’t you forgetting to read Celine in on one little thing?” She paused, then prompted. “The *reason* Briggs said that Mackenzie wants to talk to the FBI.”

Oh, right. That.

I answered in one word. “Murder.”

MACKENZIE, AGE TWELVE

Mackenzie McBride has never been bothered by heights. Better to be up high, where you can see everything, than down low, boxed in, on the ground. Jumping would be easy.

The lighthouse ledge sticks out a little less than two feet. It should feel like nothing. Her legs should shake beneath her, but Mackenzie trusts her body. She knows that two feet is half of four, and for a time, four feet by four feet was her world.

Her balance is perfect. Even now, with the wind whipping at her hair and the window barricaded off behind her, she can see herself in three hundred and sixty degrees. She knows exactly what she would look like if she leapt off the edge, if she dove off it, if she fell. She can see the way her body would land in each scenario. One of her teachers tried to tell her once that what she could do, the things she knew—it was just math.

It isn't.

She rises up on her toes. *A relevé*—and a warning for the adults gathered below as well as those in the room immediately behind her. *I can step off this ledge before you can stop me.*

It would be so easy, but she doesn't want to do that. Does she? *The FBI will be here soon. They have to be. They have to listen.* If they listened, maybe she could come in. Maybe she could end this.

They have to believe me.

Because the others? The dead ones? They didn't leap or dive. They didn't dance off the edge. They didn't jump.

They were pushed.

CHAPTER 3

There was a crowd gathered outside the lighthouse. I estimated a dozen or more, ranging in age from late teens to eighties. From this distance, they couldn't make out the details of what was going on above, but they could see what I could, plain as day.

A figure. A small one. She wasn't looking down. *Your face is angled toward the sky. Your feet are close to the edge.*

My heart began beating more rapidly in my chest. In our line of work, the margin for error was never large. But this time?

It was inches.

"Excuse me." Celine had a way of parting crowds—even those intent on watching a train wreck in real time. "FBI."

That got the attention of about half of the onlookers. Pulling my gaze from the girl on the ledge, I took note of which half and followed in Celine's wake. Lia hesitated for a brief moment behind me. I knew, without glancing back at her, that she was still staring up at Mackenzie.

Lia wasn't, generally speaking, a person built for hesitation, but it was different—for all of us—when a case involved a kid.

"FBI." Celine repeated herself to the two local LEOs—law enforcement officers—posted at the door to the lighthouse.

"Aren't you a little young to be FBI?" The officer who managed to look Celine in the eye and say those words would probably soon regret it.

"I age well." Celine had an impressive deadpan. "What can I say? I moisturize." She gave him a second to process that, then issued an order. "Move."

The officers moved before they'd even realized they'd done it.