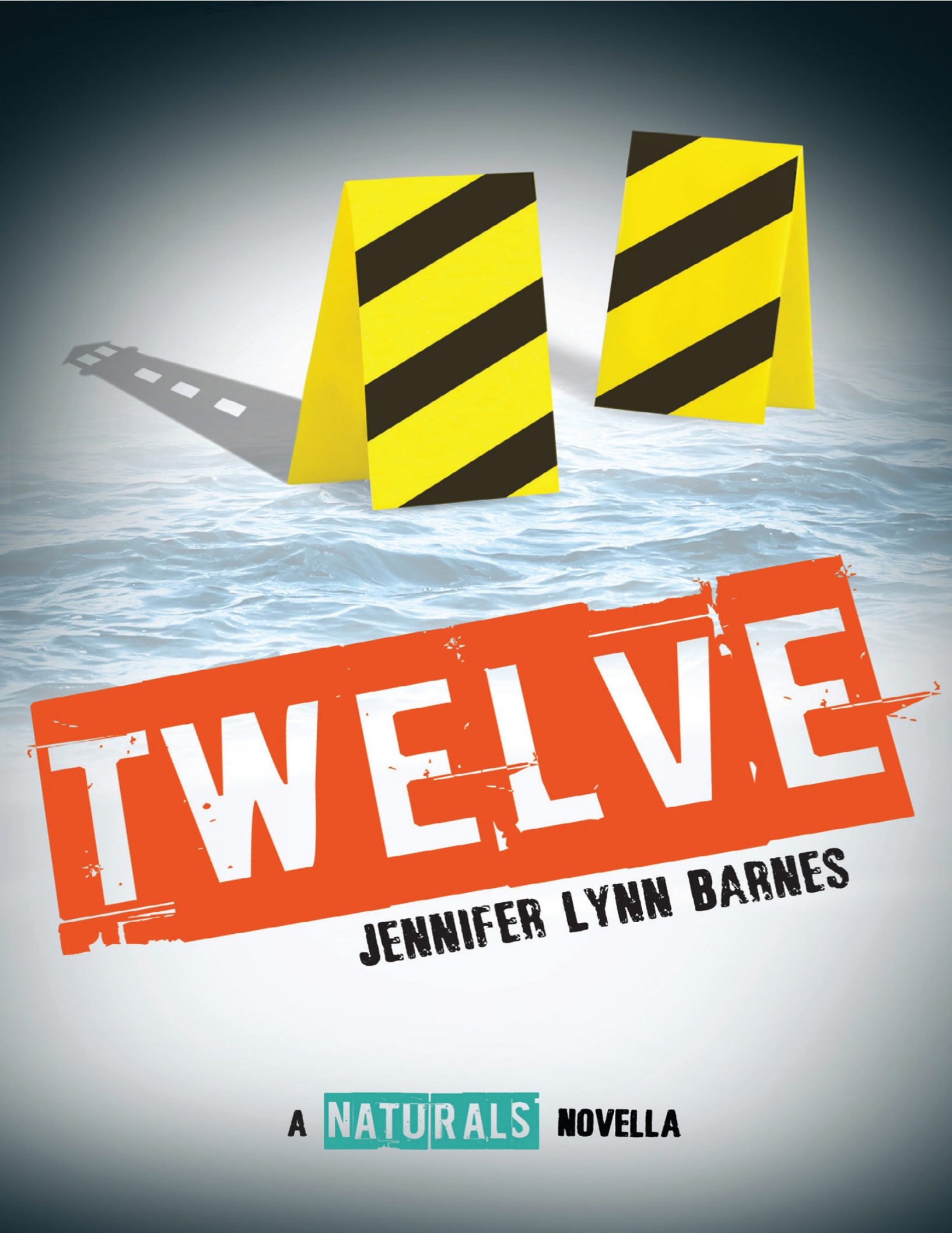
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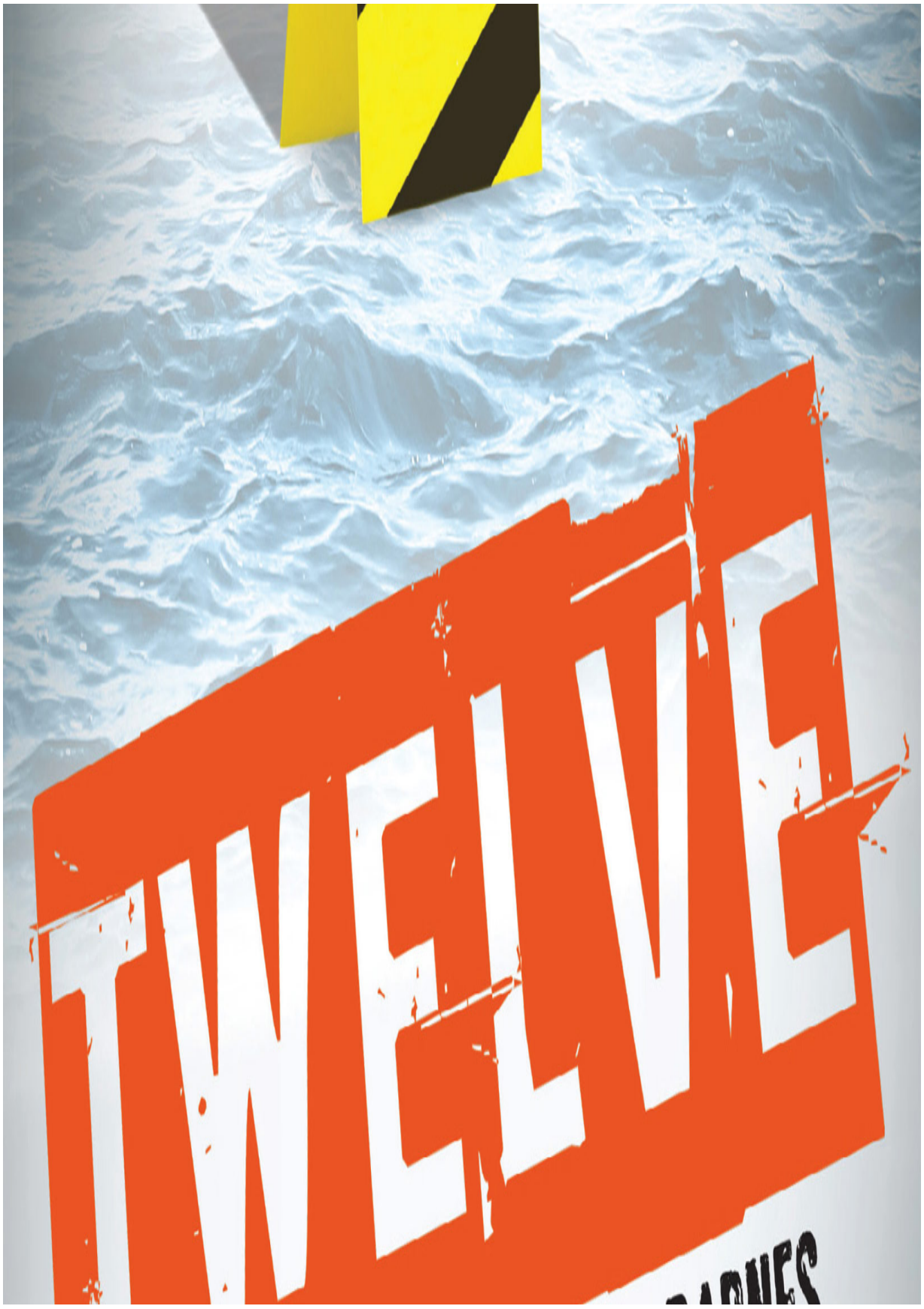
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TWELVE

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A NATURALS NOVELLA

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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

"Best, 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

"Mackenzie 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.

"I don't moisturize," Lia told one of them as we passed. "I made a deal with the devil to maintain my youth. You don't want to know what the devil asked for in return."

Coming from anyone else, that would have sounded flippant, but Lia could sell *any* lie. Luckily, her statement saved me from having to say

anything, which was fortunate, because I looked significantly younger than either Lia or Celine.

When people called the FBI, most of them didn't expect women in their early twenties. Today, we didn't have time to prove ourselves or win hearts and minds. We didn't have time for anyone questioning us or our abilities.

Mackenzie didn't have time.

Before the door to the lighthouse had even closed behind me, I'd already sunk back into observation mode. *Behavior. Personality. Environment.* Those were the cornerstones my mom had taught me when I was younger than Mackenzie was now. If you knew any two sides of the triangle, you could predict the third.

By the time I was a teenager, I did so effortlessly, without thinking, all the time. Being a Natural wasn't something you could turn off. With each step I took, my brain catalogued the details of the environment around me. The ground floor of the lighthouse seemed to be some kind of museum. There was a woman—early sixties—behind the counter, and two more officers—one of them, based on his clothing and posture, the ranking detective—posted at the door to the stairs.

As Celine began a round of introductions, I zeroed in on the only other person in the room—a man. *Forties. Thick hair. Rumpled clothing.* If Michael had been with us, he could have read shades of meaning in the man's expression and posture, but all I saw was the dominant emotion. *Devastation.*

"Mr. McBride." I greeted him, holding out a hand. He took mine and held on for an instant too long. "I'm Cassie Hobbes." He wouldn't remember my name later. I wasn't even sure he'd registered it. "We're here to help your daughter." That, he would process.

You already lost your little girl once. You can't lose her again. You can't just stand here.

"They won't let me upstairs," Mackenzie's father said dully. "My wife is up there. She's talking to her…."

There was only room for one, and it wasn't you. You're not the talker. That much was clear from the gaps in his words, the sporadic eye contact. I wanted to press him, to question him about his daughter. *Are you an observer, a listener, or caught up in your own world?* Those were the options—and two out of three would be useful to me.

But not now. There was such a thing as professionalism, and the FBI equivalent of bedside manner required a little finesse when it came to grilling a victim's family. I didn't have time to finesse anything at the moment.

The first and most important thing was getting to Mackenzie.

As Celine finished shaking the detective's hand and introduced Lia and me as specialist consultants, we got the thirty-second rundown of the situation. No one knew how Mackenzie had gotten all the way up to the top of the lighthouse. The staircase was typically secure, the lightroom at the top locked and used primarily for storage.

"It's not big." The detective paused, and I got the sense that he felt a need to justify his presence on the ground floor to us. "They don't want to crowd her."

He didn't specify who *they* were. It was just as well—I did best when I was left to form impressions for myself.

As we began our ascent of the lighthouse stairs, I let myself imagine Mackenzie doing the same. When Celine, Lia, and I made it to the top, I wondered if Mackenzie had been tired when she'd reached the ninth-story landing—or if she'd been buzzing.

With energy and adrenaline, dread and hope and fear.

Celine nodded to a ladder overhead. "I'll go in first."

I waited, then followed, hoisting myself up into the lightroom overhead. Immediately, as I pulled myself to a standing position, I took stock of the space and the people occupying it. There were four of them: two men, two women. Mackenzie's mother was the easiest to pick out—*nurse's scrubs, dark circles under her eyes, hyperfocused on the window.* The other woman—*late thirties, early forties, professional dress, hair down*—was speaking softly to Mrs. McBride. I pegged her as the psychologist. *Even-keeled. Exactly the right degree of empathetic.*

I disliked her on instinct.

That left the two men. One of them strode toward us. The other hung back. Based on his apparel, the one who hung back appeared to be a fireman.

An axe dangled from his hand.

My gaze went to the window. It was open, but wooden boards had been nailed across the frame. From where I was standing, I could barely make out the form of Mackenzie's body through the gaps in the boards.

You climbed out the window, hammer in hand. You barricaded yourself out there. That showed a presence of mind—and forethought—that I wouldn't have expected.

"If we try to take down the boards, she'll jump." The man who'd approached us followed my gaze. He was in his late fifties, the oldest person in the room—and the one in charge.

The crisis negotiator, I thought.

"Quentin Nichols." He was good enough at reading situations to introduce himself to Celine first and good enough at reading people that his attention then settled almost immediately on me.

"Special Agent Celine Delacroix," Celine replied before nodding toward Lia and me. "Lia Zhang and Cassie Hobbes will be consulting."

"Specialists?" Nichols asked. The question embedded underneath was: *What kind?*

Before we could answer, Mrs. McBride's thin, reedy voice broke through the air. "We asked for Briggs." She shook her head, back and forth, whip-fast. "Agent Briggs. *Special Agent Tanner Briggs*."

She was panicking out loud. *You're the talker in the family.* The scrubs she was wearing suggested that she'd come here straight from work. I recalled from the original case file that she'd gone back to school for nursing when Mackenzie had started kindergarten.

"It has to be Agent Briggs. Oh, God, please. Mackenzie said…"

"Mackenzie said that she wanted to talk to the agent who found her." I was the one who calmly responded, not Celine, not Lia. "Agent Briggs is now the director of the FBI."

I wasn't talking to Mrs. McBride—or to the crisis negotiator. I was talking to the girl outside the window, the one who'd gone still the moment we'd walked into the room.

"Mackenzie, sweetheart, we'll try again." Mrs. McBride choked on the words—or possibly on a sob.

She thought Mackenzie was going to jump.

I thought Mackenzie was listening.

"Agent Briggs isn't the one who found you." I addressed my words to her directly, trying not to think about what could happen if I misstepped, or if I'd read the situation wrong. "He's the one who came for you—but he's not the one who found you."

That got a response. Mackenzie turned.

The sharp intake of breath in the room told me that she hadn't moved this much in a while. Beside me, the crisis negotiator eased forward. The fireman did the same.

I stepped through them, right up to the window's edge. I would have had to hoist myself up to climb out through it, but the barricade rendered that possibility null and void. Instead, I angled my head up to look at Mackenzie's legs.

The way she'd angled her head toward the sky earlier.

"We found you," I said. "Lia and I did."

"Six years ago?" Mrs. McBride couldn't stop the question—or the skepticism that marked it. She'd hate herself for that later.

"You're lying," Mackenzie said, her voice shaking. I saw her feet move backward, a fraction of an inch, toward the edge. "I wanted to talk to Agent Briggs."

I had seconds to establish a rapport. I didn't know Mackenzie. I only knew where she was, what she was doing, and what I'd wanted when I was her age, and police officers had been tiptoeing around me.

Truth.

"I was seventeen years old when we found you. It was one of my first cases." The Naturals program wasn't public. I wasn't supposed to be saying any of this, but right now, security clearances were the least of my concerns. "I guess you could say that I wasn't a normal seventeen."

There was more motion outside the window, another collective flinch from those inside.

I didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't blink until Mackenzie's face appeared on the other side of the boarded frame. She was crouched on the ledge now, her knees pulled tight to her chest.

Safe. Steady—but ready to stand if you need to. Ready to jump. She'd do it, if I backed her into a corner. I knew that the way I always knew things—instinctively.

"What's your name?" Mackenzie asked me.

The muscles in my chest relaxed, but only slightly. I'd piqued her curiosity. She was engaging. We weren't out of the woods, but it was something.

"My name is Cassie," I told her. "Cassandra Hobbes."

There was a pause, maybe two seconds in length. "I'm Mackenzie." It was important to her, somehow, to maintain ownership over who and what

she was. It was important to her to stay on even footing with me.

You can't let yourself feel powerless. You're out there—you're up here—*because there's a part of you that desperately needs to be in control.* If something threatened that, she'd do what she had to do.

What part of her wanted to do, because *that* was control.

"Tell me about the murders." I did the only thing that I could do. I treated her like an adult. Like a *person*. Like a witness.

Mackenzie was quiet for several seconds, and then she spoke again. "I'm not a normal twelve."

CASSIE, AGE TWELVE

Eleven years earlier

They don't want her to think of this as an interrogation room. Cassie knows that, just like she knows, objectively, that the blood has been scrubbed from her hands. They took pictures first—so many pictures of her hands, her clothes…

The blood on the walls.

Cassie wasn't there for the crime scene photos. Of course she wasn't, but she can read between the lines. *Behavior. Personality. Environment.* The BPEs are reliable when nothing and no one else is. They are constant.

Behavior. The detective pulls a chair over to her side of the table. He got her chips and a Coke, and he hands them to her now.

Environment. This is a police station, and not a well-funded one. For the detective, it's his place of business. She's the new element here, the thing that has the potential to throw him off-kilter.

She's a kid.

She's quiet.

She's not crying.

"Is my mom dead?" Cassie's voice is low, but she beats the detective to the first question.

"We don't know, sweetheart." That answer comes quickly. The truth takes a little longer. "At this point, it seems likely."

Personality. Cassie forces herself to ignore the ringing in her ears and think. "You have kids." This time, the words that come out of her mouth aren't a question. The detective, she thinks, is probably divorced, and he probably has daughters, and it's probably hard for him not to bring his work home.

He sees his kids when he looks at her.

"I have two little girls—Ally and Maura."

The names don't fit together. He picked one, the ex-wife picked the other—or maybe one is a family name.

“I’m not your daughters,” Cassie states clearly. She knows she’s probably staring at him too hard. “You can ask me whatever you need to ask me. I saw people at the theater. I can describe them to you.” She doesn’t pause, because she knows that if she does, he’ll tell her to slow down. “My mom doesn’t date, but she does meet with clients one-on-one. She’s a mentalist. Do you know what a mentalist is? People think she’s psychic, but she’s not.” That seems important, when Cassie thinks back on the blood on the walls, the floor…

Too much blood.

“Maybe she fooled the wrong person,” Cassie thinks out loud. “Whoever did this—they meant to. They planned it.” Cassie sees it every time she closes her eyes. She sees it even when her eyes are open. “I need to go back there.”

For the first time, her voice trembles. She hears it, and the detective does, too, and Cassie senses immediately that he’s *relieved*. Relieved that she’s showing emotion. Relieved that he can comfort her. Relieved that he can treat her like a kid.

“I need to see the evidence,” Cassie insists. “The pictures you took. Are you interviewing anyone?”

She sees his answer coming, as he places a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “Just breathe.”

CHAPTER 4

Mackenzie was backlit. There was something haunting about the image: her face visible through the wooden boards, the sun reflecting in a halo off her hair, her eyes in shadow.

"Three kids from the high school are dead." Mackenzie's voice wasn't emotionless, but it wasn't expressive, either. She said *dead* like it was any other word. "Two girls, one boy. People say it was suicide. They say the kids jumped." She paused, and I got the sense that she was watching me every bit as closely as I was observing her. "There are cliffs, where the older kids go to party. My brother goes there sometimes. He knew one of the girls."

I forced myself to concentrate on what she was saying and not just the way she was saying it. I couldn't just go through the motions here. I had to listen to her. I had to *believe* her.

I had to let her take control.

"Three victims," I repeated back to her. "Two girls, one boy." If this were a normal case, I'd be thinking victimology—what did the three have in common, what need did they fulfill for the person who'd killed them? "People say they jumped." I continued echoing Mackenzie's statement back to her, all the better to burrow into her subconscious and water the seed I'd planted when I'd told her that I wasn't normal.

We are the same.

"But you don't think they did," I continued.

"I *know* they didn't jump." Mackenzie's voice turned harsh—vicious, even.

You're angry.

I should have seen that coming. I should have been ready for it. This wasn't the kind of anger that popped up overnight. This was old and deep and more powerful than anything else she was capable of feeling.

"Tell me how you know," I said.

My understanding of emotions wasn't like Michael's. He read what someone was feeling in the moment. He looked at a person and read, based

on physical cues, what they felt—and how they felt about what they felt and precisely which emotions they were trying not to show.

But what I did wasn't just about the moment. It was about who someone *was*. Emotions were a part of that, but I couldn't separate them from everything else.

Like the fact that Mackenzie had been victimized as a child.

Like the fact that the man who'd taken her had killed himself before the case could ever go to trial.

He took control. He took that from you. She wouldn't let anyone else do that, not ever again. Adults didn't get to look through her. They didn't get to make decisions for her.

They didn't get to *ignore* her.

"I saw the body." Mackenzie raised her head to the sky again, when most people in her position would have looked down. "The third one. After the first two, the adults blocked off the cliffs. There's a police officer there all the time now. They brought counselors into the schools—not just the high school. The middle school, too."

Unlike most of her classmates, Mackenzie would have been familiar with counselors, with grief, with things that no kid should have to experience.

"They talked about warning signs," Mackenzie continued bitterly. "And prevention and suicide contagion, like that's a thing."

It was a thing, but I didn't say that. I knew better.

"It didn't help." Mackenzie's voice was soft now.

How many other things haven't helped? I wondered. *How many times has someone told you what you're feeling, what you experienced, how to heal?*

I'd both been there and done that.

Stop projecting. That warning came to me in Agent Sterling's voice. My old mentor hadn't just taught me how to profile. She'd taught me to separate my instincts from the rest of my subconscious.

She'd taught me to recognize when I identified with a victim.

"What the adults said, the teachers and the parents and the *experts*—it didn't help. When the police blocked off the cliffs…" Mackenzie brought her eyes back to stare directly into mine. "The next body was found next to the church. They say she jumped off the steeple."

"She?"

“Kelley.” Mackenzie’s response confirmed for me what I’d suspected—she knew the third victim. *From church? Through her brother?*

That was information I could get from a source other than Mackenzie. She’d brought us here to tell us something specific. This wasn’t an interrogation, and if I tried to turn it into one, I’d be treading dangerous ground.

I had to let her say what she needed to say. I had to listen. I had to believe her.

“Kelley didn’t jump?” I was very careful not to tack the phrase *you think* on the front of the sentence this time. I was—almost certainly—not the first person Mackenzie had told this to.

If anyone believed you, you wouldn’t be up here. You wouldn’t need me.

“I saw the body.” Mackenzie repeated what she’d said earlier. “I saw the way Kelley landed. The way her bones broke. She didn’t jump.”

Lia stepped into my peripheral vision. With the boards across the windows, the chances that Mackenzie would see her standing there were slim. I allowed myself one second to glance sideways.

Lia gave a brief nod. Mackenzie was telling the truth as she knew it—no doubt, no embellishments.

“You don’t believe me, either.” Mackenzie stood suddenly.

A second looking away was a second too much. She’d taken a risk telling me her truth, knowing that I might just be another in a long line of adults to dismiss it. She’d asked for the FBI. Here we were.

There was nothing left for her to ask for.

You expect me to humor you. To lie to you. To try to manipulate or control you.

From somewhere in my memory, I could hear a male voice saying, *Breathe, sweetheart. Just breathe.*

The muscles in my jaw tightened. I wasn’t going to humor Mackenzie—or lie to her.

I was going to listen. And ask: “How would Kelley have landed if she’d jumped?”

Mackenzie hadn’t expected the question, and that was a mark in my favor. She rose up on her toes—just slightly, her hands held out to either side. “It depends. On how close she was to the edge, how she moved. There wouldn’t have been room for a running start, but she could have taken a step. Did she hold one foot out over the edge and jump from the one that

remained? Did she just step off? Did she leap? Did she hold her arms out to the side and fall? How did her knees bend, how did she leap? Were her toes pointed?”

As she spoke, Mackenzie’s body echoed her words in tiny, almost imperceptible ways. There was something graceful about even the subtlest of her movements, something remarkably unperturbed, considering what she was saying—and the fact that a strong wind could take her off that edge.

“She could have landed *so* many ways.” Mackenzie went suddenly still. For the first time since we’d started speaking, my stomach clenched. “She didn’t.”

Didn’t land the way she should have.

“I know I sound crazy.” Mackenzie knelt again—too fast this time, too suddenly. Behind me, her mother whimpered. The girl should have fallen. She should have at least stumbled or wavered, but she didn’t. “I know that you think I’m just a kid. But I’m not. I know bodies. I know how they move. When I spar, I can see other people’s moves coming. When I dance, I always know exactly how I look without ever glancing in the mirror.”

Celine came to stand beside me. She caught my gaze, and I knew exactly what she was thinking.

“I’m that way,” Celine told Mackenzie. “With faces.”

Sloane was that way with numbers, Michael with emotions, Lia with lies.

I was that way with people—with what they wanted and needed and what they were willing to do to get it.

“You don’t want to jump,” I said, my voice echoing through the tight quarters. “But you will. You already know exactly how—how you’d hold your arms, the way you’d look up, not down. You’d point your toes.”

The crisis negotiator grabbed me by the arm, his fingers digging into the tendons just above the elbow. I could hear the child psychologist hiss something behind me. They thought I was being reckless, that I was saying the wrong thing, putting ideas in Mackenzie’s mind.

The ideas are already there.

I ignored the negotiator’s punishing grip. “You know exactly how you would land,” I told Mackenzie, “because you know bodies. You know movement.”

“I know,” the girl on the ledge said desperately, “that Kelley didn’t jump.”

CELINE, AGE TWELVE

Twelve years earlier

There's not a single person at this too-formal dinner table that Celine would like to draw. To be fair, she's already drawn Michael a dozen or more times.

She knows his face almost as well as her own.

"The boys will be lining up for this one soon." Mr. Pritchett—the guest of honor—nods at Celine and smiles knowingly at her parents. "If they aren't already."

Why do grown men say such stupid things? Celine manages not to say that out loud. Her parents should truly appreciate her discretion. They're the ones who insisted that this grown-ass man—the one acting like *pretty* is the ultimate honorific an adolescent girl could receive—is important.

A valuable business connection. It is all Celine can do to keep from rolling her eyes. In a show of great restraint, she instead pictures the muscles and bones buried beneath Mr. Pritchett's healthy jowls.

"Celine isn't interested in boys yet." Her mother, college professor that she is, has just enough feminist bones in her body to add, "She's really more invested in her studies."

Studies come easily to Celine. It's the seventh grade, not rocket science.

"And her art," Michael interjects. The comment, in addition to being true, yields an immediate result: his father's attention. The shift in Thatcher Townsend's position is noticeable, even to Celine. She's done a good job of not looking at Michael's father this evening.

At the elder Townsend's face.

It's amazing, really, that no one else sees it. Not Michael, not Thatcher, not Celine's hapless father, who has no idea that she doesn't carry his DNA at all. It's all there in the bone structure that she and her father's long-time business partner share.

It's all in the face.

“You might not be interested in boys now, Celine,” Michael’s father says, playing to Mr. Pritchett’s ego by shooting him a conspiratorial look, “but you will be someday.”

You want to bet? Celine, again, restrains herself.

Michael doesn’t. “Leave her alone.”

Celine’s stomach flips. Those words will cost Michael. Thatcher Townsend is charming. Thatcher Townsend is generous, a renowned philanthropist, an excellent businessman.

Thatcher Townsend is a monster.

Most of the time, Michael tries to hide the bruises, but he can’t hide the way his nose isn’t quite straight anymore. Not from Celine. Faces don’t lie. And if Michael’s father has broken one bone, who says he won’t break another?

No. Celine won’t let that happen. *Not tonight.* She speaks up before Thatcher can turn his gaze intently toward his son. “Why?”

If she can distract Thatcher, then maybe he’ll forget what Michael said. Maybe Michael won’t have to stay home “sick” tomorrow. Maybe Celine won’t see the echoes of it in his cheek or nasal or jaw bones, long after the bruises have healed.

“Why, what, sweetheart?” Thatcher asks indulgently. His gaze is on Celine’s, but he hasn’t forgotten the way Michael spoke to him.

I’ll just have to make *you forget.* This isn’t how Celine planned on making this particular announcement. But this is *her* truth, and *her* decision. *Screw her parents—and screw Thatcher Townsend.*

Celine smiles sweetly. “Why would I be interested in boys,” she asks the table innocently, “when there are girls?”

CHAPTER 5

"You think Mackenzie's a Natural?" Lia cut straight to the chase the moment we stepped out of the room.

Celine had hung back to talk down the crisis negotiator, the psychologist, and Mrs. McBride. For someone who had a fondness for throwing gasoline on fires, Celine was also surprisingly adept at putting them out. It hadn't been my intention to be inflammatory or reckless. I'd said what I needed to say to show Mackenzie that I was listening.

I wasn't just repeating her own words back to her. I *understood*. Convincing Mackenzie of that had been worth the risk of addressing her threat to jump head-on. The fact that I'd succeeded was the only reason that I'd been able to extract a promise that she would sit tight while I made some phone calls.

I'd given her something to hold on to.

I'd left her in control.

"There's only one way to find out if she's like us," I told Lia. Feeling different didn't make a person a Natural. Believing that you knew things, that you could intuit things that other people couldn't—that didn't make you a prodigy.

The only way to tell if Mackenzie was a Natural was to find out if she was *right*.

For that, I needed Sloane. Unfortunately, the FBI Academy was not known for allowing its trainees to keep their cell phones on at all times. I circumvented the system and made a different phone call.

"Briggs." Even now that he was the FBI director, the founder of the Naturals program had a habit of answering the phone with his last name. *Efficient—and just a little egocentric*.

"I need you to get Sloane on the phone for me," I said, not bothering with *hello* any more than he had. "I also need you to get us access to everything the local PD has on three recent teenage deaths—apparent suicides. The sooner Sloane gets her eyes on those files, the better."

Maybe the detective in charge of Mackenzie's case would have handed over the files *without* receiving a phone call from the director of the FBI, and maybe he wouldn't have. Either way, I wasn't about to devote a single ounce of my attention or brain power to figuring out how to finesse the situation. My cognitive resources were already split, half focused on Mackenzie—*power* and *control* and *desperation*—and the other half working through the few facts that I knew about the trio of deaths.

If Mackenzie was right, if I proved it—she'd have a reason to come in.

Three victims. Two female, one male. All teenaged. All local. If these "suicides" really were murders, then I needed the information in the files as much as Sloane did. How far apart were the deaths, timewise? Were numbers two and three closer together or further apart than number one? I knew the third victim was female. If the first had been male, that might suggest a shift in the pattern.

The first could have been practice. The next two—the girls—they might be what you want.

"Check your phone." Lia had ducked back into the lightroom to check on Celine. Based on the first words out of her mouth when she reappeared on the landing, I concluded that Celine had probably asked her to pass that message along.

I pulled out my phone and checked my secure email. The files were there. If I had them, that meant that Sloane had them. Based on the speed with which she worked, I'd be hearing from her soon.

Not soon enough. I'd made the decision not to go back into the room until I could convince Mackenzie that I'd *done* something, that I was *doing* something. I couldn't go back just to tell her that she had to wait. In the meantime, I had to trust that Celine could handle the adults in the room—and that some part of Mackenzie would have latched on to the way Celine had responded when Mackenzie had described her awareness of her own body—of muscles and movement.

I'm that way with faces. I'd gone into this identifying with Mackenzie and laying the groundwork for her to identify with me, but with a little space, I could see that I wasn't the only option on that front. Celine's ability was the closest to Mackenzie's. Celine was the one who moved like a fighter and a dancer, and Mackenzie had mentioned sparring and dancing both. I knew what it was like to survive trauma, but Celine was the one

who'd gone to great lengths as a teenager to be seen and heard. She was comfortable with anger.

Nobody controlled her.

"Excuse me."

I looked up to see Mr. McBride making his way up the steps. Nine flights of stairs had taken a physical toll on him, but clearly he considered that the least of his problems. "Can you tell me anything?" he asked, breathing heavily. "My wife? My daughter?"

I took note of the order in which he'd asked. "They're both fine," I said. "Or as fine as they can be, under the circumstances."

Mackenzie's father ascended another step, but stopped there, below me. My phone was heavy in my hand. I had the files. I could be looking at them while waiting for Sloane's call. But I knew what it was like to be on the other end of an investigation and to feel like no one was telling you anything—or listening.

For better or worse, I could give him a minute.

"What can you tell me about Mackenzie?" I asked.

In my line of work, details were currency, and given that Sloane could feasibly call me back and say that the physical evidence *was* consistent with suicide, I needed a backup plan—one that could bring Mackenzie down off that ledge, even if she was wrong.

"Mackenzie's a good girl." Mr. McBride said that stubbornly, like he expected me to argue. When I didn't, he got nervous and pushed his hands through hair, an alternative to wringing them. "She doesn't like attention. Not like this."

She's more like you than your wife, I translated. I wondered when that shift had happened. Mackenzie McBride had wanted to be a pop star once.

She'd *loved* attention.

"Does Mackenzie ever talk about what happened to her?" I asked.

That question shut Mr. McBride down, as immediately as if he'd had an actual off-switch and I'd pressed it.

"I have a little sister," I said, trying another tack. "I didn't know about her for years. Until she was three, almost four. What she's been through…" I thought of Laurel, of the way that she used to look at swing sets and see shackles and chains. "I won't ever fully understand it." I shook my head. "I don't make her talk about it. Sometimes, though, she says things." I paused,

letting the silence work its way through his brain. “Does Mackenzie ever say things to you?”

“She said that it was small.” Mr. McBride swallowed, visibly, audibly, practically with his entire body. “The place that bastard kept her, she said that it was dark, and it was small, and he’d leave her there for hours—sometimes days.”

I thought of Mackenzie, standing on a ledge and looking up at the sky. Up, not down. At least on the ledge, there was air.

At least you’re in control. At least you’re free.

“She said she danced.”

That snapped my attention back to Mackenzie’s father.

“She what?”

“She danced,” he repeated. “Every day, all the time, whenever she could. Whenever it was dark. Whenever she couldn’t see anything. Whenever she wanted to cry. She danced.”

I thought about what it would be like to live in a four-by-four room. *You were just a kid. A kid who liked being the center of attention. A kid who wanted to be a pop star.*

He took everything away from you. He locked you up. He hurt you.

You danced.

“The older she gets, the harder it is.” Mackenzie’s father looked down. “I thought it would get easier, but she understands more now than she used to. The things she lived through…”

He couldn’t finish that sentence.

“She dances five days a week.” Mr. McBride managed a very small smile, fond and hopeful in a way that hit me like a knife to the gut. “Ballet, tap, jazz. A few years ago, she started martial arts—the kid’s practically a prodigy. There’s nothing physical that she can’t do.”

When it comes to her body—she’s in control.

“Thank you,” I told Mr. McBride. He asked me what I was thanking him for, but I couldn’t explain what he’d just told me—what he’d *really* told me.

If we’d had normal childhoods, Sloane had commented once, a long time ago, *we wouldn’t be Naturals*. Michael had learned to read emotions because he’d *needed* to be able to read his abusive father’s. Lia had grown up in a world where deception was a matter of survival. Dean’s father was a serial killer.

I'd had a mother who was a mentalist, and she'd moved us around so frequently that the only relationships I was able to form with other people were in my mind.

Mackenzie McBride had been kidnapped at the age of six. I'd known that she'd been held captive. I'd known the size of the shack. I hadn't known, until this moment, what she'd done to survive.

You danced. In the dark, you danced. For hours and hours. When you had no control over anything else, you had control over the motion. Over your own muscles. Over the decision to repeat the same moves—familiar moves—again and again and again.

I suspected, but didn't know, that when Mackenzie had danced, she'd gone to a place in her mind where other things—*the bad things*, as Laurel would say—couldn't touch her. What I did know was that on the ledge, Mackenzie had said that she knew bodies, knew how they moved, knew what she looked like when she was dancing without ever looking in the mirror.

With her childhood? Her very *not normal* childhood? That made sense. Even now, losing herself in motion, exerting physical control—it was a coping mechanism.

I'd been trying to approach this objectively. I'd been reserving judgment on whether or not Mackenzie *knew* things, the way I sometimes did.

The way we all did.

But now?

I said good-bye to Mr. McBride and started up the ladder to the lightroom. *You know bodies. You know motion.*

I'd thought that I couldn't go back in until I had proof that she was right. But right now? I didn't need proof.

I knew.

When I made it into the room, the first thing I noticed was that Celine was standing opposite the window, closer to Mackenzie than any of the others.

"You're back." Mackenzie didn't turn to look at me. I wondered if she'd seen me come into the room or if she'd heard me.

How in tune with her environment—with the bodies all around her—was she?

My phone rang, the sound almost obscene in the silence that had followed Mackenzie's statement. No matter what damage control Special

Agent Delacroix had done with the adults in this room, it was a good bet that none of them quite trusted me or the way I'd chosen to approach things.

In their eyes, this was a delicate situation. *Mackenzie* was delicate and in need of kid gloves.

I looked down at my phone, then out at the girl on the ledge. "It's my colleague," I said. "The expert."

"The one who'll tell you I'm right," Mackenzie said forcefully.

My head wanted to nod, but I forced myself to answer the phone instead. "Tell me what you've got, Sloane."

SLOANE, AGE TWELVE

Eleven years earlier

"She's got to stop pulling stunts like this, Margot."

Sloane knows that the security guard's usage of the word *stunt* is a fairly recent linguistic innovation—late nineteenth century, origin unknown. Personally, she prefers the terms *exploit* and *feat*.

"What was it this time?" Sloane's mother is wearing a tight white T-shirt and jeans. Not her work clothes.

Interesting. Only 15 percent of Margot Tavish's personal wardrobe is white.

"Blackjack tables." Security keeps the reply brief. Sloane should really learn his name—just like she's already learned the placement of the three dozen security cameras in the Majesty, the blind spots, and how to work her way through the casino while minimizing the chances that she'll show up on film. It's harder to hide from the guards.

Harder, but not impossible.

"She was counting cards." Security does not sound happy about that. "For other players, Margot. Took three hands before we managed to escort her out."

"I was not *counting* anything." Sloane feels like that has to be clarified, even if clarifying it earns her a glare from an annoyed Margot. "I was tracking the number and distribution of cards that had already been played in an effort to calculate the individual probabilities of the next card being favorable to either the player or the dealer."

Security lets out what Sloane deeply suspects is an exasperated sigh. Sloane has a great deal of experience with other people's exasperation.

"No more, Margot. Kid's twelve, and she's already persona non grata on the strip. I don't need to tell you how uncomfortable this could be if word works its way up the chain of command at the Majesty."

Sloane knows the chain of command at the Majesty precisely as well as she knows the locations of the security cameras. That is, after all, the point.

To get the owner's attention. To make him *see* her.

Margot puts a hand on Sloane's shoulder and pulls Sloane's smaller body back against her own. Sloane calculates that there is a 12 percent chance this is a sign of affection. More likely, it is protectiveness.

Or possibly a warning.

"If Shaw says anything, you can tell him that it's not *my* fault she's a genius."

It is not Sloane's mother's fault that Sloane is Sloane. That hurts, and it is not precisely true.

"Due to genetic polymorphism…" That is as far as Sloane gets before the security guard takes a step forward toward her mother.

The gesture appears quite threatening.

"I'm trying to help you out here, Margot. If Shaw wanted your kid around, he'd tell you."

"I'm his kid, too," Sloane says.

There is a long pause. A 12.35-second pause, by Sloane's estimation.

"Your boss has always been very clear," Margot Tavish whispers finally, "about what he does and does not want."

CHAPTER 6

"There are three cases." Sloane had gotten better, over the years, at easing me into her calculations, but I knew from experience that soon, the numbers would be flying fast.

Fast was good. Mackenzie wasn't backlit anymore. I hadn't realized it out on the landing, but in a room with a window, it was clear that the sky outside had begun to darken.

It looked like it might storm.

"The first case I analyzed," Sloane said brightly, "was a female, seventeen years old, sixty-four inches tall, approximately one hundred and forty-two pounds fully clothed. She was found in a supine position on uneven ground with a negative twelve-degree incline."

No one else could hear Sloane, but I could feel the eyes of every person in the room on me, gauging my reaction. *Mrs. McBride. The psychologist. The fireman. The crisis negotiator.*

Mackenzie.

"Photographs of the scene have allowed me to pinpoint the likely launch point. Working backward from the point of impact, taking into account wind resistance, vertical and horizontal distance traveled, and a range estimate for the victim's muscle density—"

"Sloane." I kept my interruption gentle.

Obligingly, my favorite human calculator cut to the chase. "She jumped."

I couldn't let my breath hitch in my throat or allow even a flicker of surprise to show on my face. Mackenzie was watching.

I'd expected Sloane to tell me that the victims had been pushed.

"Second case," Sloane continued in a tone that anyone who didn't know her well might have mistaken for cheerful. "Male, eighteen, seventy-point-two inches tall, one hundred and thirty-one pounds. Different landing pattern, different launch point on the cliff, different point of impact—same conclusion."

I wouldn’t let my insides lurch. I wouldn’t let myself look at Mackenzie, out on the ledge.

The boy jumped. I’d been so sure that Mackenzie was a Natural, that she was right, that I could use that to bring her down off the ledge. Now, when I got off this phone, I’d either have to lie to her or tell her that she was wrong.

That I didn’t believe her.

That I was just like everyone else.

You dance five days a week. You do martial arts. You exert control over your own body when you feel like you have control of nothing else.

Right now, your body is on the ledge.

Your body could jump.

“Cassie?” Sloane’s voice broke through my thoughts. “You didn’t ask me about the third victim.”

In the distance, I heard thunder. I’d come into this assuming we were working with a ticking clock, but if a storm was rolling in off the ocean—we had to get Mackenzie down. Even someone who had incredible control of her own body could fall if the surface she was standing on got slick.

If there was a strong enough wind.

“What about the third victim?” I said. “Kelley.”

I asked that question, because I wanted the still-listening Mackenzie to know that I’d tried. I wanted her to know, regardless of the outcome, that I’d gone into this in good faith. Kelley was the only one of the three victims Mackenzie had referenced by name.

Kelley was the one who mattered to her.

“Greater vertical distance traveled, less horizontal,” Sloane rattled off. “Post-mortem X-rays suggest moderate forward rotation, despite a feet-first landing. I modeled a scenario where she stepped off the ledge with one foot and shifted weight, leading to a free fall, as well as trajectories with a greater lead-up and initial vertical push—”

“Translation?” I cut in.

“The first two victims jumped.” Sloane paused. “The third didn’t.”

I stopped breathing, and then, without warning, the air came whooshing out of my lungs. *She was right. Mackenzie was right.*

“I’d need better photographs of the area surrounding the launch point, as well as a more detailed analysis of weather conditions, to rule out a fall, but the most likely conclusion is…”

I finished Sloane's statement for her. "The third victim was pushed."

I shouldn't have felt relieved. No part of me should have been grateful that a teenage girl had been murdered. But the third victim was the only one Mackenzie had actually seen, the one she'd based her conclusion on.

She was right. And that meant that I didn't have to tell her that she was wrong. It meant that I'd been right, too—about Mackenzie's ability, about the circumstances that had honed it.

Mackenzie McBride was a Natural.

"Kelley didn't jump." I stated the truth, plainly and loud enough for everyone in this room—and just outside of it—to hear. Mackenzie deserved to know that she was right. She deserved for everyone in this room to know it.

She deserved to be told something other than to calm down and breathe.

If someone pushed Kelley… My brain snaked its way to the obvious conclusion. *We're not just looking at suicide contagion.*

We were looking at an UNSUB who'd used a duo of tragic deaths in an attempt to disguise a third.

YOU

You are the witness. The power, the painkiller, the peace.

Strangers have no right to take that—not from you and not from those you bless.

How dare they talk about your work? Outsiders. The thought crawls beneath your skin. What do they know about this town? About its history?

About you.

CHAPTER 7

"What are you going to do?" Mackenzie demanded. She was squatting outside the window now. Her neck was bent, her forehead nearly touching the barricade.

"We'll open an investigation." Celine kept her answer to Mackenzie short and to the point. "A murder investigation. Technically, the case won't be federal, but I have a feeling that the local police department will welcome our involvement."

Briggs would make sure of it.

As I approached the window—and Mackenzie—I wished Michael was here to tell me exactly what to read into the way Mackenzie finally allowed her forehead to rest against the barricade. Was she tired? Relieved? Now that someone believed her, was the magnitude of what she'd done to get our attention sinking in?

I stopped inches away from her. The room was silent enough that I could hear her breathing. Outside, the sky was still painted in shades of gray, but there was no thunder, no sound at all except for Mackenzie's breathing and the barest whistling of the wind.

"You'll find out who pushed her," Mackenzie said quietly. That wasn't a question—or a request. I'd expected something like hope in her tone, but I couldn't hear much emotion in it at all.

"We will." Lia stepped forward. Of the three of us, she'd interacted with Mackenzie the least, but she was also capable of speaking with a level of conviction with which an unsuspecting listener simply could not argue. "Cassie will start crawling into people's heads. I'll interrogate—witnesses, suspects, anyone who gets on my bad side."

That got a very small smile out of Mackenzie.

"Agent Delacroix will flash her badge around and put the fear of God and the FBI in this whole town," Lia promised. "It will be a sight to behold."

If Mackenzie's only reason for crawling out on that ledge had been to make someone listen, the fact that I'd confirmed her belief, and Lia's

assurances of action, would have been enough to bring her in. But thinking back on my conversation with her father, I had to wonder if that was all there was to this.

You survived. You danced. And you've been dancing ever since.

"Mackenzie, baby…" Mrs. McBride had been remarkably silent the past few minutes. "Please." Mackenzie's mother was the talker in the family. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Kelley. We should have listened. I'm so sorry, but can't you—"

"Don't apologize," Mackenzie interrupted tersely. "It's okay."

Beside me, Lia's gaze darted almost imperceptibly toward mine. Mackenzie was lying. It wasn't okay.

A lot of things in Mackenzie's life weren't.

"Before we can leave," I said carefully, "before we can find the person who killed Kelley…"

I waited for her to fill in the blank. She had to say it herself.

"You need me to come in." Mackenzie didn't sound angry or sad, but there was something in her tone that I recognized. Something deep and cavernous, something I'd *felt*.

"You're going to be okay," I told our newest Natural, my voice catching in my throat. "Lots of things in your life—things that have happened, things that are going to happen—won't be, but you will." I let that register. No kid gloves, no sugarcoating. "You won't ever be normal, Mackenzie, but you'll be okay."

"Personally," Lia commented, "I find normal overrated."

I willed Mackenzie to hear us. *We see you. You can come down now. You can come in.*

"What if you don't catch him?" Mackenzie turned the full force of her attention back to Celine. She looked younger all of a sudden. Vulnerable. "The person who pushed Kelley. What if he gets away with it?"

He—or she, my profiler brain filled in. *Or they.* The possibilities were myriad, and I could start sorting through them just as soon as Mackenzie was in.

"Sometimes you win," Celine replied evenly, taking Mackenzie's question at face value. "Sometimes you lose. But I can promise you that we will fight like hell for Kelley. And our track record?" Celine pressed her palm flat against one of the boards. Not the one Mackenzie was leaning against. Not too close. "It's not exactly *normal*."

You're different, Mackenzie, but so are we. We see you. You aren't alone.

"You're good at what you do?" Mackenzie's voice was hoarse.

"We found you, didn't we?" Lia's tone bordered on flippant, but somehow, that made her words sound less like a rhetorical question and more like an inviolable, uncontested, naked truth.

You won't ever be normal, but you'll be okay.

"You can trust them, Mackenzie." That statement came from behind me. *The psychologist.* I'd almost forgotten she was there, that there was anyone in this room besides Mackenzie and the three of us. "We've talked about trust, haven't we?"

That was the exact wrong thing to say. I caught Mackenzie's gaze with my own, willing her to look at me—and at Lia and at Celine.

We're not humoring you. We're like *you.*

Before I could say that, Quentin Nichols stepped forward. "You tell us when you're ready for us to remove the barricade," the crisis negotiator said. "You're the one in control here, Mackenzie. It's your decision."

Emphasizing her control of the situation was a good move. It was the right move, one I might have made if he'd given me the chance. But he hadn't, and my gut said that the words would sound different to Mackenzie coming from him.

He's male.

"Stay back." Mackenzie jerked her head off the board, so suddenly that I was afraid it might send her flying backward. It didn't. "You don't get to *give* me control. You don't get to stand there and say…"

"Breathe, Mackenzie," the psychologist murmured behind me.

I snapped so Mackenzie didn't have to. "She's already breathing. She's *fine*."

But I knew: *You're not fine, Mackenzie. You haven't been fine in a very long time.* Something had triggered her, taken her back to a place she didn't want to go. She was fighting that—would fight it—tooth and nail.

As long as Mackenzie stayed where she was, she was in control. On the ledge, it was *her* body, *her* choice, *her* life.

Her eyes stared past me, past Lia, past Celine, past her own mother.

Straight to the psychologist—and then to Quentin Nichols.

You're small. And he's not. He has power. And you don't. Mackenzie took a step backward. It was a small one, but…

"Mackenzie," Celine said calmly, "I need you to stand very still."

I slid sideways, blocking Mackenzie's view of the men in the room as best I could. The fireman, at least, had the presence of mind to keep his mouth shut. I didn't trust Quentin Nichols to do the same.

Mackenzie probably wasn't his first jumper. This wasn't his first rodeo. But whether he saw it or not—she *was* different.

A clap of thunder boomed in the distance. Mackenzie raised her head to the sky. Her body didn't shake. She didn't waver.

"You need me to stand still," she repeated back to Celine. "And I need you to find the person who murdered Kelley."

This is control. This is setting your own terms.

"How are we supposed to find the killer if we have to stay here and babysit you?" Lia didn't pull her punches. She wasn't a profiler, but she did have a history of trauma and a deep-seated loathing for being treated like she was traumatized.

"You don't have to stay," Mackenzie said fiercely. "I can take care of myself."

We'd been so close to her coming in. If it had been just us in the room, we could have done it. I sure as hell wasn't leaving her alone with the people who'd botched this enough to keep her out there.

This is control. I wanted to believe that we could undo the damage, talk her down, but everything inside me said that now that she'd set her terms, she'd stick to them. *Your body. Your life.*

Your choice.

"I'll stay."

I'd been on the verge of saying those words, but Celine beat me to them.

"I'll stay with you," she repeated, her focus solely on Mackenzie. "And Lia and Cassie will work the case."

"Fine." Mackenzie's voice was like steel, as a gust of wind whipped her tawny brown hair against her face. She stared at Celine for a moment longer, then turned to Lia and me. "You do your jobs," she promised, "you find Kelley's killer—and I'll come down."

YOU

There are names for what you do. Mercy is one. But another? Another is art.

CHAPTER 8

"I thought that went well."

From the passenger seat of our government-issued SUV, I glared at Lia. I knew she was just pushing my buttons—because the more she pushed them, the less mental space I could devote to how I could have played things differently with Mackenzie.

Why we'd failed.

Walking away, leaving her out on that ledge, was hard, bordering on impossible. I could still see the way Mackenzie had looked from the base of the lighthouse. *Small. Still.* She was little more than a silhouette against the darkening sky. Down below, the ocean churned, angry and haphazard as it bore into the jagged shore.

The storm was getting closer. We didn't have long.

"Are you ignoring your phone on purpose, or is it just a side effect of the brooding?" Lia managed to sound genuinely curious about the answer to that question.

I looked down at my phone. Three new text messages—all from Celine.

"Agent Delacroix keeping busy?" Lia asked archly.

"Apparently, she's been making some calls." It didn't surprise me that Celine was still coordinating the investigation, even though she was the one who'd volunteered to stay behind. Objectively, Lia and I had skill sets that were more useful when it came to talking to witnesses, but Agent Delacroix was the one with the badge.

She was the one that Mackenzie was currently watching and listening to. Showing the little Natural that the case was moving would be more effective than anything anyone in that room could say to keep Mackenzie calm.

"Celine was able to get in touch with Kelley's parents," I told Lia. "They're anxious to speak with us." I rattled off the address Celine had sent, then turned my attention back to my phone—not to the texts, to my inbox—and the files. I had the length of this drive to read through Kelley's.

Before we talked to our victim's parents, I needed to get acquainted with her.

Her last name was Peterson. That was one of the many things I learned en route, as I skimmed the file once and read it again. *You were a senior at Cape Roane High School. Straight-A student, doctor parents, no siblings.* A quick perusal of her social media accounts told me that she had a propensity for standing in the middle of every picture. Based on the photographs her many public mourners were posting, she also had a tendency to come to school wearing workout clothes, like she simply couldn't have been bothered to change after she hit the gym.

Her face was fully made up in every single picture.

But the thing at the forefront of my mind as Lia and I climbed the steps to the Petersons' front porch wasn't the way Kelley had looked in those pictures.

It was the way she'd looked in the autopsy photos.

"Thank you for meeting with us." I sat opposite Kelley's parents in their formal living room. The walls were tastefully decorated with a mix of abstract art and high-quality portraits—some of the whole family, some just of Kelley. Now that their daughter was dead, the moments captured in time were haunting, but the impression that I couldn't shake was the association between the portraits and the paintings.

Kelley as decoration.

Kelley as art.

"Of course." Kelley's father was the one who replied, but the way his hand was woven through his wife's made it seem like the words were a joint effort. The doctors Peterson were Type A, good-looking, driven—but whatever else they were or were not, I was certain that they'd loved their daughter.

"The agent on the phone said that there was a development in Kelley's…" Isaac Peterson didn't seem the type to stumble over words, but he hesitated just long enough for his wife to fill in.

"…case."

Not Kelley's *death*. Not *suicide*—or even *murder*. Her *case*. It felt like a euphemism, as pristine as the formal white couches on which the four of us sat.

Lia leaned forward slightly. “We have reason to believe that your daughter didn’t jump.” Lia knew Celine had told the parents that much. It was why they’d agreed to meet with us—but it was also our strongest entry to what would doubtlessly be a difficult conversation.

“I knew it,” Kelley’s mom bit out. “I knew that our little girl…” She drew in a ragged breath.

Now it was her husband’s turn to finish her sentence. “We knew that Kelley couldn’t and wouldn’t have killed herself. We told the police as much, but they’re used to parents being biased when it comes to their children.”

The subtext there told me that Dr. Isaac Peterson considered himself, above all, an objective and rational person. I filed that away for future reference, but paid more attention to the way that Lia tapped two fingers—middle and index—lightly against the side of my leg. The signal was subtle, but unmistakable.

She’d caught a lie.

We knew that Kelley couldn’t and wouldn’t have killed herself. Dr. Alice Peterson might have believed that, but her husband was the one who’d spoken those words, and he did not.

No matter what he’d told the police, no matter how objective and rational his tone, he’d doubted his daughter. He’d believed she’d jumped.

My mind went to the autopsy—not the photographs documenting the damage wreaked by impact, but the close-up shots of Kelley’s lower abdomen. Scars—small, deliberate half-moons—had stretched from one of Kelley’s hip bones to the next, too low to show unless she was naked.

“Were you aware that Kelley was a cutter?” I asked Kelley’s father. I knew the question wouldn’t be a welcome one, but I needed to get to know Kelley well enough to crawl into her head, and I needed any information, no matter how seemingly insignificant, that might give me insight into her killer’s.

“Kelley put a lot of pressure on herself.” Alice Peterson seemed to consider that a full and sufficient response to my question. “She was very driven.”

“A perfectionist,” her husband added, sitting ramrod straight.

“She was perfect.” Alice’s voice cracked. I glanced at Lia, but she gave no indication that Kelley’s mother was lying. Whether or not Alice Peterson

had believed her daughter was flawless when she was alive, now that she was gone, she was *perfect*.

Grief had a way of warping perceptions.

"Tell me about Kelley," I suggested gently. That was all it took to open the floodgates, for *both* Dr. Petersons. How beautiful Kelley was. How smart. The fact that she'd applied early to an Ivy League university. The number of times she'd made homecoming court. How mercilessly she'd been able to dismantle her opponents in debate.

As the Petersons described their perfect daughter, I thought back again to Kelley's scars. *You didn't cut your wrists, your legs, or even your stomach. You sliced below your panty line.*

She'd literally hidden her pain, preserving the image.

If you had killed yourself? I thought, slipping into her mind. *You wouldn't have wanted a closed-casket funeral.* She wouldn't have wanted to mangle the body she left behind.

You wouldn't have jumped.

"Did Kelley have any rivals?" I asked. "Was there anyone she'd had conflict with? Any issues socially?"

"Kelley was very social," her father said immediately. "Everyone loved her."

Another tap on my leg, another lie. Even in grief, Isaac Peterson knew quite well that his daughter had *not* been universally beloved.

"You can't think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt her?" Lia pressed.

"Kelley didn't always get along with other girls." Alice pursed her lips. "They could be so jealous."

That was a loaded statement if I'd ever heard one.

"And boys?" I asked.

"They all wanted to date her," Isaac said immediately. He shook his head—in memory? In denial?

"I'm guessing she had to turn a lot of would-be Romeos down." Lia gave no indication of how carefully she was studying their responses to that statement. "Was that hard for her?"

The answers came in tandem. "I think so."

"Of course."

Two taps from Lia. Neither one of them thought Kelley disliked turning people down.

“It wasn’t her fault,” Alice said suddenly, leaning toward us. “What happened with the Summers boy. He was obviously very ill.”

I took a moment to connect the dots. Before Kelley’s death, two of her classmates had killed themselves. One was a boy.

The Summers boy?

“Kelley knew the boy who jumped?” I asked.

“This is Cape Roane,” her father said dismissively. “Everyone knows everyone.”

And everyone loves Kelley, I echoed his earlier lie silently back at him.

“What about the other victim?” I asked. “The girl? Did she and Kelley know each other?”

There was a long pause.

“Have you been talking to the school?” Alice Peterson couldn’t have bristled more if she were actually feline. I took that to mean that someone at the school might have had something less than flattering to say about her perfect daughter.

“Was Kelley ever bullied?” I asked. That was an easier question for a parent to be asked than *Was your daughter ever accused of bullying someone else?*

“There were tiffs, of course.” Kelley’s mother relaxed slightly. “But nothing major. Kelley knew who she was. She wasn’t the type who needed anyone’s approval.”

Kelley’s father squeezed his wife’s hand. “I will say,” he told me carefully, “that the last few weeks were very hard on our daughter.”

The last few weeks. Since the Summers boy jumped off a cliff? Since another of Kelley’s classmates did the same?

My gut said that if I pushed either of them on that point, they would end this interview, so I sidestepped. “The police file on Kelley’s death indicated that she had no defensive wounds.” That, along with the other suicides and Kelley’s history of self-inflicted injuries, was what had biased the police in favor of the suicide interpretation. “That suggests,” I explained, “that whoever pushed Kelley didn’t physically engage her beforehand. She wasn’t dragged up to the steeple.” I kept my tone gentle, to counteract the words. “Unless her attacker had a gun, the most likely explanation is that she went willingly.”

Maybe someone coerced you into going up there. Blackmailed you. Guilted you. I sorted through the possibilities, one by one. *Or maybe the*

person who pushed you was someone you trusted. Maybe you went willingly, because you wanted to be alone with that person.

Or maybe you went on your own, and your killer followed.

"Would Kelley have gone up there on a dare?" I asked. "Or for privacy—or to meet someone?"

"I…" Alice bowed her head slightly, the motion more graceful than it should have been. "I don't know."

"Is there anyone she might have trusted enough to go—"

"We don't know." Isaac Peterson repeated his wife's sentiment, and I had the distinct sense that of everything that had passed their lips during this interview, these words hurt the most.

You thought you knew your daughter, but you've realized since she died how much you don't—and didn't—know.

"Is there anyone else we should talk to?" I asked. "Anyone Kelley might have confided in? Anyone she was close to?"

That line of inquiry seemed to center Kelley's parents. Alice folded her free hand neatly in her lap, the other still woven through her husband's.

"Kelley had a lot of friends," she declared. *Kelley was popular. Kelley was perfect. Kelley was loved.* "In fact," Alice Peterson continued, her voice shaking slightly, "the pastor called to let us know that a group of students from the high school are planning a vigil for her tonight. At the church."

YOU

There's something about heights. Something pure and true. There's clarity in those final moments.

You'll feel it again soon.

CHAPTER 9

As I stepped out of the Petersons' house, the humidity was a visceral reminder that this wasn't an ordinary case. *It's going to rain.* We weren't on an ordinary timeline, and the insight I'd been able to glean about our victim from her parents—it wasn't enough.

I couldn't let myself spare more than a passing thought for Mackenzie or the lighthouse or the angry wind whipping my hair against my face as Lia and I made our way back to the car.

I had to focus.

I pulled myself into the passenger seat, shut the door, and let my mind linger on a single word. *You.* Not Mackenzie this time. And not the killer—not yet. *Kelley.* Knowing her—how she would have reacted, the limited circumstances in which she would have climbed to the top of the steeple of her own free will, who she might have done that with—that was a piece of the puzzle I needed. *Behavior. Personality. Environment.* Victim's and killer's BPEs were intertwined.

A cell phone rang then, pulling me from my thoughts. As Lia started the car, and I reflexively buckled my seat belt, I slipped my phone from my pocket with my free hand, then realized: it wasn't ringing.

Lia's was.

She answered it and flipped the audio to speaker. "Hey, Boy Wonder."

On the other end of the line, Michael responded with all the dignity he could muster. "I appreciate a good *Batman* reference as much as the next person, but clearly, if I were a character in that particular fictional universe, I would be Batman, not Robin." He didn't give Lia the chance to gainsay him before continuing. "Hypothetically, on a scale from thrilled to ecstatic, how delighted would you be if 'Batman' commandeered a private plane, left a pleasantly worded note for the fine folks at Quantico, and made his Bat-way to the lovely town of Cape Roane to battle evildoers at your side?"

"Michael." I beat Lia to a response, but didn't get more than his name out before she cut in.

“Hypothetically speaking, have you *already* done and/or are you in the process of doing all of the above?”

“Absolutely not.”

Lia rolled her eyes. “Liar.” She turned toward me. “I’m going to need directions to the church.”

“Spiritual awakening?” Michael asked her.

“Impending vigil for our murder victim,” I corrected. It took all of three minutes for me to get Lia the directions and catch Michael up to speed on the case—all of it. *Mackenzie, what she’d seen when she looked at Kelley’s body, the stakes for our newest Natural now.*

Kelley.

Her parents.

“Let’s face it,” Lia cut in. “Grief turns everyone into liars. It doesn’t, however, make you a *good* liar—and our victim’s parents, her father in particular, were very, very good.” She paused. “If I were anyone else, I would have fully believed that he’d never so much as entertained the idea that his daughter had killed herself. And the wife?” Lia pressed her foot on the gas, reminding me for the umpteenth time why I really needed to stop letting her drive. “She totally didn’t buy that any *tiffs* Kelley had had with her classmates were because other girls were just so jealous.”

“Translation?” Michael asked.

“Far be it from me to act like a profiler,” Lia replied, “but—and I say this as someone who has deeply embraced the title of lovable bitch—I deeply suspect that Kelley Peterson played to win and played for keeps.”

“She was competitive,” I confirmed. “With herself and with other people. I don’t know that I would go so far as to call her a lovable bitch.”

“You say tomato,” Lia commented. “I say to-mah-to.”

You were in pain, Kelley. You hid it. Did you cut down others—deliberately, precisely—the way you cut yourself? Most people tended to turn aggression either inward or outward. There was bleed-over, but it was somewhat rare to find a person with equal proclivities for both. *Power. Pain. Perfection.*

I knew Kelley now better than I had before, but it still wasn’t enough.

“I sense a disturbance in the force,” Michael observed on the other end of the phone line. “Heavy silence of the emotionally laden variety.”

“Cassie’s composing a mental poem,” Lia told him. “‘Ode to a Profiler’s Angst.’”

“I’m trying to figure out if Kelley was the type of person who would have climbed the steeple on her own,” I corrected, “or if someone else led her up there.”

Power. Pain. Perfection. It wasn’t hard for me to imagine Kelley making the climb. Because she could. Because, on some level, it might hurt. *Did the killer take you by surprise? Or,* I thought, picturing the aftermath of Kelley’s impact with the ground in my mind, *was it his—or her—idea?*

I could feel the shift coming. This wasn’t just about Kelley anymore. I was hovering around the edges of someone else’s subconscious. The UNSUB’s.

The *Unknown Subject’s*.

The killer’s.

“We’re about a minute out from the church,” Lia informed me—and Michael. “When do you land, Batboy?”

“Bat*man*,” Michael loftily corrected. “And fifteen minutes, give or take. Might I suggest that until then, we handle this old-school?”

“Old-school as in sneaking out of the FBI Academy like an unruly teenager and opting to ask for forgiveness instead of permission?” Lia asked innocently. All things considered, that was probably a pretty accurate depiction of what Michael had done when he’d realized that the case we were working now had ties to one of our old ones.

Michael cleared his throat. “I was thinking more along the lines of ‘old-school’ as in ‘making liberal use of video surveillance.’”

When we’d first started out, the only way we’d been given access to witnesses was through a video feed, courtesy of our FBI handlers.

“Call me sentimental,” Michael continued, “but it would hit me right in the feelings if my favorite deception detector could deal me in for old times’ sake while I’m in transit. Just think about it, Zhang. You, poking around the vigil, asking questions and listening for lies, me on the lookout for anyone who’s not grieving nearly as much as they’d like us to believe. …”

“Be still, my heart.” No one could deadpan like Lia. “I will surely be unable to control the animal attraction this nostalgia will provoke.”

I snorted, but all things considered, Michael’s suggestion wasn’t a bad one. It wasn’t unusual for killers to return to the scene of the crime, or to attend funerals, wakes, vigils, or other occasions marking the passing. *And if you are there…*

Triumph. Anger. Adrenaline. Guilt. The range of emotions Michael would be on the lookout for was wide—but I had every confidence he could spot it.

"And what is Cassie going to be doing while we take this trip down memory lane?" Lia threw the question out there, as much for my benefit as for Michael's.

If we'd had the time, I might have joined them. But the clock was ticking. We needed every advantage we could get.

"I'm going to get a feel for the crime scene and start a profile on the killer," I said.

And that was my cue to call Dean.

DEAN, AGE TWELVE

Eleven years earlier

"How are you doing, son?"

Dean stares at the FBI agent. What are the chances that Agent Briggs isn't thinking about how Dean is *doing*? What are the chances that he's thinking about what Dean has *done*?

"Fine." Fewer words are better. Dean learned that pretty quickly after his father's arrest. *Yes, ma'am* and *no, ma'am*, *yes, sir* and *no, sir*, and not causing trouble.

Not that it helps.

"You're fine," Agent Briggs repeats, eyeing the bruise on Dean's cheekbone.

"It doesn't hurt." Dean isn't lying. The pain is there, but it can't touch him. That's part of being what he is, isn't it? A lack of sensitivity to pain? To fear? To feeling?

Dean wonders, sometimes, if that's how it started for his father. Every day, he remembers the feel of the knife in his hand. The smell of burning flesh.

"You did what you had to do, Dean. If you hadn't played your father's game, if you hadn't convinced him you *wanted* to play, he would have killed Veronica." Special Agent Tanner Briggs is awfully forgiving for someone whose wife's flesh is now branded with Dean's initials. "You hurt her so that he'd leave you alone with her."

Don't tell me I helped her escape. Don't tell me I'm the reason she's alive. Don't tell me I'm the reason my father is behind bars. He's a monster.

So am I.

"Is someone giving you a hard time?" Briggs tries again. "Because of your father?"

"I should go." Dean is twelve. He's not stupid. He knows that people want to say that they've done what they can for him.

He knows, even at twelve, that there's nothing anyone can do.

“Wait.” Agent Briggs doesn’t touch him, but Dean has to push down the instinct to react like he has.

No one touches me. No one should *touch me.* If Dean doesn’t let people touch him, if he doesn’t touch back—he can’t hurt them.

He can’t become his father.

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” Agent Briggs says suddenly. “A case.”

Suddenly, Dean can hear himself think again. “Like my father’s?”

“Not exactly.” Briggs pauses. “The UNSUB—unknown subject—that we’re currently tracking has killed at least three prostitutes in the last eight weeks.”

How? The question echoes in Dean’s mind, again and again until he has to ask it out loud.

“The women were beaten to death.”

“Beaten bare-fisted?” For Dean, the question is automatic. He’s already imagining the way the women would have fought back, the way that might have made the person beating them feel. “Or with a blunt object?”

“Neither.” Briggs pauses for just a moment. “Our killer beats women to death wearing gloves.”

Dean pictures it. Something gives inside of him, something visceral and hopeful and dark. Maybe he can make a difference. Maybe he can atone.

Maybe *thinking* like a killer is enough.

CHAPTER 10

Dean didn't answer when I called. I tailed Lia to the church's front office, but once she'd been directed to the youth area, where Kelley's friends—or possibly, her "friends"—were setting up for the vigil, I peeled off and stepped back outside.

In all likelihood, most of Kelley's social group still believed that she had killed herself. I knew better. Standing with my feet on solid ground, I stared up at the steeple.

The sky was dark enough to send a shiver down my spine.

With or without Dean, there was no time to spare in stepping into the UNSUB's mind. *You know your way around this church—well enough to know how to get up to the steeple. Did you know Kelley, too?*

Did she trust you?

As a profiler, my most important task was to separate the parts of a murder that were incidental from the parts that signified something specific about the killer. To the extent that a murder had been planned, the question morphed: Which parts of the plan were necessary?

Which parts were required only to fulfill your needs?

With what little I knew, I couldn't begin to guess motive yet. Maybe the killer had hated Kelley—or been fixated on her—for some time. Maybe her recent actions had drawn attention. Based on the way Kelley's parents had staunchly insisted that what happened to the Summers boy was *not* Kelley's fault, it was also possible that some people had blamed her for her classmate's suicide.

Maybe the suicides did nothing more than provide you convenient cover for Kelley's death—or maybe, in your mind, they're connected. As I addressed the killer, I couldn't even rule out the possibility that Kelley's death had been unplanned—that she'd climbed the steeple of her own volition, for her own reasons, and the killer had followed and acted on impulse.

There were too many variables. To sort through them—and I had to sort through them now, not later—I needed to concentrate on what I knew to be

true. There were three elements to any murder: the victim, the location, and the method of killing.

I knew all three, and that was a start.

Victim: You chose Kelley. Why? That question could cycle too easily right back to motive, so I tried again. *Why this girl? What was it about her that got your attention? Did you see the Kelley the world saw—homecoming court and Ivy League and standing dead-center in every picture? Or did you know the real Kelley? She was vulnerable. Most people didn't see that.*

Did you? I rolled that question over in my mind. *Did she remind you of someone—or was this about her? Did she do something? Did you hate her?*

Did she trust you?

That was too many questions and not enough answers, so I turned to the next element of the crime. *Location: You killed her at a church.* I found myself pacing around the base of the building, my face tilting toward the sky the way Mackenzie's had, back at the lighthouse. *Churches are holy. Sacred. You killed this girl on holy ground.*

What did that say about our killer? For some, it might have been about sending a message, but not for an UNSUB who'd never intended for anyone to know that the victim had been murdered.

If you chose the church, you didn't choose it to send a message. You chose it for you—either for your convenience or your satisfaction. Are you religious? Or would any structure this tall do?

There was something about heights. Even standing with my feet on the ground, looking up at the way the steeple stretched into the sky, I felt it.

The higher you go, the farther away the rest of the world feels. It was just you and Kelley up there. Just Kelley and you.

On the brink of something but unable to push through, I tried Dean a second time, and this time, he answered.

"Cassie." Hearing him say my name sent a wave of something like relief—with a side of anticipation—through my body.

"Strangling someone is intimate," I said, well aware that was *not* the way that normal girls started conversations with their boyfriends. "Shooting someone is not. But pushing them off a building…"

Pushing involves physical contact. You touched her. Did you want to? Either way, given the lack of defensive wounds, it had been quick.

“Cassie.” Dean said my name again, and this time, I heard something different in his tone. The two of us were used to profiling in tandem. I profiled in second person. He profiled killers in first.

He wasn’t profiling anyone or anything now.

“Briggs sent Sloane some files,” I said, taking a step back. I’d assumed that Sloane had shared them, that Dean would have started sorting through them as surely as Michael, whose emotion-reading ability was of the most use in person, had taken off.

“I’ve seen the files,” Dean told me. “All three of them.”

That gave me pause. “All three?”

Sloane’s conclusion had been clear: the first two victims had jumped. That was why we were focusing on Kelley—and the church.

“I’m sorry I missed your call,” Dean continued. “I was getting ready to return it. I just wanted to be sure first.”

“Sure?” I asked, wishing he were here, that I could see him, touch him, get a preview of some kind as to what he was thinking.

“Look at the first file,” Dean said. “The photos of the victim taken at the scene.”

I set my phone to speaker and went back to the original email from Briggs, pulling up the file.

The pictures.

The body.

At first, all I saw was blood and bone, a body mangled on the rocks. I knew from Mackenzie that the first two teens had jumped from a cliff, but that wasn’t visible in the picture.

“Do you see it?” The moment the question exited Dean’s mouth, I did. Beside the body, a foot or two removed and even with the victim’s neck, was a plant of some kind, caught between two rocks. At first glance, it looked like it was growing there, but something about the positioning made me question that conclusion.

“I see it. Have you asked Sloane—”

“To ID the plant?” Dean finished. “She says it’s from the genus *hedera*. Ivy. She’s in the process of identifying the exact species, but she gave it a ninety-eight point seven percent chance that it doesn’t grow naturally nearby.”

The fingers on my right hand tightened around the phone. If the plant didn’t grow nearby, that meant that it had been left there, tucked between

two rocks.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Dean murmured. Something in his tone made me think that the first time I’d called, he’d been buried too deep in the UNSUB’s mind to hear the phone ring. He wanted to know if he’d gone too deep, if I saw it, too.

“The first two victims weren’t murdered,” I said. “Sloane said they jumped.”

And yet…

Without being prompted to, I downloaded a photograph of the second suicide victim. Scanning the surroundings didn’t reveal any plants—flowered or otherwise—among the rocks, but there was a small collection of stones.

Four of them, clustered a foot or two to the right of the victim’s neck.

“Mourning,” I said, parsing through it out loud. “Or marking.” I paused, then went ahead and took that logic one step further. “Someone found the bodies before the police did and marked the sites.”

Were you the one who found them? Did you know *them? Mourn for them?*

“What are the chances of the same person finding both suicide victims?” I asked. The markers might have been different, but the positioning was the same.

Dean’s response was a long time in coming. “The chances are good,” he said finally, his voice reverberating in my bones, “if I watched.”

YOU

There have been so many over the years. Kelley was different. Kelley was not your best work. You failed her.

You won't fail again.

CHAPTER 11

"How could our UNSUB have known in advance that there would be something *to* watch?" I asked.

Once was a coincidence. Twice was a pattern. In our line of work, patterns had meaning. Sometimes, they told us about a suspect's routine. Where they lived. How they spent their time. The radius in which they traveled.

But sometimes?

A pattern told us about the killer's need.

"I need to watch," Dean said, his words echoing my thoughts almost exactly. "The last moments…the decisions…"

"How do you know?" I asked again, the question catching my throat. "How did you know those teens were going to jump? Why were you there?"

To watch. The answer to the second question drowned out all possible responses to the first. *To mourn.*

Typically, any indicators of mourning—flowers, dressing the victim, covering the face—were signs that an UNSUB felt some degree of remorse. The posthumous honoring of a victim was an expression of complex emotion, one that allowed a killer to simultaneously make amends and retell the story of the death in their own head.

"You didn't kill the first two," I said, feeling Dean's presence on the other end of the phone line, as surely as if he'd been there in person. "They killed themselves. They jumped."

"Kelley didn't," Dean said, his voice throaty and low. "She didn't jump."

"You didn't mark her body." Those two facts were enough of a divergence from the voyeur's MO that I should have wondered if we were talking about two different people.

But the alternative was that we were dealing with escalation.

You're the watcher. You serve as witness. But Kelley didn't go over the edge of her own volition.

“What if she was supposed to?” I asked suddenly. “What if Kelley was supposed to jump?”

I’d wondered earlier what the killer had seen in Kelley.

“She was vulnerable,” I told Dean. I closed my eyes for a moment, then shifted to Kelley’s perspective. “*I* was vulnerable. I climbed the steeple willingly. I just…I *hurt*.”

Despite Kelley’s father’s objections to the contrary, he’d believed she’d killed herself.

“You were in pain,” Dean said simply, “and now you’re not.”

Maybe I’d been looking at the markers—ivy, stone—all wrong. Maybe they weren’t signs of mourning—or remorse.

Maybe they were symbols of honor. *Release.*

“I trusted you,” I said, still trying to view this from Kelley’s perspective. “I either told you what I was planning…”

“Or,” Dean replied softly, “it was my idea.”

How could an UNSUB have known in advance that two teens were going to kill themselves? *Either they told you—or it was your idea.*

Standing outside the church, looking up, it was too easy to picture Kelley up there, staring down.

“I didn’t jump,” I said, speaking on her behalf. “Maybe I wanted to. Maybe I thought about it. But it didn’t feel right.” I’d recognized earlier that Kelley wouldn’t have wanted a death that would mangle her body beyond recognition. Was that what she’d realized, up on the steeple? “I didn’t jump,” I said fiercely. “I didn’t want to.”

“You were in pain,” Dean repeated what he’d said earlier. “And now you’re not.”

“Is that what you think this is?” I asked. “Not murder, but mercy?”

“There’s something holy about what I do,” Dean replied steadily.

I couldn’t stay in Kelley’s perspective any longer. “Something holy,” I echoed Dean, “about the height and the fall.”

If jumping to her death *hadn’t* been Kelley’s idea, if someone had pushed her toward it, that suggested the manner of death held significance to the UNSUB instead. *You planted the idea in her head. You encouraged it. And when she couldn’t do it…*

“It’s a sacrament,” Dean said. “A rite.”

I thought of Kelley, looking down at the world from high up on a church. She hadn’t wanted to do it. She’d *chosen* not to.

“Kelley didn’t want your mercy,” I said lowly, addressing the nameless, faceless killer with that much more vehemence than before.

“But,” Dean countered, “she needed it.” For the longest time, he was silent on the other end of the line, and I stood outside the church, my face chapped from wind, my limbs like deadweight on my body as I sorted through all I knew.

“What have you read,” Dean asked me finally, fully himself and not speaking for the killer anymore, “about assisted suicide?”

The question took me by surprise, but it shouldn’t have. If our UNSUB had witnessed the first two suicides, if he or she had known they were going to happen, had in any way encouraged them…

That could be seen as assistance.

And Kelley? She’d been “assisted” right over the edge.

“What do you know about mercy killings?” Dean said, amending the term he’d used before. “So-called ‘angels of death’ typically begin with a loved one, often one who has asked for assistance. But after that…” He trailed off for a moment. “They don’t stop, and their victims aren’t always willing.”

“Mercy,” I said, latching on to part of what Dean had said. “Even for the unwilling.”

Like Kelley.

“What’s the typical profile for a mercy killer?” I asked, trying to view this objectively, trying not to think what Kelley’s final moment, rushing toward the ground, realizing she’d been pushed, would have been like.

“Most often,” Dean said, “you’d be looking at someone whose occupation grants them access to victims whose health has degraded to the point that they cannot fight back.”

Kelley had been young and healthy—physically. Mentally, however, she’d struggled. I hadn’t spent enough time on the other two files to know anything about the first two victims, but given that they *had* jumped, I had to assume that they’d had that much in common with Kelley.

Young. Vulnerable. In pain.

We were looking for someone with access to vulnerable teenagers—most likely, an adult. A teacher. A volunteer. A parent. A coach. Someone these kids trusted. Someone who could lead them right up to the brink and watch them fall.

“A mercy killer needs more than access,” I said. “They need a skill set that will allow them to go undetected.”

“Right,” came Dean’s reply. “In most cases, you’d expect some form of medical training.”

Medical training. Access. “Have you ever heard of an angel of death who preys on people with mental health issues?” I asked Dean.

“No.” He hesitated, just for a moment. “But I’d give it ten to one odds that the person who fits that particular profile has some kind of background in the mental health field.”

We were looking for someone with access to vulnerable teens. Someone with experience in mental health. *Someone,* I thought, *with psychological training, who knows exactly what to say to push someone over the edge.*

I barely felt the first drop of rain—or the second. I could see the lighthouse in the distance, and suddenly, I flashed back to the moment when I’d been close—*so close*—to talking Mackenzie down from the ledge.

“Dean,” I said suddenly. “Our killer likes to watch.”

My boyfriend replied, but I couldn’t hear him. I couldn’t form another coherent sentence, because all I could think, as the sky opened up and rain came down in sheets, was that Mackenzie was still out there on that ledge.

Right where you want her.

YOU

Poor little Mackenzie. What she's been through. What she's suffered. She needs help. Your help.

Release.

CHAPTER 12

I took off running. Cape Roane was a small town. The church and the lighthouse were separated by a matter of blocks.

"Call Lia," I told Dean, "or Michael. Tell them we have to get back to Mackenzie."

I didn't wait for a response. I just hung up and kept running. *I never should have left.* It was part and parcel of being a profiler that I tended to get absorbed in cases. I'd been so focused on Kelley and her killer, but I never should have taken my eyes off Mackenzie. From the moment I'd realized that this killer liked to watch…

I should have known you'd be there. Watching.

The lighthouse was closer now, but not close enough. My sides were already starting to burn, my lungs beginning to tighten like a vise in my chest, but I managed to keep enough presence of mind to give my cell phone a verbal command.

"Call Celine."

She answered, and I stopped running, just long enough to catch my breath—long enough to ask: "Mackenzie?"

"Everything is fine here." Celine's response was measured—unnaturally so. "The rain is a problem, but Mackenzie knows that, and we're discussing next steps."

I was soaked. Mackenzie must have been, too. *And the ledge…*

"You need to get her in," I told Celine. "And if you can't, you need to get her psychologist out of the room. Now."

As I reached the lighthouse, I could hear a voice ringing in my mind. *You can trust them, Mackenzie. We've talked about trust, haven't we?*

I'd thought the woman treating Mackenzie was incompetent. She'd said exactly the wrong thing at precisely the right moment to throw a kink in the works. If she'd kept her mouth shut, I could have talked Mackenzie down.

Maybe that was the point.

Thunder crashed, loud enough to jar my bones, but all I could think about was getting to Mackenzie.

Celine and our suspect met me halfway up the lighthouse stairs.

“Agent Delacroix said you needed a consult?” The psychologist didn’t sound annoyed, but her tone was brisk. “Something about adolescent depression?”

I glanced over at Celine. Apparently, she’d had to think on her feet to get the woman out of the room without causing a scene.

Point, Agent Delacroix.

“You should get back to Mackenzie,” I told Celine. “Let her know that Lia and I held up our end of the deal. She can come in.”

Tell her, I didn’t say, *that I know who killed Kelley.*

The psychologist stiffened. “If you’re going to be talking to Mackenzie,” she told Celine, “I should really be there.”

I stepped up, coming even with the woman. “Please,” I said. “This won’t take long, and it’s urgent.”

I could feel Celine looking at me. I was asking her to leave me alone with a woman I believed to be a killer. Under normal circumstances, she would have refused. Based on protocol, she should have.

But with the storm—with Mackenzie still out there—protocol was the least of our worries.

“Don’t worry,” Celine told me, even as her eyes said *Be careful*. “We’ll bring Mackenzie in.”

Celine returned the way she’d come, leaving me alone with the suspect. Now I just had to keep the suspect occupied long enough for Celine and the others to talk Mackenzie down.

Without interference this time.

Also, I thought, hyperaware of the space between my body and the killer’s next to me, *I have to keep you talking long enough for my backup to arrive.*

“We’re trying to get a handle on the motive behind the first two suicides,” I said, wishing Lia were here to sell the lie for me. “Is your practice focused on children Mackenzie’s age and younger, or do you treat older adolescents as well?”

“I primarily work with teenagers,” came the impatient response. “Mackenzie was referred to me by a colleague several months back. I’m afraid that without an in-depth look at your files I cannot comment on the

specific cases you're interested in. I *can* say, however, that children and adolescents have emotional lives every bit as complex as that of adults. Teenagers are individuals, not statistics. I could no more talk to you about a unified motive behind adolescent suicide than I could were we discussing adults."

"I understand," I said, also comprehending that unless I wanted to turn this into a confrontation, sans backup, I needed to give her something to stay for.

You're drawn to pain. People with scars that run deep. The vulnerable ones, in need of your mercy.

"It wasn't that long ago," I said, laying the trap, "that I was a teenager myself."

There was a moment's pause, during which I registered exactly how narrow the stairs we were standing on were.

How easy it would be for her to push me.

"I have to confess, when you said you'd been working with the FBI since you were seventeen, I looked for the signs."

Keep her talking, I thought. *Give her what she wants.*

"The signs of what?" I asked.

"Psychological trauma." Her expression was neutral, but I could feel her stare crawling over my skin. "Working cases like Mackenzie's when you were still a child yourself—that's a lot to take on."

Her tone was open, almost kind, and I remembered everything that Dean and I had concluded about our UNSUB from the files.

You see yourself as an angel of mercy. The first time you saw someone—or helped someone—commit suicide, they were probably in incredible pain, you probably loved them, and they might well have asked for your help.

You know trauma. You recognize it. Some part of you craves it.

Down below, I heard the door open and prayed that it was Lia—just like I prayed that up above, Celine and the crisis negotiator and Mackenzie's mother had talked Mackenzie down.

"I really should be getting back to my patient." The psychologist took a step up, positioning herself above me.

I said the only thing I could think of to stop her in her tracks. "I killed my mother." *You know trauma. You recognize it. You liberate the sufferer from it.* "She made me do it, but it was my hand holding the knife."

I only needed another minute, maybe two. I needed to distract her from the sound of footsteps running up the stairs toward us.

“I dream about it,” I said. “All of it, all the time.”

“I’m going back to Mackenzie.” Her voice was sharp, her movement up the stairs sudden.

I followed and grabbed for her arm. I’d offered her a taste of my pain. It wasn’t enough to keep her here—but I had to keep her away from Mackenzie.

“Let me go.”

“Did you treat the Summers boy?” I asked her, hoping to catch her off guard. “What about the girl who killed herself? Were you *treating* her, too?”

The response was chilling. “What are you trying to imply?”

In for a penny, in for a pound. “I’m implying that you wanted them to kill themselves,” I said, buying precious seconds. “But you overplayed your hand with Kelley.”

She jerked her arm out of my grasp, sending me flying backward into the wall. I steadied myself and prepared for another blow.

It didn’t come.

“It’s a mercy, isn’t it?” I pressed. “What you offer them? What you do? What you *did* to Kelley.”

The footsteps were right upon us now, but I couldn’t afford to turn my back on the killer above me.

She leaned forward. “I had *nothing* to do with what happened to Kelley Peterson.”

I saw a flash of motion out of the corner of my eye. Lia rounded the corner, Michael beside her, gun in hand. He raised it.

“You with the righteously indignant, yet distinctly guilty expression on your face! Hands in the air!”

The psychologist’s gaze darted from me to Michael to Lia.

“Batman said to put your hands in the air,” Lia told her. “And while you’re at it, repeat what you just said about the death of Kelley Peterson.”

MICHAEL, AGE TWELVE

Eleven years ago

"You're feeling annoyed." Michael Townsend offers the headmaster what passes for a twelve-year-old's most charming smile. "But also: secretly impressed with my hijinks. And is that…*anticipation* I see?" Michael gestures toward the headmaster's face. "Asymmetrical lip tilt, dilated pupils. Is someone secretly hoping for a new auditorium? Tennis courts? A donation to the development fund, perhaps?"

Michael's father has a history of buying his son's way out of trouble. Michael has a history of making that difficult.

It's a point of pride, really.

"What is it that you want, Mr. Townsend?" The headmaster has that austere, you-*will*-respect-me tone down. "What exactly are you hoping to accomplish?"

There was a time when Michael tried *not* to make his father angry, but it's easier now that he does the reverse. Now Michael sees the punches coming.

"What am I hoping to accomplish? Boarding school." Michael makes a show of examining his own knuckles as he answers the headmaster's question. "I'm hoping to get kicked out of this fine establishment, at which point my father will have no choice but to send me to boarding school. Possibly a string of boarding schools. Very far away, very in favor of generous donors with troublesome offspring."

"You *want* to be expelled?" The headmaster seems to find that preposterous—and also somewhat concerning.

"I need structure," Michael declares, propping his feet up on the edge of the headmaster's desk. "Discipline."

I need to get away from my father.

"Feet, Mr. Townsend."

Michael leaves his feet exactly where they are. He hears the secretary enter the room behind him. "Thatcher Townsend will be here shortly," she

announces.

Michael can feel the muscles in his shoulders and back start to tense. He won't let them. "Wonderful man, my father," he comments.

That gets a response from the headmaster: a subtle curl of his upper lip, too slight for 99 percent of the population to see. Michael recognizes the emotion for what it is. *Distaste, not quite disgust.*

The headmaster doesn't think that Michael's father is a wonderful man. *He knows.*

"You're a school official." Michael keeps his voice light and pleasant. "That makes you a mandatory reporter, doesn't it?"

The headmaster stiffens. "You should wait outside."

"I will be thrilled to wait outside," Michael promises, "after I tell you a tale of great woe." He pauses. "You might want to pull up my attendance records as corroboration."

"Mr. Townsend—"

Michael meets his gaze. "It would be unfortunate for you to have to report one of your biggest donors for suspected child abuse." Michael doesn't enjoy thinking of himself as *abused*, so he doesn't dwell on the word.

He relishes the moment.

"Almost as unfortunate," he adds, "as if I were to report you for *not* reporting one of your biggest donors." Michael allows his feet to thump down on the floor and leans forward. "Or," he says, his voice low, "you could expel me, and I could refrain from telling you anything *unfortunate* at all."

CHAPTER 13

"I didn't push Kelley Peterson. I didn't kill her. I didn't even *know* her."

The suspect's hands were in the air. I took one step away from her, then another, easing down the staircase toward Michael and—

"True."

I whipped my head toward Lia, who shrugged. "She's telling the truth.

My heart skipped a beat, and I looked for a loophole in the psychologist's statement. *You didn't push Kelley. You didn't kill her. You didn't even know her.*

"Then why, pray tell," Michael said, his gun still pointed toward her, "do you feel guilty?"

"I don't—"

"Head tilted downward, forehead fighting furrows, gaze averted, mouth drooping—don't even get me started on the direction your eyebrows are arching." Michael lowered his weapon—most likely to put her at ease. "That combination puts you somewhere between shame and guilt, even if that lovely narrowing of your eyes and the way your muscles just tightened suggest you're pissed, too."

You didn't push Kelley. You didn't kill her. You feel guilty. I tried to make the situation compute, but it didn't, because the UNSUB we were looking for might have mourned victims, might even have felt remorse at the way things had to be, but that wasn't the dominant emotion in these kills. Neither was anger.

Exaltation. Release.

"You didn't kill Kelley," I said, trying a new tack. "You *saved* her. You didn't push her; you set her free. And you feel guilty because you weren't able to honor her passing, the way you did with the others.…"

"No," the psychologist snapped. "I feel guilty because when *Mackenzie* told me that Kelley was pushed, I didn't believe her. I feel guilty that I left my most vulnerable patient—on a ledge that's getting slicker by the second—for this."

You feel guilty, I thought reflexively, *because if you'd kept your mouth shut when I was on the verge of talking Mackenzie down, she might not still be up there.*

That wasn't me profiling the killer. That was me profiling the woman standing two steps above me—and that distinction was enough to send my heart pounding in my ears.

As if from a great distance, I heard Lia confirm that every word that the psychologist had just spoken was true. Her guilt was centered on Mackenzie.

You're the reason she's still in such a precarious position. A crack of thunder drowned out every other noise in the stairwell, but not the deafening roar of my own thoughts. *But you're not the only reason.*

Mackenzie's psychologist wasn't the only one who'd spoken up and whose words had kept Mackenzie out on that ledge. *You weren't the only person in that room with a background in psychology, motivation, mental illness, and the human mind.*

I had similar training—and I was willing to lay a lot of money on it that any crisis negotiator worth his salt had the same.

You're the one in control here, Quentin Nichols had told Mackenzie. *It's your decision.*

I'd assumed that he hadn't realized how Mackenzie would take a man in a position of power *giving* her control, like it was his to dole out. But in Quentin Nichols's line of work, he *had* to know what to say, how to manipulate a target, how to defuse a dangerous situation…

Or how to blow it up.

YOU

The boards are off the windows. It's just you and Mackenzie now, separated by feet.

Soon to be inches.

Clearing the room before the FBI agent returned was the right call. You promised Mackenzie's mother that this would be over shortly.

It will be.

You wouldn't have chosen Mackenzie. She's younger than Cara was—younger than you were when Cara died—but she's hurting. You can see that. You feel it. This child is hurting. She will always hurt.

She needs you.

You didn't arrange for Mackenzie to be standing on that ledge. You didn't befriend her, didn't mentor her, didn't lead her to this place. She's not like the others, but she needs you all the same.

Needs this.

And after Kelley? Your heart ticks up a beat. You need this, too.

CHAPTER 14

I pushed past the psychologist and bolted up the stairs, aware that Michael and Lia were following on my heels, but focused only on Mackenzie. *The ledge. It's slick now. You're shivering. What's he saying to you?*

What is he nudging you to do?

I reached the ninth-story landing to find Mrs. McBride and the fireman standing to one side. Celine was on the other side of them, fighting with the door to the lightroom. It was jammed.

The ladder was up.

"Mackenzie let us take the boards off the window," Mrs. McBride told me, breathless, glowing, and fighting tears. "Quentin said she needed space—but she's coming down."

They'd left her alone with him—and based on the trouble Celine was having with the door, he'd locked them out.

"Nichols isn't talking her *down*," I told Celine, keeping my voice low. "We have to get in there. *Now*."

It took time for the fireman to cut through the door, time for Celine to pull down what was left of the ladder.

Time we didn't have.

Per protocol, Agent Delacroix pulled herself up first. I followed a heartbeat later—screw protocol. On the far side of the room, Mackenzie stood ramrod still on the ledge, the window open, the remains of the barricade scattered on the floor.

Quentin Nichols stood between her and us—close enough that he could have pulled Mackenzie in.

If he'd wanted to.

"It's not your fault you're different," the crisis specialist was murmuring. "I'm betting that no one asked you, back then, if you wanted to be saved. If there was anything left worth saving."

Lightning flashed behind Mackenzie, sending an almost tactile shock through the room. But Mackenzie didn't jolt. Her muscles held steady. As rain and wind beat at her, her eyes stayed focused.

On the man in front of her.

“You told yourself that you came up here for Kelley, but, Mackenzie? If this were just about Kelley, you wouldn’t still be out there.” Quentin Nichols sounded tender.

He sounded sure.

“There’s no shame,” he said, “in taking control and deciding for yourself what you need.”

Control. Decide. His word choices were deliberate—and given the way Mackenzie’s mind worked, terrifying. He shifted his weight forward, so slightly that it might not have been visible to his target on the ledge.

She would have felt it all the same.

You know what she needs. I silently addressed Quentin. *You know that left to her own devices, she might not do it.*

“He pushed Kelley.” I said the one thing guaranteed to draw the UNSUB’s attention my way—the one thing sure to break through to Mackenzie. “She wouldn’t jump, so he pushed her.”

“I let her go,” Nichols corrected, his attention still focused on Mackenzie, his tone still gentle. “Kelley was hurting. Some pain gets better—but some doesn’t. What you’ve lived through, Mackenzie? The fight you fight every day? It’s not going away.”

It felt like he was telling me that—not just her.

“Part of you will always be in that shack,” he continued softly, the sudden cruelty of that statement jarring. “And as long as you’re there—the man responsible wins.”

“No,” I said, my voice like a gunshot that ricocheted through the lightroom. “You win, Mackenzie, because you’re alive. Because you survived. Because that son of a bitch is in the ground, and Mackenzie McBride is still dancing.”

“Step back from the window.” Celine had her weapon raised and aimed at Nichols. The crisis negotiator didn’t even seem to register it.

Mercy is what matters. What you and only you can give Mackenzie—no one can take that away.

“Your FBI friends think you’ll come in,” he told the girl on the ledge. “They think I’m the one keeping you out there. They think you’re that easily manipulated—that you’re helpless and weak, and if they tell you fairy tales, you’ll believe them. But I’ll tell you the truth.” He paused, his expression tender. “I had a sister like you. Bad things happened to her. Like

you. I didn’t understand then, but I do now. Some wounds can’t heal. Some *people* can’t heal.” He took a step toward her this time—a full step. “But you don’t have to do this—you don’t have to *end* this—alone.”

“He killed Kelley,” I repeated, close to shouting now to be heard over the storm, to make her hear me. “He *wants* you to jump.” No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn’t tell Mackenzie that everything he’d said was a lie, because it wasn’t. Even when wounds healed, the scars remained. She’d always feel them.

But this was her body. Her choice. Her life.

“Dance,” I told her. She was on a ledge. It was pouring rain. That was the last thing I should have advised, but in that four-by-four shack, when she was just a little girl, Mackenzie had danced—hours upon hours, again and again, because it was *her* body.

Because no one was going to take that away.

“Don’t listen to him, Mackenzie. *Dance*.”

Slowly, she raised her arms, rounding them in front of her, then allowing them to part. She shifted her weight to one foot, the other toe pointing.

For the first time since we’d entered the room, Quentin Nichols turned to face Celine and me head-on.

“Hands in the air!” Celine barked. “On the ground!”

On some level, I was aware that Michael and Lia had joined us, that Celine had backup. But my attention was focused solely on the man in front of me.

The man who was close enough to Mackenzie to reach out and touch her.

“I didn’t plan this,” he told me.

You didn’t search Mackenzie out. You didn’t groom her. You didn’t lead her slowly toward this, day by day.

“You planned the others,” I countered. “You found them. You listened to them.” I swallowed. “You made them trust you.”

“I volunteer,” Quentin said, closing his eyes for just a moment, the expression on his face eerily wistful. “I coach. I work with the youth group at the church.”

He didn’t just have one point of access, one set of hunting grounds. He’d cultivated several.

“There have been others,” I stated, reading into that. “Over the years.”

“I’m there for them. I help when I can. And when I can’t…” He bowed his head, the motion bordering on ceremonial. “I offer release.”

Behind him, Mackenzie stopped dancing. Her eyes meeting mine, she sank slowly to a sitting position.

She’s coming in.

I tried not to show even a hint of relief.

“What I do is a duty,” Nichols was saying, “not a pleasure.”

“It’s mercy,” I said. I had to keep his attention on me. I couldn’t let him turn around.

For a moment, I thought it was working, and then, without warning, he whirled. He saw Mackenzie. She froze. Her legs were dangling into the room. She was almost safe.

You will save her. He moved.

I lunged forward, knowing even as I did that I couldn’t get to him before he reached her. A gunshot went off. My ears ringing, I hit the ground. The impact knocked the breath from my chest. I looked up, forcing my eyes to the ledge.

Mackenzie was sitting there.

Nichols was down.

Celine approached him, her freshly fired gun still in her hands. Taking use of the cover she provided, Michael knelt to feel for a pulse. I forced my eyes from the two of them, pulled myself up off the ground, and stumbled toward Mackenzie.

She slid off the ledge, into my arms. Beside us, Michael looked at Celine and shook his head.

Nichols was gone.

I wrapped my arms around Mackenzie, blocking the dead body from view, but she fought my hold and stepped aside. She wanted to see it.

To see *him*.

“For the record…” Lia managed to pull Mackenzie’s attention away from the killer’s corpse. “When he said that what he tried to do to you—what he did to the others—wasn’t a pleasure?” Lia spat in the dead’s man direction. “He lied.”

LIA, AGE TWELVE

Eleven years earlier

The girl sits down, and her mother brushes her hair. Long, even strokes. "You're lucky, you know." The brush stills, then the woman wielding it corrects herself. "Blessed."

Blessed because the leader has chosen her.

Blessed because she's favored by God.

What a joke.

"Sadie." Her mother says the name she was given at birth, the one *he* knows. "This *is* a blessing."

It would have been easier if she couldn't hear, plain as day, that Mama believes that.

Believes in him.

The girl turns. She needs, just this once, for her mother to see the truth—to see her.

"I don't have visions." Truths get more potent the longer you keep them from your tongue. There's *years* of power in this one. "I never have. He doesn't have them, either. He's a liar. I'm a better one, and I will literally rip his eyes out of their sockets the next time he comes to my bed."

She was nine the first time. With the right lies—the right truths—she put him off. Until she was twelve.

"This isn't you." Her mother backs away, frightened, but the girl called Sadie—the girl who used to *be* Sadie—knows the truth.

After all, her mother was the one who told her, all those years ago—*Pretend it's not you. Whatever happens, pretend that it isn't happening to you.*

Sadie is good at pretending. *Lia* is better. After all, she's pretended to be Sadie all these years.

"I love you, Mama." Lia can make that sound and feel true without having to worry about whether or not it still is. "Even though you're planning on telling him everything I tell you, even though you'll stand back

and let him put me in a hole in the ground, even though you'll watch me starving and dying of thirst and look straight through me until he gives me permission to exist again—*I love you*."

Her mother is wearing a bracelet made of thorns—penance. She removes it, tries to force it around her daughter's wrist.

Lia lets her. As the thorns bite into her flesh, she lets her eyelashes flutter. Her face visibly softens. She dons the Sadie mask. "You did well, Mama." The words are gentle, and they sound true-true-true. Lia is leaving tonight. She knows now that no one will be coming with her. She can feel the last bit of Sadie flickering inside of her like a candle, ready to die.

She lets Sadie caress the side of her mother's face, one last time.

"Your faith is pure." Lia knows how to sell a lie, and nine-tenths of it is telling people exactly what they want to hear.

"This was a test?" Her mother is breathless. Questions can't be lies, but Lia hears the hesitation, the uncertainty. Some part of Mama has always known what the leader does to those, like Sadie, whom he calls blessed.

But the others? They aren't like Sadie, aren't like *Lia*. They don't know when someone is lying, when the leader is spitting falsehoods. They can't lie nearly so convincingly themselves.

This is the truth: there is blood on Sadie's hands, on *Lia*'s. One lie—the right lie—can doom a man. She wishes a lie could save her mother.

He's going to kill you someday. All of you.

Lia won't be here to die. "It was a test," she confirms gently. She leans forward, touches her forehead to her mother's. "Tell me you love me."

It's Lia who turns, not Sadie. It's Lia whose hair her mother is brushing. She'll always be Lia now.

"I love you, Sadie."

It would be easier, for Lia, if that were a lie.

CHAPTER 15

"Worst thing about this case." Dean sat at the end of my bed. It had taken three days—and Briggs calling in a favor—for my boyfriend to get twenty-four hours of leave from Quantico. Given that Briggs had also had to grease the wheels to excuse Michael's better-to-ask-for-forgiveness-than-permission trip to Maine, I was starting to suspect that someone at the FBI Academy was going to be read in on the Naturals program fairly soon.

"The worst thing about this case…" I took my time to feel the weight of the words. "The worst thing is knowing that Mackenzie could have died because I got it wrong."

I'd left a vulnerable twelve-year-old alone with a killer whose specialty was exploiting vulnerabilities. I knew better than to make assumptions. I knew how easily one wrong mental turn could lead even the strongest profiler astray.

And yet…

Dean took my hand in his and turned it over so that he could trace his thumb along the lines of my palm. "Are you sure that the worst part wasn't *why* you got it wrong?"

Being a Natural didn't make a person infallible. I knew that, but I'd started working with the Bureau young enough that I also had a healthy amount of experience under my belt. Normally, when I made mistakes, they were smaller.

Normally, I self-corrected.

I didn't need to turn too much of my profiler's eye inward to know why it had been far too easy for me to see a psychologist as the enemy. I'd thought from the beginning that the woman didn't—and couldn't—understand what Mackenzie had been through.

Just like the Bureau psychologist I'd been assigned when I was a teenager had never understood me.

"You think I should see someone." I let my fingers curl slowly into a fist, and Dean cupped his hand around mine.

"I think it might help." His lips brushed, white-hot, over my knuckles.

As much as I'd fought to ignore my own scars, I'd never tried to make Dean forget his. I had never—and would never—pretend that the worst moments of his life didn't matter. I knew and accepted that *Behavior, Personality, Environment* wasn't a one-time calculation, that everything we did and experienced became a part of us.

I knew that the things that happened when we were young had the longest to burrow in.

Without our particular childhoods, none of us would have been Naturals. Lia wouldn't have been Lia without growing up in the cult. Sloane had always had an affinity for numbers, but isolation had turned them into a coping mechanism. Michael's sensitivity to emotions developed as a survival skill, and Dean understood killers because he'd been raised to be one. I'd long since accepted the role that my own childhood had played in making me a Natural profiler.

Why was it so much harder to accept that there were other traumas whose effects had formed me just as much?

"Quentin Nichols had a sister." I leaned back against the headboard, my fingers intertwining themselves with Dean's. It was easier—always—to talk about someone other than myself. "She killed herself when she was eighteen. Quentin was four years younger."

"He was there." Dean didn't make that a question.

"His family blamed him for not being able to stop it." That was what I'd been able to piece together, after the fact. "According to people who knew him, Nichols always said that was why he went into crisis negotiation—to save lives. But in reality…" I closed my eyes, just for a moment, knowing that Dean deserved more than me talking about the case because it was easier than addressing the elephant in the room.

"In reality," I continued, opening my eyes to his deep brown ones, "Nichols convinced himself that he *had* saved his sister. He was there for her, in the end. He told her it was okay. He let her go."

Dean's head tilted down toward mine. "He gave her what mercy he could."

Dean and I had always acknowledged that to do what we did, a person needed a bit of monster in them. That was why he understood Nichols, why I could see the motive and understand it myself.

"I killed my mother." I'd said those words to Mackenzie's psychologist. I could say them to Dean now. "I was holding the knife. I felt it go into her

chest.”

“You couldn’t stop it,” Dean told me. “The knife was in your hands. Her fingers wrapped around yours.”

I laid my hand on his chest. There was a spot, just inside the rib cage…

“You need to talk to someone,” Dean told me.

I closed my eyes. “I know.” For almost a minute, I sat there, listening to the sound of his heart, feeling it beat beneath my palm.

“Best part of this case.” Dean always knew exactly when I’d reached my limit, exactly how to distract me. He laid his hand on my chest. I could feel the warmth of it through my thin white T-shirt. I could feel him feeling my heartbeat.

“The best part of this case was Mackenzie.” I didn’t even have to think about my answer. “Before she came in—she danced.”

She was going to survive, just like she always had.

“You talked to her parents?” Dean asked.

I nodded. “She’ll come to us when she’s fifteen—if she still wants to.”

Mackenzie’s parents were hedging their bets on their daughter joining the Naturals program, but the profiler in me knew that their daughter wouldn’t change her mind about this. She’d spend the next three years convincing them that normal wasn’t an option.

Not for her.

Not anymore.

Without warning, Dean’s mouth descended over mine. I rose up to meet him, my hands on either side of his face, my legs wrapping themselves around his body.

I wasn’t normal.

Neither was he.

“The new girl can’t have my room.” The voice that issued that statement was completely matter-of-fact and utterly unbothered by what Dean and I were up to on the bed.

We split apart.

Laurel tilted her head to one side. “Do you prefer the screams,” she asked Dean softly, “or the blood?”

There was a single beat of silence, and then Lia sauntered into the room behind my little sister.

“I give that a nine out of ten for delivery,” Lia told Laurel. “But a ten for creepy content.”

Laurel shrugged, her expression unchanging. “I try.”

Most of the time, Laurel tried *not* to be creepy—and failed. But my sister was strangely at ease with Lia, who was already training her to use her unnatural solemnity to her advantage *and* to spot lies.

“The new girl can’t have my room when she gets here,” Laurel repeated emphatically. “I don’t care if it’s not for another three years.”

Technically, my grandmother was the one raising my sister. Technically, our base of operations was not Laurel’s house. Technically, she didn’t *have* a room here, but when we’d returned from this case, we’d found the bedroom Laurel sometimes stayed in completely decorated with ponies.

I belong here. That was what the expression on Laurel’s tiny face said. Her mouth, in contrast, addressed Dean. “I was just messing with you about the blood.” She paused. “And the screams.”

I glanced at Lia, and she shrugged, which I took to mean that statement was *mostly* true.

“Come on, short stuff.” Lia tweaked the end of Laurel’s ponytail. “Let’s leave Angsty and the Brood here to their special alone time, and I’ll teach you how to convince your teacher that the dog really did eat your homework.”

Before Lia could actually leave Dean and me to our own devices, her cell phone rang.

“Video call,” she told us. “It’s Sloane.”

It took all of two seconds before Lia had helped herself to a slice of the bed. The moment she did, Laurel took off.

“Hey, Sloane.” Lia answered and angled the phone’s screen so that Dean and I could see.

“The nine millimeter Luger was designed by a German weapons manufacturer in 1902.” Sloane’s greeting was unconventional, if not entirely unexpected. “In 2015, the FBI shifted to using a one-hundred-and-forty-seven grain nine millimeter Gold Dot G2 for ammunition.”

Lia took one for the team and responded to that statement. “Either you’re in the middle of weapons training, or you’ve spent the past forty-eight hours with Celine.”

Special Agent Delacroix had fired a shot in the line of duty. She’d saved Mackenzie’s life—and taken the life of a killer. There was a process that had to be followed in the wake of an event like that. Celine had to be cleared—legally and psychologically—before she could return to the field.

“Celine needs me.” Sloane fiddled with something, though I couldn’t quite make out what she held between her fingers. “No one has ever needed me before.”

“We all need you,” Dean told her. Sloane was our light in the darkness.

“Dean,” Sloane said very seriously, “I hope this is not oversharing, but Celine needs me in a *very different way.*” Knowing Sloane, I half expected her to share exactly what that very different way entailed—possibly with graphs, almost certainly with precise description of angles and body parts—but she spared us the explicit details and opted instead for another statistic. “Did you know that forty-six percent of Texans meditate at least once a week?”

“You don’t say.” Lia grinned.

Sloane frowned into the camera. “I just *did* say. And, Cassie? I looked into those brothers in Texas, and the thing is, they aren’t.”

“Aren’t brothers?” I asked.

“Aren’t in Texas,” Sloane corrected. “At least, they’re not there anymore. The whole family picked up and moved with no warning. Even weirder? I can’t figure out where they went.”

“And if *you* can’t figure it out…” Michael plopped down beside Sloane and squeezed into the frame. “There’s a very good chance they’re off the grid.”

“A ninety-seven point four percent chance,” Sloane clarified.

“Exactly,” Michael declared. “Now, on a somewhat unrelated note: adorable onesies for the Sterling-Briggs Wonder Twins, yay or nay?”

He held up what appeared to be a custom-made infant onesie emblazoned with the words SPECIAL AGENT BABY.

“I was thinking of putting something inappropriate, but humorous and endearing, on the back,” he clarified.

There were nine and a half weeks left until Michael and Sloane would be home. Nine and a half weeks before I could look at Dean and know he wasn’t leaving the next day.

Three years until Mackenzie would join the program.

Who knew how long to find the brothers.

But Briggs and Sterling’s twins were expected to make their arrival early—and that meant any day.

“I vote yes on the onesies,” I declared.

“All in favor?” Sloane asked formally.

I leaned back against Dean, and Lia leaned against me before we all chorused in unison, “Aye.”

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"This one's all you, Rodriguez."

"No way. I took the drunk tank after the Bison Day parade."

"Bison Day? Try Oktoberfest at the senior citizen center."

"And who got stuck with the biter the next day?"

Officer Macalister Dodd—Mackie to his friends—had the general sense that it would not be prudent to interrupt the back-and-forth between the two more senior Magnolia County police officers arguing in the bullpen. Rodriguez and O'Connell had both clocked five years on the force.

This was Mackie's second week.

"I've got three letters and one word for you, Rodriguez: *PTA brawl*."

Mackie shifted his weight slightly from his right leg to his left. Big mistake. In unison, Rodriguez and O'Connell turned to look at him.

"Rookie!"

Never had two police officers been so delighted to see a third. Mackie set his mouth into a grim line and squared his shoulders.

"What have we got?" he said gruffly. "Drunk and disorderly? Domestic disturbance?"

In answer, O'Connell clapped him on the shoulder and steered him toward the holding cell. "Godspeed, rookie."

As they rounded the corner, Mackie expected to see a perp: belligerent, possibly on the burly side. Instead, he saw four teenage girls wearing elbow-length gloves and what appeared to be ball gowns.

White ball gowns.

"What the hell is this?" Mackie asked.

Rodriguez lowered his voice. "This is what we call a B.Y.H."

"B.Y.H.?" Mackie glanced back at the girls. One of them was standing primly, her gloved hands folded in front of her body. The girl next to her was crying daintily and wheezing something that sounded suspiciously like the Lord's prayer. The third girl stared straight at Mackie, the edges of her pink-glossed lips quirking slowly upward as she raked her gaze over his body.

And the fourth girl?

She was picking the lock.

The other officers turned to leave.

“Rodriguez?” Mackie called after them. “O’Connell?”

No response.

“What’s a B.Y.H.?”

The girl who’d been assessing him took a step forward. She batted her eyelashes at Mackie and offered him a sweet-tea smile.

“Why, officer,” she said. “Bless your heart.”

NINE MONTHS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

Catcalling me was a mistake that most of the customers and mechanics at Big Jim's Garage only made once. Unfortunately, the owner of this particular Dodge Ram was the type of person who put his paycheck into souping up a *Dodge Ram*. That—and the urinating stick figure on his back window—was pretty much the only forewarning I needed about the way this was about to go down.

People were fundamentally predictable. If you stopped expecting them to surprise you, they couldn't disappoint.

And speaking of disappointment… I turned my attention from the Ram's engine to the Ram's owner, who apparently considered whistling at a girl to be a compliment, and commenting on the shape of her ass to be the absolute height of courtship.

"It's times like this," I told him, "that you have to ask yourself: Is it wise to sexually harass someone who has both wire cutters and access to your brake lines?"

The man blinked. Once. Twice. Three times. And then he leaned forward. "Honey, you can access my brake lines any time you want."

If you know what I mean, I added silently. *In three…two…*

"If you know what I mean."

"It's times like this," I said meditatively, "that you have to ask yourself: Is it wise to offer to bare your man-parts for someone who is both patently uninterested and holding wire cutters?"

"Sawyer!" Big Jim intervened before I could so much as give a snip of the wire cutters in a southward direction. "I've got this one."

I'd started badgering Big Jim to let me get my hands greasy when I was twelve. He almost certainly knew that I'd *already* fixed the Ram and that if he left me to my own devices, this wouldn't end well.

For the customer.

"Aw hell, Big Jim," the man complained. "We were just having fun."

I'd spent most of my childhood going from one obsessive interest to another. Car engines had been one of them. Before that, it had been

telenovelas, and afterward, I'd spent a year reading everything I could find about medieval weapons.

"You don't mind a little fun, do you, sweetheart?" Mr. Souped-Up Dodge Ram clapped a hand onto my shoulder and compounded his sins by squeezing my neck.

Big Jim groaned as I turned my full attention to the real charmer beside me.

"Allow me to quote for you," I said in an absolute deadpan, "from *Sayforth's Encyclopedia of Archaic Torture*."

One of the finer points of chivalry south of the Mason-Dixon Line was that men like Big Jim Thompson didn't fire girls like me no matter how explicitly we described alligator shears to customers in want of castration.

Fairly certain I'd ensured the Ram's owner wouldn't make the same mistake a *third* time, I stopped by The Holler on the way home to pick up my mom's tips from the night before.

"How's trouble?" My mom's boss was named Trick. He had five children, eighteen grandchildren, and at least three visible scars from breaking up bar fights. He'd greeted me the exact same way every time he'd seen me since I was four.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," I said.

"Here for your mom's tips?" That question came from Trick's oldest grandson, who was restocking the liquor behind the bar. This was a family business in a family town. The entire population was just over eight thousand. You couldn't throw a rock without it bouncing off three people who were related to each other.

And then there was my mom—and me.

"Here for tips," I confirmed. My mom wasn't exactly known for her financial acumen or the steadfastness with which she made it home after a late shift. I'd been balancing our household budget since I was nine—around the same time that I'd developed sequential interests in lock-picking, the Westminster Dog Show, and fixing the perfect martini.

"Here you go, sweetheart." Trick handed me an envelope that was thicker than I'd expected. "Don't blow it all in one place."

I snorted. The money would go to rent and food. I wasn't exactly the type to party. I might, in fact, have had a bit of a reputation for being

antisocial.

See also: my willingness to threaten castration.

Before Trick could issue an invitation for me to join the whole family at his daughter-in-law's house for dinner, I made my excuses and ducked out of the bar. Home sweet home was only two blocks over and one block up. Technically, our house was a one-bedroom, but we'd walled off two-thirds of the living room with dollar-store shower curtains when I was nine.

"Mom?" I called out as I stepped over the threshold. There was an element of ritual to calling her name, even when she wasn't home. Even if she was on a bender—or if she'd fallen for a new man, experienced another religious conversion, or developed a deep-seated need to commune with her better angels under the watchful eyes of a roadside psychic.

I'd come by my habit of hopping from one interest to the next honestly, even if her restlessness was less focused and a little more self-destructive than my own.

Almost on cue, my cell phone rang. I answered.

"Baby, you will not believe what happened last night." My mom never bothered with salutations.

"Are you still in the continental United States, are you in need of bail money, and do I have a new daddy?"

My mom laughed. "You're my everything. You know that, right?"

"I know that we're almost out of milk," I replied, removing the carton from the fridge and taking a swig. "And I know that someone was an *excellent* tipper last night."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. I'd guessed right this time. It was a guy, and she'd met him at The Holler the night before.

"You'll be okay, won't you?" she asked softly. "Just for a few days?"

I was a big believer in absolute honesty: say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't ask a question if you don't want to know the answer.

But it was different with my mom.

"I reserve the right to assess the symmetry of his features and the cheesiness of his pickup lines when you get back."

"Sawyer." My mom was serious—or at least as serious as she got.

"I'll be fine," I said. "I always am."

She was quiet for several seconds. Ellie Taft was many things, but above all, she was someone who'd tried as hard as she could for as long as she could—for me.

“Sawyer,” she said quietly. “I love you.”

I knew my line, had known it since my brief obsession with the most quotable movie lines of all time when I was five. “I know.”

I hung up the phone before she could. I was halfway to finishing off the milk when the front door—in desperate need of both WD-40 and a new lock—creaked open. I turned toward the sound, running the algorithm to determine who might be dropping by unannounced.

Doris from next door lost her cat an average of 1.2 times per week.

Big Jim and Trick had matching habits of checking up on me, like they couldn’t remember I was eighteen, not eight.

The guy with the Dodge Ram. He could have followed me. That wasn’t a thought so much as instinct. My hand hovered over the knife drawer as a figure stepped into the house.

“I do hope your mother buys Wūsthof,” the intruder commented, observing the position of my hand. “Wūsthof knives are just *so* much sharper than generic.”

I blinked, but when my eyes opened again, the woman was still standing there, coiffed within an inch of her life and be-suited in a blue silk jacket and matching skirt that made me wonder if she’d mistaken our decades-old house for a charitable luncheon. The stranger said nothing to indicate why she’d let herself in or how she could justify sounding more dismayed at the idea of my mom having purchased off-brand knives than the prospect that I might be preparing to draw one.

“You favor your mother,” she commented.

I wasn’t sure how she expected me to reply to that statement, so I went with my gut. “You look like a bichon frise.”

“Pardon me?”

It’s a breed of dog that looks like a very small, very sturdy powder puff. Since absolute honesty didn’t require that I say *every* thought that crossed my mind, I opted for a modified truth. “You look like your haircut cost more than my car.”

The woman—I put her age in her early sixties—tilted her head slightly to one side. “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

She had a Southern accent—less twang and more drawl than my own. *Com-pluh-mehnt or an* in-*suhlt?*

“That depends on your perspective more than mine.”

She smiled slightly, like I'd said something *just darling* but not actually amusing. "Your name is Sawyer." After informing me of that fact, she paused. "You don't know who I am, do you?" Clearly, that was a rhetorical question, because she didn't wait for a reply. "Why don't I spare us the dramatics?"

Her smile broadened, warm in the way that a shower is warm, right before someone flushes the toilet.

"My name," she continued in a tone to match the smile, "is Lillian Taft. I'm your maternal grandmother."

My grandmother, I thought, trying to process the situation, *looks like a bichon frise.*

"Your mother and I had a bit of a falling-out before you were born." Lillian was apparently the kind of person who would have referred to a Category 5 hurricane as *a bit of a drizzle*. "I think it's high time to put that bit of history to rest, don't you?"

I was one rhetorical question away from going for the knife drawer again, so I attempted to cut to the chase. "You didn't come here looking for my mother."

"You don't miss much, Miss Sawyer." Lillian's voice was soft and feminine. I got the feeling she didn't miss much either. "I'd like to make you an offer."

An offer? I was suddenly reminded of who I was dealing with here. Lillian Taft wasn't a powder puff. She was the merciless, dictatorial matriarch who'd kicked my pregnant mother out of her house at the ripe old age of seventeen.

I stalked to the front door and retrieved the Post-it I'd placed next to the doorbell when our house had been hit with door-to-door evangelists two weeks in a row. I turned and offered the handwritten notice to the woman who'd raised my mother. Her perfectly manicured fingertips plucked the Post-it from my grasp.

"'No soliciting,'" my grandmother read.

"Except for Girl Scout cookies," I added helpfully. I'd gotten kicked out of the local Scout troop during my morbid true crime and facts-about-autopsies phase, but I still had a weakness for Thin Mints.

Lillian pursed her lips and amended her previous statement. "'No soliciting except for Girl Scout cookies.'"

I saw the precise moment that she registered what I was saying: I wasn't interested in her *offer*. Whatever she was selling, I wasn't buying.

An instant later, it was like I'd said nothing at all. "I'll be frank, Sawyer," she said, showing a kind of candy-coated steel I'd never seen in my mom. "Your mother chose this path. You didn't." She pressed her lips together, just for a moment. "I happen to think you deserve more."

"More than off-brand knives and drinking straight from the carton?" I shot back. Two could play the rhetorical question game.

Unfortunately, the great Lillian Taft had apparently never met a rhetorical question she was not fully capable of answering. "More than a G.E.D., a career path with no hope of advancement, and a mother who's less responsible now than she was at sixteen."

Were she not an aging Southern belle with a reputation to uphold, my grandmother might have followed that statement by throwing her hands into touchdown position and declaring, "*Burn!*"

Instead, she laid a hand over her heart. "You deserve opportunities you'll never have here."

The people in this town were good people. This was a good place. But it wasn't *my* place. Even in the best of times, part of me had always felt like I was just passing through.

A muscle in my throat tightened. "You don't know me."

That got a pause out of her—and not a calculated one. "I could," she replied finally. "I could know you. And *you* could find yourself in the position to attend any college of your choosing and graduate debt free."

CHAPTER 2

There was a contract. An honest-to-God, written-in-legalese, sign-on-the-dotted-line *contract.*

"Seriously?"

Lillian waved away the question. "Let's not get bogged down in the details."

"Of course not," I said, thumbing through the nine-page appendix. "Why would I go to the trouble of reading the terms before I sell you my soul?"

"The contract is for your protection," my grandmother insisted. "Otherwise, what's to keep me from reneging on my end of the deal once yours is complete?"

"A sense of honor and any desire whatsoever for an ongoing relationship?" I suggested.

Lillian arched an eyebrow. "Are you willing to bet your college education on my honor?"

I knew plenty of people who'd gone to college. I also knew a lot of people who hadn't.

I read the contract. I wasn't even sure why. I was not going to move in with her for an entire year. I was not going to walk away from my home, my life, my mother for—

"*Five hundred thousand dollars?*" I may have punctuated that amount with an expletive or two.

"Have you been listening to rap music?" my grandmother demanded.

"You said you'd pay for *college*." I tore my gaze from the contract. Even just reading it made me feel like I'd let the guy with the Dodge Ram tuck a couple of ones into my bikini. "You didn't say anything about handing me a check for half a million dollars."

"It won't be a check," my grandmother said, as if that was the real issue here. "It will be a trust. College, graduate school, living expenses, study abroad, transportation, tutors—these things add up."

These things.

“Say it,” I told her, unable to believe that anyone could shrug off that amount of money. “Say that you’re offering me five hundred thousand dollars to live with you for a year.”

“Money isn’t something we talk about, Sawyer. It’s something we have.”

I stared at her, waiting for the punch line.

There was no punch line.

“You came here expecting me to say yes.” I didn’t phrase that sentence as a question, because it wasn’t one.

“I suppose that I did,” Lillian allowed.

“Why?”

I wanted her to actually say that she’d assumed that I could be bought. I wanted to hear her admit that she thought so little of me—and so little of my mom—that there had been no doubt in her mind that I’d jump at the chance to take her devil of a deal.

“I suppose,” Lillian said finally, “that you remind me a bit of myself. And were I in your position, sweet girl…” She laid a hand on my cheek. “I would surely jump at the chance to identify and locate my biological father.”

CHAPTER 3

My mom—in between alternating bouts of pretending that I'd been immaculately conceived, cursing the male of the species, and getting tipsy and nostalgic about her first time—had told me exactly three things about my mystery father.

She'd only slept with him once.

He hated fish.

He wasn't looking for a scandal.

And that was it. When I was eleven, I'd found a picture she'd hidden away, a portrait of twenty-four teenage boys in long-tailed tuxedos, standing beneath a marble arch.

Symphony Squires.

The caption had been embossed onto the picture in silver script. The year—and several of the faces—had been scratched out.

Money isn't something we talk about, I thought hours after Lillian had left. I mentally mimicked her tone as I continued. *And the fact that the man who knocked your mother up is almost certainly a scion of high society isn't something I'll come right out and* say, *but…*

I picked the contract up again. This time, I read it from start to finish. Lillian had conveniently forgotten to mention some of the terms.

Like the fact that she would choose my wardrobe.

Like the mandatory manicure I'd have once a week.

Like the way she expected me to attend private school alongside my cousins.

I hadn't even realized I *had* cousins. Trick's grandkids had cousins. Half of the members of my elementary school Girl Scout troop had cousins *in that troop*. But me?

I had an encyclopedia of medieval torture techniques.

Pushing myself to finish the contract, I arrived at the icing on the cake. *I agree to participate in the annual Symphony Ball and all Symphony Deb events leading up to my presentation to society next spring.*

Deb. As in *debutante*.

Half a million dollars wasn't enough.

And yet, the thought of those hypothetical cousins lingered in my mind. One of my less random childhood obsessions had been genetics. Cousins shared roughly one-eighth of their DNA.

Half siblings share a fourth. I found myself going to my mother's bedroom, opening the bottom drawer of her dresser, and feeling for the photograph she'd taped to the back.

Twenty-four teenage boys.

Twenty-four possible producers of the sperm that had impregnated my mother.

Twenty-four Symphony Squires.

When my phone buzzed, I forced myself to shut the drawer and look down at the text my mom had just sent me.

A photo of an airplane.

It may be more than a few days. I read the message that had accompanied the photograph silently and then a second time out loud. My mother loved me. I knew that. I'd *always* known that.

Someday, I'd stop expecting her to surprise me.

It was another hour before I went back to the contract. I picked up a red pen. I made some adjustments.

And then I signed.

APRIL 15: 5:13 P.M.

Mackie kneaded his forehead. “Are you sure none of you wants to call your parents?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you know who my father is?”

“My stepmother’s faking a pregnancy, and she needs her rest.”

Mackie wasn’t touching that with a ten-foot pole. He turned to the last girl, the one who’d successfully picked the lock mere seconds after he’d arrived.

“What about you?” he said hopefully.

“My biological father literally threatened to kill me if I become inconvenient,” the girl said, leaning back against the wall of the jail cell like she *wasn’t* wearing a designer gown. “And if anyone finds out we were arrested, I’m out five hundred thousand dollars.”

EIGHT AND A HALF MONTHS EARLIER

CHAPTER 4

I arrived at my grandmother's residence—a mere forty-five minutes from the town where I'd grown up and roughly three and a half worlds away—on the contractually specified date at the contractually specified time. Based on what I knew of the Taft family and the suburban wonderland they inhabited, I'd expected my grandmother's house to be a mix of Tara and the Taj Mahal. But 2525 Camellia Court wasn't ostentatious, and it wasn't historic. It was a nine-thousand-square-foot house masquerading as average, the architectural equivalent of a woman who spent two hours making herself up for the purpose of looking like she wasn't wearing makeup. *This old thing?* I could almost hear the two-acre lot saying. *I've had it for years.*

Objectively, the house was enormous, but the cul de sac was lined with other houses just as big, with lawns just as sprawling. It was like someone had taken a normal neighborhood and scaled everything up an order of magnitude in size—including the driveways, the SUVs, and the dogs.

The single largest canine I'd ever seen greeted me at the front door, butting my hand with its massive head.

"William Faulkner," the woman who'd answered the door chided. "Mind your manners."

She was the spitting image of Lillian Taft. I was still processing the fact that the dog was (a) the size of a small pony and (b) named *William Faulkner*, when the woman I assumed was my aunt spoke again.

"John David Easterling," she called, raising her voice so it carried. "Who's the best shot in this family?"

There was no reply. William Faulkner butted his head against my thigh and huffed. I bent slightly—*very* slightly—to pet him and noticed the red dot that had appeared on my tank top.

"I will skin you alive if you pull that trigger," my aunt called, her voice disturbingly cheerful.

What trigger? I thought. The red dot on my torso wavered slightly.

"Now, young man, I believe I asked you a question. Who's the best shot in this family?"

There was an audible sigh, and then a boy of ten or so pushed up to a sitting position on the roof. “You are, Mama.”

“And am *I* using your cousin for target practice?”

“No, ma’am.”

“No, sir, I am not,” my aunt confirmed. “Sit, William Faulkner.”

The dog obeyed, and the boy disappeared from the roof.

“Please tell me that was a Nerf gun,” I said.

It took my aunt a moment to process the question, and then she let out a peal of laughter—practiced and perfect. “He’s not allowed to use the real thing without supervision,” she assured me.

I stared at her. “That’s not as comforting as you think it is.”

The smile never left her face. “You *do* look like your mother, don’t you? That hair. And those cheekbones! When I was your age, I would have killed for those cheekbones.”

Given that she was the best shot in this family, I wasn’t entirely certain she was exaggerating.

“I’m Sawyer,” I said, trying to wrap my mind around the greeting I’d gotten from a woman my mom had always referred to as the Ice Queen.

“Of course you are,” came the immediate reply, warm as whiskey. “I’m your Aunt Olivia, and that’s William Faulkner. She’s a purebred Bernese mountain dog.”

I’d recognized the breed. What I hadn’t recognized, however, was that William Faulkner was *female*.

“Where’s Lillian?” I asked, feeling like I’d well and truly fallen down the rabbit hole.

Aunt Olivia hooked the fingers on her right hand through William Faulkner’s collar and reflexively straightened her pearls with the left. “Let’s get you inside, Sawyer. Are you hungry? You *must* be hungry.”

“I just ate,” I replied. “Where’s Lillian?”

My aunt ignored the question. She was already retreating back into the house. “Come on, William Faulkner. Good girl.”

My grandmother’s kitchen was the size of our entire house. I half expected my aunt to ring for the cook, but it quickly became apparent that she considered the feeding of other people to be both a pastime and a spiritual

calling. Nothing I said or did could dissuade her from making me a sandwich.

Refusing the brownie might have been taken as a declaration of war.

I was a big believer in personal boundaries, but I was also a believer in chocolate, so I ignored the sandwich, took a bite of the brownie, and then asked where my grandmother was.

Again.

“She’s out back with the party planner. Can I get you something to drink?”

I put the brownie back down on my plate. “Party planner?”

Before my aunt could answer, the boy who’d had me in his sights earlier appeared in the kitchen. “Lily says it’s bad manners to threaten fratricide,” he announced. “So she didn’t threaten fratricide.”

He helped himself to the seat next to mine and eyed my sandwich. Without a word, I slid it toward him, and he began devouring it with all the verve of a little Tasmanian devil wearing a blue polo shirt.

“Mama,” he said after swallowing. “What’s fratricide?”

“I imagine it’s what one’s sister very pointedly does *not* threaten when one attempts to shoot her with a Nerf gun.” Aunt Olivia turned back to the counter. It took me about three seconds to realize that she was making *another sandwich.* “Introduce yourself, John David.”

“I’m John David. It’s a pleasure to meet you, madam.” For a trigger-happy kid, he was surprisingly gallant when it came to introductions. “Are you here for the party?”

I narrowed my eyes slightly. “What party?”

“Incoming!” A man swept into the room. He had presidential hair and a face made for golf courses and boardrooms. I would have pegged him as Aunt Olivia’s husband even if he hadn’t bent to kiss her cheek. “Fair warning: I saw Greer Richards making her way down the street on my way in.”

“Greer *Waters*, now,” my aunt reminded him.

“Ten to one odds Greer *Waters* is here to check up on the preparations for tonight.” He helped himself to the sandwich that Aunt Olivia had been making for me.

I knew it was futile, but I couldn’t help myself. “What’s happening tonight?”

Aunt Olivia began making a third sandwich. “Sawyer, this rapscallion is your Uncle J.D. Honey, this is *Sawyer*.”

My aunt said my name in a way that made me 100 percent certain they’d discussed me, probably on multiple occasions, possibly as a problem that required a gentle hand to solve.

“Is this the part where you tell me I look like my mother?” I asked, my voice dry as a desert. My uncle was looking at me the same way his wife had, the way my grandmother had.

“This,” he told me solemnly, “is where I welcome you to the family and ask you, quite seriously, if I just stole your sandwich.”

The doorbell rang. John David was off like a rocket. All it took was a single arch of my aunt’s eyebrow before her husband was on their son’s heels.

“Greer Waters is chairing the Symphony Ball,” Aunt Olivia murmured, clearing away John David’s plate and depositing sandwich number three in front of me. “Between you and me, I think she’s bitten off a bit more than she can chew. She just recently married the father of one of the debs. There’s trying and then there’s trying too hard.”

This from a woman who had made me three sandwiches since I’d walked in the front door.

“In *any* case,” Aunt Olivia continued, lowering her voice, “I am just certain she’ll have Capital *O* Opinions about the way your grandmother has arranged things.”

Arranged things for what? This time, I didn’t bother saying a word out loud.

“I know you must have questions,” my aunt said, brushing a strand of hair out of my face, seemingly oblivious to the fact that *I had been asking them*. “About your mama. About this family.”

I hadn’t expected this kind of welcome. I hadn’t expected affection or warmth or baked goods from a woman who’d spent the past eighteen years ignoring my mother—and my *existence*—altogether. A woman that my mom had never even once mentioned by name.

“Questions,” I repeated, my voice catching my throat. “About my mom and this family and the circumstances surrounding my highly inconvenient and scandalous conception?”

Aunt Olivia’s lips tightened over a pearly smile, but before she could reply, Lillian Taft entered the room wearing a gardening hat and gloves and

trailed by a pale, thin woman with brown hair knotted severely at her neck.

“Always grow your own roses,” my grandmother advised me without preamble. “Some things should not be delegated.”

It’s nice to see you, too, Lillian.

“Some things shouldn’t be delegated,” I repeated. “Like party planning?” I asked facetiously, eyeing the woman who’d followed her in. “Or like greeting the prodigal granddaughter when she arrives at your home?”

Lillian met my eyes. Her own didn’t narrow or blink. “Hello, Sawyer.” She said my name like it was one that people should know. After an elongated moment, she turned to the party planner. “Could you give us a moment, Isla?”

Isla, as it turned out, could.

“You look thin,” Lillian informed me once the party planner had exited. She turned to my aunt. “Did you offer her a sandwich, Olivia?”

Sandwich #3 was literally still sitting on the plate in front of me. “Let’s stipulate that I have been sufficiently sandwiched.”

Lillian was not deterred. “Would you like something to drink? Lemonade? Tea?”

“Greer Waters is here,” my aunt interjected, keeping her voice low.

“Horrid woman,” Lillian told me pleasantly. “Luckily, however…” She removed her gloves. “I’m much, much worse.”

That, more than the advice about roses, felt like a life lesson à la Lillian Taft.

“Now,” Lillian continued, as the sound of high heels clicking against the wood floor announced the impending arrival of the apparently infamous Greer Waters, “Sawyer, why don’t you run on upstairs and meet your cousin? Lily’s staying in the Blue Room. She can help you get ready for tonight.”

“Tonight?” I asked.

Aunt Olivia took it upon herself to shoo me out of the room. “Blue room,” she echoed cheerfully. “Second door on the right.”

CHAPTER 5

I counted the steps as I made my way up the spiral staircase and got to *eleven* before I paused to take in the artwork lining the wall. A blond-haired little girl blew a dandelion in one portrait and sat astride a horse in the next. I watched her grow, mahogany-framed picture by mahogany-framed picture until a baby boy joined her in the yearly portrait, their outfits color-coordinated, her smile sweet and practiced and his served with increasingly large sides of trouble.

When I made it to the top of the stairs, I came face-to-face with a family portrait: Aunt Olivia and Uncle J.D.; the blond girl, now a teenager, sitting beside John David; and the elegant Lillian Taft standing with one hand on her daughter's shoulder and one hand on her grandson's. To the right of the family portrait, there was one of Aunt Olivia in a white dress. At first, I thought it was a wedding dress, but then I realized that my aunt wasn't much older in this picture than I was now. The teenage Olivia wore elbow-length white gloves.

My eyes flitted to the left of the family portrait. A frame hung there, empty.

Maybe they were waiting for a new portrait to be finished.

Or maybe, I thought, staring at the blank space, *this frame used to hold a picture of my mother.*

"I am on the verge of using some very unladylike language." The voice that issued that statement was sweet as pie.

"Lily…"

"Unladylike and *creative*."

As I made my way toward the second door on the left, the person who'd said my cousin's name spoke up again, tentatively this time. "On a scale of one to bad, is this really so awful?"

The reply was delicate and demure. "I suppose that depends on how one feels about felonies."

I cleared my throat, and the occupants of the room turned to look at me. I recognized my cousin Lily from the portraits: light hair, dark eyes, small waist, big bones. Every hair was in place. Her summer blouse was freshly

pressed. The girl next to her was stunningly beautiful and also, based on her expression, on the verge of projectile vomiting.

Then again, I probably would have been nauseous, too, if I were lying on my stomach with my back arched and the tips of my toes touching the back of my head.

“Hello.” Cousin Lily did an admirable impression of someone who had decidedly *not* been discussing felonies a moment before. For a girl who looked like she’d just stepped out of a magazine spread entitled “Tasteful Floral Prints for Virginal Ivy League Hopefuls,” she had balls.

This girl and I share one-eighth of our DNA.

“You must be Sawyer.” Lily had her mother’s way of saying the word *must*: two parts emphasis, one part command.

The contortionist on the floor unfolded herself. “Sawyer,” she repeated, her eyes wide. “The cousin.”

She sounded just horrified enough to make me wonder if she considered *cousin* synonymous with *axe murderer*.

“Our grandmother sent me up,” I told Lily, as her friend attempted to stand very still, like I was some kind of bear and any motion might be taken as reason to attack.

“I’m supposed to help you get ready for tonight,” Lily said. She caught the gaze of the doe-eyed girl next to her, who was literally wringing her hands. “I’m supposed to *help her* get *ready* for *tonight*,” Lily repeated. Clearly, she was trying to get some kind of message across.

“I can *go* if you *two* are in *the middle* of *something*.” I echoed Lily’s emphasis.

My cousin turned her dark brown eyes back to me. She had a way of looking at a person like she was considering dissecting you or giving you a makeover or possibly both.

I did not like my chances.

“Don’t be silly, Sawyer.” Lily took a step toward me. “You aren’t interrupting a thing. Sadie-Grace and I were just having a little chat. Did I introduce you to Sadie-Grace? Sadie-Grace Waters, meet Sawyer Taft.” Lily had clearly inherited our grandmother’s penchant for rendering her own questions rhetorical. “It *is* Taft, isn’t it?” She plowed on before I could reply. “I apologize for not being there to greet you downstairs. You must think I was absolutely raised in a barn.”

I'd spent six months at age thirteen learning everything there was to know about gambling and games of chance. I was willing to lay good odds right now that my oh-so-felicitous cousin hadn't been particularly enthused about the idea of a blood relation from the wrong side of the tracks being suddenly foisted upon her. Not that she'd admit to a lack of enthusiasm.

That, I thought, *would be almost as ill-mannered as threatening fratricide*.

"I was pretty much raised in a bar," I replied when I realized Lily had finally paused for a breath. "As long as you can refrain from breaking a chair over someone's back, we're good."

Emily Post had apparently not prepared either Lily or Sadie-Grace for offhanded discussions of bar brawls. As they searched for an appropriate response, I drifted toward a nearby window. It overlooked the backyard, and down below, I could see shimmery black tablecloths being spread over round-top tables. There were easily a half-dozen workers and three times that many tables.

There was also a catwalk.

"Were you really raised in a bar?" Sadie-Grace came to stand beside me. She was tall and willowy thin and bore a striking resemblance to a certain classic beauty best known for marrying into the royal family. Her delicate fingers worried at the tips of ridiculously thick and shiny brown hair.

Wide-eyed. Anxious. Prone to yoga. I catalogued what I knew about her, then answered the question. "My mom and I lived above The Holler until I was thirteen. I wasn't technically allowed in the bar, but I have a slight tendency to take technicalities as a challenge."

Sadie-Grace nibbled on her bottom lip, looking down at me through impossibly long lashes. "If you grew up like that, you must know things," she said very seriously. "You must know people. People who know things."

A quick glance at Lily told me that she didn't like the direction this conversation was going.

I turned back to Sadie-Grace. "Are you, by any chance, fixing to ask me what my stance is on felonies?"

"We need to get you a dress for tonight, Sawyer!" Lily smiled brightly and shot laser eyes at Sadie-Grace, lest the latter even *think* about answering my question. "We'll hit the shops. And goodness knows we could stand to do something about those eyebrows."

I took that to mean that Lily had come down on the side of *makeover* over *dissection*, but I got the feeling that it had probably been a pretty close call.

Beside me, Sadie-Grace assiduously avoided eye contact, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

I don't want to know, I decided. *Whatever my cousin's gotten herself into, whatever I overheard, I really and truly do not want to know.*

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES has written several acclaimed young adult novels, including the four books in the Naturals series, The Naturals, Killer Instinct, All In and Bad Blood. She has advanced degrees in psychology, psychiatry, and cognitive science. She received her PhD from Yale University and is now a professor of psychology. You can find her online at www.jenniferlynnbarnes.com, or follow her on Twitter @jenlynnbarnes.