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The Naturals

THE NATURALS

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

Quercus

LBRIS

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PART ONE: KNOWING

You've chosen and chosen well. Maybe this one will be the one who stops you. Maybe she'll be different. Maybe she'll be enough.

The only thing that is certain is that she's special.

You think it's her eyes—not the color: an icy, see-through blue. Not the lashes, or the shape, or the way she doesn't need eyeliner to give them the appearance of a cat's.

No, it's what's behind those icy blues that brings the audience out in droves. You feel it, every time you look at her. The certainty. The knowing. That otherworldly glint she uses to convince people that she's the real deal.

Maybe she is.

Maybe she really can see things. Maybe she knows things. Maybe she's everything she claims to be and more. But watching her, counting her breaths, you smile, because deep down, you know that she isn't going to stop you.

You don't really want her to stop you.

She's fragile.

Perfect.

Marked.

And the one thing this so-called psychic won't see coming is you.

CHAPTER 1

The hours were bad. The tips were worse, and the majority of my coworkers definitely left something to be desired, but *c'est la vie, que sera sera*, insert foreign language cliché of your choice here. It was a summer job, and that kept Nonna off my back. It also prevented my various aunts, uncles, and kitchen-sink cousins from feeling like they had to offer me temporary employment in their restaurant/butcher shop/legal practice/boutique. Given the size of my father's very large, very extended (and very Italian) family, the possibilities were endless, but it was always a variation on the same theme.

My dad lived half a world away. My mother was missing, presumed dead. I was everyone's problem and nobody's.

Teenager, presumed troubled.

"Order up!"

With practiced ease, I grabbed a plate of pancakes (side

of bacon) with my left hand and a two-handed breakfast burrito (jalapeños on the side) with my right. If the SATs didn't go well in the fall, I had a real future ahead of me in the crappy diner industry.

"Pancakes with a side of bacon. Breakfast burrito, jalapeños on the side." I slid the plates onto the table. "Anything else I can get for you gentlemen?"

Before either of them opened their mouths, I knew exactly what these two were going to say. The guy on the left was going to ask for extra butter. And the guy on the right? He was going to need another glass of water before he could even *think* about those jalapeños.

Ten-to-one odds, he didn't even like them.

Guys who actually liked jalapeños didn't order them on the side. Mr. Breakfast Burrito just didn't want people to think he was a wuss—only the word he would have used wasn't *wuss*.

Whoa there, Cassie, I told myself sternly. *Let's keep it PG.*

As a general rule, I didn't curse much, but I had a bad habit of picking up on other people's quirks. Put me in a room with a bunch of English people, and I'd walk out with a British accent. It wasn't intentional—I'd just spent a lot of time over the years getting inside other people's heads.

Occupational hazard. Not mine. My mother's.

"Could I get a few more of these butter packets?" the guy on the left asked.

I nodded—and waited.

"More water," the guy on the right grunted. He puffed out his chest and ogled my boobs.

I forced a smile. "I'll be right back with that water." I managed to keep from adding *pervert* to the end of that sentence, but only just.

I was still holding out hope that a guy in his late twenties who pretended to like spicy food and made a point of staring at his teenage waitress's chest like he was training for the Ogling Olympics might be equally showy when it came to leaving tips.

Then again, I thought as I went for refills, *he might turn out to be the kind of guy who stiffs the little bitty waitress just to prove he can.*

Absentmindedly, I turned the details of the situation over in my mind: the way that Mr. Breakfast Burrito was dressed; his likely occupation; the fact that his friend, who'd ordered the pancakes, was wearing a much more expensive watch.

He'll fight to grab the check, then tip like crap.

I hoped I was wrong—but was fairly certain that I wasn't.

Other kids spent their preschool years singing their way through the ABCs. I grew up learning a different alphabet. Behavior, personality, environment—my mother called them the BPEs, and they were the tricks of her trade. Thinking that way wasn't the kind of thing you could just turn off—not even once you were old enough to understand that when

your mother told people she was psychic, she was *lying*, and when she took their money, it was *fraud*.

Even now that she was gone, I couldn't keep from figuring people out, any more than I could give up breathing, blinking, or counting down the days until I turned eighteen.

"Table for one?" A low, amused voice jostled me back into reality. The voice's owner looked like the type of boy who would have been more at home in a country club than a diner. His skin was perfect, his hair artfully mussed. Even though he phrased his words like they were a question, they weren't—not really.

"Sure," I said, grabbing a menu. "Right this way."

A closer observation told me that Country Club was about my age. A smirk played across his perfect features, and he walked with the swagger of high school nobility. Just looking at him made me feel like a serf.

"This okay?" I asked, leading him to a table near the window.

"This is fine," he said, slipping into the chair. Casually, he surveyed the room with bulletproof confidence. "You get a lot of traffic in here on weekends?"

"Sure," I replied. I was starting to wonder if I'd lost the ability to speak in complex sentences. From the look on the boy's face, he probably was, too. "I'll give you a minute to look over the menu."

He didn't respond, and I spent my minute bringing Pancakes and Breakfast Burrito their checks, plural. I figured that if I split it in half, I might end up with half a decent tip.

"I'll be your cashier whenever you're ready," I said, fake smile firmly in place.

I turned back toward the kitchen and caught the boy by the window watching me. It wasn't an *I'm ready to order* stare. I wasn't sure what it was, actually—but every bone in my body told me it was *something*. The giggling sensation that there was a key detail that I was missing about this whole situation—about *him*—wouldn't go away. Boys like that didn't usually eat in places like this.

They didn't stare at girls like me.

Self-conscious and wary, I crossed the room.

"Did you decide what you'd like?" I asked. There was no getting out of taking his order, so I let my hair fall in my face, obscuring his view of it.

"Three eggs," he said, hazel eyes fixed on what he could see of mine. "Side of pancakes. Side of ham."

I didn't need to write the order down, but I suddenly found myself wishing for a pen, just so I'd have something to hold on to. "What kind of eggs?" I asked.

"You tell me." The boy's words caught me off guard.

"Excuse me?"

"Guess," he said.

I stared at him through the wisps of hair still covering my face. "You want me to guess how you want your eggs cooked?"

He smiled. "Why not?"

And just like that, the gauntlet was thrown.

"Not scrambled," I said, thinking out loud. Scrambled eggs were too average, too common, and this was a guy who liked to be a little bit different. Not too different, though, which ruled out poached—at least in a place like this. Sunny-side up would have been too messy for him; over hard wouldn't be messy enough.

"Over easy." I was as sure of the conclusion as I was of the color of his eyes. He smiled and closed his menu.

"Are you going to tell me if I was right?" I asked—not because I needed confirmation, but because I wanted to see how he would respond.

The boy shrugged. "Now, where would the fun be in that?"

I wanted to stay there, staring, until I figured him out, but I didn't. I put his order in. I delivered his food. The lunch rush snuck up on me, and by the time I went back to check on him, the boy by the window was gone. He hadn't even waited for his check—he'd just left twenty dollars on the table. I had just about decided that he could make me play guessing games to his heart's content for a twelve-dollar tip when I noticed the bill wasn't the only thing he'd left.

There was also a business card.

I picked it up. Stark white. Black letters. Evenly spaced. There was a seal in the upper left-hand corner, but relatively little text: a name, a job title, a phone number. Across the top of the card, there were four words, four little words that knocked the wind out of me as effectively as a jab to the chest.

I pocketed the card—and the tip. I went back to the kitchen. I caught my breath. And then I looked at it again.

Tanner Briggs. The name.

Special Agent. Job title.

Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Four words, but I stared at them so hard that my vision blurred and I could only make out three letters.

What in the world had I done to attract the attention of the FBI?

CHAPTER 2

After an eight-hour shift, my body was bone tired, but my mind was whirring. I wanted to shut myself in my room, collapse on my bed, and figure out what the Hello Kitty had happened that afternoon.

Unfortunately, it was Sunday.

"There she is! Cassie, we were just about to send the boys out looking for you." My aunt Tasha was among the more reasonable of my father's various siblings, so she didn't wink and ask me if I'd found myself a boyfriend to occupy my time.

That was Uncle Rio's job. "Our little heartbreaker, eh? You out there breaking hearts? Of course she is!"

I'd been a regular fixture at Sunday night dinners ever since Social Services had dropped me off on my father's doorstep—metaphorically, thank God—when I was twelve. After five years, I still hadn't ever heard Uncle Rio ask a

question that he did not immediately proceed to answer himself.

"I don't have a boyfriend," I said. This was a well-established script, and that was my line. "Promise."

"What are we talking about?" one of Uncle Rio's sons asked, plopping himself down on the living room sofa, dangling his legs over the side.

"Cassie's boyfriend," Uncle Rio replied.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't *have* a boyfriend."

"Cassie's secret boyfriend," Uncle Rio amended.

"I think you have me confused with Sofia and Kate," I said. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have thrown any of my female cousins under the bus, but desperate times called for desperate measures. "They're far more likely to have secret boyfriends than I am."

"Bah," Uncle Rio said. "Sofia's boyfriends are never secret."

And on it went—good-natured ribbing, family jokes. I played the part, letting their energy infect me, saying what they wanted me to say, smiling the smiles they wanted to see. It was warm and safe and happy—but it wasn't me.

It never was.

As soon as I was sure I wouldn't be missed, I ducked into the kitchen.

"Cassandra. Good." My grandmother, elbow-deep in flour, her gray hair pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her