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# BAD BLOOD

A **NATURALS** NOVEL

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

Quercus

## CHAPTER 1

The serial killer sitting across from me had his son's eyes. The same shape. The same color. But the glint in those eyes, the light of anticipation—*that's wholly your own.*

Experience—and my FBI mentors—had taught me that I could delve further into other people's minds by talking to them than by talking about them. Giving in to the urge to profile, I continued to appraise the man across from me. *You'll hurt me if you can.* I knew that, had known it even before coming to this maximum security prison and seeing the subtle smile that crossed Daniel Redding's lips the moment his gaze met mine. *Hurting me will hurt the boy.* I sank deeper and deeper into Redding's psychopathic perspective. *And the boy is yours to hurt.*

It didn't matter that Daniel Redding's hands were cuffed together and chained to the table. It didn't matter that there was an armed FBI agent at the door. The man in front of

me was one of the world's most brutal serial killers, and if I let him past my defenses, he would burn his mark into my soul as surely as he'd branded the letter *R* onto the flesh of his victims.

*Bind them. Brand them. Cut them. Hang them.*

That was how Redding had killed his victims. But that wasn't what had brought me here today.

"You told me once that I would never find the man who killed my mother," I said, sounding calmer than I felt. I knew this particular psychopath well enough to know that he would try to get a rise out of me.

*You'll try to burrow into my mind, to plant questions and doubts so that when I walk out of this room, a part of you goes with me.*

That was what Redding had done months ago when he'd dropped that bombshell about my mother. And that was why I was here now.

"Did I say that?" Redding asked with a slow and subtle smile. "It *does* sound like something I might have mentioned, but . . ." He lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug.

I folded my hands on the table and waited. *You're the one who wanted me to come back here. You're the one who set the lure. This is me, taking the bait.*

Eventually, Redding broke the silence. "You must have something else to say to me." Redding had an organized killer's capacity for patience—but only on his own terms, not on mine. "After all," he continued, a low hum in his voice, "you and I have so very much in common."

I knew he was referencing my relationship with his son. And I knew that to get what I wanted, I'd have to acknowledge that. "You're talking about Dean."

The moment I said Dean's name, Redding's twisted smile deepened. My boyfriend—and fellow Natural—didn't know that I was here. He would have insisted on coming with me, and I couldn't do that to him. Daniel Redding was a master of manipulation, but nothing he said could possibly hurt me the way every word out of his mouth would have shredded Dean.

"Does my son fancy himself in love with you?" Redding leaned forward, his cuffed hands folding in imitation of my own. "Do you tiptoe into his room at night? Does he bury his hands in your hair?" Redding's expression softened. "When Dean cradles you in his arms," he murmured, his voice taking on a musical lilt, "do you ever wonder just how close he is to snapping your neck?"

"It must bother you," I said softly, "to know so incredibly little about your own son."

If Redding wanted to hurt me, he'd have to do better than trying to make me doubt Dean. If he wanted what he said to haunt me for days and weeks to come, he'd have to hit me where I was most vulnerable. Where I was *weak*.

"It must bother you," Redding parroted my own words back at me, "to know so incredibly little about what happened to your own mother."

The image of my mom's blood-soaked dressing room surged to the front of my mind, but I schooled my face into

a neutral expression. I'd set Redding up to hit me where it hurt, and in doing so, I'd steered the conversation exactly where I wanted it to go.

"Isn't that why you're here?" Redding asked me, his voice velvety and low. "To find out what I know about your mother's murder?"

"I'm here," I said, staring him down, "because I know that when you swore to me that I would never find the man who killed my mother, you were telling the truth."

Each of the five teenagers in the FBI's Naturals program had a specialty. Mine was profiling. Lia Zhang's was deception detection. Months ago, she'd pegged Redding's taunting words about my mother as true. I could feel Lia on the other side of the two-way mirror now, ready to separate every sentence I got out of Dean's father into *truth* and *lies*.

*Time to lay my cards on the table.* "What I want to know," I told the killer in front of me, enunciating each word, "is exactly what kind of truth you were telling. When you guaranteed me that I would never find the man who murdered my mother, was that because you thought she'd been murdered by a *woman*?" I paused. "Or did you have reason to believe that my mother was still alive?"

Ten weeks. That was how long we'd been looking for a lead—any lead, no matter how small—on the cabal of serial killers who'd faked my mother's death nearly six years earlier. The group that had held her captive ever since.

"This isn't a casual visit, is it?" Redding leaned back in his chair, tilting his head to the side as his eyes—*Dean's*

eyes—made a detached study of mine. “You haven’t simply reached a tipping point, my words haven’t been slowly eating away at you for months. You know something.”

I knew that my mother was alive. I knew that those monsters had her. And I knew that I would do anything, make a deal with any devil, to bring them down.

To bring her home.

“What would you say,” I asked Redding, “if I told you that there was a society of serial killers, one that operated in secret, killing nine victims every three years?” I could hear the intensity in my own voice. I didn’t even sound like myself. “What would you say if I told you that this group is steeped in ritual, that they’ve been killing for more than a century, and that *I* am going to be the one to bring them down?”

Redding leaned forward. “I suppose I’d say that I wish I could be there to see what this group will do to you for coming after them. To watch them take you apart, piece by piece.”

*Keep going, you sick monster. Keep telling me what they’ll do to me. Tell me everything you know.*

Redding paused suddenly, then chuckled. “Clever girl, aren’t you? Getting me talking like that. I can understand what my boy sees in you.”

A muscle in my jaw ticked. I’d almost had him. I’d been *this* close. . . .

“Do you know your Shakespeare, girl?” Among his

plethora of charming qualities, the serial killer across from me had a fondness for the Bard.

“‘To thine own self be true?’” I suggested darkly, racking my brain for a way to reel him back in, to *make* him tell me what he knew.

Redding smiled, his lips parting to show his teeth. “I was thinking more of *The Tempest*. ‘Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.’”

*All the devils.* The killer across from me. The twisted group that had taken my mother.

*Seven Masters,* a voice whispered in my memory. *The Pythia. And Nine.*

“From what I know of this collective,” Redding said, “if they’ve had your mother for all these years?” Without warning, he surged forward, bringing his face as close to mine as his chains would allow. “She might be quite the devil herself.”

## CHAPTER 2

The FBI agent at the door drew his sidearm the moment Redding lunged toward me. I stared at the killer's face, inches from mine.

*You want me to flinch.* Violence was about power, about control—who had it and who didn't.

"I'm fine," I told my FBI escort. Agent Vance had worked with Agent Briggs off and on since I'd joined the Naturals program. He'd been tapped to stand guard because both Briggs and his partner, Agent Sterling, had decided to stay on the other side of the two-way mirror. They had a history with Daniel Redding, and right now, we wanted all of the psychopath's attention focused on me.

"He can't hurt me," I told Agent Vance, saying those words as much for my target's benefit as the agent's. "He's just being melodramatic."

Minimizing language, designed to keep Redding engaged in this game of verbal chess. I'd gotten him to admit that,

at the very least, he knew of this group's existence. Now I needed to find out what he'd heard and who he'd heard it from.

I needed to stay focused.

"No reason to get testy." Redding settled back in his seat and made a show of holding his cuffed hands up in a mea culpa for Vance, who holstered his sidearm. "I am simply being candid." The edges of Redding's lips twisted as his attention returned to me. "There are things that can break a person. And once broken, a person—such as your mother—can be formed into something new." Redding tilted his head to the side, his eyes heavy lidded, as if he were caught in the midst of a particularly vivid daydream. "Something *magnificent*."

"Who are they?" I asked, refusing to take the bait. "Where did you hear about them?"

There was a long pause.

"Say that I did know something." Redding's face stilled. His voice was neither soft nor loud as he continued. "What would you give me in return?"

Redding was highly intelligent, calculating, sadistic. And he had only two obsessions. *What you did to your victims. And Dean.*

My fingers curved into fists on the table. I knew what I had to do, and I knew, without question, that I was going to do it. No matter how sick it made me. No matter how much I didn't want to say the words.

"Dean reaches for me more now than he used to." I looked

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down at my hands. They were shaking. I forced myself to turn my left hand over and brought the fingers on my right hand to meet it. "His fingers entwine with mine, and his thumb . . ." I swallowed hard, my thumb making its way to my palm. "His thumb draws tiny circles on the palm of my hand. Sometimes he traces his fingers along the outside of mine. Sometimes . . ." My voice caught in my throat. "Sometimes I run my fingers along his scars."

"I gave him those scars." The look on Redding's face told me that he was savoring my words, would savor them for a very long time.

A ball of nausea rose in my throat. *Keep going, Cassie. You have to.*

"Dean dreams about you." The words felt like razor-edged sandpaper in my mouth, but I forced myself to continue. "There are times when he wakes up from a nightmare and can't see what's right there in front of him because the only thing that he can see is *you*."

Telling Dean's father these things wasn't just making a deal with the devil. This was selling my soul. It was dangerously close to selling Dean's.

"You won't tell my son what you had to do to get me to talk." Redding drummed his fingers along the tabletop, one after another. "But every time he reaches for your hand, every time you touch his scars, you'll remember this conversation. I'll be there. Even if the boy doesn't know it, *you* will."

"Tell me what you know," I said, the words ripping their way out of my throat.

"Very well." Satisfaction played along the edges of Redding's lips. "The group you're hunting looks for a specific type of killer. Someone who longs to be a part of something. A joiner."

This was the monster, giving me my due.

"I'm not much of a joiner myself," Redding continued. "But I am a listener. Over the years, I've heard rumors. Whispers. Urban legends. Masters and apprentices, ritual and rules." He tilted his head slightly to one side, watching my reaction, as if he could see the workings of my brain and found them enticing. "I know that each Master chooses his own replacement. I don't know how many of them there are. I don't know who they are or where they're located."

I leaned forward. "But you did know that they took my mother. You knew she wasn't dead."

"I'm a man who sees patterns." Redding enjoyed talking about what kind of man he was, demonstrating his superiority to me, to the FBI, to Briggs and Sterling, whom he must have suspected were hiding behind the glass. "Shortly after I was incarcerated, I became aware of another inmate. He'd been convicted of murdering his ex, but insisted she was still alive. There was never a body, you see. Just a copious amount of blood—too much, the prosecutors argued, for the victim to have lived."

Those words were familiar enough to send a chill down my spine. *My mother's dressing room. My hand fumbling for the light switch. My fingertips touching something sticky, something wet and warm and—*

“You suspected this group was involved?” I could barely hear myself ask the question over the deafening beating of my own heart.

One edge of Redding’s mouth quirked upward. “Every empire needs its queen.”

There was more to it than that. There had to be.

“Years later,” Dean’s father added, “I was moved to take on an apprentice of my own.”

He’d taken on three, but I knew which one he was referencing. “Webber.” The man had kidnapped me, loosed me in a forest, and hunted me. Like I was an animal. Like I was prey.

“Webber brought me information. About Dean. About Briggs. About you—and about Special Agent Lacey Locke.”

Locke, my original FBI mentor, had started life as Lacey Hobbes, my mother’s younger sister. She’d ended life a serial killer, re-creating my mother’s murder over and over again.

*Not a murder*, I reminded myself. The whole time Locke had been killing women in my mom’s image, my mother had been *alive*.

“You found out the details of my mother’s case.” I focused, as much as I could, on the here and now, on Redding. “You saw a connection.”

“Whispers. Rumors. Urban legends.” Redding fell back on what he’d said before. “Masters and apprentices, rituals and rules, and at the center of it all, a woman.” His eyes gleamed. “A very specific kind of woman.”

My lips and tongue and throat were dry—so dry, I almost couldn’t force out the words. “What kind?”

“The kind of woman who could be formed into something magnificent.” Redding closed his eyes, his voice humming with pleasure. “Something new.”

*You take the knife. Step by step, you make your way to the stone table, testing the balance of the blade in your hand.*

*The wheel is turning. The offering turns with it, chained to the stone, body and soul.*

*"All must be tested." You say the words as you drag the flat of the knife across the offering's neck. "All must be found worthy."*

*Power thrums through your veins. This is your decision. Your choice. One twist of your wrist and blood will flow. The wheel will stop.*

*But without order, there is chaos.*

*Without order, there is pain.*

*"What do you need?" You lean down as you whisper the ancient words. The knife in your hand angles into the base of the offering's neck. You could kill him, but it would cost you. Seven days and seven pains. The wheel never stops turning for long.*

*"What do I need?" The offering repeats the question, smiling as blood streams down his naked chest. "I need nine."*

## CHAPTER 3

"Well, that was cheerful." Lia jumped off the table she'd been sitting on.

Agent Vance had just delivered me to the observation area. Sterling and Briggs still had their twin gazes fixed on the room I'd vacated a few moments earlier. On the other side of the two-way mirror, guards pulled Daniel Redding to his feet. Briggs—competitive and ambitious and, in his own way, idealistic—would never view Redding as anything other than a monster, a threat. Sterling was more restrained, the type who kept her emotions on lockdown by following preset rules, including one that said that men like Daniel Redding didn't *get* to chip away at her control.

"I swear," Lia continued with a wave of her hand, "serial killers are so predictable. It's always all 'I want to watch you suffer' and 'let me quote Shakespeare while I imagine dancing on your corpse.'"