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ALSO BY JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

THE INHERITANCE GAMES SAGA

The Inheritance Games

The Inheritance Games
The Hawthorne Legacy
The Final Gambit
The Brothers Hawthorne

The Grandest Game

The Grandest Game
Glorious Rivals
The Gilded Blade

Games Untold
The Same Backward as Forward

THE NATURALS

The Naturals
Killer Instinct
All In
Bad Blood
Dangerous Impulses
Twelve: A Novella

THE DEBUTANTES

Little White Lies
Deadly Little Scandals

The Lovely and the Lost

RAISED BY WOLVES

Raised by Wolves
Trial by Fire
Taken by Storm

Every Other Day

At First Sight

DANGEROUS IMPULSES

A NATURALS NOVEL

THE MULTI-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

TEMPEST

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CHAPTER 1

"A fear of nutcrackers isn't as uncommon as one might think." Sloane stared up at the massive nutcrackers standing guard over Santa's village. "Surprisingly, it's more strongly correlated with a fear of clowns than a fear of dolls."

We'd been in line to meet Santa for almost an hour. The couple in front of us had two small children, marital issues that they were valiantly suppressing, and a love of cheesy Christmas sweaters and college football, respectively. The mom behind us kept fussing with her daughter's oversized plaid bow in a way that clearly wasn't about the bow. The fact that she'd dressed her three-year-old in pristine winter white told me the woman was the kind of type-A optimist who routinely overestimated the number of variables—in life and in motherhood—within her control. As for my little sister, Laurel had spent our entire time in line creeping out the elves.

Compared to other four-year-olds, my half sister was

eerily self-contained. Laurel could go hours without making a single noise, and she had a way of standing utterly still, blinking only half as often as you expected her to—and less than that when she was *really* focused on something.

Laurel was *really* focused on the elves.

"I have to go to the bathroom," the little girl behind us announced.

"No, you don't," her mother replied.

The line moved forward, and Laurel moved with it, still staring down her elven targets.

"Fifty-four percent of the children in this line have to go to the bathroom," Sloane told me, and then she shifted her gaze to the two-year-old at the front of the line. "Another three to six percent are going right now."

Bringing my little sister to meet Santa at the mall hadn't been my idea, but one did not argue with Nonna. My very Italian grandmother had tasked Sloane and me with a dual mission: get a picture of Laurel with Santa and find out what she wanted for Christmas. My little sister wasn't big on toys, but Nonna had been firm: every child deserved a little Christmas magic.

I'd told Laurel we could leave if she wanted to, but Laurel did not want to leave. Laurel wanted to stare into the souls of elves. I wasn't 100 percent sure what it was about them that had her so absorbed, but I suspected at least part of it was the way Santa's helpers kept flitting in and out of character, glassy-eyed one moment and smiling just a little too broadly the next.

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My baby sister was wired to notice things like that.

"There is just one Santa," Laurel said quietly, intently. "But there are many elves."

Sloane opened her mouth to reply. I could see her wanting to rattle off all kinds of statistics about Santa Claus mythologies across the world, but in honor of the magic of Christmas, my friend and fellow Natural restrained herself to "The global elf-to-Santa ratio is indeed quite high."

Just three more families to go, I told myself. Then the line moved forward again, and the sibling pair in front of us turned toward Laurel.

"Do you want to play I Spy?" the little girl asked.

"You can go first," her brother told Laurel, his generosity clearly motivated by a desire to make sure his little sister did *not* go first.

"I Spy," Laurel said quietly. "I know that game." Six months earlier, she'd more or less viewed other children as a foreign species, but in the past few weeks, that had slowly started to change. Laurel had started *playing.* Not all that often and not all that well—but sometimes.

I just wished it wasn't I Spy.

"I spy with my little eye something . . . *red.*" Laurel always chose something red. *The color of blood.* For a moment, I could feel the weight of the knife in my hand—and my mom's hand on mine. I could *see* blood blooming outward from the blade.

"Santa's suit?" the little boy in front of us guessed.

"No." Laurel shook her head.

"Your hair?" the little girl said.

Laurel shook her head again. Instinctively, I scanned the people around us for a wound, a scratch, a burn. *Nothing.*

"Santa's butt?" the little boy said loudly.

"Jacob," his mother chided.

Laurel nodded solemnly.

"Santa's butt!" Jacob was delighted.

"No fair," his sister opined. "Santa's sitting down. We can't even see his butt!"

"Imogen!"

"Well, we can't," Imogen muttered.

I found myself grinning at Sloane and thinking that maybe coming here and trying this hadn't been such a bad idea after all, and then Jacob and Imogen went for their turn with Santa, and I realized that the elf at the front of the line had a fresh curling iron burn on her neck.

Red.

"And what are you going to ask Santa for?" the elf asked Laurel brightly. Maybe a little *too* brightly.

Laurel stared and stared at that burn, then lifted her eyes to the elf's. "You don't have to stay here if you don't want to." Laurel's voice was high and sweet, if just a little flat, and it carried. "You can go. No one will stop you. No one will hurt you. Not even that Santa."

"Santa doesn't hurt anyone!" the elf hastily assured Laurel . . . and all the children behind us in line. "And I don't want to go anywhere."

"Yes, you do," my sister insisted.

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"Being an elf is a job," Sloane explained to Laurel. "Only about twelve percent of Americans truly hate their jobs, but that percentage goes up by roughly six hundred percent when the job involves polyester." Sloane looked up at the elf. "No offense."

The elf stopped being creeped out by Laurel long enough to shoot a flirtatious smile at Sloane. "None taken."

"*I* might be," Sloane blurted out. "Taken. I'm not sure. There is a five-point-six percent—no, no, a four-point-five percent—no . . . There is *some* chance that I am taken."

"She means in a relationship," Laurel informed the elf. "Not kidnapped."

"Next!" It was our turn at last and not a moment too soon. Laurel walked right up to Santa but showed no inclination whatsoever to climb into his lap.

"Are you the real Santa?" Laurel said, deathly serious and utterly unblinking.

"What do you think?" the jolly man replied, his eyes sparkling in a way that told me the man behind the beard *absolutely* had grander thespian ambitions than playing Santa at the mall.

"I think you answered a question with a question," Laurel replied flatly. "And when you were talking to Jacob, your eyes cheated down and to the left."

Santa glanced at me, and I shrugged. *She spends a lot of time with a deception detector* didn't exactly roll off the tongue.

"Well, how about this," Santa told Laurel. "If you tell me what you want for Christmas, I'll get a message to the real Santa for you."

"How about you drop the act?" Laurel countered. "And let these elves go."

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CHAPTER 2

Around the time I dropped Laurel off at Nonna's house with one of my many aunts, I got a text from Dean.

BRIEFING ROOM, 15 MINUTES.

Fortunately, my home—and the team's—was close to Nonna's. From the outside, the Naturals House Version 2.0 looked like a Mediterranean mansion squeezed onto a Denver-sized lot. On the inside, the house was a work in progress that Michael had purchased primarily for its full basement—and possibly also its elevator.

In typical Michael fashion, he squeezed onto said elevator with me just before the door closed. Some people liked to build in a margin for error, and some people *lived* in that margin. Michael had never met a buzzer shot he wouldn't take.

"No stairs?" Michael's smirk was very slightly lopsided. "How very unlike you."

"Remind me which one of us is the profiler here?"

Michael leaned against the elevator wall. "Would you prefer I describe the precise size of your pupils and the subtle, fleeting downturn of your lips?"

There was never hiding anything from Michael. Most of the time, I didn't even try. "How many Naturals does it take to prevent one little girl from traumatizing a mall Santa and several elves?" I said. "Hint: it's apparently more than two."

"Where *is* Sloane?" Michael asked amiably.

"Still at the mall," I reported. "Gift shopping. She promised to keep her sticky fingers in check and stay away from the gingerbread lattes."

"You know what I love about you, Colorado?" Michael hadn't ditched the nickname even now that our base of operations *was* in Colorado. "Your flawless sense of humor."

"Do I look amused?"

"You look overstimulated with a hefty dash of latent anxiety." Michael arched a brow. "And just a tiny bit amused."

I flashed back to the expression on Santa's face when Laurel had made her best attempt at liberating his elves . . . and cracked a smile.

"Fine," I told Michael. "It was a little bit funny, but I still have a bone to pick with Lia."

"A bone?" Michael faux-gasped as the elevator came to a stop. "With *Lia Zhang* of all people? That veritable angel on Earth? That bastion of all that is innocent and good?"

I snorted and prepared myself for Michael's next quip, but there was no next quip, which struck me as highly suspicious. "What I'm hearing," I said, my sixth sense going off, "is that you and Lia are off-again?"

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"Who's to say?" Michael replied as we made our way out of the elevator, past Sloane's lab, and into the basement briefing room.

Michael and Lia were like gunpowder and more gunpowder. There was no telling what might have set them off, even for a Natural profiler like me, so I turned my attention to the other person currently in the briefing room instead.

At first glance, Dean Redding looked like a guy who worked with his hands: all muscle, fingernails uneven and short, dark blond hair just long enough to fall into his eyes. Dean nearly always wore plain, fitted T-shirts in one of two colors. *Black. White.* Today's was white.

I knew every one of the calluses on his palms.

"Where's Sterling?" I asked. Special Agent Veronica Sterling was nothing if not punctual. When it came to briefings, she typically arrived first.

"Sterling isn't the one who called this meeting," Dean said.

"Briggs?" I hadn't even known he was in town. In my mind, Briggs was still *Agent Briggs*. In reality, he was *FBI Director Briggs*, and we saw him far less than we used to.

"Not Briggs." Michael gestured in the vicinity of Dean's lips. "Or so says Captain Broodster's equivalent of a mischievous, if slightly constipated, grin."

Dean lifted his head, and as his hair fell out of his eyes, I realized that Michael was right:

Dean was *amused*. "If Sterling didn't call this meeting," I said, "and neither did Briggs, then who—"

"Three of you?" a familiar voice demanded behind us. "Only three?"

I turned to see my formidable-to-a-fault grandmother standing there, five foot nothing, scowling and carrying a lasagna.

"What kind of briefing is this?" Nonna pointed a finger at Dean. "I need all five!"

All five . . . of us.

"*You* called us in for a briefing?" Michael seemed thoroughly tickled at the prospect.

"You." Nonna jabbed her index finger in his direction. "How is your problem with the kissing?"

Once, almost a full year earlier, Nonna had taken something I'd said to mean there were certain deficiencies in Michael's kissing ability, and she'd been on a mission to remediate the *problem* ever since. It made seemingly no difference to her whatsoever that *I* was not the person he was kissing.

"A true gentleman," Michael told Nonna gallantly, "never kisses and tells."

"Pffft." Nonna set the lasagna down and then produced silverware and paper plates seemingly out of nowhere. "Eat. All of you. And where is the one with the computer?"

"Here!" Sloane popped in with a laptop in one hand and what looked suspiciously like a latte in the other.

Michael eyed that cup like a bomb.

"Sloane," I said. "You promised!"

"I shoplifted nothing," Sloane reported, "and this is a *peppermint* latte. Is that lasagna?"

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Nonna had pretty much adopted all of my fellow Naturals, but she had a special soft spot for Sloane and a perpetual need to feed people.

"Eat," Nonna told Sloane. "You made me the slides I asked for?"

"I did!" Sloane confirmed, plugging her laptop in and pulling up what appeared to be an FBI-style briefing entitled PROJECT MISTLETOE. "I took the liberty of adding some statistics about spatulas, but then I questioned the wisdom of that and un-took the liberty, so it's exactly what you asked for."

"Project Mistletoe?" Dean said, his voice wry.

Nonna scowled. "When I want your opinion, young man, I will tell you what opinion to have. Eat."

We ate, and finally, Lia strolled in wearing a pale blue dress that looked like it had been plucked straight off a 1950s housewife. With a pert little flounce, she took up a perch on the arm of Michael's chair.

Definitely off-again, I thought. She was sitting that close to him *because* they'd fought. Lia was complicated.

"You're late," Nonna told her. "No lasagna for you."

"That is an extremely credible threat," Lia deadpanned. "And I am properly chagrined."

"You are skin and bones." Nonna harrumphed. "Eat."

Without further ado, my grandmother gestured at Sloane to advance "Project Mistletoe" to the next slide, which contained two photographs. One was of Special Agent Veronica Sterling, and the other was of FBI Director Tanner Briggs.

Project Mistletoe... The implication of that and the

photographs dawned on me. It was pretty clear where this was going, and it did not bode well. My grandmother didn't really believe in personal boundaries. It wasn't so much that Nonna was bad at minding her own business as it was that she'd never met any business she did not consider hers.

"These two," Nonna said emphatically, gesturing to Sterling and Briggs. "Why are they not married? Why are they not having babies?"

If I hadn't known Nonna as well as I did, I might have taken those as rhetorical questions. They were *not* rhetorical questions.

"Because they were married once before and it ended badly?" Sloane ventured. "Also, statistically, in the past ten years, the percentage of adults between the ages of twenty and forty who are opting not to procreate has increased by a factor of—"

Michael drew his index and middle fingers across his neck, gesturing for Sloane to stop talking before Nonna realized what she was saying.

"A factor of incomprehensible gestures?" Sloane guessed.

I bit back a grin. My grandmother had eight children. Most of *her* children had at least four. My dad was the only one who'd never wanted kids of his own, and when fate had dropped me into Nonna's lap, she'd been both thrilled and gutted—thrilled to know me and gutted to have missed out on most of my childhood. Nonna was the type of woman who hadn't batted an eye at the idea of raising my *maternal* half sister. She loved Laurel as fiercely as she hated Olive Garden—which was to say, with every fiber of her soul.

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"Just so we're all on the same page here," Lia said, raising a hand, "this is a briefing about the fact that you want Briggs and Sterling married and reproducing ASAP?"

"Are they in love?" Nonna punctuated that question by hitting the conference table with the palm of her hand. "Will they make beautiful babies? Pfft. So they've been married before. Maybe it went badly. Maybe it didn't."

It had, in fact, gone very badly.

"Nonna," I said. "I don't think—"

"Next slide," Nonna barked at Sloane, who obliged. The words EXHIBIT 1 appeared at the top of the slide. Pictured beneath them was a photograph of a mound of flour-sprinkled dough. As much as I knew I should probably try to put a stop to this incredibly inappropriate briefing sooner rather than later, I kind of wanted to see where this was going.

"You can tell a lot about two people by the way they knead dough," Nonna said meaningfully.

Michael took in my grandmother's expressions and raised both brows. "That might or might not be euphemistic."

Nonna shrugged. "People who will not stay out of my kitchen get put to work."

"Since when?" I said incredulously. Nonna was infamous for chasing people out of her kitchen.

"Thanksgiving." My grandmother smiled smugly. "I let Veronica and Tanner help with the rolls, let them work the dough. Lots of dough. His hands. Hers. It could not be clearer—the passion, it is there. These two, *they* know about the kissing."

"Nonna!" I wasn't sure what the most mortifying part of this was: discussing the *passion* of Sterling and Briggs or the fact that my grandmother was the one leading that discussion. "This is so not our business."

"Pffft. Next slide."

Exhibit 2 was a photograph of a red onion, chopped right down the center.

"I'm really looking forward to this," Lia said, and I genuinely couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or truthful.

"Some people are tree trunks," Nonna declared with a wave of her hands. "Some people are onions. The spicy ones, they are onions. Either way, there are rings. Layers."

"Pretty sure this one's a metaphor," Michael announced.

Nonna quelled him with a single look. "Intimacy," she said, her accent growing just a little thicker, "is knowing another person's layers, knowing that they know yours and that you do not have to be any one version of yourself for them. These two, around each other, sometimes they are *here*..." Nonna tapped the screen, near one of the outer rings of the onion, then moved inward. "And sometimes *here*. You see?"

Sloane raised her hand. "I see the onion. I do not understand the onion."

Nonna smiled slightly. "It is the good days and the not so good. Who you were, who you are, who you will be. These two, they know each other." Nonna touched the screen again. "*Here*. And *here*. And *here*."

From the way Nonna was talking about Sterling and

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Briggs, you would have thought she'd spent years observing the two of them, but Briggs made it out to Colorado only once or twice a month, and most of his time *wasn't* spent in my grandmother's kitchen. Still, the profiler in me had to admit that Nonna wasn't wrong. Sterling and Briggs might have had more baggage than most airports, but they . . . *fit*. That was plain enough that I could see it in the ways they pissed each other off every bit as much as in their mutual habit of communicating whole sentences, maybe even paragraphs, with a single glance.

None of which meant this was a *good* idea.

"Briggs has already proposed," I told my grandmother. "Repeatedly. And Sterling keeps turning him down. The rest of us don't get a vote."

"No voting." Nonna was suspiciously agreeable about that. "Not until the end of my presentation," she continued. "Your Sterling, she spends time with Laurel, much time at my house. I might have broached the issue with her. Possibly more than once. Possibly a few times. And two days ago, do you know what Veronica Sterling said to me?" Nonna nodded to Sloane, who advanced the presentation to the next slide.

Exhibit 3 didn't include a picture—just words, and only two of them.

"*I can't*," Nonna read. "*Can't*. She did not tell me that she *will not* marry him. She did not say that she does not *want* a future with him. The woman *cannot* let herself have what she wants. Why?" Nonna let that question hang in the air. "What is standing in her way?" My grandmother gently hit

her chest with her fist, right over her heart. "Something in *here*." Nonna planted her palms back on the table again, like a general rolling out war plans. "That is where you five come in. Next slide!"

This time, there was no exhibit—just a picture of Michael, Dean, Lia, Sloane, and me.

"*Naturals*," Nonna said. When we'd moved to Denver and she'd been read in on the program, Nonna, in true Nonna fashion, hadn't batted an eye. "You have abilities, yes?" Nonna pointed at Michael. "This one, with the emotions and the sarcasm. That one, with the numbers." *Sloane*. "And you." Nonna narrowed her eyes at Lia. "The lies you pick out—how many of them are lies that people tell themselves?"

Lia looked at Michael. "More than most people want to admit."

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

"And Cassie. My Cassie." Nonna turned her attention to me. "You understand people. You and your quiet Dean who never eats enough . . . you can predict, yes? Behavior. Personality. Environment. You will crawl inside their heads. You will figure out why she *cannot* say yes. Find obstacles. Remove them." Nonna nodded, thoroughly satisfied with herself. "Boom, happily ever after."

"Profiling doesn't really work like that, ma'am," Dean said.

"*Can* it work like that?" Nonna countered dangerously. "Last slide!"

The final slide bore the words FIVE DAYS. Today was December nineteenth.