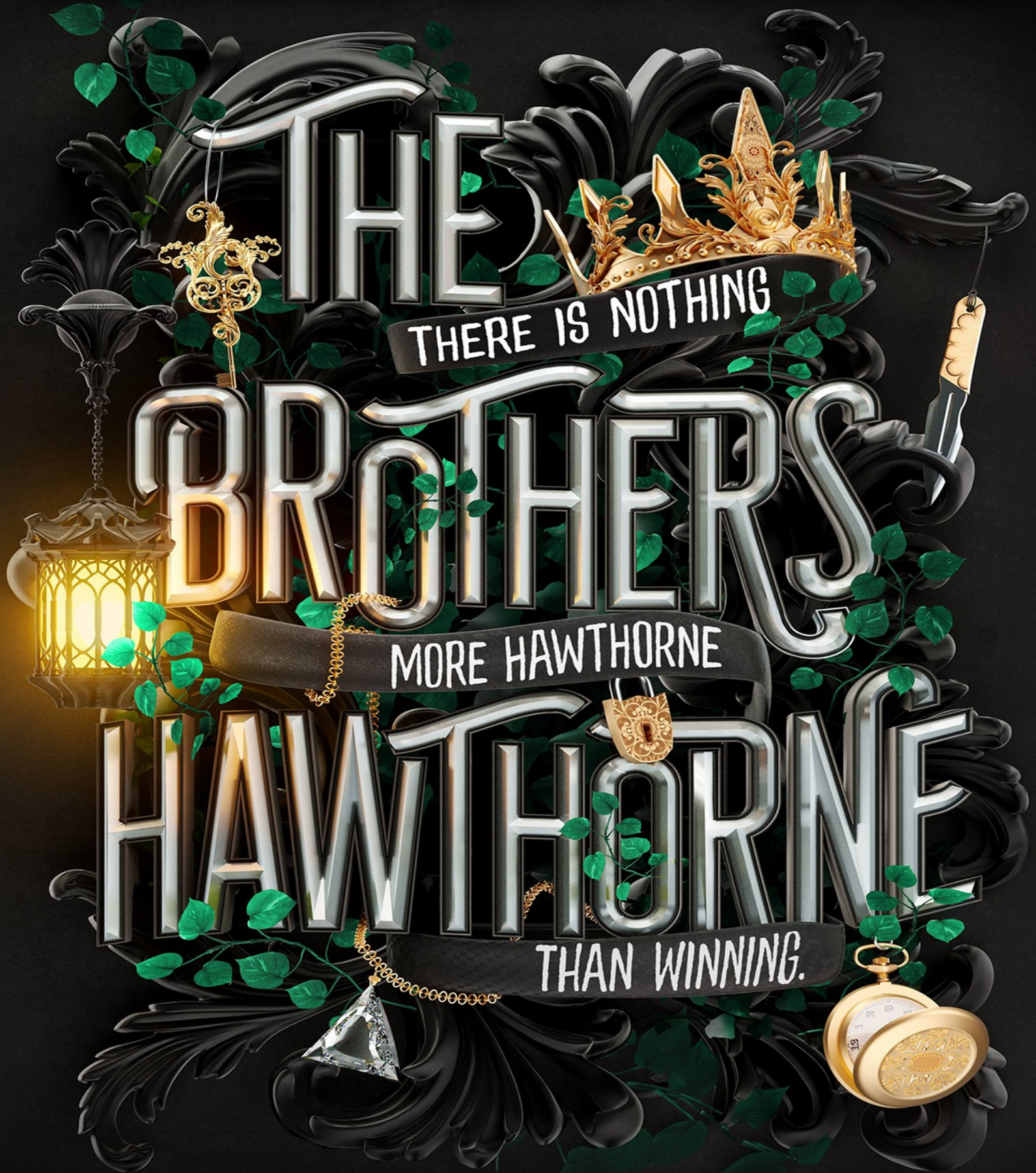


#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

THE INHERITANCE GAMES

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



THE
BROTHERS
HAWTHORNE

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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TWELVE AND A HALF YEARS AGO

Grayson and Jameson Hawthorne knew the rules. You couldn't get around rules if you didn't know them. *On Christmas morning, you may not step foot outside your rooms before the clock strikes seven.*

Beneath his blanket, Jameson lifted a military-grade walkie-talkie to his mouth. "You set the clocks forward?" He was seven to his brother's eight—both plenty old enough to spot a loophole.

That was the trick. The challenge. The game.

"I did," Grayson confirmed.

Jameson paused. "What if the old man set them back after we went to bed?"

"Then we'll have to go to Plan B."

Hawthornes *always* had a Plan B. But this time, it proved unnecessary. Hawthorne House had five grandfather clocks, and they all struck seven at the exact same time: 6:25.

Success! Jameson flung down his walkie-talkie, threw back the covers, and took off—out the door, down the hall, two lefts, a right, across the landing to the grand staircase. Jameson *flew*. But Grayson was a year older, a year taller—and he'd already made it from his wing halfway down the stairs.

Taking the steps two at a time, Jameson made it seventy percent of the way down, then launched himself over the banister. He hurtled toward the ground floor and landed on top of Grayson. They both went down, a mess of limbs and Christmas morning madness, then scrambled to their feet and

raced neck and neck, arriving at the Great Room doors at the exact same time—only to find their five-year-old brother had beaten them there.

Xander was curled up on the floor like a puppy. Yawning, he opened his eyes and blinked up at them. “Is it Christmas?”

“What are you doing, Xan?” Grayson frowned. “Did you sleep down here? The rules say...”

“*Can’t step a foot,*” Xander replied, sitting up. “I didn’t. I *rolled.*” At his brothers’ unblinking stares, Xander demonstrated.

“You log-rolled all the way from your bedroom?” Jameson was impressed.

“No stepping.” Xander grinned. “I win!”

“Kid’s got us there.” Fourteen-year-old Nash sauntered over to join them and hoisted Xander up on his shoulders. “Ready?”

The fifteen-foot-tall doors to the Great Room were closed only once a year, from midnight on Christmas Eve until the boys descended on Christmas morning. Staring at the gold rings on the door, Jameson imagined the marvels that lay on the other side.

Christmas at Hawthorne House was *magic*.

“You get that door, Nash,” Grayson ordered. “Jamie, help me with this one.”

Grinning, Jameson locked his fingers around the ring, next to Grayson’s. “One, two, three... pull!”

The majestic doors parted, revealing... *nothing*.

“It’s gone.” Grayson went unnaturally still.

“What is?” Xander asked, craning his neck to see.

“Christmas,” Jameson whispered. No stockings. No presents. No marvels or surprises. Even the decorations were gone, all except the tree, and even that had been stripped of ornaments.

Grayson swallowed. “Maybe the old man didn’t want us to break the rules this time.”

That was the thing about games: Sometimes you lost.

“No Christmas?” Xander’s voice quivered. “But I *rolled*.”

Nash set Xander down. “I’ll fix this,” he swore in a low tone. “I promise.”

“No.” Jameson shook his head, his chest and eyes burning. “We’re missing something.” He forced himself to take in every detail of the room. “There!” he said, pointing to a spot near the top of the tree where a single ornament hung, hidden among the branches.

That wasn’t a coincidence. There were no coincidences in Hawthorne House.

Nash crossed the room and snagged the ornament, then held it out. A sphere made of clear plastic dangled from a red ribbon. The plastic had a visible seam.

There was something inside.

Grayson took the ornament and, with the precision of a neurosurgeon, broke it open. A single white puzzle piece fell out. Jameson pounced. He turned the piece over and saw his grandfather’s scrawl on the back. *1/6*.

“One out of six,” he said out loud, and then his eyes widened. “The other trees!”



There were six Christmas trees in Hawthorne House. The one in the foyer stretched up twenty feet overhead, its boughs wrapped in sparkling lights. The dining room tree was strung with pearls, the one in the Tea Room bedecked in crystal. Cascading velvet ribbons danced through the branches of an enormous fir on the second-story landing; a white tree decorated solely

in gold sat on the third.

Nash, Grayson, Jameson, and Xander scoured them all, obtaining five more ornaments, four with puzzle pieces inside. Opening those four ornaments allowed them to assemble the puzzle: a square. A *blank* square.

Jameson and Grayson reached for the final ornament at the same time. “I’m the one who found the first clue,” Jameson insisted fiercely. “I *knew* there was a game.”

After a long moment, Grayson let go. Jameson had the ornament open in a flash. Inside, he found a small metal key on a little flashlight keychain

“Try the light on the puzzle, Jamie.” Even Nash couldn’t resist the lure of this game.

Jameson turned the flashlight on and angled its beam toward the assembled puzzle. Words appeared. *SOUTHWEST CORNER OF THE ESTATE.*

“How long will it take us to walk there?” Xander asked dramatically. “*Hours?*”

The Hawthorne estate, like Hawthorne House, was sizable.

Nash knelt next to Xander. “Wrong question, little man.” He looked up at the other two. “Either of you wanna tell me the right one?”

Jameson’s gaze darted to the keychain, but Grayson beat him to speaking. “What exactly is that a key *to*?”



The answer was a golf cart. Nash drove. As the southwest corner of the estate came into view, an awed hush swept over the brothers as they gaped at the sight before them.

This present *definitely* wouldn’t have fit in the Great Room.