



∞ AN INHERITANCE GAMES NOVEL ∞

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

THE
FINAL
GAMBIT

∞ AN INHERITANCE GAMES NOVEL ∞

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JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston

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Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
Visit us at LBYR.com

First Edition: August 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barnes, Jennifer (Jennifer Lynn), author.

Title: The final gambit / Jennifer Lynn Barnes.

Description: New York ; Boston : Little, Brown and Company, 2022. | Series: An inheritance games novel | Audience: Ages 12+. | Summary: "Eighteen-year-old Avery Grambs is weeks away from inheriting the multibillion-dollar Hawthorne fortune, but first she'll have to survive a dangerous game against an old enemy looking for vengeance."—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022017764 | ISBN 9780316370950 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316371124 (ebook) | ISBN 9780316466301 (int'l) | ISBN 9780316485050 (Walmart exclusive edition) | ISBN 9780316451338 (B&N exclusive edition)

Subjects: CYAC: Inheritance and succession—Fiction. | Wealth—Fiction. | Puzzles—Fiction. | Secrets—Fiction. | Families—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.B26225 Fin 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022017764>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-37095-0 (hardcover), 978-0-316-37112-4 (ebook), 978-0-316-46630-1 (int'l), 978-0-316-48505-0 (Walmart exclusive edition), 978-0-316-45133-8 (B&N exclusive edition)

E3-20220730-JV-NF-ORI

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

CHAPTER 1

We need to talk about your eighteenth birthday.” Alisa’s words echoed through the largest of Hawthorne House’s five libraries. Floor-to-ceiling shelves stretched up two stories, encircling us with hardcover and leather-bound tomes, many of them priceless, every single one a reminder of the man who had built this room.

This house.

This dynasty.

I could almost imagine the ghost of Tobias Hawthorne watching me as I knelt and ran my hand over the mahogany floorboards, my fingers searching for irregularities in the seams.

Finding none, I stood and replied to Alisa’s statement. “Do we?” I said. “Do we *really*?”

“Legally?” The formidable Alisa Ortega arched an eyebrow at me. “Yes. You may already be emancipated, but when it comes to the terms of your inheritance—”

“Nothing changes when I turn eighteen,” I said, scanning the room for my next move. “I won’t inherit until I’ve lived in Hawthorne House for a year.”

I knew my lawyer well enough to know *that* was what she really wanted to talk about. My birthday was October eighteenth. I would hit the year mark the first week in November and instantly become the richest teenager on the planet. Until then, I had other things to focus on.

A bet to win. A Hawthorne to best.

“Be that as it may...” Alisa was about as easily deterred as a high-speed train. “As your birthday approaches, there are some things we should

discuss.”

I snorted. “Forty-six billion of them?”

As Alisa gave me an exasperated look, I concentrated on my mission. Hawthorne House was filled with secret passages. Jameson had bet me that I couldn’t find them all. Eyeing the massive tree trunk that served as a desk, I reached for the sheath fixed to the inside of my boot and pulled out my knife to test a natural crack in the desk’s surface.

I’d learned the hard way I couldn’t afford to go anywhere unarmed.

“Moping check!” Xander “I’m a Living, Breathing Rube Goldberg Machine” Hawthorne poked his head into the library. “Avery, on a scale of one to ten, how much do you need a distraction right now, and how attached are you to your eyebrows?”

Jameson was on the other side of the world. Grayson hadn’t called once since he’d left for Harvard. Xander, my self-appointed BHFF—*Best Hawthorne Friend Forever*—considered it his sacred duty to keep my spirits high in his brothers’ absence.

“One,” I answered. “And ten.”

Xander gave a little bow. “Then I bid you adieu.” In a flash, he was gone.

Something was definitely exploding in the next ten minutes. Turning back toward Alisa, I drank in the rest of the room: the seemingly endless shelves, the wrought-iron staircases spiraling upward. “Just say what you came here to say, Alisa.”

“Yes, Lee-Lee,” a deep, honeyed voice drawled from the hall. “Enlighten us.” Nash Hawthorne took up position in the doorway, his trademark cowboy hat tipped down.

“Nash.” Alisa wore her power suit like armor. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Nash leaned against the doorframe and lazily crossed his right foot over his left ankle. “Kid tells me to leave, I’ll leave.” Nash didn’t trust Alisa with me. He hadn’t for months.

“I’m fine, Nash,” I said. “You can go.”

“I reckon I can.” Nash made no move to push off the doorframe. He was the oldest of the four Hawthorne brothers and used to riding herd on the

other three. Over the past year, he'd extended that to me. He and my sister had been "not dating" for months.

"Isn't it not-date night?" I asked. "And doesn't that mean you have somewhere to be?"

Nash removed his cowboy hat and let his steady eyes settle on mine. "Dollars to doughnuts," he said, turning to amble out of the room, "she wants to talk to you about establishing a trust."

I waited until Nash was out of earshot before I turned back to Alisa. "A trust?"

"I merely want you to be aware of your options." Alisa avoided specifics with lawyerly ease. "I'll put together a dossier for you to look over. Now, regarding your birthday, there's also the matter of a party."

"No party," I said immediately. The last thing I wanted was to turn my birthday into a headline-grabbing, hashtag-exploding event.

"Do you have a favorite band? Or singer? We'll need entertainment."

I could feel my eyes narrowing. "No party, Alisa."

"Is there anyone you'd like to see on the guest list?" When Alisa said *anyone*, she wasn't talking about people I knew. She was talking about celebrities, billionaires, socialites, royals....

"No guest list," I said, "because I'm not having a party."

"You really should consider the optics—" Alisa began, and I tuned out. I knew what she was going to say. She'd been saying it for nearly eleven months. *Everyone loves a Cinderella story.*

Well, *this* Cinderella had a bet to win. I studied the wrought-iron staircases. Three spiraled counterclockwise. But the fourth... I walked toward it, then scaled the steps. On the second-story landing, I ran my fingers along the underside of the shelf opposite the stairs. *A release.* I triggered it, and the entire curved shelf arced backward.

Number twelve. I smiled wickedly. *Take that, Jameson Winchester Hawthorne.*

"No party," I called down to Alisa again. And then I disappeared into the wall.

CHAPTER 2

That night, I slid into bed, Egyptian cotton sheets cool and smooth against my skin. As I waited for Jameson's call, my hand drifted toward the nightstand, to a small bronze pin in the shape of a key.

"Pick a hand." Jameson holds out two fists. I tap his right hand, and he uncurls his fingers, presenting me with an empty palm. I try the left—the same. Then he curls my fingers into a fist. I open them, and there, in my palm, sits the pin.

"You solved the keys faster than any of us," Xander reminds me. "It's past time for this!"

"Sorry, kid," Nash drawls. "It's been six months. You're one of us now."

Grayson says nothing, but when I fumble to put the pin on and it drops from my fingers, he catches it before it hits the ground.

That memory wanted to loop into another—*Grayson, me, the wine cellar*—but I wouldn't let it. In the past few months, I'd developed my own methods of distraction. Grabbing my phone, I navigated to a crowd-funding site and did a search for *medical bills* and *rent*. The Hawthorne fortune wasn't mine for another six weeks, but the partners at McNamara, Ortega, and Jones had already seen to it that I had a credit card with virtually no limit.

Keep gift anonymous. I clicked that box again and again. When my phone finally rang, I leaned back and answered. "Hello."

"I need an anagram of the word *naked*." There was a hum of energy to Jameson's voice.

"No, you don't." I rolled over onto my side. "How's Tuscany?"

"The birthplace of the Italian Renaissance? Full of winding roads, hills

and valleys, where a morning mist rolls out in the distance, and the forests are littered with leaves so golden red that the entire world feels like it's on fire in the very best way? That Tuscany?"

"Yes," I murmured. "That Tuscany."

"I've seen better."

"Jameson!"

"What do you want to hear about first, Heiress: Siena, Florence, or the vineyards?"

I wanted *all of it*, but there was a reason Jameson was using the standard Hawthorne gap year to travel. "Tell me about the villa." *Did you find anything?*

"Your Tuscan villa was built in the seventeenth century. It's supposedly a farmhouse but looks more like a castle, and it's surrounded by more than a hundred acres of olive orchard. There's a pool, a wood-fired pizza oven, and a massive stone fireplace original to the house."

I could picture it. Vividly—and not just because I had a binder of photos. "And when you checked the fireplace?" I didn't have to ask if he *had* checked the fireplace.

"I found something."

I sat up, my hair falling down my back. "A clue?"

"Probably," Jameson replied. "But to what puzzle?"

My entire body felt electric. "If you don't tell me, I will *end* you, Hawthorne."

"And I," Jameson replied, "would very much enjoy being ended." My traitorous lips threatened a smile. Tasting victory, Jameson gave me my answer. "I found a triangular mirror."

Just like that, my brain was off to the races. Tobias Hawthorne had raised his grandsons on puzzles, riddles, and games. The mirror was probably a clue, but Jameson had been right: There was no telling what game it was meant to be a part of. In any case, it wasn't what he was traveling the world looking for.

"We'll figure out what the disk was." Jameson as good as read my mind.

“The world is the board, Heiress. We just have to keep rolling the dice.”

Maybe, but this time we weren't following a trail or playing one of the old man's games. We were feeling around in the dark, hoping that there might be answers out there—answers that would tell us why a small coinlike disk engraved with concentric circles was worth a fortune.

Why Tobias Hawthorne's namesake and only son had left that disk for my mother.

Why Toby had snatched it back from me before he'd disappeared, off to play dead again.

Toby and that disk were my last connections to my mother, and they were gone. It hurt to think about that for too long. “I found another entry to the passageways today,” I said abruptly.

“Oh, really?” Jameson replied, the verbal equivalent of holding out a hand at the beginning of a waltz. “Which one did you find?”

“Circular library.”

On the other end of the phone line, there was a brief but unmistakable silence.

Realization dawned on me. “You didn't know about that one.” Victory was so very sweet. “Would you like me to tell you where it is?” I crooned.

“When I get back,” Jameson murmured, “I'll find it myself.”

I had no idea when he was coming back, but soon my year at Hawthorne House would be up. I would be free. I could go anywhere, do anything—and *everything*.

“Where are you headed next?” I asked Jameson. If I let myself think too much about *everything*, I would drown in it—in wanting, in longing, in believing we could have it all.

“Santorini,” Jameson replied. “But say the word, Heiress, and—”

“Keep going. Keep looking.” My voice went hoarse. “Keep telling me everything.”

“Everything?” Jameson repeated in a rough, low tone that made me think of what the two of us could be doing if I were there with him.

I rolled over onto my stomach. “The anagram you were looking for? It's

knead.”