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JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

THE GRANDDEST GAME



ONLY ONE CAN WIN.

∞ AN INHERITANCE GAMES NOVEL ∞

THE GRANDEST GAME

#1 New York Times bestselling author

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston

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For Rose

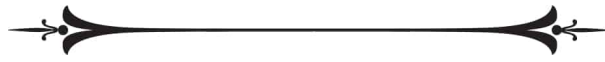
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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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Prologue



ONE YEAR AGO

There was a price to be paid for power, always. The only question was how steep that price was—and who was going to pay it.

Rohan knew that better than most. He also knew better than to get his knickers in a twist about it. What was a little blood loss or the occasional broken heart or finger among friends?

Not that Rohan had *friends*, per se.

“Ask me why you’re here.” The Proprietor’s quiet command slashed through the air like a sword.

The Proprietor of the Devil’s Mercy *was* power, and he’d raised Rohan like a son—a Machiavellian, amoral, *useful* son. Even as a child, Rohan had understood that in this hidden, underground palace, knowledge was currency, and ignorance was weakness.

He knew better than to *ask* a damn thing.

Instead, he smiled, a rogue’s smile, as much a weapon in his arsenal as any blade or secret he’d collected. “Asking is for those without other ways of obtaining answers.”

“And you are a master of those other ways,” the Proprietor acknowledged. “Observation, manipulation, the ability to go unseen or command a room at will.”

“I am also quite easy on the eyes.” Rohan was playing a dangerous game,

but then, that was the only kind of game he'd ever played.

"If you will not *ask...*" The Proprietor's hand curved around the handle of his ornate silver cane. "Then tell me, Rohan: Why have I summoned you here?"

This was it. Certainty thrummed through Rohan's veins as he answered. "The succession."

The Devil's Mercy was, on its surface, a luxurious gambling club, hidden and known only to its members: the ultra-wealthy, the aristocratic, the influential. In truth, the Mercy was so much more. A historic legacy. A shadow force. A place where deals were struck and fortunes set.

"The succession," the Proprietor confirmed. "I am in need of an heir. I've been given two years to live, three at the outside. By December thirty-first of next year, I will pass the crown."

A different person might have focused on the prospect of death, but Rohan did not. In two hundred years, control of the Mercy had passed only four times before. The heir was always young, the appointment for life.

This was and had always been Rohan's endgame. "I am not your only option for heir."

"Why should you be?" Coming from the Proprietor, that was not a rhetorical question. *Make your case, boy.*

I know every inch of the Mercy, Rohan thought. Every shadow, every trick. The membership knows me. They know not to cross me. You've already spoken of my skills—the more palatable ones, at least.

Out loud, Rohan opted for a different tactic. "We both know I'm a magnificent bastard."

"You are everything I made you to be. But some things must be won."

"I'm ready." Rohan felt the way he did every time he stepped into the ring to fight, knowing that pain was inevitable—and irrelevant.

"There's a buy-in." The Proprietor cut to the chase. "To take control of the Mercy, you must first purchase your stake. Ten million pounds should suffice."

Automatically, Rohan's mind began charting paths to the crown. The fact

that he *could* see options set off his sixth sense. “What’s the catch?”

“The catch, my boy, is what it ever was—for me, for all who came before us, all the way back to the first Proprietor’s heir. You cannot make your fortune within the walls of the Mercy, nor use any leverage obtained while in her employ. You cannot so much as enter these halls, use the Mercy’s name, or approach or accept favor from any member.”

Outside of the Mercy, Rohan had nothing—not even a last name.

“You will leave London within twenty-four hours, and you will not return unless and until you have the buy-in.”

Ten million pounds. This wasn’t just a challenge. This was exile.

“In your absence,” the Proprietor continued, “the duchess will act as Factotum in your stead. If you fail to obtain the buy-in, *she* will be my heir.”

There it was: the game, the stakes, the threat.

“Go,” the Proprietor said, blocking the way back to Rohan’s rooms. “*Now.*”



Rohan knew London. He could move through any part of the city, high society or low, like a ghost. But for the first time since he was five years old, he didn’t have the Mercy to go back to.

Look for an opening. Look for a loophole. Look for a weakness. His mind churning, Rohan looked for a pint.

Outside his pub of choice, two dogs fought. The smaller of the two had the look of a wolf about her. She was losing the fight. Stepping into the middle of it probably wasn’t the wisest course of action, but Rohan was a little beyond *wisdom* at the moment.

When the larger dog had been sent on its way, Rohan wiped the blood off his forearm and knelt in front of the smaller one. She snarled. He smiled.

The pub door opened. Inside, a television blared—an anchor’s voice. “We’re hearing reports that the first annual Grandest Game, the sprawling,

mind-twisting competition designed and funded by Hawthorne heiress Avery Grambs, has reportedly reached its conclusion. A winner of the seventeen-million-dollar prize is expected to be announced via livestream any—”

The door slammed shut.

Rohan met the dog’s wolfish gaze. “Annual,” he murmured. Meaning that next year, there would be another. He would have a year to plan. A year to arrange things just so. Fortunately, Avery Grambs had never been a *member* of the Devil’s Mercy.

Hello, loophole. Rohan stood. He reached for the pub door and glanced down. “Coming?” he asked the dog.

Inside, the owner of the pub recognized Rohan immediately. “What’ll it be?”

Even without the backing of the Mercy, a man of Rohan’s skills and reputation still had a card or two to play. “A pint for me,” he said. “A steak for her.” Rohan’s lips curved, more on one side than the other. “And transportation out of London. Tonight.”

Chapter 1



LYRA

The dream started the way it always did, with the flower. Seeing the calla lily in her hand filled Lyra with sickly sweet dread. She looked to her other hand—and the sad remains of a candy necklace. It held only three pieces of candy.

No.

On some level, Lyra knew she was nineteen, but in the dream, her hands were small—a child’s hands. The shadow looming over her was large.

And then came the whisper: “*A Hawthorne did this.*”

The shadow—her biological father—turned and walked away. Lyra couldn’t see his face. She heard footsteps going up the stairs.

He has a gun. Lyra woke with a start, a breath trapped in her chest, her body rigid, and her head... on a desk. In the time it took for her vision to clear and the real world to slide firmly back into place in front of her, Lyra remembered that she was in class.

Except the lecture hall was almost empty.

“You have ten minutes left on the test.” The only other person in the room was a fifty-year-old man wearing a blazer.

Test? Lyra’s gaze darted to a clock on the wall. As she registered the time, her panic began to ebb.

“Might as well just take the zero at this point.” The professor scowled at

her. “The rest of the class is already done. I suspect *they* didn’t spend last night partying.”

Because the only reason a girl who looks like me could be tired enough to fall asleep in class is because she was partying. Annoyance flared inside Lyra, banishing the last remnants of the dream’s dread. She looked down at the test. Multiple choice.

“I’ll see what I can get done in ten minutes.” Lyra fished a pen out of her backpack and began to read.

Most people could see images in their minds. For Lyra, there were only words and concepts and feelings. The only time she *saw* anything in her mind’s eye was when she dreamed. Luckily, not getting bogged down in mental imagery made her a very fast reader. And just as luckily, whoever had written this test had fallen into a predictable pattern, a familiar one.

To find the right answer, all a person had to do was decode the relationships between the options offered. Were two of them opposites? Did one of those opposites vary from the remaining choices only by nuance? Or were there two answers that *sounded* the same? Or one or more answers that *seemed* true but probably weren’t?

That was the thing about multiple-choice tests. You didn’t need to know anything about the material if you could break the code.

Lyra answered five questions in the first minute. Four the next. The more test bubbles she filled in, the more palpable the professor’s irritation with her grew.

“You’re wasting my time,” he said. “And yours.”

The old Lyra might have taken a tone like that to heart. Instead, she read faster. *Spot the pattern, spot the answer.* She finished with one minute to spare and handed the test in, knowing exactly what the professor saw when he looked at her: a girl with a body that said *party* to some people more than it had ever said *dancer*.

Not that she was a dancer, anymore.

Lyra grabbed her bag and turned to leave, and the professor stopped her. “Wait,” he ordered tersely. “I’ll grade it for you.” *Teach you a lesson* was

what he meant.

Turning slowly back to face him gave Lyra time to school her features into a neutral expression.

After grading the first ten questions, the professor had marked only one of her answers incorrect. His eyebrows drew closer together as he continued grading, and that percentage held—then improved.

“Ninety-four.” He looked up from the test. “Not bad.”

Wait for it, Lyra thought.

“Just imagine what you could do if you put in a little more effort.”

“How would you know what kind of effort I put in?” Lyra asked. Her voice was quiet, but she met his eyes head-on.

“You’re wearing pajamas, you haven’t brushed your hair, and you slept through most of the test.” He’d recast her, then, from the party girl to the sloth. “I’ve never even seen you in lecture,” the professor continued sternly.

Lyra shrugged. “That’s because I’m not in this class.”

“You—” He stopped. He stared. “You’re...”

“I’m not in this class,” Lyra repeated. “I fell asleep in the prior lecture.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned and started up the aisle toward the exit. Her stride was long. Maybe it was graceful. Maybe *she* was, still.

The professor called after her. “How did you get a ninety-four percent on a test for a class you’re not even taking?”

Lyra kept walking, her back to the man, as she answered. “Trying to write trick questions backfires if the person taking the test knows how to look for tricks.”

Chapter 2



LYRA

The email came in that afternoon: from the Registrar's Office, CC-ed to the Bursar's Office, subject line *Enrollment Hold*. Reading it three times didn't change its contents.

Lyra's phone rang halfway through her fourth read. *You're fine*, she reminded herself, as much out of habit as anything. *Everything is fine*.

Bracing herself for impact, she answered. "Hi, Mom."

"So you *do* remember me! And your phone *does* work! And you *haven't* been kidnapped by a mathematically minded serial killer intent on adding you to his incredibly sinister equation."

"New book?" Lyra guessed. Her mother was a writer.

"New book! She likes numbers more than people. He's a cop who trusts his instincts more than her calculations. They *hate* each other."

"In a good way?"

"A *very* good way. And speaking of mind-blowing chemistry and sizzling romantic tension... how are you?"

Lyra made a face. "Bad segue, Mom."

"Answer the question, you avoider! I am going into daughter withdrawal. Your dad thinks the first week in November is too early for Christmas decorations, your brother is four and has no appreciation whatsoever for dark chocolate, and if I want anyone to watch rom-coms with me, I'm going