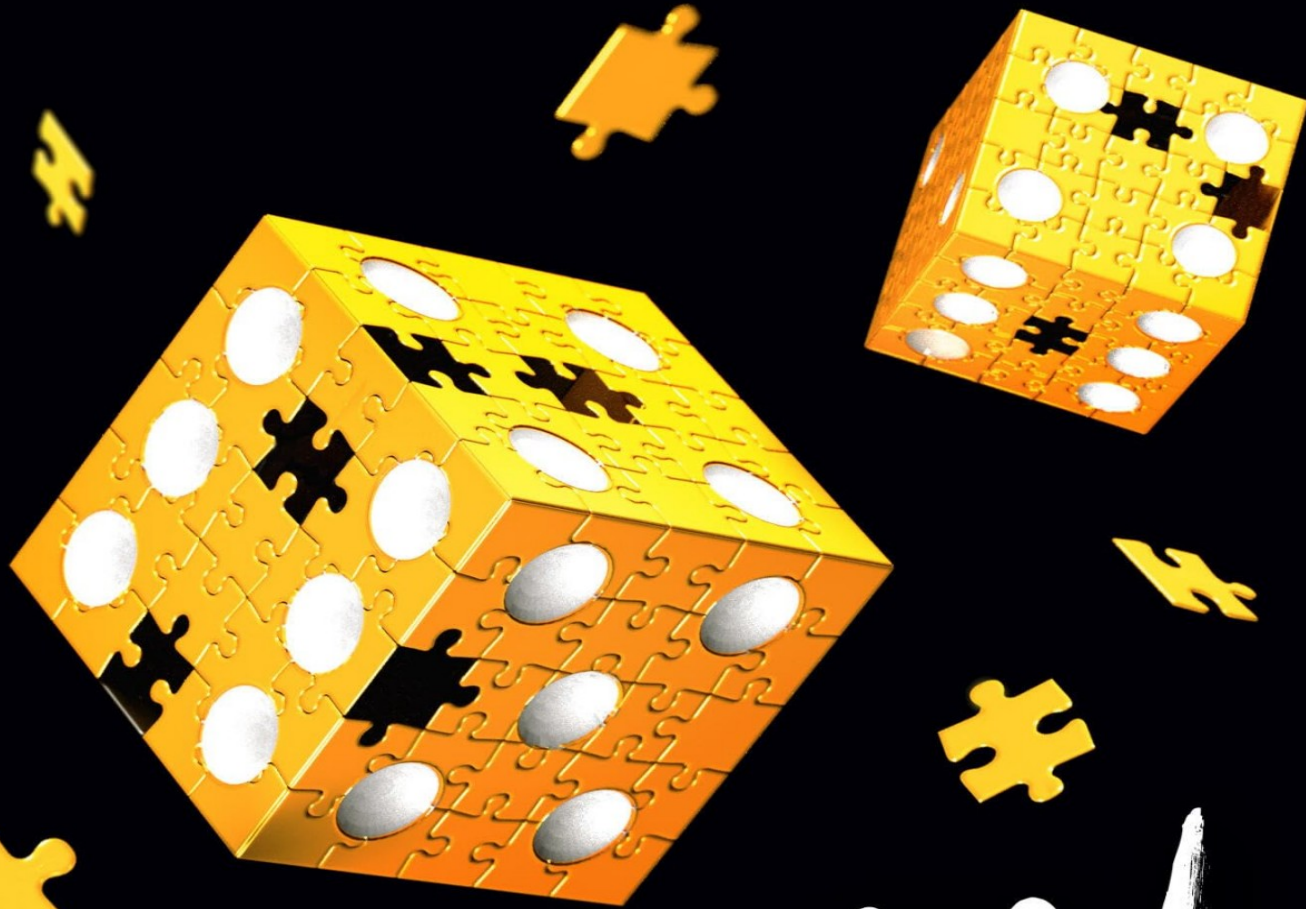


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The Naturals

Killer Instinct

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*For Anthony, my partner
in crime, now and always.*

YOU

Anything can be counted. The hairs on her head. The words she's spoken to you. The number of breaths she has left.

It's beautiful, really. The numbers. The girl. The things you have planned.

The thing you're destined to become.

CHAPTER 1

New Year's Eve fell on a Sunday. This would have been less problematic if my grandmother hadn't considered "Thou shalt gather thy family for Sunday dinner" an inviolable commandment, or if Uncle Rio had not appointed himself the pourer of wine.

There was a lot of wine.

By the time we were clearing away the plates, it was pretty clear that none of the adults would be driving themselves home anytime soon. Given that my father had seven siblings, all of them married, several with kids a decade or more my senior, there were a lot of "adults." As I carried a stack of plates into the kitchen, the dozen or so arguments brewing behind me were almost, but not quite, drowned out by the sound of boisterous laughter.

Viewed from the outside, it was chaos. But viewed with a profiler's eye, it was simple. Easy to understand. Easy to make sense of. This was a family. The *kind* of family, the individual personalities—those were there in the details: shirts tucked and un-tucked, dishes chipped but handled with love.

“Cassie.” My great-uncle bestowed upon me a beatific, bleary-eyed smile as I came into the kitchen. “You miss your family, eh? You come back to visit your old Uncle Rio!”

As far as anyone in this house knew, I’d spent the past six months at a government-sponsored gifted program. Boarding school, more or less. Parts of that were true.

More or less.

“Bah.” My grandmother made a dismissive noise in Uncle Rio’s general direction as she took a stack of plates from my hands and transferred them to the sink. “Cassie did not come back for old fools who drink too much and talk too loud.” Nonna rolled up her sleeves and turned on the faucet. “She came back to see her nonna. To make up for not calling like she should.”

Two guilt trips, one stone. Uncle Rio remained largely unfazed. I, on the other hand, felt the intended twinge of guilt and joined Nonna at the sink. “Here,” I said. “Let me.”

Nonna harrumphed, but slid over. There was something comforting about the fact that she was exactly the same as she’d always been: part mother hen, part dictator, ruling her family with baked ziti and an iron fist.

But I’m not the same. I couldn’t dodge that thought. *I’ve changed.* The new Cassandra Hobbes had more scars—figuratively and literally.

“This one gets cranky when she does not hear from you for too many weeks,” Uncle Rio told me, nodding at Nonna. “But perhaps you are busy?” His face lit up at the prospect, and he studied me for several seconds. “Heartbreaker!” he declared. “How many boyfriends you hide from us now?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Uncle Rio had been accusing me of hiding boyfriends from him for years. This was the first and only time he’d ever been right.

“You.” Nonna pointed a spatula—which had appeared in her hand out of nowhere—at Uncle Rio. “Out.”

He eyed the spatula warily, but held his ground.

“Out!”

Three seconds later, Nonna and I were alone in the kitchen. She stood there, watching me, her eyes shrewd, her expression softening slightly. “The boy who picked you up here last summer,” she said, “the one with the fancy car...He is a good kisser?”

“Nonna!” I sputtered.

“I have eight children,” Nonna told me. “I know about the kissing.”

“No,” I said quickly, scrubbing at the plates and trying not to read too much into that statement. “Michael and I aren’t...We don’t...”

“Ahh,” Nonna said knowingly. “His kisses, not so good.” She patted me consolingly on the shoulder. “He is young. Room for improvement!”

This conversation was mortifying on so many levels, not the least of which was the fact that *Michael* wasn’t the one I’d been kissing. But if Nonna wanted to think that the reason my phone calls home had been so few and far between was because I was caught in the throes of young romance, let her.

That was an easier pill to swallow than the truth: I’d been subsumed into a world of motives and victims, killers and corpses. I’d been held captive. Twice. I still woke up at night with memories of zip ties digging into my wrists and the sound of gunfire ringing in my ears. Sometimes, when I closed my eyes, I saw light reflected off of a bloody blade.

“You are happy at this school of yours?” Nonna made her best attempt at sounding casual. I wasn’t fooled. I’d lived with my paternal grandmother for five years before I’d joined the Naturals program. She wanted me safe, and she wanted me happy. She wanted me *here*.

“I am,” I told my grandmother. “Happy.” That wasn’t a lie. For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged somewhere. With my fellow Naturals, I never had to pretend to be someone I wasn’t. I couldn’t have, even if I’d wanted to.

In a house full of people who saw things the rest of the world missed, it was impossible to hide.

“You look good,” Nonna admitted grudgingly. “Better now that I have fed you for a week.” She harrumphed again, then gently shoved me to the side

and took over washing the dishes. “I will send food back with you,” she declared. “That boy who picked you up, he is too skinny. Maybe he will kiss better with a little meat on his bones.”

I sputtered.

“What’s this about kissing?” a voice asked from the doorway. I turned, expecting to see one of my father’s brothers. Instead, I saw my father. I froze. He was stationed overseas, and we weren’t expecting him for another couple of days.

It had been over a year since the last time I’d seen him.

“Cassie.” My father greeted me with a stiff smile, a shade or two off from the real deal.

My thoughts went to Michael. He would have known exactly how to read the tension in my father’s face. In contrast, I was a profiler. I could take a collection of tiny details—the contents of a person’s suitcase, the words they chose to say hello—and build the big picture: who they were, what they wanted, how they would behave in any given situation.

But the exact meaning of that not-quite-a-smile? The emotions my father was hiding? Whether he felt a spark of recognition or pride or anything fatherly at all when he looked at me?

That, I didn’t know.

“Cassandra,” Nonna chided, “say hello to your father.” Before I had a chance to say anything, Nonna had latched her arms around him, squeezing tightly. She kissed him, then smacked him several times, then kissed him again.

“You are back early.” Nonna finally pried herself away from the prodigal son. She gave him a look—probably the same look she’d given him when he’d tracked dirt in on her carpet as a little boy. “Why?”

My father’s gaze flitted back to me. “I need to talk to Cassie.”

Nonna’s eyes narrowed. “And what is it you need to talk to our Cassie about?” Nonna poked him in the chest. Repeatedly. “She is happy at her new school, with her skinny boyfriend.”

I barely registered that assertion. My attention was fully focused on my father. He was slightly disheveled. He looked like he hadn't slept at all the night before. He couldn't quite look me in the eye.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," Nonna said, with the force of a sheriff declaring martial law. "Nothing is wrong." She turned back to my father. "You tell her nothing is wrong," she ordered.

My father crossed the room and took my shoulders gently in his hands.

You're not normally this gentle.

My brain ran through everything I knew about him—our relationship, the type of person he was, the fact that he was here at all. My stomach felt like it had been lined with lead. I knew with sudden prescience what he was going to say. The knowledge paralyzed me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't blink.

"Cassie," my father said softly. "It's about your mother."

CHAPTER 2

There was a difference between *presumed dead* and *dead*, a difference between coming back to a dressing room that was drenched in my mother's blood and being told that after five long years, there was a body.

When I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, I had prayed every night that someone would find my mother, that the police would be proven wrong, that somehow, despite the evidence, despite the amount of blood she'd lost, she'd turn up. Alive.

Eventually, I had stopped hoping and started praying that the authorities would find my mother's body. I had imagined being called in to identify the remains. I'd imagined saying good-bye. I had imagined burying her.

I hadn't imagined this.

"They're sure it's her?" I asked, my voice small, but steady.

My father and I were sitting on opposite sides of a porch swing, just the two of us, the closest thing to privacy Nonna's house could afford.

“The location’s right.” He didn’t look at me as he replied, staring out into the night. “So is the timing. They’re trying to match dental records, but you two moved around so much....” He seemed to realize, then, that he was telling me something I already knew.

My mother’s dental records would be hard to come by.

“They found this.” My father held out a thin silver chain. A small red stone hung on the end.

My throat closed up.

Hers.

I swallowed, pushing the thought down, like I could unthink it by sheer force of will. My father tried to hand me the necklace. I shook my head.

Hers.

I’d known my mother was almost certainly dead. I’d *known* that. I’d believed it. But now, looking at the necklace she’d worn that night, I couldn’t breathe.

“That’s evidence.” I forced the words out. “The police shouldn’t have given it to you. It’s evidence.”

What were they thinking? I’d only been working with the FBI for six months. Almost all of that time had been spent behind the scenes, and even I knew you didn’t break chain of evidence just so a halfway-orphaned girl could have something that had belonged to her mother.

“There weren’t any prints on it,” my father assured me. “Or trace evidence.”

“Tell them to keep it,” I ground out, standing up and walking to the edge of the porch. “They may need it. For identification.”

It had been five years. If they were looking for dental records, there probably wasn’t anything left for me *to identify. Nothing but bones.*

“Cassie—”

I tuned out. I didn’t want to listen to a man who’d barely known my mother telling me that the police had no leads, that they thought it was all right to compromise evidence, because none of them expected this case to be solved.

After five years, we had a body. That was a lead. *Notches in the bones. The way she was buried. The place her killer had laid her to rest.* There had to be *something*. Some hint of what had happened.

He came after you with a knife. I slipped into my mother's perspective, trying to work out what had happened that day, as I had so many times before. *He surprised you. You fought.*

"I want to see the scene." I turned back to my father. "The place where they found the body, I want to see it."

My father was the one who'd signed off on my enrolling in Agent Briggs's gifted program, but he had no idea what kind of "education" I was receiving. He didn't know what the program really was. He didn't know what I could do. Killers and victims, UNSUBs and bodies—this was my language. *Mine.* And what had happened to my mother?

That was mine, too.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Cassie."

It's not your decision. I thought the words, but didn't say them out loud. There was no point in arguing with him. If I wanted access—to the site, to pictures, to whatever scraps of evidence there might be—Vincent Battaglia wasn't the person to ask.

"Cassie?" My father stood and took a hesitant step toward me. "If you want to talk about this—"

I turned around and shook my head. "I'm fine," I said, cutting off his offer. I pushed down the lump rising in my throat. "I just want to go back to school."

"School" was overstating things. The Naturals program consisted of a grand total of five students, and our lessons had what you would call *practical applications*. We weren't just pupils. We were resources to be used.

An elite team.

Each of the five of us had a skill, an aptitude honed to perfection by the lives we'd lived growing up.

None of us had normal childhoods. Those were the words I kept thinking, over and over again, four days later as I stood at the end of my grandmother's drive, waiting for my ride to arrive. *If we had, we wouldn't be Naturals.*

Instead of thinking of the way I'd grown up, going from town to town with a mother who conned people into thinking she was psychic, I thought about the others—about Dean's psychopath of a father and the way Michael had learned to read emotions as a means of survival. About Sloane and Lia and the things I suspected about their childhoods.

Thinking about my fellow Naturals came with a particular brand of homesickness. I wanted them here—all of them, any of them—so badly that I almost couldn't breathe.

"Dance it off." I could hear my mother's voice in my memory. I could see her, wrapped in a royal blue scarf, her red hair damp from cold and snow as she flipped the car radio on and turned it up.

That had been our ritual. Every time we moved—from one town to the next, from one mark to the next, from one show to the next—she turned on the music, and we danced in our seats until we forgot about everything and everyone we'd left behind.

My mother wasn't a person who'd believed in missing anything for long.

"You're looking deep in thought." A low, no-nonsense voice brought me back to the present.

I pushed back against the memories—and the deluge of emotions that wanted to come with them. "Hey, Judd."

The man the FBI had hired to look after us studied me for a moment, then picked up my bag and swung it into the trunk. "You going to say good-bye?" he asked, nodding toward the porch.

I turned back to see Nonna standing there. She loved me. Fiercely. Determinedly. *From the moment you met me.* The least I owed her was a good-bye.

"Cassandra?" Nonna's tone was brisk as I approached. "You forget something?"

For years, I'd believed that I was broken, that my ability to love—fiercely, determinedly, freely—had died with my mother.

The past few months had taught me I was wrong.

I wrapped my arms around my grandmother, and she latched hers around me and held on for dear life.

"I should go," I said after a moment.

She tapped my cheek with a little more oomph than necessary. "You call if you need anything," she ordered. "Anything."

I nodded.

She paused. "I am sorry," she said carefully. "About your mother."

Nonna had never met my mother. She didn't know the first thing about her. I'd never told my father's family about my mom's laugh, or the games she'd used to teach me to read people, or the way we'd said *no matter what* instead of *I love you*, because she didn't just love me—she loved me forever and ever, no matter what.

"Thanks," I told my grandmother. My voice came out slightly hoarse. I tamped down on the grief rising up inside me. Sooner or later, it would catch up to me.

I had always been better at compartmentalizing than ridding myself of unwanted emotions altogether.

As I turned away from Nonna's prying eyes and walked back to Judd and the car, I couldn't banish the memory of my mom's voice.

Dance it off.

CHAPTER 3

Judd drove in silence. He left it to me to break it, if and when I was ready to do so.

“The police found a body.” It took me ten minutes to push those words past the edge of my lips. “They think it’s my mother’s.”

“I heard,” Judd said simply. “Briggs got a call.”

Special Agent Tanner Briggs was one of the Naturals program’s two FBI supervisors. He’d been the one to recruit me, and he’d used my mother’s case to do it.

Of course he’d gotten a call.

“I want to see the body,” I told Judd, staring out at the road in front of us. Later, I could process. Later, I could grieve. Answers, facts, *that* was what I needed now. “Pictures of the crime scene,” I continued, “anything Briggs can get from the locals, I want to see it.”

Judd waited a beat. “That all?”