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KILLER INSTINCT

When a killer plays
mind games, winning is a
matter of life and death.

A **NATURALS** NOVEL

KILLER INSTINCT

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

A **NATURALS** NOVEL

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

ALSO BY JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

The Naturals

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*For “Special Agent” Elizabeth Harding.
Thanks for everything.*

CHAPTER 1

he majority of children who are kidnapped and killed are dead within three hours of the abduction. Thanks to my roommate, the walking encyclopedia of probabilities and statistics, I knew the exact numbers. I knew that when you went from discussing *hours* to *days* and *days* to *weeks*, the likelihood of recovery dropped so far that the FBI couldn't justify the manpower necessary to keep the case active.

I knew that by the time a case was classified "cold" and found its way to us, we were probably looking for a body—not a little girl.

But...

But Mackenzie McBride was six years old.

But her favorite color was purple.

But she wanted to be a "veterinarian pop star."

You couldn't stop looking for a kid like that. You couldn't stop *hoping*, even if you tried.

"You look like a woman in need of amusement. Or possibly libation." Michael Townsend eased himself down onto the sofa next to me, stretching his bad leg out to the side.

"I'm fine," I said.

Michael snorted. "The corners of your mouth are turned upward. The rest of your face is fighting it, like if your lips parted into even a tiny smile, it might clear the way for a sob."

That was the downside to joining the Naturals program. We were all here because we saw things that other people didn't. Michael read facial

expressions as easily as other people read words.

He leaned toward me. “Say the word, Colorado, and I will selflessly provide you with a much-needed distraction.”

The last time Michael had offered to distract me, we’d spent half an hour blowing things up and then hacked our way into a secure FBI drive.

Well, technically, *Sloane* had hacked our way into a secure FBI drive, but the end result had been the same.

“No distractions,” I said firmly.

“Are you sure?” Michael asked. “Because this distraction involves Lia, Jell-O, and a vendetta that begs to be paid.”

I didn’t want to know what our resident lie detector had done to provoke the kind of vengeance that came laden with Jell-O. Given Lia’s personality and her history with Michael, the possibilities were endless.

“You do realize that starting a prank war with Lia would be a very bad idea,” I said.

“Without question,” Michael replied. “If only I weren’t so overly burdened with good sense and a need for self-preservation.”

Michael drove like a maniac and had a general disdain for authority. Two months earlier, he’d followed me out of the house *knowing* that I was the subject of a serial killer’s obsession, and he’d gotten shot for his trouble.

Twice.

Self-preservation was not Michael’s strong suit.

“What if we’re wrong about this case?” I asked. My thoughts had looped right back around: from Michael to Mackenzie, from what had happened six weeks ago to what Agent Briggs and his team were out there doing right now.

“We’re not wrong,” Michael said softly.

Let the phone ring, I thought. Let it be Briggs, calling to tell me that this time—this time—my instincts were right.

The first thing I’d done when Agent Briggs had handed over the Mackenzie McBride file was profile the suspect: a parolee who’d disappeared around the same time Mackenzie had. Unlike Michael’s ability, my skill set wasn’t limited to facial expressions or posture. Given a handful of details, I

could crawl into another person's skull and imagine what it would be like to be them, to want what they wanted, to do the things that they did.

Behavior. Personality. Environment.

The suspect in Mackenzie's case had no focus. The abduction was too well planned. It didn't add up.

I'd combed through the files, looking for someone who seemed like a possible fit. *Young. Male. Intelligent. Precise.* I'd half begged, half coerced Lia into going through witness testimony, interrogations, interviews—any and every recording related to the case, hoping she'd catch someone in a revealing lie. And finally, she had. The McBride family's attorney had issued a statement to the press on behalf of his clients. It had seemed standard to me, but to Lia, lies were as jarring as off-key singing was to a person with perfect pitch.

"No one can make sense of a tragedy like this."

The lawyer was young, male, intelligent, precise—and when he'd said those words, he'd been lying. There was one person who could make sense of what had happened, a person who *didn't* think it was a tragedy.

The person who'd taken Mackenzie.

According to Michael, the McBrides' lawyer had felt a thrill just mentioning the little girl's name. I was hoping that meant there was a chance—however small—that the man had kept her alive: a living, breathing reminder that he was bigger, better, smarter than the FBI.

"Cassie." Dean Redding burst into the room, and my chest constricted. Dean was quiet and self-contained. He almost never raised his voice.

"Dean?"

"They found her," Dean said. "Cassie, they found her on his property, exactly where Sloane's schematics said they would. She's alive."

I jumped up, my heart pounding in my ears, unsure if I was going to cry or throw up or shriek. Dean smiled. Not a half smile. Not a grin. He beamed, and the expression transformed him. Chocolate-brown eyes sparkled underneath the blond hair that hung perpetually in his face. A dimple I'd never seen appeared in one cheek.

I threw my arms around Dean. A moment later, I bounced out of his grip and launched myself at Michael.

Michael caught me and let out a whoop. Dean sat down on the arm of the couch, and there I was, wedged in between them, feeling the heat from both of their bodies, and all I could think was that Mackenzie was going to get to go home.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join?”

The three of us turned to see Lia in the doorway. She was dressed from head to toe in black, a white silk scarf tied neatly around her neck. She arched an eyebrow at us: cool and calm and just a little bit mocking.

“Admit it, Lia,” Michael said. “You’re just as happy as we are.”

Lia eyed me. She eyed Michael. She eyed Dean. “Honestly,” she said, “I doubt that anyone is as happy as Cassie is at this exact moment.”

I was getting better at ignoring Lia’s suggestive little digs, but this one hit its target, dead center. Squished in between Michael and Dean, I blushed. I was *not* going to go there—and I wasn’t going to let Lia ruin this.

A grim expression on his face, Dean stood and marched toward Lia. For a moment, I thought he might say something to her about spoiling the moment, but he didn’t. He just picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Hey!” Lia protested.

Dean grinned and threw her onto the sofa with Michael and me and then resumed his perch on the edge of the couch like nothing had happened. Lia scowled, and Michael poked her cheek.

“Admit it,” he said again. “You’re just as happy as we are.”

Lia tossed her hair over her shoulder and stared straight ahead, refusing to look any of us in the eye. “A little girl is going home,” she said. “Because of us. Of course I’m as happy as you are.”

“Given individual differences in serotonin levels, the probability that any four people would be experiencing identical levels of happiness simultaneously is quite—”

“Sloane,” Michael said, without bothering to turn around. “If you don’t finish that sentence, there’s a cup of fresh ground coffee in your future.”

“My immediate future?” Sloane asked suspiciously. Michael had a long history of blocking her consumption of caffeine.

Without a word, Michael, Lia, and I all turned to look at Dean. He got the message, stood up, and strode toward Sloane, giving her the exact same treatment he’d given Lia. When Dean tossed Sloane gently on top of me, I giggled and almost toppled onto the floor, but Lia grabbed hold of my collar.

We did it, I thought, as Michael, Lia, Sloane, and I elbowed for room and Dean stared on from his position, just outside the fray. *Mackenzie McBride isn’t going to be some statistic. She’s not going to be forgotten.*

Mackenzie McBride was going to grow up, because of us.

“So,” Lia said, a decidedly wicked glint in her eyes. “Who thinks this calls for a celebration?”

CHAPTER 2

It was late September, the time of year when you could practically feel the last, labored breaths of summer as it gave way to fall. A slight chill settled over the backyard as the sun went down, but the five of us barely felt it, drunk on power and the unfathomable thing we'd just managed to do. Lia chose the music. The steady beat of the bass line drowned out the sounds of the tiny town of Quantico, Virginia.

I'd never really belonged anywhere before I joined the Naturals program, but for this instant, this moment, this one night, nothing else mattered.

Not my mother's disappearance and presumed murder.

Not the corpses that had started piling up once I had agreed to work for the FBI.

For this instant, this moment, this one night, I was invincible and powerful and part of something.

Lia took my hand in hers and led me from the back porch onto the lawn. Her body moved with perfect, fluid grace, like she'd been born dancing. "For once in your life," she ordered, "just let go."

I wasn't much of a dancer, but somehow, my hips began to keep time to the music.

"Sloane," Lia yelled. "Get your butt out here."

Sloane, who'd already had her promised cup of coffee, bounded out to join us. It became quickly apparent that her version of dancing involved a great deal of bouncing and occasional spirit fingers. With a grin, I gave up trying to

mimic Lia's liquid, sensuous movements and adopted Sloane's. *Bounce. Wiggly fingers. Bounce.*

Lia gave the two of us a look of consternation and turned to the boys for backup.

"No," Dean said curtly. "Absolutely not." It was getting dark enough that I couldn't make out the exact expression on his face from across the lawn, but I could imagine the stubborn set of his jaw. "I don't dance."

Michael was not so inhibited. He walked to join us, his gait marked by a noticeable limp, but he managed some one-legged bouncing just fine.

Lia cast her eyes heavenward. "You're hopeless," she told us.

Michael shrugged, then threw in some jazz hands. "It's one of my many charms."

Lia looped her arms around the back of his neck and pressed her body close to his, still dancing. He raised an eyebrow at her, but didn't push her away. If anything, he looked amused.

On again, off again. My stomach twisted sharply. Lia and Michael had been *off* the entire time I'd known them. *It's none of my business.* I had to remind myself of that. *Lia and Michael can do whatever they want to do.*

Michael caught me staring at them. He scanned my face, like a person skimming a book. Then he smiled, and slowly, deliberately, he winked.

Beside me, Sloane looked at Lia, then at Michael, then at Dean. Then she bounced closer to me. "There's a forty percent chance this ends with someone getting punched in the face," she whispered.

"Come on, Dean-o," Lia called. "Join us." Those words were part invitation, part challenge. Michael's body moved to Lia's beat, and I realized suddenly that Lia wasn't putting on a show for my benefit—or for Michael's. She was getting up close and personal with Michael solely to get a rise out of Dean.

Based on the mutinous expression on Dean's face, it was working.

"You know you want to," Lia taunted, turning as she danced so her back was up against Michael. Dean and Lia had been the program's first recruits. For years, it had been just the two of them. Lia had told me once that she and

Dean were like siblings—and right now, Dean looked every inch the overprotective big brother.

Michael likes pissing Dean off. That much went without saying. Lia lives to pull Dean off the sidelines. And Dean...

A muscle in Dean's jaw ticked as Michael trailed a hand down Lia's arm. Sloane was right. We were one wrong move away from a fistfight. Knowing Michael, he'd probably consider it a bonding activity.

"Come on, Dean," I said, intervening before Lia could say something inflammatory. "You don't have to dance. Just brood in beat to the music."

That surprised a laugh out of Dean. I grinned. Beside me, Michael eased back, putting space between his body and Lia's.

"Care to dance, Colorado?" Michael grabbed my hand and twirled me. Lia narrowed her eyes at us, but rebounded quickly, wrapping an arm around Sloane's waist, attempting to coerce her into something that resembled actual dancing.

"You're not happy with me," Michael said once I was facing him again.

"I don't like games."

"I wasn't playing with *you*," Michael told me, twirling me around a second time. "And for the record, I wasn't playing with Lia, either."

I gave him a look. "You *were* messing with Dean."

Michael shrugged. "One does need hobbies."

Dean stayed at the edge of the lawn, but I could feel his eyes on me.

"Your lips are turning upward." Michael cocked his head to one side. "But there's a wrinkle in your brow."

I looked away. Six weeks ago, Michael had told me to figure out how I felt about him—and about Dean. I'd been doing my best not to think about it, not to let myself feel anything about *either* of them, because the moment I felt something—anything—Michael would know. I'd gone my whole life without romance. I didn't need it, not the way I needed *this*: being part of something, caring about people in a way that I hadn't realized I still could. Not just Michael and Dean, but Sloane and even Lia. I *fit* here. I hadn't fit anywhere in a very long time.

Maybe ever.

I couldn't screw that up.

"You sure we can't talk you into dancing?" Lia called out to Dean.

"Positive."

"Well, in that case..." Lia cut in between Michael and me, and the next thing I knew, I was dancing with Sloane and Lia was back with Michael. She looked up at him through heavily lashed eyes and put her hands flat on his chest.

"Tell me, Townsend," she said, practically purring. "Do you feel lucky?"

This did not bode well.

CHAPTER 3

was dead. Outmanned, outgunned, seconds away from disaster—and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

I “I’ll see your three and raise you two.” Michael smirked. If I’d been an emotion reader, I could have determined if it was an *I have an incredible hand and I’m spoon-feeding you your own doom* smirk or an *it’s smirk-worthy that you can’t tell I’m bluffing* smirk. Unfortunately, I was better at figuring out people’s personalities and motivations than the exact meaning of each of their facial expressions.

Note to self, I thought. Never play poker with Naturals.

“I’m in.” Lia twirled her gleaming black ponytail around her index finger before sliding the requisite number of Oreos to the center of the coffee table. Given that her expertise was spotting lies, I took that to mean that there was a very good chance that Michael was bluffing.

The only problem was that now I had no idea if *Lia* was bluffing.

Sloane looked on from behind a veritable mountain of Oreos. “I’ll sit this one out,” she said. “Also, I’m entertaining the idea of eating some of my poker chips. Can we agree that an Oreo missing its frosting is worth two-thirds of its normal amount?”

“Just eat the cookies,” I told her, eyeing her pile mournfully—and only partially joking. “You have plenty to spare.”

Before joining the Naturals program, Sloane had been Las Vegas born and raised. She’d been counting cards since she’d learned to count. She sat out about a third of the hands, but won every single hand she played.

“Somebody’s a bad sport,” Lia said, wagging a finger at me. I stuck my tongue out at her.

Somebody only had two Oreos left.

“I’m in,” I sighed, pushing them into the pot. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. If I’d been playing with strangers, I would have had the advantage. I could have looked at a person’s clothes and posture and known instantly how much of a risk taker they were and whether they’d bluff quietly or put on a show. Unfortunately, I wasn’t playing with strangers, and the ability to get a read on other people’s personalities wasn’t nearly as useful in a group of people you already knew.

“What about you, Redding? Are you in or are you out?” Michael issued the words as a challenge.

So maybe Lia misread him, I thought, turning that idea over in my head. *Maybe he’s not bluffing*. I doubted Michael would have challenged Dean unless he was certain he was going to win.

“I’m in,” Dean said. “All in.” He pushed five cookies into the pot and raised an eyebrow at Michael, mimicking the other boy’s facial expression almost exactly.

Michael matched Dean’s bet. Lia matched Michael’s. My turn.

“I’m out of cookies,” I said.

“I’d be open to discussing a modest interest rate,” Sloane told me before returning her attention to divesting an Oreo of its frosting.

“I have an idea,” Lia said in an overly innocent tone that I recognized immediately as trouble. “We could always take things to the next level.” She unknotted the white kerchief around her neck and tossed it to me. Her fingers played with the bottom of her tank top, raising it up just enough to make it crystal clear what the “next level” was.

“It is my understanding that the rules of strip poker specify that only the loser is required to disrobe,” Sloane interjected. “No one has lost yet, ergo—”

“Call it a show of solidarity,” Lia said, inching her shirt up farther. “Cassie’s almost out of chips. I’m just trying to even the playing field.”

“Lia.” Dean was not amused.