

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LESSONS
in
POWER

BLOOMSBURY

LESSONS *in* POWER

For Jeana



LESSONS *in* POWER

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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The Ruling Class

Lessons in Power

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CHAPTER 1

“Tess, has anyone ever told you that you’re an absolute vision when you’re plotting something?” Asher Rhodes shot a lazy grin in my direction.

I ignored Asher and kept my gaze fixed on the street in front of the Roosevelt Hotel. A man named Charles Bancroft had a reservation at the Roosevelt’s five-star restaurant for lunch—pricey, considering Mr. Bancroft had recently convinced a judge that his child support and alimony payments should be kept to a minimum.

“Asking for a friend,” Asher clarified. Then he nudged his best friend. “Henry, my good man, tell Tess she’s pretty as a picture when she’s preparing to unleash her wrath on the delightfully unsuspecting father of one of our classmates.”

“Kendrick?” Henry Marquette said.

“Yes?” I replied without taking my eyes away from the street.

“You are utterly *terrifying* when you are plotting something.”

A dark car pulled up to the curb. I smiled. “Thank you,” I told Henry. Then I turned to Asher. “Get Vivvie on the phone,” I instructed. “Tell her we’re a go.”

Vivvie and her aunt had lived at the Roosevelt Hotel for almost a month until they’d found a DC apartment. That was plenty of time for friendly-to-a-fault Vivvie Bharani to have endeared herself to the staff.

Convenient, that, I thought as I watched Charles Bancroft climb out of the backseat of his luxury sedan. Asher relayed my message to Vivvie, then put the phone on speaker.

“The eagle has landed,” Vivvie said from the other end. “The bird is in the bush.”

Few things in life gave Vivvie and Asher as much joy as talking in code. I didn’t bother translating. One of the bellhops wheeled a cart of luggage out in front of Bancroft’s car. Bancroft disappeared into the restaurant, but his driver wasn’t going anywhere.

That was my cue.

I took a step forward. Henry caught my elbow. “No bloodshed,” he said. “No blackmail. No obstruction of justice.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” I told him, stepping away from his grasp. “What are your thoughts on extortion?” Without waiting for an answer, I headed for Bancroft’s car.

Henry and Asher followed on my heels.

“The cat is dancing in the catnip,” Asher reported back to Vivvie. “Grumpy lion is grumpy.”

“Did you just refer to me as a grumpy lion?” Henry asked Asher.

“Absolutely not,” Asher promised. Then he took the phone off speaker and lowered his voice. “*Suspicious lion is suspicious*,” he stage-whispered to Vivvie.

With one last glance back at Henry and Asher, I approached Bancroft’s car and knocked on the window. The driver rolled it down.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I’m a friend of Jeremy’s,” I said. “I’d like to talk.”

Jeremy Bancroft was a senior at the Hardwicke School, due to graduate in the spring. Or at least he had been due to graduate from Hardwicke in the spring until his father stopped payment on his tuition. From what I’d gathered, Mr. Bancroft’s sole focus was making his ex-wife suffer for daring to divorce him, and he had no qualms whatsoever about using his own children to do it.

I had no qualms about lying in wait in the man's car. An hour later, I was rewarded.

"I'm telling you right now," Bancroft said, shifting his phone from one ear to the other as he situated himself in the backseat of the car, "they'll be signed on with the firm by the end of business day tomorrow. Guaranteed."

The car pulled away from the curb. I sat silently in the front passenger seat until we'd merged into traffic. Then I turned around.

"What the ..." Bancroft hung up the phone and started barking out orders to his driver. "Mick, pull over."

"Mick had to step out," I told Jeremy's father. "Right about now, he's probably wondering where you and your car are."

In reality, Bancroft's driver had agreed to take a very conveniently timed bathroom break. He was, as it turned out, fonder of his boss's son than of his boss.

"I don't know who you are," Bancroft gritted out, "or what you want—"

"I'd like for you to stop using your children as pawns in whatever sick game you have going on with your ex-wife," I said. "But I'll settle for a rather large transfer of funds."

Bancroft stared at me in disbelief. "Who put you up to this?"

"A better question might be what I'm going to do if you don't transfer those funds."

"Do?" Bancroft sputtered. "You can't *do* anything. You're a kid."

"I'm Tess Kendrick," I said. "Keyes." The second last name was an afterthought. The combination of the two had the man in the backseat paling. "I go to Hardwicke with your son. Jeremy seems fairly convinced that you're hiding money in an offshore account to keep your child support payments to a minimum."

Bancroft showed not even a trace of emotion at the mention of his son. "Prove it," he spat out.

"I don't have to." I took my time explaining those words. "Either you *have* been hiding assets," I said, "which makes you a felon, or you're actually as broke as you claim to be, which makes you the very last person in the

world whom anyone in DC should trust to invest their money.” I paused. “I wonder how long it would take for news of your financial difficulties to spread.”

Bancroft snorted, but his eyes gave him away. He was looking nervous. *Good.* “You think my ex-wife wants DC society to realize how broke *she* is?” the man countered. “If she was going to go public with this, she would have already.”

True.

“I’m not your ex-wife.” I picked up my phone and brought up the contact information for the *Washington Post*. “And as it turns out, *I* don’t have a vested interest in whether people think she’s broke or not.” I turned the phone toward Bancroft just long enough for him to see who I was calling, then hit the *call* button, setting the phone to speaker.

It rang once.

Twice.

“Stop,” Bancroft said.

I hit the button to end the call just as someone picked up. I held out the paperwork Henry had asked his family attorney to draw up. “In an ideal world,” I said, “you’d amend the divorce settlement you made with your ex-wife.”

A muscle in Bancroft’s jaw ticked. He’d take his chances weathering damaging rumors before he’d give his ex anything she wanted.

“However,” I continued, “I thought you might prefer making an anonymous donation to your children’s school.”

I held out the papers again. Bancroft took them. Reading them, he frowned. “A scholarship fund?”

“Donors can put whatever stipulations they would like on a donation. Your stipulations are very specific.”

Jeremy and his little sister would be the recipients of scholarships that would pay their Hardwicke tuition through graduation.

“I only have two children.” Bancroft looked up from the pages and glowered at me. “Why am I funding three scholarships?”

I offered him a tight-lipped smile. "Price of doing business."

A vein in Bancroft's forehead throbbed. "And if I tear up these papers, call the police, and have you arrested for stealing my car?"

I shrugged. "Technically," I said, "*I* didn't steal your car."

The car slowed to a stop at the curb of the Roosevelt, having circled the block. In the driver's seat, Henry turned around. "Technically," he said, "I did."

"Henry Marquette," I clarified for the man in the backseat. "His mother is Pamela Abellard." My smile took on a cat-eating-canary glint. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't the Abellards your firm's biggest client?"

Bancroft's grip tightened over his phone, his knuckles turning white.

"We both know you're not making that call," I said. I nodded toward the paperwork in his hands.

The man's eyes went back to Henry's.

"Normally," Henry told him conversationally, "when someone asks me to commit grand theft auto, my answer is a firm no. But I have a sister." Henry's expression was perfectly polite, but his mint-green eyes flashed, striking against his dark brown skin. "My little sister," Henry continued, "is your daughter's age. Nine years old."

Bancroft signed the papers. He made a call and authorized the transfer of funds.

As I exited the car, I glanced over at Henry. "Should I call Asher and tell him we won't be needing that getaway distraction?"

Before Henry could reply, pop music reverberated off the building. Asher jogged into the middle of a large crowd and struck a dramatic pose.

"You say 'distraction,'" Henry deadpanned, "Asher hears 'flash mob.'"

Five seconds later, Vivvie danced wildly past and gave me a questioning look. I nodded.

"The possum has fallen on the nun!" Vivvie called to Asher.

Asher didn't miss a beat of choreography. He shimmied and punched a fist into the air. "Long live the possum!"

CHAPTER 2

I had exactly three hours to recover from my confrontation with Jeremy Bancroft's father before I found myself facing off against a very different opponent.

"What do you know about the War of the Roses?" My paternal grandfather closed his fingers around a black knight and then used it to remove my rook from the chessboard.

No mercy. No hesitation.

"Wars of the Roses," I said, countering his move. "Plural."

The edges of the old man's lips quirked upward. He inclined his head slightly—both an acknowledgment of my point and a command to continue.

"Bunch of guys in the fifteenth century fighting for the throne of England."

I kept my summary short and to the point. As in chess, every move in a conversation with William Keyes came with consequences, either immediate or down the line. He was grooming me as his heir, attempting to mold me in his own image. If I gave an inch, he'd take a mile, and I had no desire to be either molded or groomed.

Especially by a man who may or may not have conspired to assassinate the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court.

"The Wars of the Roses were a series of lethal confrontations and political maneuverings between the house of Lancaster and the house of York," Keyes corrected, sliding his bishop across the board as he lectured.

“Political unrest tends to be unkind to weak and strategically impotent kings.”

His gaze settled on the chessboard—on *my* king—but I knew he was thinking about another ruler and another throne.

Weekly Sunday night dinners at the Keyes mansion had cemented my understanding of my paternal grandfather as a man with many allies and many enemies. More often than not, he considered President Nolan the latter. Every bump in the road for the Nolan administration was taken as incontrovertible evidence that Peter Nolan had never been the right man for the job.

I picked up my bishop and plunked it back down. “Check.”

“Bloodthirsty girl,” Keyes commented. “You get that from your mother. Patience,” he continued, eyeing the board, “is a Keyes trait.”

This was the way it was with him, drawing lines between the Kendrick blood in me and the Keyes.

“Did you know that the term *kingmaker* was first used to refer to the role the Earl of Warwick played in the struggle between Lancaster and York?” My grandfather resumed his lecture, but I knew his eyes missed nothing—not the effect that hearing Ivy referred to as my *mother* still had on me, not the positions of the pieces on the board. “During the Wars of the Roses, Warwick deposed not one but two kings.”

Kingmaker was what people called William Keyes. He wielded tremendous power and influence behind the scenes in the American political game.

“Warwick wasn’t just wealthy and powerful,” Keyes continued. “He was *strategic*.”

Power. Politics. Game theory. This was what passed for casual conversation in this house. William Keyes had two sons. One of them was dead; the other was estranged. I was his only grandchild. In his eyes, that meant his legacy rested on me.

“I’d like to see you showing a bit more initiative about becoming a part of the Hardwicke community, Tess.”

From the Wars of the Roses to high school extracurriculars in two seconds flat.

“I’m not really much of a joiner,” I said. That was an understatement.

“The debate club, a sport or two,” William Keyes continued, as if I hadn’t spoken. “It’s high time you started making your mark.”

The prestigious Hardwicke School was a microcosm of Washington. The mark I’d made there, up to and including what I’d done for Jeremy Bancroft a few hours earlier, wasn’t the kind you could put on a résumé—or the kind my newfound grandfather would have approved of.

“The queen,” Keyes told me, returning his attention to our game, “is the most dangerous piece on the board.” His index finger trailed the edge of the black queen for a moment, before moving it forward. “Check.”

He was boxing me in.

I could see, already, how this was going to end. “You’ll have checkmate in three moves.”

The old man’s lips parted in a dangerous smile. “Will I?”

He’d gone into this game fully expecting to win it, just like he fully expected me to yield to his decrees about Hardwicke.

“Luckily for me,” I told him, my fingers closing around my own queen, “I’ll have checkmate in two.”

CHAPTER 3

Shockingly, I made it through my Monday classes without developing the slightest inclination to sign up for the debate team.

“Hypothetically speaking,” Asher said as he took the seat beside mine in our last class of the day, “if I told Carmen Seville that you could take care of a little problem involving a vengeful ex–best friend on the yearbook staff and some aggressively unflattering photo angles ... would that be a bad thing or a good thing?”

Asher smiled when he said the words *good thing*. It was implied that I should find that smile persuasive.

Sliding into the seat behind him, Vivvie took one look at my face. “Bad thing,” she told Asher, correctly interpreting my facial expression. “That would be a very bad thing.”

“Allow me to rephrase,” Asher said. “If I had, by chance, volunteered your most excellent services—”

I stopped him there. “I don’t have services.” Seeing the skepticism clear on their faces, I clarified, “Yesterday, with Jeremy’s father? That was a onetime thing.”

Asher raised one eyebrow to ridiculous heights. “So when one of the seniors on the lacrosse team was hazing the freshmen and you surreptitiously recorded said hazing and uploaded it as an attachment to his college applications, that was ... what, exactly?”

I shrugged. No one had been able to prove that was me.