

LBRIS

We know  
books

Also by Navessa Allen

*Lights Out*

AN INTO DARKNESS NOVEL

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# CAUGHT UP

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QUERCUS

**LBRIS**

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## 1

## JUNIOR

THE BLOOD WAS EVERYWHERE. SOAKED into my shirt, sprayed onto my pants, and buried beneath my blunted nail bits. This was why I always wore head-to-toe black. With any other color, the blood would be too obvious, but with black, the wet spots were easier to explain: Someone threw a drink at me, or a passing car hit a puddle, and I got splashed. I'd had to come up with countless excuses over the years.

Thankfully, I wouldn't need any of them tonight because it was pissing down rain. Lightning arced overhead, painting the distant high-rises in silver and white. Thunder chased after it, rattling the windows of nearby buildings. The city looked like Gotham on nights like this. Gritty, dangerous.

I pulled my gaze from the storm. Three figures stood beside me on the river's edge, all dressed in black because they'd learned the same lesson I had about bloodstains. They were motionless, eyes dead as they stared straight ahead, jackets flapping around them like errant wings. Another bolt of lightning tore through the sky, bathing us in silver. We looked more like a flock of vultures ready to descend on a corpse than a group of brothers who were supposed to be out celebrating.

Four days. It had been raining for four fucking days, and the river was so bloated with runoff that the car we'd just pushed into it was being sucked beneath the surface with alarming ease. Maybe we'd get

lucky, and the cops would think its owner had gotten caught in a flash flood and drowned instead of what we'd *really* done to him.

A spark of red flared to life in my periphery. I turned to see my youngest brother, Greg, lift a cigarette to his lips.

"Those things will kill you," I said.

He blew smoke into the wind. "Not before something else does."

With that, he turned and strode away, Stefan trailing in his wake.

Alec, the brother closest to me in age, met my eyes across the gap they'd left between us. "We done here?"

I nodded. Yeah, we were done. Tommy Marchetti had been dealt with. Just like Dad ordered.

Alec pulled up the collar of his jacket to keep the rain off his neck as he followed after our younger brothers, leaving me alone to watch the tail end of Tommy's Beamer disappear into the night-black water. The old bastard was finally gone, finally out of the way, and I couldn't have asked for a better birthday present.

I waited just long enough to make sure the car wasn't going to inconveniently bob back to the surface, before striding into the warehouse crouched at the river's edge. The floor was poured concrete, and the clapboard walls were old enough that the wind whistled through the cracks between them with every gust, but at least I wasn't getting rained on anymore.

My brothers stood beneath the glow of a fluorescent light, their eyes trained on a large red smear at their feet.

Alec pointed at it. "What do you want us to do about this?"

"Bleach," I said.

He headed toward a back closet.

I eyed Greg. "He bled a lot."

Greg's dark eyes rose to mine as he took another pull from his cigarette. "Fresh corpses tend to do that."

I might have been "Junior," but out of all of us, Greg resembled Dad the most, especially now that the humor had started to fade from his eyes and the same jaded look the rest of us wore was creeping into his expression.

Alec rejoined us, and we moved back as he upended an entire bottle of bleach over the stain. When he was finished, he tossed the empty bottle toward some other trash gathered in a corner. This place used to belong to a fishmonger before the local industry collapsed. Now it was owned by one of my father's associates, a man who turned a blind eye to our occasional use of it.

Alec shifted to face me. "You still wanna go out?"

I leveled my gaze at him. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I'm down if you are."

Stefan gave Alec an *Are you fucking serious?* look he didn't see. Beside Stefan, Greg watched me, waiting for my decision. As the oldest, I was the de facto leader. The one Dad trusted the most, the one my brothers turned to for guidance. Just once, I wished someone else would make a goddamn decision so I didn't have to think so fucking much all the time.

I refocused my gaze on Alec. "No, I don't want to go out. I'm drenched and I'm tired, and by the time we all shower and change, it'll be two o'clock in the morning and everything will be closing."

"So you're gonna spend your last birthday in your twenties sad and alone?" Alec asked. "Sounds pretty fucking depressing."

I shook my head, starting to get annoyed. "I didn't spend it alone. We had family dinner, and then the four of us got to come on this fun little field trip." He opened his mouth to argue but I cut him off. "We're done here. I don't care what the fuck the three of you do for the rest of the night, but I'm going to my apartment. Tell Mom and Dad I won't be back for a few days."

Without waiting for a response, I left. Maybe it was depressing, but I wanted to be alone. I wanted quiet and the solitude of my own space, and there was no way I'd get that if I went back to our parents' house with my asshole brothers.

My apartment wasn't far from the docks, maybe ten minutes on foot, and I was already soaked, so I didn't give a fuck about getting rained on. It almost felt good to be a little cold. The deep heat of summer was descending on the city, and with all the water around us, the

air had turned cloying and fetid. The storm was blowing some of it away, but I knew it was only temporary. We'd be lucky if we got a day or two of cooler temps before the mercury crept back toward ninety.

People rushed past me on the sidewalk. Most were hunched over like that somehow protected them from the downpour, but I strode through it upright, hoping the rain would wash away the evidence of my sins. Fuck, I was tired. And not because of what I'd just done. This was a bone-deep exhaustion that gnawed at me like a rabid wolf.

I wondered if my father ever felt like this. If our "work" weighed on him in the same way. Unlike me, Dad hadn't been born into the mob. He'd carved out a space among their foot soldiers and slowly fought his way up the ranks. Now he was the guy the big shots turned to when they needed their messes cleaned up, but since he thought too much of himself to get his hands dirty anymore, he delegated.

A humorless grin tugged at my lips. Of course our work didn't weigh on Dad. He wasn't the one doing it. *I* was. Well, me and my brothers. We bore the brunt of everything. The risk of getting caught. The risk of getting hurt. The risk of never being able to sleep again because every time we closed our eyes, images of the things we'd done swelled to the surface and threatened to drown us in the depths of our own memories.

Or maybe that was just me. Maybe I was being a morose mother-fucker, because instead of spending my birthday out on the town, like I'd planned, I'd spent it down at the docks creating more nightmares for myself.

I shook my head and focused on my surroundings. This part of the city was old, and not in a nice way; old in a forgotten way that had so far escaped the gentrification taking over other neighborhoods. The brick-and-mortar buildings crowded close to the street were only a few stories high. Puddles gathered on the sidewalk, reflecting the neon glow of nearby shop signs. Small groups of people huddled beneath awnings, smoking cigarettes or talking with friends while they waited for the rain to end. This neighborhood was working class, immigrants mostly, and the streets were teeming with the evidence of it. It was a good place to get lost, to go unnoticed, and that's why I rented an apartment here.

Most of the time, Dad liked to keep us close because he was a paranoid old man. My brothers and I, despite being in our twenties, still spent a lot of time sleeping in our childhood bedrooms. I stayed away on nights like tonight, when I needed to disappear, clear my head for a while before I was fit to be around other people again. The sights and sounds of the city reminded me that the world kept turning. That people were out here living their lives, blissfully unaware of the darkness that seethed just beneath the surface. It gave me hope, reminded me that there was more to life than death and destruction and the constant threat of spending the rest of my days behind bars.

By the time I reached the unobtrusive door tucked between a jeweler and a bakery, I was more than ready to be out of the rain. Up a narrow flight of stairs, my small studio apartment sat dark and stagnant, with a moldy note in the air that spoke of neglect. When was the last time I'd been here? A month ago? Two? This spring had passed in a blur, kicked off by an accidental homicide that my idiot cousin, Aly, and her boyfriend committed. Their victim had been a serial killer, but he'd also been the spawn of a billion-dollar family, and it had taken all of *my* family's time and resources to trick the Feds into thinking Bradley Bluhm was still alive and on the run. During that time, Dad's paranoia reached new heights, and he'd barely let any of his children out of his sight. I'd probably catch hell for staying away, tonight of all nights, but I needed some time to myself.

I flipped the light switch next to the door and was relieved when a nearby lamp flickered to life. At least I'd remembered to keep up with the utility bills. The glow from the light illuminated a compact space that could best be described as utilitarian. Bed to the right, sofa to the left, kitchen straight ahead, with a door beside the fridge that led to the bathroom.

I grabbed a change of clothes and went to shower, turning the water up until it was scalding. Trails of pink ran down the drain as I scoured the last of the blood from my skin. In my mind, I replayed the memory of Tommy's car disappearing beneath the black surface of the water,

and I grinned. I was glad he was gone, because it freed up one of the last hurdles standing between me and his daughter.

Lauren Marchetti.

The girl I'd grown up with back in the "old neighborhood," as we called Little Italy, before my parents moved us out of the city and into a swanky suburb. She'd been a grade below me, and at the end of my senior year, a situation involving the two of us had spun out of control, getting so bad that she'd ended up transferring out of the district.

I closed my eyes, thinking back, my smile slipping as I remembered the feeling of Tommy's knuckles hammering into the side of my face, hearing his enraged voice tell me that if I ever so much as looked at his daughter again, he would kill me. I'd gone home afterward, making a beeline toward my room, wanting to hide the shame of getting my ass kicked by an old man, but my father had caught me, taken one look at my face, and demanded to know what happened.

I shook my head as the water rushed over me, thinking back to what a naïve kid I'd been, even at eighteen, even after all the shit I'd already seen and done. Dad had forced the story out of me, and I'd been terrified he'd make everything worse by going on the warpath against Tommy. Mafia men weren't exactly known for letting slights against their family go unanswered. But instead of promising retribution, Dad only offered more threats.

Well, Tommy was no longer around to follow through on his, and I didn't fear my old man as much as I used to. I was done fucking around. I was done waiting. I'd spent nearly a decade keeping my distance from Lauren, and god help anyone who tried to get between us this time.

Once I was out of the shower, I bagged up my dirty clothes and carried them down to a dumpster around the corner. Dumpsters were great for disposing evidence. By the time the cops got suspicious, the trash was already in the landfill, and good luck sorting through it. Even if they eventually found my clothes, being left out in the elements and surrounded by rotting refuse would contaminate them enough that any samples would be useless in court.

I kicked my shoes off by the front door afterward and collapsed onto the threadbare couch. And then I did what I did every night without fail: I pulled my phone from my pocket, opened my favorite social media app, and went straight to Lauren's profile. Her page was filled with barely clad photos of herself, all artfully posed and perfectly lit.

Interspersed among these shots were small slices of life: what she'd had for lunch; a snap of her hugging her monstrous dog; her holding a sign at a rally. Today's picture featured her wearing a fitted black pantsuit, shaking hands with an older white woman in an office. I smiled to see it. Marion Blackwell had been a hard nut to crack. Lauren had been trying to meet the councilwoman for months, hoping to secure her vote on a new city ordinance aimed at making sex work safer. The more conservative-leaning Blackwell had been avoiding Lauren, but a little digging revealed her son's "white powder" problem, and all it took was the threat of leaking photos of him snorting lines in the back of a strip club for Blackwell to change her mind and take the meeting.

I would have done much worse to see this picture of Lauren looking so triumphant. She'd come a long way from the quiet, bespectacled honor roll student with an arm full of textbooks I remembered. This curvaceous goddess barely resembled her anymore, but the evidence was irrefutable: large brown eyes, a button nose, that slight gap between her two front teeth, and most damning of all, a beauty mark right beneath her left eye.

Scrolling back to the top of her profile, I clicked on the link in her bio, and up popped my Me4U app. Lauren was so determined to secure rights for sex workers because she was one herself.

And I was her number one fan.

Just beneath her creator profile was a small button that allowed you to request a custom video from her. I tapped it and then sent my latest request, along with a message.

*Good job with Blackwell today. I'm proud of you. Now show me how proud you are of yourself, Lauren.*

## 2

## LAUREN

I STOOD OVER MY ROOMMATE'S shoulder, watching their computer screen while a video of me finger-fucking myself played in slow motion. It was dark as a cave in Ryan's room, the blackout curtains doing their job to block the bright light of late afternoon. Onscreen, I looked stunning. Nude. Lost in the throes of passion. A veritable goddess of sex. Right up until I suddenly let out a silent shriek (Ryan's volume was muted) and fell sideways off the bed.

Ryan snapped back a few frames and hit pause. "Here," they said, pointing at the editing software beneath the video. "If we cut it here and then transition to the side, it'll make it seem like it was one continuous filming session, and you switched the camera position to be artsy."

I arched a brow. "And not like I had to stop in the middle of recording because someone set the fire alarm off? *Again?*"

Ryan tucked a strand of long blond hair behind their ear, turning the spectacular shade of red that only the very pale can achieve. "I didn't want to turn the stove fan on too high in case your mic picked it up."

"Uh huh," I said. "I'm sure that was it."

Ryan turned even redder. Tormenting them was as easy as it was enjoyable.

I opened my mouth to see if I could make them flush all the way to their toes, but their door burst open behind us, and we turned,

blinking against the sudden brightness as our third roommate, Taylor, swept into the room. At first, all I saw was her outline, but as my eyes adjusted, I noted her lavender hair swaying around her shoulders and the floral silk robe tied loosely around her curves. She wore a full face of makeup, her skin highlighted and bronzed, her almond eyes framed with false lashes, telling me she was either getting ready to film, or had just finished.

She stopped a few feet away and hefted a small box in each hand, looking from me to Ryan and back again. "A sub just sent me a video request for a close-up of my asshole." Her grin turned taunting. "Who wants to help me bleach and wax it?"

I swiveled to Ryan, who already held their finger to their nose in a *not it* gesture.

"I'm out," they said. "I'll have to stare at it the whole time I'm filming and editing. I shouldn't have to prep it, too."

My shoulders slumped in exaggerated defeat as I turned back to Taylor. "Fine. I'll do it."

She shimmied her shoulders, looking pleased. Her subscriber must have offered her a ton of money for the shot. She and I might have made a living filming spicy videos for our subs, but we both felt that close-ups were much more intimate and required a level of vulnerability that we weren't usually comfortable with.

Her gaze slid past me to Ryan's computer screen. "Is that the shot Ryan ruined when they burned dinner last night?"

Ryan swiveled back toward their monitor, cheeks still pink. "I didn't ruin it. Lauren was able to finish filming."

Taylor and I shared a smirking glance. As part of chore rotation, we took turns cooking. Some nights that meant mac 'n' cheese with hot dogs cut up in it (Taylor), traditional Italian fare (me), and increasingly elaborate dishes from across the globe that were either incredible or ended up splattered all over our kitchen (Ryan). In Ryan's defense, at least they were trying to expand their culinary skills. And they *had* gotten better recently. It was only when they attempted some complicated new recipe, like last night, that our house filled with smoke.

"You owe me a new saucepan," I said. "I think tandoori paste is burned into the metal of the one you used last night."

Ryan bristled. "Keep making fun of me, and I'll show Taylor the video I cut together of you falling and unfalling over and over again."

I sucked in a horrified gasp. "You didn't."

With a click, Ryan pulled up another tab in their editing software, and there I went, tumbling off the bed in slo-mo. And then back onto it. Off again. On. These were deeply unflattering angles for my boobs, which seemed to be trying to flee from each other in opposite directions. My hair looked electrified, and the horror on my face made it clear I thought I was about to be serial murdered.

"I might never recover from seeing myself like this," I said.

Ryan cackled. Beside me, Taylor was laughing so hard that she'd stopped making noise. My revenge for this betrayal would make headline news.

It took five solid minutes and increasingly violent threats of bodily harm for Ryan to close out the tab and promise to delete it.

Another several passed before Taylor was able to speak. "Who's the video even for?"

"My favorite sub," I told her.

She glanced my way, wiping tears from her eyes. "NT95?"

I nodded. Even though I'd been doing this for years, I still got nervous filming certain video requests, especially ones with large price tags attached to them. I wanted them to be perfect. Wanted my subs desperate for more. And NT95 was a day-one subscriber, my very first, in fact, signing up almost as soon as I announced my Me4U page on social media. We'd spent countless hours sexting. I knew about his horrible father and the constant pressure he was under at work. He sent me congratulatory notes every time I won a new politician over, asked me to please be safe when I attended public rallies. He wasn't just some faceless sub anymore. He was important to me. Hence me hovering over Ryan's shoulder instead of leaving them alone to work in peace.

"What did he request?" Taylor asked.