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By Navessa Allen

INTO DARKNESS

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AN INTO DARKNESS NOVEL

GAME ON

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QUERCUS

1

TYLER

ONE MILLION DOLLARS. THAT'S WHAT I could make tonight if the party keeps up like this.

I still couldn't believe I'd pulled it off. Weeks of planning, tens of thousands in costs, and untold laws broken—all to host a private, high-stakes gambling night onboard an abandoned freight ship that sat decaying in the old port. It was the absolute last place anyone would think to look for an ultra-exclusive party for the city's elite, which is why it was perfect.

A raucous cheer erupted from the crowd. Everyone wore masks to protect their anonymity, including the staff, but, as the master of ceremonies, I knew who they were. I turned to see a blond woman in a scarlet ball gown jump in celebration. She must have hit it big, which was good for both her *and* me.

As the bookie hosting this little soiree, my take-home was ten percent of all winnings. And while, yes, a million dollars might *seem* like a lot of cash, after all the bribes and payouts, I'd be lucky to net a third of it, most of which would get reinvested into my next game night.

But it was worth it. The real money was in interest, anyway. If any of our players ran out of funds, we, the house, helpfully supplied them with the means to keep playing. For a fee, of course. It was small enough to be appealing, a fisherman's hook to ensnare the unsuspecting. Only

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after people took the bait did they realize how much that fee stacked up if they didn't pay us back on time.

My gaze swept over the rest of the room, a cavernous chamber that was formerly a cargo bay. Now, over two dozen tables filled the space, some draped in white linens holding platters of gourmet dishes, others surrounded by gamblers in designer dresses and suits. A bar was set up along the far wall, and waitstaff made their way to and from it, delivering top-shelf cocktails to the crowd. Soft light filtered down from chandeliers, glinting off jewels and champagne flutes in a way that lent a dreamlike quality to the scene.

I sighed, thinking of the war of one-upmanship I was fighting with myself. Tonight was a triumph, a party to end all parties. But next time, I'd have to come up with something even better, even more unexpected and exciting. My parties *had* to remain the most elusive and sought-after entertainment in this city. The wealthy, I'd learned, were a lot like spoiled children, easily distracted by the latest shiny object, and it took a lot to keep them clamoring for a spot at my tables.

And to think, all this started in my college dorm room. I'd been a broke-as-shit double major in finance and business, looking to make some tuition money on the side so I wouldn't have to drop out. I'd always been good with numbers and pattern recognition, so cards were easy for me. My brain inherently *knew* which ones were left in a deck without having to consciously count them.

At first, my poker nights were small, just me and whoever I convinced to play. Most didn't stick around after repeatedly losing to me, and I thought I'd been cooked because of it, my money-making scheme over before it even began. But then rumors started circulating that I was unbeatable, and soon every wannabe poker pro and math genius was clamoring to get in on the games, making me enough cash to stave off financial panic.

A class about entrepreneurship planted the seed that there might be more stable money *behind* the table, running the games like a business. I opened it up to all levels of gamblers, from experienced players to rookies trying their luck for the first time. Then two things happened at

once: People at school found out that my best friend, Josh, was the son of a notorious serial killer, and the faculty caught wind of my games. So we moved to the city to start over. I transferred schools, but Josh dropped out to become a professional hacker because he was a better programmer than any of his professors, and there was nothing left for them to teach him.

I left the games behind, finished out my senior year, and went into corporate finance after graduation. But it only took me a year to realize I hated it. Hated dressing up in a suit to go work with a bunch of shit-heads who treated *The Wolf of Wall Street* like an instruction manual. Hated my entry-level salary that barely covered cost of living, because I *knew* there were better (and easier) ways to make money. Also, it was boring as shit. Unchallenging. And my boss was a fucking idiot, landing his role via nepotism, not merit—another reminder of why I'd always hated the rich.

Quitting let me get back to my old ways. I started another poker night, building it back up from scratch. This time around, I let myself think bigger. I wasn't just in it to make money. I had an objective: revenge. A target to pursue. Every game advanced my agenda, but tonight, in particular, was a massive move forward in bringing me one step closer to *him*.

Another cheer sounded from a nearby blackjack game. This time it was an art dealer who'd won. To his left, a hedge fund manager looked on with envy. To his right, a crime boss gave him a congratulatory slap on the back.

I pulled my gaze away and adjusted my mask. It was black, accented with green jewels and molded to look like a devil, complete with glaring eye holes and twisted horns. Maybe it was overkill, but seeing as how I'd been described as the devil incarnate more than once in my life, I figured the symbolism would serve as a good reminder to my clients that it wasn't smart to fuck with me.

I settled the mask back in place and headed toward a trio of poker tables near the ship's boiler. Seated at the center one, with his back to me, was a twenty-year-old man-child who had no business being here.

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Blake McCormick.

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He was an heir to one of the largest fortunes in the city. I'd seated him with the best poker players in attendance, and if all was going to plan, he was being overserved by the bartenders. I'd also instructed his dealer to inform Blake that if he overextended and ran out of money, the house would happily lend him more.

The dealer and I locked eyes, and the man sent me a subtle nod of confirmation.

I grinned. The kid was already running up a debt, and the night was still young. Who knew how much he might owe me by the time it was over? Half a million? More? Whatever the amount, it was a debt I fully planned to exploit.

Because Blake had an older sister who would do absolutely anything to protect him, and she was going to be my way in. My means to an end. *She* was going to lead me straight to *him*. My father. The man I moved to this city to find. The man I moved to this city to ruin.

See you soon, Stella, I thought, smiling to myself as another round of cheers rose from the crowd.

2

STELLA

THE SHOP WAS QUIET THIS early in the day, without the buzz of tattoo guns or the idle conversation of my coworkers.

Too quiet.

It left room for thoughts to bubble up. Thoughts like, would my utilities increase again this month? Why was the word "Ohio" now an insult? And would that mole on my thigh eventually turn into skin cancer and kill me?

I plugged my phone into the sound system and put on my favorite playlist to drown out my inner monologue. Soft, eerie music floated from the overhead speakers. The notes were filled with longing, regret, and fading memories of happier times. One of the other artists I worked with, Elayne, said it sounded like the funeral dirge of a Victorian spinster. She'd looked confused when I'd thanked her.

The song matched the shop's décor: dark, Gothic. Framed antique ephemera hung on the walls. Vintage taxidermy rubbed elbows with reproduction Roman busts and leafy houseplants on bookshelves. In the common areas, thick rugs softened the cement floors, with cushy leather armchairs and sofas crowded atop them. It was maximalist, a feast for the eyes. New customers regularly told me they didn't know where to look first. Returning customers loved discovering new curiosities while they waited for their appointment. It had turned into a sort

of game, with me switching out pieces to see who would be the first to notice a new addition.

I carried my morning coffee and my tablet over to the seating area and curled up in my usual corner spot. Sometimes, I still couldn't believe this place was mine. That I'd created my dream tattoo parlor out of what had once been a lifeless concrete cube. It had taken a lot of hard work, countless hours of planning and drafting and arguing with contractors when they tried to nickel-and-dime me. There were moments when I'd felt like it would never get done, that I would fail at this like I had failed at everything else—too flighty to stick it out, too weak to follow through. But somehow, I'd persevered through that hellish, stressful year, and the reward of sitting here, staring at what I'd accomplished, made it all worth it.

I took a sip of coffee before setting it aside to pick up my tablet. The shop wouldn't open for several hours, and I usually spent this time creating. All my tattoos were hand-drawn and unique. I was a neo-traditionalist, melding vintage and modern styles. My specialty was pronounced line work and vibrant colors with a dash of whimsical illustration, art nouveau meets Studio Ghibli. The style wasn't for everyone, but those who loved it, *loved it*.

I'd been working at my craft for years. I was good at what I did, and it showed in my busy schedule. Today, I had three tattoos and two consultations scheduled, and while that might not sound like a lot to a layperson, it *was*. One of the tattoos was small and wouldn't take much time, but the other two were much more complex. I was looking at eight hours of tattooing, and I could already feel my back twinging with anticipatory stiffness. I'd need several painkillers and a heating pad tonight—but again, worth it.

A rattle at the front door had me lifting my head.

This part of the city was up-and-coming. Meaning, there were as many nice parts as there were bad ones, and the threat of break-ins was real. The curtains were shut, so I couldn't see who was out there, but I wasn't worried. Instead of glass, the windows were made of a clear,

shatterproof polycarbonate. Every inch of the shop (both inside and out) was covered with cameras, and I'd installed Grade 1 commercial locks on all the doors. It was *really* hard to break in here.

Trusting my security measures, I went back to drawing.

The door swung open.

Fuck!

I leapt up, grabbing a nearby urn to use as a makeshift club, when my mother walked inside. She was sixty-five but looked much younger, thanks to a mix of genetics and the money to afford the best skin care and cosmetic treatments on the market. Tall and trim, she was dressed in a hunter green, mid-length embroidered dress that probably cost as much as a used sedan. Her jet-black hair hung loose down her back. She wore red-soled stilettos. In one hand, she carried a custom Hermès handbag and the keys I now regretted giving her. In the other, she held . . . a lamp?

“What are you doing, Mom?”

She yelped and spun toward me, clutching her chest. “What am I doing? What are *you* doing, standing there in the dark like a pervert?”

My mother was originally from England but had lived in the States for long enough that her accent had morphed into a strange blend of posh British and snooty American—some vowels elongated, others clipped. Because of it, “pervert” ended up sounding more like *pearvert*, and despite my annoyance, I almost grinned. My younger brother, Blake, and I were going to have so much fun calling each other *pearverts* when I told him about this.

“I thought someone was trying to break in,” I said.

“And you were going to do what? Scare them to death?” Mom's expression morphed into concern. “Darling, are you not moisturizing? You look positively ghoulish in this light.”

The threat of grinning vanished. I hefted the urn. “My plans are leaning more toward blunt-force trauma. What are you doing here?”

She indicated the lamp. “I saw this at an antique store downtown and thought of the perfect place for it.”

"You couldn't have waited until we were open to drop by unannounced?"

That earned me an exaggerated eye roll. "Oh, please, Stella. Unlike you, the rest of us don't have time to lounge about in dirty sweatpants all morning. I have a breakfast meeting and then a full day of work followed by a charity dinner for impoverished children. And if I didn't pop by like this, I'd never see you."

She turned and strode toward the front desk like she owned the place. I took a moment to glance down at myself. Ugh, I must have dribbled coffee on my sweats at some point. And no, I hadn't moisturized yet. Leave it to Mom to point out all my morning failures within two minutes of clapping eyes on me.

I sighed and followed her. My mother had grown up in a cruel and unforgiving household where praise was anathema and warmth nonexistent. Despite all her years in therapy, she was still deeply uncomfortable with displays of affection and donned snobbery like armor. Especially when she was feeling vulnerable or neglected—which clearly she was, judging by that last comment. Instead of saying it outright, she came at it sideways, picking at me because she couldn't bring herself to admit how much she cared and that she worried over me constantly, just like any other parent.

Instead, the signs that she loved me were more subtle, seen in the way she sneakily tried to pay my rent and randomly dropped into the shop with some excuse for needing to be here. Today, it was the lamp; two weeks ago, it was because she was "in the area."

So yeah, Mom was a complete snob with tons of childhood baggage she was still working through, and we had a complex relationship. But I loved her, and she was the first person I would turn to if I ever ended up in real trouble. Again.

She set the lamp on the front desk, her back to me as she fiddled with its placement.

I used her momentary distraction against her, wrapping my arms around her narrow waist and giving her a quick hug. "I missed you, too."

She started to stiffen, and I pulled away before she got too uncomfortable.

"Yes, well, no need to get overly emotional about it," she said, but I knew she was mollified. She placed the lamp next to the computer monitor and stepped back. "Don't let anyone put their grubby hands all over this. It's Tiffany."

I nearly choked. "Are you trying to get me robbed?"

She waved a hand, bejeweled rings flashing in the dim light. "I doubt any of the hooligans you work with could tell it's real. Oh, speaking of which . . ." She pulled a business card from her bag. "Give this to Elayne. It's for a tenant rights attorney your father and I met the other night. I told him about her terrible landlord. He thinks there's something to it and agreed to take her on pro bono."

I accepted the card. It was thick, tactile, and understated. My eyes widened as I read the firm name—it was one of the most prestigious in the city.

I shook my head. Mom might be eccentric, aloof, and pretentious as hell, but beneath that lay a heart of gold. That charity she'd mentioned? I had no doubt she sat on its board, had organized tonight's dinner herself, wrangled all her wealthy friends into attending, and would essentially hold everyone hostage until they reached whatever outrageous fundraising goal she'd set for the night. And then she would doggedly follow the money after it was donated, ensuring it reached those most in need first.

Mom reached out like she might be about to pull me into another hug, and I stilled, not wanting to spook her. She hesitated, met my eyes, and shot me a close-lipped smile as she patted me on the shoulder instead. "You're still coming by for Tippi's birthday?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Tippi was our family dog, an ancient bichon frise who was half-blind, fully deaf, and an even bigger snob than the woman before me.

Mom looked me over one more time, wincing. "You're not . . . wearing that the rest of the day, are you?"

I pointed toward the door. "Out."

She opened her mouth, but I raised the urn and gave it a threatening shake.

Wisely, she made her way toward the front, but she took her damn time, making sure I knew that this was her choice. At the door, she paused, her face pinched. "I saw Maddie this weekend, at her aunt's annual summer soiree."

I went stiff, the name like a slap.

Mom's expression darkened. "She asked after you."

"Why?" I asked, unease creeping up my spine.

Mom shrugged. "Audacity?"

"Is she finally ready to take responsibility for what she did?"

Mom's answering laugh was humorless, all the answer I needed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I said. "Until she finally tells the truth, she and I have nothing to say to each other."

"I told you because if she's bold enough to say something to me, she might be bold enough to seek you out herself. And I'm not saying you should forgive her—"

"There's no forgiving what she did," I spat.

"But murdering her would probably give you wrinkles, and if you're not even following a proper skin care routine, then you're more susceptible to them than—"

"Okay, it was nice seeing you. Goodbye!" I said, practically shoving her out of the shop.

She paused, turning back with an expression close to regret on her face, like maybe she was about to come back inside and try to have a real conversation for once. I was just about to reopen the door when she seemed to think better of it, giving me a terse nod of goodbye before striding toward the waiting Mercedes at the curb.

Many hours later, I was saying goodbye to my last tattoo appointment of the day. She was a blond woman in her early twenties who thought she was the coolest person in the city. Which, I mean, she probably

was. She had over two million followers across her social media accounts and about as many YouTube subscribers, earning a respectable living as a cozy gamer.

Her right forearm was now covered by a large, stylized crow perched on a flower-wreathed skull. We'd been working on it for months because she had a low pain tolerance, first laying down the line art, then adding in the shading, and finally, tonight, the last of the color. The bright jewel tones popped even through the Saniderm bandage covering the tattoo.

My gaze lifted to hers. "Ashley, I swear to God, if you don't follow the care instructions I gave you . . ."

She rolled her heavily lined eyes, looking harassed. "Yes, Mom."

I stiffened. I wasn't *that* much older than her. "That is some of my best work. Don't fuck it up."

"Or what, you'll ground me?"

I shook my head. "I'll get on your next livestream and tell all your followers that you use cheat codes."

"Client privilege!" she said, whipping her head around to see if anyone overheard.

"That only exists for lawyers and therapists."

Her face turned red in betrayal. "I trusted you."

I grinned. "That was your first mistake."

She flipped me off and stomped out the front door.

"Pleasure working with you!" I called after her.

A draft of balmy night air kissed my skin as the door slowly swung shut behind her. Today had been another scorcher, the sun unrelenting, the humidity high enough to frizz even my bone-straight hair. Summer was my least favorite time of year. The moisture-laden atmosphere turned everything sticky and smelly. All the concrete made it worse, absorbing the heat throughout the day and storing it up like a battery, expelling it at night, so it never cooled down. I couldn't wait for autumn to arrive. I had *juuuust* enough basic bitch in me that September would find me standing in line for my first pumpkin spice latte of the season like everyone else.

The door closed, cutting off the heat of the night, and I returned to the front desk to exit out of Ashley's transaction. It was 9 p.m., and the tattoo parlor was buzzing. Literally, because of all the needles, but that sound was nearly drowned out by voices raised in conversation.

The shop was mid-sized with a simple layout. The reception area and front desk flanked the door. A hallway led deeper inside, with six individual tattoo rooms branching off of it. None of them had doors, and the cement floors made the acoustics echoey, so voices carried. The music tonight was upbeat and punchy because Elayne had tuned us in to an alt-pop station.

I grinned, feeling content, borderline happy. After nearly losing everything, I had made something. Something that belonged to me and me alone. With no help from anyone else, despite how much my parents tried to intervene in my life. I wasn't ungrateful they wanted to help. The problem was that they'd already done so much for me (too much, really) that I was determined to do this *one thing* by myself.

Was I terrified of fucking it up? Absolutely. Money was still tight because the business was new, and my inheritance was needed elsewhere, so I scrimped and saved where I could, making sure every dollar earned went to good use. I was a one-woman handyman, cleaning crew, IT specialist, and, on one disgustingly memorable occasion, plumber.

And it was starting to pay off. We had regular, returning clientele. Good online reviews. A growing social media presence thanks to my carefully curated pictures and videos. I still lost sleep some nights, worried that it would all go up in flames, but my fear wasn't constant anymore, and on weeks like this, when we were in danger of being overbooked, it made me think that I might actually pull this off. That I might actually succeed at something for once in my life. And that was all I really wanted. Not just to prove that I could do it, but because this was what I *loved*.

My gaze strayed to the Tiffany lamp next to the register. Mom was right. It looked perfect there. Okay, fine, so maybe letting them help

just a little wouldn't kill me, but I drew the line at paying my rent.

A heavy footfall pulled me from my thoughts, and I turned to see Derrick, one of my tattoo artists, strolling out of the hallway. He was a rough-looking, silver-haired man in his mid-fifties. Tall, beefy, white, with a mutton chop beard and more tattoos than anyone else I knew. In his past life, he'd belonged to an outlaw motorcycle club down in Texas, but he'd had a falling out with its megalomaniac leader and hightailed it out of there before he wound up dead. I wasn't even sure Derrick was his real name, but I didn't give a shit because his specialty was realism, and he was fucking *good*.

My gaze shifted to the client following him, a towering young Black man whose face was turned toward his forearm, admiring his new ink. As he got closer, I saw why. It looked like something had clawed him, three long gashes peeling back to reveal a glimpse of a panther beyond. It was almost spooky how good it was, like his skin had been ripped open.

In moments like this, I wondered how the hell I'd landed Derrick. He was a world-class artist, regularly drew in famous clients, and could have worked anywhere, but for whatever reason, he'd shown up one day and applied. Hell, he was the half the reason I didn't have weekly panic attacks anymore—that's how much money he brought in. It made me wonder if one of my parents had gotten to him somehow. This wouldn't be the first time they'd done something sneaky like that, helped me from the shadows even though I'd told them I needed to do this on my own. Whenever I hinted at it to Derrick, he expertly changed the subject or played dumb, and my suspicions only grew.

"That looks amazing," I said.

Derrick let out an ambiguous huff, but his client sent me a blinding smile.

"Thanks," he said.

I tried to pretend I wasn't starstruck. "Will it have time to heal before training camp?"

He nodded. "Yeah, we don't start until late September."