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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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www.evernightpublishing.com

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ISBN: 978-0-3695-0476-0

Cover Artist: Jay Aheer

Editor: Audrey Bobak

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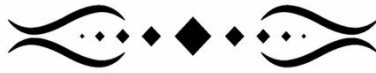
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HITMAN NEXT DOOR

Sam Crescent

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Chapter One

“Do you think I’m going to be the only one to find out?”

Nate Evans looked into the eyes of the contract killer he found lurking a few feet from his neighbor’s house. This was what he’d been warned about. To most, keeping an eye on Lemon Bosworth was a shit assignment, but Nate knew what his boss wanted.

“It doesn’t matter. Do you think you’re the first guy here?” He pulled out his knife, and before the bastard could respond, he jammed his knife deep into his throat. He wasn’t lying when he said he was the first man he killed.

His boss was right.

Whoever had leaked the information about his neighbor being the bastard daughter of Alessandro Rocco had all but put a death warrant out for the young woman. This was why Rocco asked him to come here. To move in next door and do whatever it took to keep the woman safe.

He’d been on this assignment for six months, and in all those times, Lemon had never once reminded him of the man who fathered her. She was nothing like his other children either.

Her life shouldn’t touch the Italian mafia, but her mere existence was too much of a temptation for all the people who wanted to take from Rocco. At the kitchen sink, he rinsed off the blood and spent the next hour dealing with the dead body.

This was the first time he’d caught a guy so close to Lemon’s house. It wasn’t good. Pretending to be into security and setting up a personal shop in the local town was starting to wear thin. He had his own office and had paid for a couple of employees, both of whom were associated with Rocco, just to protect his daughter.

He was on the way out to the car to take the body for disposal when he saw Lemon on a ladder outside her house.

Rather than pause to admire her curvy ass that he’d become addicted to, he quickly dumped the package into the back of his trunk and locked it.

The men were waiting for him for the body, but he turned to admire Lemon’s handiwork.

“Hey, Nate, what do you think?” Lemon asked.

They were four weeks away from Christmas, and he knew how excited she was about it. Just as she’d been over Halloween and Thanksgiving.

On Halloween she'd displayed a graveyard outside her house, dressed as a witch, and offered candy to all the local kids. He had no choice but to dress up for the occasion, seeing as he needed to protect her and every potential moment was a threat to her life.

"Looking good."

Unlike some of the other hitmen who worked for Rocco, he got this assignment for his ability to blend in. He was a pretty boy, had been all his life. His good looks made men trust him, believing his loyalty, and well, women were more than happy to drop to their knees for him. He'd never been lacking of female company, but from the moment he met Lemon, that had all changed, which screwed with his fucking head.

Lemon, bastard child or not, was his boss's kid.

She was completely off-limits.

But, and this was a big but, he wanted her, badly. He'd never wanted any woman the way he wanted this one. It made no sense. She wasn't his type, not even a little bit. She wasn't blonde, greedy, a gold-digger, or a whore.

She had long, brown hair that caressed the top of her butt, which was so fucking curvy and round. All he wanted to do was get his hands on her curves, to grip her tightly and hold her to him so he could drive inside her hard and deep. Brown eyes that were so damn expressive. Even when she tried to hide her feelings, she failed.

Lemon was a beautiful woman, smart, funny, and her father's dark world hadn't touched her. It had only glimpsed her.

He'd been given every single little detail of her life in order to protect her. He knew Lemon never spoke to her father, refused to live with him, and had even turned down a fully furnished apartment, complete with a bodyguard and allowance.

Instead, she had used the money her mother had left to her, purchased this house in a small town, close to nothing and nowhere, and took a job at a supermarket, far away from her father. What Lemon didn't know was that the money she thought her mother left her was from her father.

Alessandro was an evil bastard. One of the deadliest Italian mafia capos of all time. He'd become a legend in a few short years after taking over from his father. However, Alessandro had one weakness in his entire life—Lemon's mother. Instead of giving her up, he'd kept her. Trying to play happy families.

Nate pulled out of his thoughts as Lemon climbed down the ladder, stepping off with a bounce to her step.

“Do you think so? It’s not too much?”

He glanced up the street. “You’re the first person to put their decorations up.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t care about waiting. My mom always put hers up on Thanksgiving. She wanted the house to sparkle during a time of gratefulness. I like it.” She clapped her hands and turned toward him. “Could I interest you in a little hot chocolate?”

“I would love some, but I’ve got a couple of errands to run.”

“You work way too hard.”

“I know, but there’s no rest for me.” He winked at her, playing along. She had no idea there was a dead body in the trunk of his car. “Can I come over after?” Nate didn’t know why he even asked that. This was only going to torture him more. Being close to Lemon always did. He’d never met a woman who affected him this deeply.

“Sure. I’d like that. You can help me put up the tree.” She put a hand on his arm and went back to her part of the house.

They lived together in the tiny cul-de-sac at the bottom of a long road. Most of the people in residence were families, and it was all a little too clean-cut for him. He had dirt on most of the people. This was what made him good at what he did. He was thorough.

He watched her as she bent down, picking up her boxes, and then entered her house and closed the door.

After climbing behind the wheel, he pulled out of his drive and took off, heading toward a secure location.

He was only ten minutes into his journey when he got the call from Rocco himself.

“She’s safe,” he said.

“You took out another hit.”

“I’ve got it all covered.”

He waited for the two minutes for Rocco to curse. It was rare for the boss man himself to lose it. Nate had worked for him for nearly twenty years now, and he was the best at what he did. Where men in his profession got more reclusive, he made sure he could mingle with the best of them. There was no room for errors in his world. He liked being able to blend into this world.

“How is she?” Rocco asked.

“She had no idea she was being watched, sir. She’s putting up Christmas decorations.”

Rocco chuckled. “Her mother used to do that. She hated taking them down, but she loved putting them up. Is she ... how is she?”

“She is ... fine. She seems happy.” He rarely saw Lemon without a smile on her face. Unless she talked about her mother, she was always a happy person. She was quite the sparkly person by nature. He liked that about her.

In his line of work, the darkness always came a little too close for comfort. If he allowed himself to dwell and to fall down that dark path, there was no coming back for him. He’d be lost.

“Good. That is good. Does she ever mention me?” Rocco asked.

“No, sir.”

There was silence.

“Everything will be waiting for you.” Rocco hung up.

It had taken twenty years of loyal service for Rocco to be real with him. Taking care of Lemon was a highly classified mission.

He gripped the steering wheel even tighter.

“She is to be protected and happy at all times. If she is hurting for money, let me know. I will fund whatever she needs. I do not want her in any kind of pain, or wanting anything else. Am I understood?”

Nate was used to more damaging and bloody tasks, but making a woman happy, he was good at that as well.

Only, Lemon was the boss’s daughter. She was completely off-limits.

He was never one to fall into temptation, but each day he spent with her, it was getting harder for him to resist her.

“Ouch!”

Lemon winced as she saw the droplet of blood ooze out of her finger. Needles were a pain, but trying not to stab herself with them appeared to be a challenge.

Wrinkling her nose, she sucked on her finger, tasting the metallic taste until it all but disappeared.

The current garment she was making was proving to suck, at least to her. Her passion for dressmaking had come from her mother, who loved being in front of a sewing machine.

The very one she worked on now once belonged to her mother.

Putting the dress to one side, she touched the machine, thinking about her mother, her sweet smile. The promise of something amazing once she was done.

Lemon hadn't purchased an item of clothing in years. After learning the skills straight from her mother, her love of creating had never died. She loved being able to see some beautiful fabric and to make herself something, whatever she liked.

Even the pants she wore now, made of lycra fabric with love hearts all over. They were on the big side, but she tended to make things a size or two too big. It was a flaw.

"You're going to have to wait."

She turned off her lamp and stepped out of the spare bedroom.

Walking downstairs, she paused as she looked at the sitting room. She had so many pictures and books. Some crafting, some for cooking, reading books. This was her life.

At twenty years old, most of her possessions were her mother's.

Just thinking about her mother, she couldn't help but rub her chest as the pain filled her. The loss too great for her to bear.

She pushed it aside as she heard Nate return.

Her very sexy and completely off-limits neighbor.

He was much older than her, twenty years older, but damn it, she had a crush. A pathetic one at that.

Nate was always so nice to her. It sickened her. All her life, she had avoided men. It had been so easy to do. Guys her own age were nothing more than adult babies. She never dated where she worked. Relationships were not her strong suit.

She also didn't make friends all that easy either. After six months of working at the supermarket, she had zero friends. No one sat with her at lunch. No one talked to her.

Unfortunately, this was how she liked it. Her mother had often tried to get her to mingle with kids her own age, but it hadn't worked. She was happy in her own company. Not that she was a bad person. People just didn't get her or what she liked.

At the fridge, she poured out two mugs of milk, then tipped it into the saucepan before placing it on the stove.

This was what her mother used to do with her every night she had a

bad dream. Nice hot cocoa.

Damn it.

She needed to stop thinking about her mother.

Her doorbell rang, and her heart started to race. Or maybe she needed to think about her mother, rather than the hot, good-looking guy about to enter her presence.

Sometimes she felt like she babbled in front of him, looking more like a child than a responsible twenty-year-old woman.

She forced a smile to her lips as she opened the door, cringing internally when she realized she still wore her comfy heart pants.

It wasn't the first time Nate had seen her faux pas when it came to fashion. She imagined he preferred more sophisticated women. The kind that had lots of money and the power of seduction rather than a large ass and tits, with massive hips. Yep, she had been blessed to be on the curvier side of things. It made creating clothes for herself even more enjoyable. Rather than wearing the frumpy outfits fashion lines seemed to think was appropriate, she got to wear her own creations that made her feel fabulous.

"Is that hot chocolate still on offer?" he asked.

"Of course." She'd pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail that settled over one shoulder. She kept meaning to get it cut, but each time she tried to, she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

Her mother had once said her hair was beautiful. The longer, the better.

After closing the door, she flicked the lock into place, and her mind raced with all the dirty thoughts of what Nate could do to her.

The books she read were a bad influence. She shouldn't be thinking naughty things. Her mother had a love of erotic romance, and well, alone in this house, it would seem she had certainly found a love of them as well.

It was laughable, a virgin wanting to be fucked in every single corner of the house, to know what it felt like to be craved, desired, ravished. Nate could do what he wanted to her any day of the week.

"So, hot chocolate. If my memory serves, you like it sweet, don't you?" she asked.

Her face was on fire. She had to be blushing.

Was he laughing?

Did he know what she was thinking?

"Can you read minds?" she asked.

He frowned. "No, I cannot."

"Oh, well, that would be an awesome skill, wouldn't it? I was just thinking about what would be an amazing superpower, and mind-reading had to be right up there." She brushed past him, going to the stove. She'd put the heat on low so no milk bubbled over.

"Superpowers. You wouldn't want to move things with your mind?" he asked.

"Nah, so lame. I am more of the knowing people's innermost secrets." She thought back to learning the truth about her dad. How humiliated she was and upset. "Believe me, it would have come in handy. What about you? What is your superpower?"

Nate chuckled. "I don't have one."

"This isn't real. It is all make-believe. You know that, right?" she asked.

"I get that. Why are we talking about superpowers?"

"No reason. Just thinking. Babbling. You know the drill. Did you have a good time running errands?" she asked.

"It was smooth and efficient."

She had no idea what that meant.

Returning her attention to the hot chocolate, she added some actual chopped chocolate into the mix, along with a sprinkle of cinnamon and a dash of vanilla.

Once it was all thoroughly melted, she poured it into their mugs and placed one in front of him.

He took a sip of the chocolate and she watched him close his eyes. "This is good."

"Yay, I'm glad."

"So tell me about your day. Your work."

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't want to talk about that. I like to keep work at work."

His brow rose.

"Do you want to talk about your job?" she asked.

"No, mine is top secret."

She chuckled. "Right. So, I know this is our first Christmas since we've moved in. Do you not decorate for Christmas? Do you not celebrate it?"

"I do and I will. I didn't know how long I was going to be here, you

know?”

“Oh, do you move around a lot?”

“I go wherever work takes me.”

She frowned. “Then why come here? You’ve opened a shop here.”

“That’s what I do. I open up shops, spread the security word, and get people to work for me.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Are you like a rich entrepreneur? Are you here doing a documentary or something?”

“No, no, God, no. Nothing like that at all. I guess you could say I’m looking for a place to settle down, but my job doesn’t allow me to stick to one place.”

Lemon sipped at her drink. “You’re looking to put down roots?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. You know, I did hear something strange about our houses today.”

“The curse?” he asked.

“What? You know about it?”

“Yeah, I heard of it. Apparently, whoever moves into these houses are destined to end up together.”

“Oh,” she said. She had heard that but not when she moved in. Only today, she’d been in the restroom, about to leave her stall when she heard a couple of colleagues gossiping about her. They talked about the houses, the previous occupants, and Lemon couldn’t help but wonder if she was destined to fall in love with Nate. Falling in lust was easy. That part had already been done. So easy. Love though, that was something else entirely. “It sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t believe in that stuff, Lemon. The previous couples were clearly friends who got close, and feelings developed.”

“And we’re not friends?” she asked.

He opened his mouth and closed it.

“You’re right. We’re neighbors.” She sipped at her hot chocolate, relishing the burn because at least the pain in her mouth took away from the pain in her chest. Of course, they weren’t friends.

That would be crazy.

Chapter Two

Nate had fucked up.

Three days later, Lemon was still avoiding him.

He'd fucked up when it came to his opinion of them as friends. After talking with her father, he tried to forget how badly he wanted her.

This wasn't good. He wanted to fuck her so badly. Running a hand down his face, he stood at her door, waiting for her to answer.

He'd been waiting nearly a minute. Now that didn't seem too long to wait, but this was Lemon. She never made him wait.

Glancing down at the time on his watch, he tensed up as the door opened.

The smile on Lemon's face fell, and he hated that. He loved her smile. She was a beautiful woman, and this was all his fault.

"I want to apologize," he said.

"Nate, you don't need to do this."

"We're friends, okay? We are friends." He couldn't handle the silent treatment, not from Lemon.

What the fuck was this woman doing to him?

He was twenty years her senior.

This shouldn't be happening to him.

She folded her arms. Her gaze went to the flowers in his arms, then up to his face. "Nate, I'm not angry."

"You've been avoiding me."

She ran fingers through her hair. He rarely got the chance to see all those locks flowing freely. Seeing them now, he wanted to run his fingers through the length, wrap it around his fist as he watched her take his cock.

Damn it.

He had to gain control.

This was fucking messed up.

Lemon was his boss's kid. If Rocco ever found out that he was having sexy thoughts about his daughter, he'd be six feet under by the end of the day.

"No, I haven't."

"Lemon, we've lived next to each other for six months. I know you're avoiding me."

"Maybe I am, but it is for your own good."

“Why?” he asked.

“You’re right. We’re not friends. I barely know you, and the whole curse thing is a load of nonsense. Believe me, I ... er, the truth is, I have a date.”

Nate didn’t think he heard right. He couldn’t have heard correctly. “You have a date?”

“Yes, I have a date. I was at the bank, and this really sweet guy asked me. He’s in college, but he has come home for the holidays. He’s heading back next week, but before he did, he wanted to ask me out.”

“Who is he?”

She frowned. “Not that it is any of your business, but his name is John Krause. I like him, and we’re just neighbors.”

“Truce,” he said, holding out the flowers. Fuck, this wasn’t what he wanted to do right now, but a date? That was a big fucking deal and now he needed to go research who this John Krause was.

“Nate, you don’t have to.”

“I want to. I’m not used to making friends, okay? I am a loner by nature. I don’t get attached to anyone. That’s how my job works, and I like you, Lemon. You’re a great girl.”

“A great girl. Thank you.” She took the flowers. “If we’re going to be friends, I don’t suppose I can come and get your advice later on the dress I’m going to wear?”

“Don’t wear jeans,” he said. “Jeans are the kiss of death on a date.” He also didn’t want this John Krause to see how fucking gorgeous her ass was in a pair.

She chuckled. “Okay. Thank you.”

He loved how quickly she smiled and how she didn’t hold a grudge for too long. “I better get going. I don’t want to keep you from picking out an outfit.”

“Thanks, Nate.”

She stepped back and closed the door.

Hands clenched into fists, he wanted to go and pound this fucker’s face in. Since when did someone take notice of Lemon?

He was very cautious in keeping an eye on everything that was associated with her. No one paid any attention to her.

Entering his home, he ignored all the lies and pictures decorating the walls. This was the persona he had to portray. Most of the pictures were

taken with actors or people on Rocco's payroll. They were all paid to play a part and to keep silent.

Nate had insisted if he had to play friendly neighbor, he didn't want the bullshit that came without being prepared. Some jobs he went into without any preparation at all because they didn't need it. Lemon was different. He was on bodyguard and babysitting duty.

He fired up his laptop and hacked into the local council register to find John Krause. Once he had the name, he did a quick search across social media accounts, police servers, and any other relevant database that would help him to build up a picture of this boy.

The image of the guy made Nate tense. Classic boy next door with light blond hair and green eyes. A smile that told Nate the fucker was lying about something.

Within the hour, he had all the dirt he needed on John. The boy was the son of one of the wealthiest people in town. They owned a vacation villa out in the middle of nowhere, with views for miles, and John had a history a mile fucking long. On his record, it all looked squeaky clean, but beneath the surface was a man who liked to take what he wanted without listening to the woman say no.

He was a player.

An asshole.

And there was no way he was going to let this John anywhere near Lemon. She didn't deserve this.

He knew where John was taking her, an Italian restaurant in town, and Nate called ahead, booking himself a table.

His doorbell rang just as he hung up from making a reservation.

That had to be Lemon.

He walked to the door, took a deep breath, and opened it.

She stood in a dress that nearly fucking killed him. Tight in the chest, pushing those tits together, showcasing her cleavage. It was fitted at the waist and flared out over her hips. At least she wasn't showing off her nice ass.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He didn't like it.

She looked amazing, and that should have all been for him, not anyone else.

"Is it all wrong?"

"No. No. You look gorgeous," he said.

Lemon laughed. “Seriously? Are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No, I’m not just saying that. I mean it.”

He didn’t want her going anywhere else but upstairs so he could strip her naked.

“I’m so pleased. Thank you, Nate. I’ll see you later,” she said.

He walked toward the door and heard the sound of a car honking its horn.

“That’s John.”

She looked so happy, and it pissed him off to know someone else was putting a big smile on her face.

No.

All her smiles.

All her happiness should be for him. No one else.

Hands clenched, he watched as Lemon approached the car. The fucker didn’t even get out to get her door. The boy needed to be taught some manners.

Once he saw the bastard’s taillights going in the distance, he grabbed his jacket and left his home, intent on following them.

He climbed behind the wheel of his car and went straight toward the restaurant. On arriving, he clocked the car, parked a couple of spots away, and headed inside.

The maître d’ didn’t waste any time, and Nate paid him well for it.

A waitress sauntered up, hips swaying, but he wasn’t interested in her.

After a glass of water came, he sat back and watched Lemon and John talk. He noticed her hands shook a little.

Had her date upset her? Was she putting on a brave face?

The waitress moved toward the table, but where she’d been flirty with him, she kept her distance from John. Interesting.

Once she was done taking their orders, Nate signaled her over to him.

She came willingly.

Considering she wasn’t putting out any of the come-fuck-me vibes with John, he had to wonder what she knew.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“You know that guy over there having dinner with the brunette?”

She didn’t even look over her shoulder. “He’s a regular. He believes because he’s got money, he can have whatever he wants and treats us all like

crap. Why?"

He smiled. "How would you like to make a bit of extra cash?"

She pursed her lips. "I'm not a whore."

"Good. I don't want your pussy. I want you to make their date the worst. Bring out everything wrong."

He pulled out his stash of cash and slid it across for her.

"Fine."

"Make it extra horrible. I will double it for you."

She sashayed away and he watched the events of the night unfold.

Dates were supposed to be fun.

All the good books and the movies claimed they were fun. They were worth getting dressed up for.

First, the waitress started to hit on John as if she wasn't there. She could handle that because the truth was, she'd still been reeling from her encounter with Nate. John treated the waitress like trash, talking down to her. Each second that passed, her nerves started to get wound tighter.

She had no idea what to say for fear of him going over the edge. She had never met anyone like him.

Their food was completely messed up. The pasta was horrible. The waitress spilled food down her dress and while John was trying to feel up the waitress, he tipped the red wine, destroying her dress, which had taken her four days to finish, learning lots of new skills in the process.

Just as John started screaming at the waitress, Nate appeared as if out of thin air.

"I think it's time to call an end to this night, don't you?" he asked.

"Who the hell are you?"

Nate had put a hand on the base of her back, and she loved his touch. Her body felt warm all over.

"I'm the guy who's going to be taking her home."

"Excuse me, but I don't need you taking my dates home." John reached out to grab her arm.

She pulled away, not liking how she felt around him. Her mother had always told her to trust her gut, and she should have listened. The date had gone horribly wrong, and with Nate here, interfering, she had a feeling he had something to do with it.

"I think it best I just go home."

“It’s our fucking date, Lemon. You’re coming with me.”

He went to grab her arm again, and she flinched, which was unnecessary as he never got to touch her.

Nate intervened. Within seconds, he had John’s arm bent at an odd angle, with him over the table, screaming for help. Threatening to sue.

“Stop it,” she said. “Nate, stop.”

“Don’t you ever talk to a lady like that. Do you hear me?” he asked.

He let John go, and her date crumpled to the floor. She’d never seen Nate act like that.

If she hadn’t been paying attention to him, she would’ve missed the money he slid into the waitress’s hand. The wink he gave her.

All of her suspicions were confirmed. He’d helped to mess up her date, and now she was pissed.

Lemon didn’t fight him on the way toward the car, or even as he helped her inside. She swatted at his hand when he tried to secure her seat belt. There were some things she could do herself.

She was so pissed off at him.

Arms folded, she waited for him to talk as he pulled out of the restaurant. Nothing.

Gritting her teeth, she expected him to apologize or say and do something.

They got all the way home, and still, he didn’t say a single word. Lemon tried to remain calm. To keep her cool, but with each second that passed, she knew there was an explosion coming.

Nate brought the car to a stop, turned off the ignition, and leaned a little toward her. “Next time, vet your dates with a little more care. You’re welcome.”

He climbed out of the car.

At first, she wasn’t sure if she’d heard him correctly. Surely, she had to be losing her mind, but no, she’d heard him.

After opening the car door, she slid out and slammed the door closed with as much force as she could muster.

“Hey!”

He kept on walking but beeped his car closed. With him nearly to his door, she had no choice but to speed up to keep up with him.

“Don’t you dare close that door on me.” She pushed with all her might, stopping the door from closing.

“Go back home, Lemon.”

“No!” She stomped her foot, not caring if she looked like a child. “You are not going to ruin my date, the first-ever date I’ve ever been on, might I add, and then pretend that you were doing me—”

“Your first date?”

She stopped and growled. “Don’t interrupt me.”

“You’re telling me this was your first date?”

“Yes, and I told you to stop interrupting me.”

“How?”

Lemon gritted her teeth. “What?”

“How is that your first date?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“How is he your first date? What the fuck happened to all of the other dates in between?” Nate asked.

His arms were folded across his chest, and she hated how muscular he looked. The scent of red wine was too much. Surely, she couldn’t get drunk from it soaking her skin.

She slapped her hands together. “It’s pretty simple. I haven’t been asked on a date, nor have I gone on one. There have been no men. No boys. John was the first guy to ever ask me out.”

“But what about you?”

“What?”

“Why haven’t you asked anyone out?”

“We’re getting off topic with this. Why did you ruin my date, Nate?”

“Does this have something to do with your dad?”

She tensed up. “What do you know about my dad?” She never talked about him, not to anyone.

“It’s pretty fucking clear to me you’ve got daddy issues.”

“How?”

“Your home.”

She shook her head. “You’re talking bullshit.” She turned on her heel, but she didn’t get to go anywhere as Nate held her arm, stopping her from leaving.

“I don’t think so. You want to know how I know about your dad? Your place. The pictures. You have so many of them with your mom, but none with your dad. Not a single one, and believe me, I’ve studied them.”

She tried to pull her arm away from him, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“Leave me alone.”

“No. You followed me in here and now you don’t like it because I’m the one watching your back?”

“I don’t need anyone to watch my back. I don’t need a daddy figure.”

“No. You need someone to put you over their knee and spank your fucking ass. John isn’t a good guy.”

“No, what I need is a guy who is willing to look at me for me, but you know what, there’s no one around like that. Guys are just after what they can get and screw the women they hurt in the process.” She thought about her mother, and her own pain at what her father did.

“What you need, Lemon Bosworth, is a good, hard fuck!”

Nate pulled away and she gasped.

Neither of them spoke. Their raised voices went inherently silent as they stared at one another.

“I think I should go.” Staring at him after what he said, she couldn’t think straight. Not now.

“Wait,” Nate said. He didn’t touch her as she glanced back at him.

“What you said was cruel, Nate Evans.” She shrugged. “Do you think I enjoy being alone? You think going on that date tonight was easy for me?” She shook her head. “It was hard. I’m not ... I don’t know how to be with men. I’m a twenty-year-old virgin, living alone.” She lifted a part of her stained dress. “Making clothes for fun. Tonight, I just wanted to forget who I was for a little while.”

“Damn it, Lemon, stop it.”

“I don’t look like the kind of women men want,” she said. “You think I don’t know that? Mousy hair. Curves, or as some people would put it, fat.”

“Don’t.” He took a step toward her, but she squared her shoulders, refusing to back down. “I thought ... I thought you were a good guy.”

She moved toward the door, gripping the handle.

“I came to break up your date because I couldn’t stand the thought of another man touching what belonged to me.”

Lemon looked over her shoulder, surprised to see Nate had moved even closer to her. She hadn’t heard him move.

“What?”

His hand touched her hip. “Do you think I could stand another man putting his hands on what’s mine? You’re mine, Lemon. I don’t think you’re mousy or fat. I think you’re fucking gorgeous, and being around you leaves

me in a constant state of fucking need.”

She gasped as he pressed against her back, and she felt the hard ridge of his cock.

“Do you feel what you do to me? How badly I want you?”

Lemon pressed her hands flat against the door, trying to find anything that would ground her. This was ... surreal.

“You’re lying,” she said.

Nate surprised her further as he brushed his lips across her neck, his teeth sinking against her flesh as his hands moved up to cup her tits.

“No, I don’t lie to you, Lemon. I tell you like I see it, and when I say I want to fuck you, I do. You’re going to be mine. It’s just a matter of time.”

Chapter Three

Nate finished putting the last of the decorations up on his house. He had no choice but to go out at the last minute and purchase a shitload of stuff in order to keep up appearances with the rest of the street.

He'd never been one for Christmas.

His life didn't normally involve being in one place long enough to put up a tree and to make the house glow outside with all the fairy lights.

After he finished, he was rather impressed with his handiwork, and right on time as Lemon arrived home.

She'd made her escape three nights ago, and had avoided him since, but he knew she wanted him.

He shouldn't even be delving into this temptation, but she was impossible to resist. Rocco hadn't called for an update in a short time, but rather than think of the potential spies on his ass, he tried to live his life.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Wow, it's incredible."

He stepped back from the ladder, moving as close to Lemon as possible. "Did you have a good day at work?"

"Yeah, it was long. Lots of customers today." She shrugged.

"Lemon."

"Nate."

They both spoke at the same time.

"You go first."

"I have to go and ... I'm tired."

She went to leave, but he couldn't let her. He was tired of her pulling away from him. Gripping her hand, he spun her close. "Don't go."

He put his hand on her hip as she collided with his chest.

The feel of those full tits pressed against him made his cock stiff within seconds. This woman. What was it about her that drove him crazy? That made him hungry for her? He didn't get it. He'd enjoyed his fair share of easy pussy. Women were easy. They fell for him without even trying, but Lemon was special.

A virgin.

The boss's daughter.

And he wanted her all to himself.

"Nate, I don't know what you want from me."

“You think it was easy for me to say we’re not friends and just neighbors? The way I feel for you, Lemon ... you’re twenty years my junior.”

“Age is just a number,” she said.

“Then tell me you don’t want me. Tell me I’m making all of this up inside my head, where you’re not curious about what it means to be with me.”

She tilted her head back, and he saw tears in her eyes. “I can’t.”

“Then if you’re curious about where this is going to go, you have one hour.”

“One hour?”

“Yes. One hour to make your mind up. You knock on my door, and I’ll know you want more than to be friendly neighbors. If you do, we’ll see where this goes.” He let her go, reluctantly.

It was so damn hard to step back, but he had no choice.

He picked up his ladder and made his way around back.

Of the two houses, Lemon’s had been the one graced with the swimming pool out back. He knew the curse of the houses, but he didn’t believe in any of that shit. He’d done his research, and there was no denying there appeared to be some validity to it, but he couldn’t believe it.

No one fell in love just because two houses were sandwiched together. Besides, it wasn’t like his purchase of this place was random.

He was doing everything for a job. For Lemon’s father.

He had to keep reminding himself that this was for a job, not for any other purpose, but it was impossible.

You shouldn’t be inviting her over to fuck her. That’s what all of this is about. You want to finally feel Lemon wrapped around you. To feel her tight cunt give way to your cock!

Shaking his head, he went to his kitchen to pull a bottle of vodka from the freezer. He poured himself a generous shot glass and tipped it back in one go.

This wasn’t important.

Lemon was a job. When she came over, he’d make sure she left. He’d crush her heart once and for all.

The very thought made him sick to his stomach.

He’d give anything to have her sweet smiles and to hear the sound of her laughter. She soothed the monster inside him.

With the glass firmly in his grip, he launched it across the room, relishing the sound of the shatter as it collided with the wall. The splinters of glass fell to the floor.

“Damn it!”

This wasn’t going according to plan.

As if his life couldn’t get any more fucked up, the cell phone with the ring tone alerting him to Rocco’s call went off.

If he ignored it, Rocco would get suspicious.

“What’s up?” he asked, answering after the fifth ring.

“I was checking in. There has been word on the street that O’Leaves are looking into Lemon. It’s a very vague call. Informant didn’t have much to go on, but they think they know how to keep me in line,” Rocco said.

While his boss talked, Nate made his way upstairs, going toward the attic where he’d set up multiple surveillance cameras, including inside Lemon’s home and surrounding it.

Several computers blinked to life as he moved the mouse, alerting them to his wish to view.

Not only did he have cameras set up in and around Lemon’s property, but there were also several up and down the street, including in town, and he even had one in the main reception of the motels.

This was how seriously he took his job.

Lemon’s safety was his top priority.

“I’m just checking now for any activity.” There wasn’t much going on. A couple of kids playing outside.

He clicked his way through the security footage. He never missed anything.

“It’s all clear here. I will keep an eye on everything and report back.”

“I should bring her home,” he said.

Nate clicked onto Lemon’s bedroom. She wore a towel and sat on the edge of her bed, staring into space.

Was she thinking about him?

He hoped she was.

“Sir, what would you like me to do?”

“I can’t bring her home. Lemon will have nothing to do with me.” Rocco sighed. “Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

He heard the sadness in his boss’s voice. “I can bring her in, boss.”

“No. I promised her mother she would live her best life. One that

wasn't about being near me. It's the last promise I gave her before she died. I will not break that promise. Keep her safe, please, for me."

Rocco didn't wait for a response and hung up.

When it came to Lemon and her mother, it was the only time in his life he'd seen Rocco vulnerable. He must have loved Lemon's mother fiercely.

Putting the phone down, he looked at Lemon as she sat on the bed. She got up and moved to her wardrobe.

Everything she owned was handmade by either herself or her mother.

She was always so giddy when she had fabric deliveries, and she sometimes showed off her makes to him. It was how she spent most of her days.

He wanted to preserve that part of her. The woman with the easy smile and full of love and happiness.

Lemon brought out a need within him to protect her. To keep her safe.

Running fingers through his hair, he had no choice but to click away from watching her. There were times he found himself staring at her for hours at a time. It wouldn't do. Not when there was a threat to her life.

Clicking his way across the cameras, he quickly made sure she was safe.

No one lurked in corners or looked out of place.

Gritting his teeth, he was so fucking annoyed.

Whoever thought they could kill Lemon was going to meet with him, and they were going to know not to fucking mess with him.

Anger rolled through his entire body.

Putting the cameras to sleep, he went to his bedroom, checked all of his weapons, and did a full sweep of the house. He was prepared for everything. Guns, knives, rope, tape, all the arsenal he needed to keep Lemon safe.

What he wasn't prepared for was the knock on his door at exactly the hour point.

Lemon had come to him, just as he hoped she would.

He didn't keep her waiting, opening the door to find Lemon in one of her favorite jumpsuits. It took her a week to figure out the instructions, and when she was done, she'd worn it straight away, asking him what he thought when they met on the lawn.

It showed off her ass to perfection.

He loved it.

Staring into her nervous brown eyes, he couldn't resist. He sank his fingers into her hair and pulled her in close. As he slammed his lips down on hers, he heard the slight catch in her throat as he kissed her, hard.

Lemon debated coming.

The truth was, she wanted Nate. Had been attracted to him for a long time.

Age to her was just a number. She'd never seen people as old and young, just people at different stages in life. It was never important.

Her mother had told her love wasn't always right. People fell in love for any reason, and there was no fighting it.

Lemon didn't think she was in love with Nate.

The curse of the houses was too silly to believe.

What she felt for Nate was lust. Pure, unadulterated lust. His offer was too tempting to deny, and as he kissed her, drawing her into the house, she couldn't help but feel her need for him.

He slammed her up against the door the moment it was closed, and she gasped.

Nate took charge, just as she knew he would, pressing her hands above her head, keeping them there, locked into place.

It made her moan for more as he broke the kiss.

"Keep them up there," he said.

His hands were everywhere, roaming her body, touching her stomach, her ass, running up her back. Finally, when she didn't think he was going to touch her properly, he cupped her tits, pressing them together.

He kissed each mound before stepping back and staring at her. There was no mistaking the lust in her eyes.

Without a word, Nate took her hand and led her upstairs toward his bedroom. She didn't have time to take in much of her surroundings.

"You've got to tell me to stop," Nate said.

"No. I don't want to." He'd ruined her date, but the truth was, after he'd hurt her over the friends-versus-neighbors comment, all she wanted to do was to forget about him. To not think of him in this way.

Nate wouldn't let her stop. He was determined to plague her thoughts, and now, this ultimatum he threw out. There was no way she could have passed it up, and she didn't know who the biggest fool was, him or her.

There was something off about Nate. She wasn't exactly sure what it was, but it was like his security business in town, and a few of the pictures he had on the wall.

He said a couple of the people were his friends, but he'd been unable to give names, or even tell her where they had been. His office in town was rarely open.

Something wasn't right.

But as he pushed her jumpsuit that she'd spent hours sewing up down her body, all her questions and concerns about this man evaporated.

This was the first time a man had seen her naked.

Her first instinct was to hide, to cover her body, but as Nate stepped back to pull the shirt off his body, she couldn't help but admire the endless ink and muscular chest he had on display.

Every single part of his upper body was covered in ink. She got a glimpse of it when he wore short-sleeved shirts, but this, his body was a work of art.

He grabbed her hand, drawing her close. "Do you like what you see?" he asked.

His hand went to her ass, tightening his grip on one cheek.

She nodded. "Do you like what you see?"

He released a growl. "Very fucking much." He pressed his face against the crook of her neck. His tongue licked right over the pulse, and she gasped, letting out a moan as he began to kiss her.

The spot was so sensitive.

She closed her eyes, feeling a pulse deepen between her legs, and she wanted him to touch her right there.

Nate spun them around, and she landed on the bed with a jolt. He moved her up the bed, and she followed his lead.

Nerves hit her hard, taking her by surprise. This was her first time.

Nate stepped back. She watched as he reached for the button of his jeans, opening it up, then sliding the zipper down.

Within seconds, he stood in only a pair of black boxer briefs. There was no ink on his legs.

He knelt on the bed, and she made out the outline of his cock.

He was big.

Understatement.

The boxer briefs appeared even tighter across his erection, and her

mouth went dry as she thought about how he would fit inside her.

She hadn't been with anyone. Watching porn movies and reading books were the extent of her sexual experience. She had no idea what the hell she was doing.

Nate knelt before her, his hands going to her knees, and he slid them open.

She couldn't run away when his hands were on her, with the way he touched her.

All fear fell away, and she was left with was this need. This desire.

It didn't go away. Not once.

"Please," she said.

"I know what you need."

His cock pressed against her core.

She was still wearing underwear, and she was pleased she picked a pretty, matching, lace blue set. It had taken her a long time to pick the right lingerie for the occasion.

"I'm not going to fuck you tonight," he said, whispering the words against her ear.

"You're not?"

"No." He bit down on her neck. "You're not ready, but that doesn't mean we can't do other things."

"Other things?" She sounded like a damn robot, repeating everything he said.

Her face felt hot, but she ignored the flush and instead, focused on the man as he slowly rocked against her.

Feeling his rock-hard cock between her thighs was nearly too much, more than she could bear. This was all new to her.

Nate pressed her tits together, his tongue licking across the curves of each breast. "Fuck, you taste so good, and I haven't even gotten to the fun part yet."

"Fun part?"

She wanted to slap herself for constantly saying the same thing.

Nate kissed down her body, going to each tit and sucking it through the lace. She gasped, feeling the tightness in her stomach as he slowly moved down toward her pussy.

She expected him to kiss her, but he tore away her panties, and then his mouth was on her, and fuck! It was the best feeling in the world.

He held the lips of her sex open, so there was nothing getting between him and her pussy, and he made love to her with his mouth. His focus was on her clit as he trailed his tongue back and forth, doing small circles, then sucking it into his mouth.

She moaned.

Arched up.

Begged for more.

Nate didn't stop. He ravished her pussy. Sending her moving higher up into an orgasm, faster than she expected. This was more than she had done with anyone.

When she came, Nate didn't stop. He continued to lick at her cunt as if he was a drowning man and her pussy was his salvation. It was the single most amazing experience in all her life.

She never wanted him to stop.

He brought her down from the peak only to send her hurtling back toward another orgasm. Twice within a matter of minutes. She didn't think it was possible.

But as he moved over her, kissing her lips, she tasted herself and wasn't repulsed. The hard length of his cock grazed her, and this time, she pushed him to the bed.

"Lemon?"

"I don't have a clue what I'm doing, but that doesn't mean I'm not a fast learner." She didn't dare kiss his body.

Her hands shook as she pulled down his boxer briefs, and the sexiness of the moment was gone.

His cock sprang forward, and she stared at him, wrapping her fingers around his length, much like she'd seen in porn movies.

"Tell me what you want." She licked the tip.

"Oh, fuck, that feels good. Don't use too much teeth, but put your mouth on me."

That night, as she experienced her first two orgasms at the hands of the man who drove her wild, she also learned how to suck his cock.

Nate showed her with his actions how he liked to be licked, to get his length nice and slick before she took him into her mouth. When she moaned, he arched up. His fingers sank into her hair, holding her in place as he thrust into her mouth.

She let him, loving the way he let go.

This wasn't love. This was sex.

That was what she was going to have with Nate. She was finally going to get to see what all the fuss was about.

Love didn't come into the equation.

She had no clue as to why that felt like the biggest lie of her life.

Chapter Four

Nate came awake as he heard the lock on his kitchen door. Lemon was curled up in his arms, and every single warning bell went off in his head.

He reached for his cell phone and swiped into his security system to see a man entering his premises.

Fuck.

Lemon was still fast asleep, and he slowly extracted himself from her embrace, missing her warmth the instant he did it.

He pulled on his boxers.

Last night with Lemon in his bed, he hadn't fucked her, but he'd enjoyed exploring her body.

After leaving his bedroom, he closed the door and flicked the lock into place, to keep her safe.

On his way downstairs, avoiding all the floorboard creaks, he grabbed the first weapon he came to, a knife, then a gun. He held both within his grip.

This was fucking bullshit.

Lemon in his bed. Whoever had been out there had learned a new hiding spot, clearly. When Lemon was at work, he would have no choice but to case the area, to see if there was a part of the neighborhood he'd missed.

Adrenaline pumped through his system. He was so fucking ready for whoever came close.

One quick glance around a corner, he saw the bastard staring at his photographs.

Fuck!

With Lemon asleep upstairs, he planned his attack, slowly, swiftly, and with ease.

This person was clearly an amateur. You didn't stop and admire the décor when you were intent on killing someone.

With the guy distracted, Nate moved quickly, swiftly, putting himself at a more advantageous position.

Who the hell was this man?

From his new place, looking at the man in the mirror, it was clear. The ink of the O'Leaves was clear on his neck.

This shouldn't have happened. No one got the better of him, and seeing this now pissed him off.

Lemon had nothing to do with her father. The fact they were coming

after her like this was starting to piss him off even more. There was no time to lose.

The gun was a mistake to pick up.

Stepping away from the room, he had no choice but to lure the bastard away, and once he was in the kitchen, Nate opened a drawer and closed it, moving toward the doorway.

He kept his back close to the wall, waiting.

The arms appeared first, firmly holding the weapon.

Nate waited, and then with ease, he plunged his knife into the man's chest. Within seconds, he had the gun away from him and had plunged the knife in a second time, then a third. He did all this without once making a mess, which he considered a victory.

With his hand over the guy's mouth, he had to admit he was impressed. Three knife wounds, and he still tried to fight him, hitting out, hungry to survive, but Nate didn't let him go. There was no room for questioning. Not with his precious treasure asleep upstairs.

He waited. Counting down the seconds.

It wasn't long before the man was dead.

Nate held the dead body, lowering him to the ground, and then wanting to do nothing more than to expel all his anger into the man. There was no way he could do it though, not without risking Lemon waking up.

He didn't linger on what had happened.

Working with speed, he got the hitman wrapped up in a body bag, the blood cleaned up from the floor, and after quickly pulling on a pair of sweatpants, he dumped the body in the car, which he would deal with later.

There was no blood on him, and for that, he was thankful.

In the kitchen, he quickly got to work on some morning coffee.

He heard Lemon wake up and he gritted his teeth as he waited for the kettle to finish. Then he poured them two generous cups and headed upstairs.

The door rattled, and he cursed.

How was he going to handle this line of questioning?

He was pretty sure the truth wasn't going to cut it.

After he flicked the lock, the door opened and a panicked-looking Lemon greeted him, in one of his shirts, which he wasn't going to deny was sexy as fuck to see her in.

"Nate."

"Lemon, I come with coffee," he said. Part of him wanted to bow

down to her, to make a joke of it.

“The door was locked.”

He smiled. “Er, I was ... this is ... all new to me.”

“What is?”

“Having a virgin in my bed.”

Her cheeks went a beautiful shade of red. He loved the color on her. “When I woke up, I didn’t know how to keep you in bed and I thought a coffee and talking was what the doctor ordered, and so I didn’t want you to leave before I got a chance to do that.” And he was totally winging these excuses.

This was one of the many reasons Rocco hired him.

He could talk and charm his way out of anything.

“Oh, well, the coffee does sound good. Do you think we could leave the whole virgin thing out of the conversation?”

“You know you’re still one, don’t you?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

“Oh, good. For a minute there, I thought you didn’t know.” He winked at her. “Try your coffee.”

He made shit coffee.

Lemon took a sip and he laughed as she stifled her shudder. “It’s very good.”

“Oh, please, you and I both know it’s shit.”

“It’s coffee, and it’s first thing in the morning.”

They stood with him outside the door, her inside his room, drinking coffee.

“Maybe we could go and have a seat?” he asked.

Lemon looked back at the bed, and from the quick glance, it was clear she wanted to do anything but.

“Sure. Sure.” The lies spilled with ease past her lips, and he followed her into the bedroom.

He put his coffee down and then took hers from her, placing it on the cabinet beside the bed.

Next, he cupped her face. “You have no reason to be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“Yes, you are.” He kissed her lips. “And you’ve got no reason to be.” Sinking his fingers into her hair, he tilted her head back. “Do you want to talk about what happened last night?”

“Do you regret it?” she asked.

“Not a single second of it.”

“Then no, it was—” She stopped, biting her lip. “It was the most amazing night.”

“Good, because it is only going to get better. I don’t want to rush things with you, Lemon. You’re a special woman, and you deserve to have the best.”

“What does that even mean?” she asked.

“It means when the right time comes, you will belong to me. There will be no fear, no nerves, and we won’t have argued before I take what is mine.”

She licked her lips, and her gaze fell to his chest. “I don’t like arguing with you.”

“Good.” He kissed her again. “Did you like my mouth on you?”

She moaned.

“I’m going to need words, Lemon.” The blush was back, and he couldn’t resist stroking her cheeks. “Talk to me.”

“Yes, I liked it.”

“Lemon, I’m not a man who fucks with the lights off or hides what I want.” He tightened his grip on her hair. “I know what I want and I go after it. When it comes to a woman I want, and sex, I like it dirty. I like it open and exposed, and raw. Nothing left untouched. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Tonight, I want to take you out to dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. I’ve heard of a nice Italian restaurant. I think it’s only fair I make your night amazing, don’t you?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to. Your first time isn’t going to be with anyone else but me.” With that, he kissed her again. “You can wear jeans if you wish, or that dress you showed me a couple of weeks ago.”

“I’ve shown you a lot of things,” she said.

He growled, unable to resist thinking about last night with her pretty pussy spread open for him. “You’re right. I’m thinking of the red one, plunging neck. Wear that.”

“I will.” She smiled.

Her hands touched his. He felt the nerves rushing up her body, and the last thing he wanted was for her to feel any kind of apprehension about touching him.

“I love it when you touch me, Lemon. Don’t ever stop.”

She chuckled. “Like this?”

Her hands ran up his arms, going toward his neck.

“Yes.”

He wasn’t one for touching, but like always, Lemon defied everything, and she didn’t even realize it.

She broke down his own barriers. The first and only woman to do that to him.

“I need to go to work,” she said.

It was the last place he wanted her to go.

Lemon sat in the lunchroom on her break, biting into an apple when she looked up to see a woman had joined her.

“Hi, I’m Cindy. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She’d been working at the supermarket for six months and no one had come to sit with her.

“Hello,” she said, offering her hand.

Friends were hard to come by.

Her mother often said she was the kind of person who didn’t need them. She would give some statement or quote that would make her feel a little better about her not wanting to be near too many people.

“I’m Lemon,” she said as an afterthought, not really sure what this woman wanted. A long history of not trusting people would do that to a person.

“I’ve been meaning to come and sit with you and to catch up on all the gossip. Life just gets in the way. Do you want to see my two little devils?”

Before Lemon could refuse, Cindy already had them out. Two pictures. A boy and a girl.

“Those are my little angels. They were nightmares coming into this world, and well, they are still little terrors, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. Do you have any children?”

“Er, no, I do not.” She would have to get to the sex part for that to be a reality.

“Well, they have been the highlight of my entire world. Now, I know we’re just friends and all, but you tell me about yourself.”

“Not a lot to tell,” Lemon said.

“Oh, please, I bet there is a lot to tell. A young woman such as yourself, living in the cursed houses right next door to that hunk of man meat.”

This wasn’t going how she imagined conversations should go.

“Cursed houses?” She refused to get jealous just because this woman noticed that Nate was a handsome man.

“Please, do not tell me that you do not know about the cursed houses.”

Lemon shook her head. “I mean, I think I’ve heard, but I put that down to gossip.”

“Nah, it’s not just gossip. It is absolute truth, I tell you. Personally, I don’t know why they call it the cursed houses. People finding their soulmates is not a curse.” She fluffed up her hair. “So are you and the man, you know, dating?”

She forced a smile to her lips, trying to remain calm, even though Cindy made her nervous. This wasn’t small talk.

“No, we’re not dating. Well, we ... I’m not sure what you would call it.”

Cindy laughed and started to clap. “I just knew it. We all have a bet going on, you see? We all know you were part of the cursed houses, and well, I just won the jackpot, honey. I knew you were going to be dating that guy, even if I do think he’s dating beneath him.” Cindy got up, leaving the insult hanging in the air.

She went back to her friends, and Lemon stood. The apple she’d been eating no longer appealed, and well, worked called, which was what she wanted now more than ever.

People were betting on her love life, and now they even thought she didn’t have what it took to have Nate.

The way he’d touched her last night, that wasn’t fake.

She rubbed at her temple, wishing her mother was alive so she could phone up and talk to her. Her father was out of the question. She would never call him for anything, not a damn thing.

Going into the back, she saw the pallet waiting to be taken into the shop to fill up the shelves. She pulled it across the floor, waiting for

customers to pass before she settled back into her work.

She had completed the full pallet and was putting the shelves to rights when there was a tap on her shoulder. Spinning around, expecting to see a customer, she plastered a smile on her face, only to come face to face with Nate.

“Nate?”

He pulled her in close and slammed his lips down on hers, right there in the baking aisle.

People passed.

A couple whistled.

Time stood still as she wrapped her arms around his neck, and he drew her close. One of his hands so close to her ass, but teasing at the base.

He pulled away, dropping another kiss to her lips.

Lemon slowly came to her senses, realizing she was still in the supermarket, and they were not at home.

“What was that for?” she asked. “Not that I’m complaining.” It was her workplace, so in a way, highly inappropriate, but she couldn’t deny that it made her toes curl and her heart melt.

“I wanted to come and see you,” he said, tucking some hair behind her ear.

“You did? You were at work?”

“Yeah, I was out running errands.”

“What kind of errands?” she asked.

“Work stuff. Totally boring. I missed lunch, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t come and kiss you.” He took her hand, locking their fingers together.

Lemon glanced past his shoulder to see Cindy with a couple of her friends, laughing.

She pulled away from Nate. “Well, it was good to see you. I’ll talk to you later?”

He stared down at her, and she had no choice but to keep his gaze. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“That is not nothing, Lemon. Those women giving you a hard time?”

“No. I am left alone.”

Nate shook his head, reaching out to her. “Don’t lie to me.” He drew her closer to him, his hand on her hip. “Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing. They ... I don’t even know what the hell is going on. The whole cursed-houses thing. One of the women came and asked if we were dating, and I let it slip we were, and she made some disparaging comment about how I’m way out of your league.” She shrugged and held her thumbs up. “All in a day’s work, right?”

He shook his head, and the glare he sent down to the women had Cindy and her friends moving on.

“Hey,” Lemon said. “It’s fine. I don’t care.”

“Lemon, you look miserable. I’m not having that.” He cupped her face, tilting her head back. “You are a wonderful, beautiful, sexy woman. They’re just jealous bitches, and the truth is you’re way out of *my* league. You shouldn’t be looking at a guy like me.”

“What? A guy into security?” she asked.

“We are very different people.” He kissed her again.

He always gave vague answers. They were starting to wear a little thin. Six months, Nate knew more about her than anyone else. She shared her sewing journey with him. She cooked for him.

“I’m looking forward to our date tonight,” he said.

“Me too.”

“The red dress?” he asked.

“The red dress.”

He pulled her against him and kissed her.

With one touch and a kiss, he helped to make her forget her own senses. After running her hands up his chest, she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back with a passion.

She wished she wasn’t at work.

Someone cleared their throat, and Lemon had no choice but to step back.

“Tonight,” Nate said.

She agreed and watched as Nate left the store. Turning her attention back to the disapproving customer, she helped the woman as best she could but knew there would be a complaint about her behavior. There was nothing she could do about it.

Her lips still tingled from Nate’s kisses.

She looked forward to tonight’s date so much.

After getting through work, she was more than looking forward to getting home.

There was no car in Nate's drive, and she made her way into her own home to shower and change.

In the red dress, she sat on the edge of her bed, nervous.

Nate should be picking her up in five minutes.

One glance outside, and there was no car in sight.

Was Nate going to stand her up?

She licked her lips, feeling her hands go clammy.

Maybe Cindy was right?

She wasn't the kind of woman men like Nate went for. After standing up, she went to her vanity table, which she rarely used. Sliding open the drawer, she pulled out the picture. Six years ago, she'd bent the picture in half. Her mother wouldn't allow her to tear apart memories.

Opening the card, she stared at what she once thought was her little family. Her mother, herself, and her father.

She hadn't looked at this picture in so long.

Biting her lip, she stared at her parents. Memories surged inside her, of seeing them together, even after the reality of what they were came to mind.

She bent her father back and away from the picture, putting it into the drawer. Was she doomed to make the same mistake as her mother?

The doorbell rang.

Nate wasn't late.

He was right on time.

Chapter Five

Disposing of a body was easy.

An O'Leaves hitman was an entirely different setup. Rocco had no choice but to come to town at a secured location, to check the body out, and then to make his decisions.

To send a message to the O'Leaves, a part of his body had to be removed, packaged up, and dealt with. After spending the morning with Lemon's father, the only person he'd wanted to see was Lemon herself. Seeing her upset had made him want to deal with the women personally. To hurt them, but he couldn't allow his cover to be blown and dead wives would raise too much suspicion.

All afternoon, he'd been checking every single nook and cranny in the neighborhood to see where he'd fucked up. The O'Leaves hitman had gotten way too close, and he didn't like that.

There was no spot, so he'd been too distracted by Lemon to keep an eye out for the bastard's arrival.

Wasn't going to happen again.

He now had sensors attached that would alert him with a text message. It was an easy cover to control, being in security.

Now as he sat opposite Lemon, with the scents of Italian food surrounding him, he was at peace.

She looked nervous as she perused the menu.

"Do you see anything you like?" he asked.

"So much. I love Italian food. It's my favorite." She closed the menu. "I will let you order for me."

He smiled and signaled for the waiter to come closer. The waitress from the other night was nowhere to be seen, which he'd also put in as a request. Tonight was going to be perfect.

The waiter left and Lemon sighed. "I'm impressed. You ordered in Italian, didn't you?"

"I'm a man of many skills."

"Your parents must be very proud."

Nate picked up his wine, taking a sip. "I don't have any parents."

"You don't?"

"Nope. I ended up in the foster system. I was a troubled boy. No one knew my name or when I was born. One of the foster mothers gave me a

name, an identity. Probably the nicest person I ever met, but she was too old and died of a heart attack. After that, I stayed in the system, bouncing around from one place to another, before I got out at eighteen.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. “Have you ever thought to look for your parents?”

He did, and killed the both of them, which was what put him on Rocco’s sonar. “They had passed by the time I found them. I have no way of knowing why they put me into foster care.” He did. They were bored, and it turned out every single child they had, they dumped into the foster system when the drugs and their needs outweighed taking care of a kid.

He hated them.

Their deaths were easy.

Like he said, he was a troubled kid.

It took years of practice to get where he was now. The seemingly carefree man who had the world at his fingertips.

Women wanted him and men admired him.

Again, all part of the illusion he built. The only person he’d ever cared about sat right in front of him.

“Er, my father is married,” she said. “It’s ... my mother was his mistress.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Er, I had no idea. I thought I just had a dad that was like so many others, you know? He went away on business. He wasn’t always home for the holidays, but Mom made it seem like the most natural thing in the world. When they were together, he loved her and she loved him. They were pretty inseparable actually.” Lemon laughed.

“You didn’t like your dad?” he asked.

“No. I actually loved him. Doted on him to be precise. I’d wait every single day he was due to arrive at the window, watching, waiting. When I saw him, I’d run out and he’d catch me. He was my hero.”

“What happened?”

Lemon took a sip of her wine. “I’ve never told anyone this. We were out shopping. Mom and me. I needed some new pants, and she loved to sew, like me. We were at the mall, shopping for fabric, and I spotted him. I saw my dad, and without thinking, I ran over to him and hugged him tight. I was fourteen years old, and he treated me like a total stranger.” She stopped, and he saw her hand shaking so he reached out to touch her, to offer her comfort.

Rocco had a real family.

Lemon and her mother were the side family.

The irony was Rocco wanted Lemon and her mother more than he did his legal one.

“Mom came over, told them how sorry she was, and that he looked like my father. Man, looking back, it was so ... heartbreaking. My dad ignored me and barely looked at my mother. Bearing in mind, I’d seen them together. He was always so loving and caring. Anyway, I was heartbroken. I wasn’t an idiot. I knew he was my dad. Same cologne and all of that. Then mom told me the truth. She was cheating with my dad. The family we saw was his real family. We were just ... there. I was the bastard. She didn’t say that.”

“Do you still see your father?”

“I chose not to. From that day on, I never waited for him again. He would always come. There would be gifts, but I’d make excuses, you know. I’d go on school trips, or I’d stay in my room. I ignored him.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. You probably think my mom is a horrible person or something.”

“I don’t think that.”

She took a sip of her wine, and he saw her struggling to gain control of her emotions.

“Your father is still alive?” he asked.

“Yes. Very much alive, and he has reached out to me a couple of times. He was there for my mom’s funeral, but I ignored him.”

“And your mother chose that life with him?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Not really. She met him at some kind of club. I don’t know. She said she was out dancing and he was this dashing stranger. One thing led to another, and when she found out he was married, she was pregnant with me. After that, she intended to keep it strictly parental. They were in love. That was all she’d say to me, how much she loved him, how much he meant to her.” She waved a hand in front of her face, letting out a groan. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“I’m not married. I don’t have a kid waiting for me. I’m not going to hurt you, Lemon. I’m not your father.”

“Then who are you?” she asked. “I’ve seen the pictures in your house, Nate. You think I don’t know who some of those people are?”

He frowned.

She pressed her lips together and leaned forward. “You’ve got pictures taken with porn stars. Are you like, a porn star?”

The very question took him by surprise, and he couldn’t help but laugh. One of Rocco’s businesses was in the porn industry. It was a lucrative business, but being part of the mafia, anything that made money would always end up being their business. Rocco had scruples and limits, but they were limited.

Lemon glanced around as he stopped laughing. “No, I’m not a porn star. I just happen to have friends who are, and I don’t judge.”

“Oh,” Lemon said.

“Look, after you grow up in the foster system, you learn not to judge people, and to embrace all elements of life. I’ve been without money. There is no video of me fucking anyone. We all have our ways to cope and to get out of it. I learned long ago that I’m damn good at security and protecting people. It’s what I do best.”

Her face was once again red, not from the flush of arousal, but embarrassment.

“Is that what you were thinking?” he asked. “I was a porn star?”

“I had no idea what to think.”

He chuckled. The pictures were all lies. Some of the women were so fucking high, they wouldn’t have remembered what they did.

The waiter brought a pause to their conversation by bringing out their food. It was a distraction he needed.

Lemon would have questions. Most women did, and he got the sense, due to her father, she didn’t trust easily.

He was going to have to work damn hard to make sure she never found out the truth.

You can’t have her for life.

Rocco would kill you.

He couldn’t think of letting her go.

Lemon was his. He would fight to keep her.

A couple of days later

Lemon pulled out the latest batch of cookies from the oven. The scent of cinnamon and nutmeg hung heavy in the air, making her mouth water.

She loved baking these Christmas cookies that were her mother’s recipe. Every Christmas, there would always be a jar of these waiting for her

when she came home. One by one, she transferred them to a cooling rack as she got to work on the icing.

She hated icing sugar, especially as the bag she'd picked up at the store had so many lumps in it. Sieving was her nemesis, but she did it. Her mother always said if you're going to start something, do it right, and do it well.

Separating out the icing, she mixed the colors in together and hummed a Christmas song as she did, decorating each one as she went.

She had just finished putting the final button onto the cookies when there was a knock on the door.

Wiping her hands on a towel, she opened the door, expecting to find Nate, only to come face to face with her father.

She dropped the towel in her hand. The last time she saw him was two years ago at the funeral.

“What are you doing here?”

“Are you going to invite me in?”

Lemon took a deep breath and knew she had no choice, otherwise, the street would talk.

Her father, Alessandro Rocco. She had lied to Nate. He had no idea her real father was one of the scariest men within the Italian mafia. Her mother had told her the truth, why it was so important for the two of them to remain a secret.

It was to keep them both safe. He'd failed to keep them both safe.

Her mother had been killed because of him. Their identity had been discovered, and it had caused her mother's death.

Just thinking about it brought tears to her eyes.

“You're baking your mother's cookies,” he said.

He used to love them.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Lemon, it is not safe for you here. You need to come home.”

She snorted. “Come home? What home? That home ceased to exist when men came into the house, raped and murdered my mother, and burned the house down to the ground with her inside it!” She wanted to hurt him, punish him.

He flinched as she threw the truth right at him.

His enemies had taken out their punishment on her mother.

Tears filled her eyes, and she looked away from the man who had

once been her hero. “I need you to leave. You promised me and her that you wouldn’t interfere in my life.”

“And I intend to keep all of my promises I made to her, Lemon. But your mother would want you to do it alive, not dead.” He took a step toward her, and she backed away.

“I don’t need you to take care of me.”

There was another knock on the door.

Shit!

Nate was supposed to come over. That was why she’d baked the cookies. Her father wasn’t the kind of man she wanted him to meet. Nate was a good man. Her father wasn’t. He was a criminal. His connections kept him out of jail. A monster who walked and talked like a businessman.

She turned on her heel and went to the door.

Nate was there with flowers. It was snowing, and he had flowers.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said.

“Nate, er, now is not a good time.”

“Do you want me to come back at a diff...” He trailed off, and Lemon knew her father had arrived.

“Nate, this is my dad. Dad, this is my neighbor, Nate.” She glanced between the two men. Her father looked at the flowers. “My dad was just leaving.”

“Alessandro Rocco,” her father said, holding out a hand.

“Nate Evans. Pleasure to meet your acquaintance.”

They shook hands, and she saw the tension in both of their hands.

Neither looked ready to let go.

“Let me pack you a bag of those cookies. You can eat them as you leave.” She made her escape, bagging up six cookies and returning to the door.

They both stood there, glaring at one another.

“Here you go,” Lemon said.

“Lemon.”

“You can go. We don’t need to talk about anything else.” She didn’t want her father scaring away Nate, not that he’d scare easy.

“I will go for now, but I won’t be gone far,” Rocco said.

She didn’t like that. He promised to keep his distance. Once again, he was breaking promises.

He left, and she saw the fancy car with the blacked-out windows.

Whenever he came to them, it was always a second-hand car, and he never wore business suits. This man wasn't the father she remembered.

Lemon smiled up at Nate.

"Do you want to come in?" she asked.

"I did, but I've got to do something," he said. "Raincheck?"

Why wasn't she surprised? Of course the moment he met her father, he would have excuses not to come near her. Her father always got in the way.

"Right, of course. Yeah, no problem." Her heart shattered into a million pieces, but she kept the fake smile on her lips, pretending everything was okay. Why wouldn't it be? She was just a woman with a mafia-connected father.

Not even an acknowledged daughter.

Nate stepped up and kissed her forehead.

It was so odd for him to do.

"I'll be back soon." He stepped away, going toward his car. She stood at her doorway, aware of the snow falling. It was only a light dusting. She waved at Nate, but he didn't see. His car was speeding off.

Closing the door, she stared at the flowers.

Was her father that scary?

She had never been afraid of him. Angry and hurt, but never scared.

In the kitchen, she put the flowers in a vase, and for some reason, she felt exactly like her mother did all those years ago when Rocco had failed to turn up.

Chapter Six

Nate stared across the café table as Rocco sipped at his coffee. He hadn't expected him to be visiting Lemon.

"My daughter is looking well," Rocco said.

"She isn't aware of the danger to her life."

"Good. That is good."

Tension mounted.

Nate was aware of the guards who could take him out without a second thought. Some of them, he'd personally trained.

He was poised, ready. One hand on his gun.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Evans, you are not here to court my daughter. You are only here to keep her safe."

"I'm playing the role of a friendly neighbor."

Rocco slammed his palm on the table. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"I take you for a man who is suffering the loss of a woman he loved dearly. A daughter who wants nothing to do with you. Trying to keep her safe and her life untouched by the darkness of yours. I see everything. I'm no fool. Lemon is a smart woman. She would have spotted me instantly as the guard I am." The lies kept on spilling.

He cared for Lemon and planned to take care of her, protect her with his very life. She deserved someone who didn't look at her like she was nothing. Not that he should be the one to judge. He wasn't her father. All he knew was part of the pain she felt from the memory of her father rejecting her.

"She told me," Nate said.

"What?"

"About the mall. Going to look for fabric, seeing you with your real family. From the time she was fourteen years old, you stopped being her hero."

As the words spilled, he saw the crack start in Rocco's demeanor. He did love his daughter very much.

It wasn't unheard of for a mafia man to take a mistress or to keep a dozen of them. They all had the wealth of keeping them within a lifestyle they were accustomed to. Rocco was different. The only mistress he kept was Lemon's mother.

Rumors would always follow Rocco, and Nate had never taken any of

them seriously. They were dangerous men, and their lives didn't allow them to take on civilian women who didn't know the score.

"Lemon needs to come home." Rocco pressed his fingers together, leaning on the table. "Do you think I wasn't aware of the whole cursed houses?"

Nate couldn't help but roll his eyes. That fucking curse. "Seriously? You believe in that?"

"Do your research, Nate, and while you're at it, stay the hell away from my daughter." Rocco got to his feet.

There was no way Nate was going to stay away.

He waited as Rocco left the café. Nate wasn't an idiot. He knew about the houses. After the curse was mentioned, he'd looked into it. For the most part, it was all based on rumor, but he'd delved a little deeper, finding previous owners and discovering that each couple before him and Lemon had each gotten married.

All of them.

No divorces.

So, he delved even further back, and from the moment the houses were built, the couples who entered later left together, married or in a relationship.

To him, it didn't sound like a curse. Like a fairytale. As if the houses picked out soulmates.

He stood up, paid the money for the coffees neither of them had touched, climbed in his car, and drove all the way back to Lemon's house. Once he was parked, he stayed outside, looking at their houses, seeing no discernable mark. Nothing to suggest they were cursed.

Nate didn't believe in shit like that. He also didn't believe in love.

People may think they were in love, and put a label on their feelings which bound them in marriage, but he didn't believe in it.

Getting out of his car, he hated that the sun had already set. It was freezing cold and way too dark.

He went straight to Lemon's house and rang the bell.

Her father's words were clear. Stay away from Lemon, but Nate was never one to follow the rules exactly.

Seconds later, Lemon opened the door, dressed in a bathrobe. She'd clearly been asleep. Her lips were slightly plump, her hair wild from dreaming.

He couldn't resist her.

Banding his arm around her waist, he stepped over the threshold. No words were needed as he closed the door, flicking the lock into place, and then, lifting Lemon into his arms as he went straight to her bedroom.

She didn't ask how he knew where her room was. He wouldn't tell her how he stalked her house, putting cameras into secure locations so he could keep an eye on her. For weeks, he studied her home, her life, everything about her. Their first real meeting had been carefully orchestrated by him.

He put Lemon on her feet, tugged at the belt of her robe, and let it fall free. He slid his hands around her waist, tugging her close as he caught sight of the negligee. The lace traced over the curve of her tits, teasing, tempting. He wanted her.

His cock was already rock-hard.

With the robe on the floor, he tugged off his jacket, being careful so she didn't hear the loud noise as he had a gun in it.

Lemon reached out, but her hands were clenched, almost as if she was too afraid to touch him.

He couldn't have that.

He needed her hands on him more than anything.

Taking hold of her wrist, he placed it on his chest. "I want you to touch me, Lemon."

Uncurling her hand, he put her hand back on his chest. "You can always touch me."

She stayed perfectly still, but he had no problems putting his hands on her.

Wrapping them around her waist, he pulled her toward him, sinking his fingers into her hair at the same time he grasped her ass.

He lifted the negligee, finding supple flesh with no underwear.

"I need to taste you." He growled the words against her lips as he pushed her back to the bed.

Taking hold of her knees, he spread her thighs and stared down at her pretty pussy. She had a light smattering of hair, which he didn't mind. He never liked a woman to be bare. He loved a woman to look like one.

"Touch yourself," he said.

Her hand went between her thighs, and he watched as she stroked her slit. A single finger sliding through. It wasn't enough to give her any real

kind of pleasure. His cock needed more.

He smacked her hand out of the way, grabbed her ass, and pressed his face against her pussy. It had been too long since he last tasted her. He needed her again.

Sliding his tongue between her slit, he stroked over her clit, around, then down toward her entrance, before going back to her clit. Over and over, he sucked at her tender flesh, feeling her orgasm beginning to spiral. He wanted her to come, needed her to. Tonight, Lemon was losing her virginity. He was going to take it and own this delicate peach.

Sucking hard on her clit, he felt her come. When she was soaking wet, he'd take her.

He continued to tease her until her body shook with the aftershocks of pleasure. Each pulsing into the next until she couldn't stand it any more.

Standing up, he went to his belt and slid it open.

A beautiful flush covered her body. One he wanted to see over and over again.

Down the zipper went, and he kicked the jeans to one side. Wrapping his fingers around his length, he crawled on the bed.

Lemon had moved up until she was against the pillows, watching his strip show, but now, she was going to be all his.

He grabbed her ankle, pulling her down a little. She let out a little yelp, and he moved between her thighs, staring into her eyes.

With one hand on his cock, he positioned himself between her thighs, waiting. One bump against her clit had her arching up, a whimper escaping.

"Please," she said.

"I need you to tell me now, Lemon. Do you want this?"

"Yes."

"Once I start, I'm not going to be able to stop," he said.

She touched his face. "I trust you."

That had to be one of the biggest mistakes she had ever made.

He eased his cock down to her entrance. He'd never been the kind of man to care about the pain he inflicted upon other. Lemon was different. Everything about her was different. She wasn't just some woman.

She was ... Lemon.

Nate didn't know what the fuck that meant, just that she wasn't like other women. Not that he loved her.

Tensing up, he slammed to the hilt, tearing past the thin wall of her

virginity, feeling it give way as he took her.

Lemon's scream filled the air, and along with it, for the first time in his life, Nate felt guilt.

Pain was expected.

Nate was so large.

Lemon hadn't expected it to hurt that much.

"Shit, I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay. Just, don't move." She licked her lips, feeling her eyes well with tears. This wasn't the way she wanted to do this, not for her first time. This was a disaster.

"I didn't want to cause you pain," he said.

His hand cupped her cheek, and his lips brushed across hers. There was still a slight twinge in her pussy, but he hadn't moved. His tongue traced across the seam of her lips, and she couldn't resist deepening the kiss, opening up for him.

He growled against her mouth, and she moaned as he plundered her lips, tasting him.

Still, he didn't move.

The kiss was on fire. She loved how he touched her. His pelvis stayed perfectly still. No movement, and it made her hungry for more of him.

"Fuck, baby, I've got you. Tell me if you want me to stop."

She preferred him when he didn't have a clue if he could stop. This was her first time, and she wasn't going to screw it up.

Reaching around his buttocks, she grabbed his ass. He wasn't even all the way inside her.

"Lemon!"

"I want you, Nate. I don't want you to treat me with kid gloves. I can take it." The pain had lessened. She hadn't been a virgin by choice, well, not really. Yes, she had issues with her dad, and men were grouped together in that category, but she liked Nate. He was different, and she wanted a piece of that.

Seeing her father had reminded her of exactly what she didn't want out of life. To be part of his world, or near him. Her mother may have been happy being second best, but not her.

She would never forget that feeling of running up to him and being ignored.

Pushing all those thoughts of her father out of her mind, she focused on Nate. He was the most important person in her world.

No one else.

She thrust her pelvis up, trying to make him go deeper.

“Stop!” Nate growled out the word so sharply, she had no choice but to follow. Holding herself still, he looked up at him and waited. “I want to make sure you’re not hurting first.”

“Nate, I’m fine.”

“Look at me.”

She stared right at him, loving the blueness of his eyes. He had such beautiful eyes. Any woman could get lost in them, and she had a feeling most often, people did.

“Now, I want you to be still. Completely and totally still.”

She sat poised, waiting, not moving, wanting to, but afraid to.

Both of his hands went to either side of her head, caging her in. She licked her lips, and as he began to thrust inside her, she couldn’t help but respond in case there was pain.

There wasn’t.

There was no pain.

Just pleasure.

A gasp fell from her lips, and Nate immediately stopped. “You’re still in pain.”

She shook her head. “I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

“No, please, don’t stop.” She tried to wriggle on his dick, not wanting him to stop, more than happy for him to keep on moving, to take her, to fuck her, to be with her one hundred percent.

Nate did exactly that.

He took hold of her hands, keeping them on either side of her head but locking her into place. She whimpered as he took his time, thrusting in and out of her. He moved her legs around his waist, and it seemed to help him go deeper, to hit a spot within her that had her arching up and begging for more.

At first, he started off slowly. Each thrust slow and steady, not going too fast. He built it up until he went from making love to her, to fucking her.

Every plunge had her crying out, feeling the coil of her orgasm start to uncurl. Nate reached down between them, his thumb tracing across her clit.

The first stroke making her cry out as the pleasure assaulted her body. It was intense as she came around his cock. Different.

Each pulse made her feel like she was trying to suck Nate into her body. Clenching around his hard cock.

After her orgasm, Nate showed her how gentle he'd been, how he'd taken his time to draw her orgasm out of her. He changed.

He wasn't gentle.

He was fierce, pounding inside her with so much force the bed hit the wall. The sounds vibrated around the room, but Lemon didn't care. All she cared about was being with Nate, of feeling him inside her.

"Fuck!" Nate slammed inside her, and within seconds, she felt his arousal as he came. Each drop filling her as he flooded her pussy.

It seemed to go on and on forever.

He collapsed against her as the last of his release left him, his lips brushing across hers as he kissed her.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you."

"I believe a woman's first time is supposed to be painful."

"It still doesn't mean I like you being hurt." He reached out, pushing some of her hair back from her face. "You're so beautiful."

She put a hand on his chest, feeling a little more confident to finally touch him. "So are you."

"I'm not beautiful."

Lemon laughed. "Do you want me to call you handsome? Sexy?"

In response, he kissed her hard. She moaned, knowing she could get used to the sheer possession of his kisses. She didn't know if it was like this for every guy, but she wasn't going to take the time to find out.

He was ... everything.

All of a sudden, he pulled away. "I'll be back."

She frowned as he left the room. "Nate, where are you going?"

He was gone for a couple of minutes. During that time, Lemon sat up and stared down between her thighs.

Blood, mixed with his cum and hers, oozed between her legs. Some of the books mentioned blood.

She looked up as Nate returned. "I'm not on the pill."

"Don't worry about it." He surprised her as he picked her up.

“Hey, what are you doing? You shouldn’t be doing this.”

“I’m doing this.”

“I’m too heavy.”

“You’re not.”

“Nate, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

He gave her a little jostle, leaving her no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck and to hold on to him, not wanting to let go.

His laughter filled the air. “See, nothing to fear.”

Nate took her to the bathroom, where he’d run her a bubble bath.

He lowered her into the water. “You will be sore,” he said.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll be back.”

“Nate, I can take care of the sheets.”

“And I’m going to go and take care of it now.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

She wasn’t worried. Well, maybe a little.

The pill made her feel queasy. Her mother had tried to get her to use one to help control her menstrual cycle, to make it regular. When she was younger, her cycle had been a mess and her mother had only been trying to do what was best for her, but the pill made her feel sick.

She wasn’t ready to have a baby.

Putting her hands on her stomach, she smiled, thinking about being a mom. Nate would make a wonderful father, of that, she was sure.

There was no doubt in her mind.

She shook her head. It was crazy. There was no way she was going to have a baby with Nate. They barely knew each other, and that wasn’t going to change any time soon.

Putting her hands into the water, she closed her eyes, enjoying the soothing possibilities of the bath water.

Tonight had been amazing.

She had thought about what her first time would be like and in all her wild imaginings, she had never thought it would be with a man like Nate.

“All done,” he said.

Her thoughts brought him back to her.

Nate came toward her, and she sat up as he moved in behind her, pulling her in close. He held her. His hands rested on her stomach as he kissed her neck.

This was the kind of life she could get used to.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Fine. You?”

“I’m great.”

She tilted her head back to look at him. “I’m sorry if I wasn’t ... any good.”

He kissed her. “Enough of that. You were perfect, just as I knew you would be.”

Chapter Seven

Nate was screwed.

He'd purposefully not worn a condom. The thought of being with Lemon had been too good to deny, and he hadn't wanted to bag his dick to temper the experience one bit. He was an asshole. No denying it.

The thought of kids with Lemon didn't repulse him either.

It was why, even after two days, he had her bent over the arm of a chair, the skirt she wore riding up her back, her legs wide open, as he plunged his dick into her tight heat.

After taking her virginity, Nate couldn't get enough of her.

He woke up thinking about her, and not as a job either, but the woman he wanted to keep.

In all his life, he'd never been so greedy, nor had a woman plagued his thoughts, but he couldn't get enough of Lemon. Even when he wasn't with her, he wanted to be.

"You're all mine, Lemon. Say it."

"I'm all yours." She gasped as he took hold of her hips and began to fuck her hard and fast.

He wanted to see her face, but he also loved watching her open up and take his dick, seeing her cunt spread open for him. Not only did she look pretty taking the whole of his cock, she looked even better when her hole was dripping with his cum.

Lemon rocked back against him.

Her ass slapping back against him as he rode her pussy, going deep and hard, and feeling her tighten around him with little aftershocks from her release. He'd already made her come with his mouth.

The taste of her was so fucking good, and he could gladly lick her pussy all day fucking long. In fact, he was growing tired of always waiting for her.

Today, he'd picked her up from work, brought her home, and fucked her.

She normally wore pants to work, but today, he'd been blessed with her in a skirt.

He'd gone to his house, and as he pounded inside her, getting closer and closer to his own orgasm, he knew taking her back to work was going to be difficult.

Tightening his hold on her hips, he fucked her hard, making her take all of his cock to the hilt. There were times he was too much for her, but Lemon took him. His name was a constant echo around the room as he fed his cock to her.

His release was so close.

He slammed inside her, once, twice, and by the third time, he was balls deep inside her, flooding her womb, wanting it to work. To make her pregnant with his kid so when all of this was over, he'd have a reason to keep her by his side.

"Oh, my," Lemon said.

"I told you lunch could be so much fun." Nate eased out of her but told her to remain still.

"You didn't wear a condom again," she said.

"I wanted to be inside you. I'm clean. I can get the paperwork to prove it."

"It's not about just being clean, which I do appreciate, but you do know if you keep forgetting to use a condom, I could become pregnant." She pushed some of her hair off her face and turned to look at him. "You do know that?"

"Nah, I had no idea. I've got little Nates running around all over the place." He wanted to smack himself upside the head. "I'm kidding. There is no one else. I promise."

"That's not funny."

He grabbed some tissue, intending to wipe her, but not before he saw his cum spilling from between her lips.

Nate didn't care if it made him a creep, or whatever, he fucking loved to see her like this, spread open, available, all for him.

So beautiful.

Some of his cum would stay inside her.

He cleaned her up, slid her panties in place, and helped her to stand.

Cupping her face, he kissed her lips, sinking his hand into her hair as he deepened the kiss.

"Will you come and see me tonight, after work?" he asked.

"You want me to come to your office?"

"Yes." He had big plans there. Also, he knew she was getting more suspicious about not knowing anything about his life, so he'd arranged for a couple of Rocco's men to be in place when she came. They were going to be

seated at desks, and then as she entered, they'd slowly begin to leave, saying they were done for the day.

Provided it went off without a hitch, he wouldn't have a problem.

"I'd love to." She smiled.

"Good. Now I didn't just bring you here to fuck you. I do have food."

He took her hand, leading her through to the kitchen. He opened the fridge.

From the moment he decided to pick her up for lunch, he'd made sandwiches ahead of time.

Sitting at the counter, he took a large bite. Lemon followed his direction, and he watched her eat. The slight flush to her body aroused him. He'd caused that.

She looked so fucking beautiful.

Staring at her now, he thought about her being pregnant with his child. Her stomach swollen.

His cock hardened as he thought about it.

She would look amazing, and he had no doubt she'd be a fantastic mother.

All his life, he'd never once considered kids. Children were a weakness, and he'd never met a woman he wanted to father children with.

Lemon.

She was blowing his entire world.

They finished off the sandwiches, and he drove her back to work, wanting to tell her to quit. He'd take care of her.

Just as he watched her curvy ass swaying away from him, an alert went off on his cell phone. Typing on his cell, he tapped into his secure feed, and there in Lemon's house was a guy taking a look around.

Anger consumed him.

Since the O'Leaves, no one had dared come near Lemon. This was the first potential attack in days. He didn't like it.

Lemon's house was completely decorated for the holiday season. She loved Christmas so much. This man took one of the decorations off the tree, threw it to the floor, and stomped on it, instantly pissing Nate off.

He spun back, driving with enough speed to get him to Lemon's place. Nate had no choice but to keep to the speed limit and to keep on checking his cell phone.

The fucker had only taken two ornaments off the tree and destroyed them, but now he'd moved on to some of her pictures and shit.

Putting his foot on the gas, he prayed there was no sheriff around.

Once on the street, he parked a couple of feet away, got out, and slowly approached the house.

He'd combed through Lemon's house. He knew where to go without making any sound.

After running around the back of Lemon's house, he let himself in with the gate.

Nate checked where the guy was, and he was still in the living room, giving him the perfect chance to get into the house undetected.

With speed, he moved.

Lemon had told him about the spare keys, and then in her sweet way, realizing what she'd told him, had asked him to forget. With the key from underneath the plant pot, he slid it into the lock, opening the door with ease.

Inside he went.

Someone's cell phone went off, and it wasn't his.

"Hello. Yeah, I'm here. Are you sure this chick is the right target?" He was silent. "I don't know what the big deal is. I'm here and believe me, this chick is so fucking boring. I can't believe Rocco would father such a boring cunt. Ugly too. Isn't all of his kids got blonde hair or some shit?"

With each word spoken, Nate's anger went to an all-time high.

How fucking dare he insult his woman.

He'd heard enough.

Nate charged into the room. He had to be careful. The gun wasn't the weapon of choice he wanted, but his hands.

The man turned as Nate slammed into him, taking him down to the floor, missing the coffee table in the center.

He landed a blow to the man's face, shocking him.

Wrapping his fingers around his neck, he tried to squeeze with all his might. He'd been known to suffocate a man to death, but this fucker was clearly a lot better than some of the assholes he'd taken on.

He landed a punch to Nate's side, and they rolled. Now Nate was the one on the floor as he brandished a knife.

"So that's how this works. Rocco got a guard on his daughter's ass, huh?"

Nate didn't say a word.

Drawing his knee up, he hit the bastard right between the knees. It did the trick.

The knife was not going to do. The blood would take too long to clean, but as the enemy recovered quickly, Nate had to think fast.

There wasn't any time to make this a fistfight.

He slid the knife in his grip right across his opponent's neck. The death he was going for failed as he made so much fucking mess.

"Bastard."

He clocked the O'Leaves ink on the back of his neck.

"Fuck."

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Rocco. "We've got a problem."

All day long, Lemon had been looking forward to the end of her shift. She wanted to get to know Nate more. She liked him a lot.

Love was still out of the question. There was no way the house she lived in dictated who she loved.

She had asked Cindy, when they'd been put on produce together about it. According to Cindy, every single couple who lived in the houses she and Nate owned, had fallen in love. A few of the couples still lived in town, but Lemon wasn't going to go ask total strangers about the potential curse being the reason they were together. It seemed tacky and rude.

It was pointless. And useless.

Houses didn't bring people together.

So, she continued with her shift, knowing she liked Nate, a lot. It wasn't love. She didn't see herself with him in ten years, and certainly not fifty years.

Running fingers through her hair, she stifled a yawn.

Christmas was a busy time of year, and even though there were a few weeks until the big day, people liked to get their shopping done early. Empty shelves were a constant menace. She'd even started to dream about packing shelves. It wasn't good when her dreams were against her.

Leaving the store, she walked the short distance toward Nate's office. She'd never been inside, and she'd never seen him do anything related to the store. Part of her expected it to be closed, but as she stood in front of it, she caught sight of six men and different desks.

Two were reading through paperwork. Two more were on the computer, and another two were on the phone.

She stepped inside.

Lemon didn't know what she expected to find, but it wasn't a very neat and professional-looking business. This did surprise her.

The one nearest her had a badge on his jacket saying *Carl*. He got to his feet and came toward her.

"Hi, Nate said you would be here. Come with me. He told me to put you in his office."

"Oh, that's fine. I don't mind waiting here."

The office was silent, and as she turned to look, she must have been imagining it because the men got back to work.

Strange.

"He insisted. Sometimes what we do is a little more confidential." He walked ahead of her without waiting for her to refuse a second time.

Gripping her bag tightly, she smiled at the men. They were all large, muscular, and they possessed this deadly look in their gaze, like they had seen death one time too many and rather than fear it, they loved it.

"The big guy will be back shortly," he said.

The door to Nate's office was closed and she spun around in a circle, a little perplexed.

There was a large desk, a computer, a telephone, everything he'd need to run a business. A couple of filing cabinets, artwork.

This was where the magic happened for him.

Lemon took a seat, nibbling on her lip and feeling a little awkward being alone in Nate's office.

She got to her feet and walked over to a filing cabinet.

With her hand on it, she quickly pulled away. This was crazy.

She sat down, and just as her ass hit the chair, the door opened.

"You came," Nate said.

"Was I not supposed to?" she asked.

"Yes. I wanted you to come. To see the place, but I got a call that needed attending to. I know my men can handle it, but you know clients. They want the best, which in this case is the boss."

"Oh, right." She chuckled. "I see. Well, if I was the one hiring, it would be you I wanted."

Nate stepped right up to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "So, what do you think of the place?"

"It's very neat," she said.

He laughed. "You'd be surprised how much my clients prefer

cleanliness over everything else.” He pressed a kiss to her lips. “I had a place back in the city. It was a dump, and I had no choice but to clean shop. Within a week, I had more work than I cared to think about.”

“Must be nice to own your own place. To be your own boss.”

“You can do it too, if it’s something you want to do.”

She shook her head. “Nah, the only thing I can do is craft and make stuff. I have to pay to live. I don’t want to starve.”

“There are always options.” He moved her back until her ass hit the desk.

In one easy move, all his office equipment was on the floor, and he had her spread out.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve thought about this this afternoon?” Nate asked.

“Lots?”

“Yeah, and I can’t get enough of you. You’re like a drug to me, Lemon. One taste is never enough.”

She gasped as his lips went to her neck, then to the other side. His teeth bit down in a nibble.

She closed her eyes, sinking her teeth into her lip in an attempt to contain any noise. She didn’t want his employees to hear.

“We’re all alone,” Nate said.

“How did you know?”

“I know you. I know what it is that drives this body wild, and believe me, I know what makes you sink your teeth into your lip. No one is going to hear us. I wouldn’t do that to you. When it comes to you, Lemon, I do not share.”

There was no hesitation.

His possession aroused her.

She cried out as he removed her jacket. It didn’t take Nate long to have her naked. All her clothes, including her underwear, were on the floor as he pressed her back.

“Now when I’m sitting at this desk, it’s you I’m going to be thinking about.”

He pressed his palm between her thighs. Two fingers touched her clit, stroking her. The pleasure was so intense, she didn’t know if she was going to be able to handle it.

“Nate?”

“I’ve got you. I want you to come for me. Let me see you lose control.”

At the sound of his voice and the way he pressed two fingers across her clit, the orgasm took her by surprise.

She screamed his name. Sensation flooded her body.

It was everywhere. Nate moved closer, and she didn’t know when he’d gotten naked, but the hardness of his cock pressed between her thighs.

He wore his clothes, but within seconds, he was deep inside her, fucking her on his desk.

Nate held her tightly, not letting her go.

His lips were on hers, his cock inside her, and she was completely surrounded by him. She moaned his name, and he growled.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve wanted to do this? I want you, Lemon, all the fucking time.”

She loved this.

Nate was the first man she had wanted to be with.

There was no one else.

This wasn’t about the houses. They had nothing to do with it. They were just two houses with no meaning. What was real were the feelings she had with Nate.

It’s not love.

But was it?

He pulled all the way out of her until only the tip remained before slamming balls deep within her.

His name fell from her lips as he fucked her and made love to her. The tempo changed as he worked her pussy, driving her higher toward release.

She didn’t want him to stop, and this time, they came together, finding their release. Their mutual moans filled the air. The pulse of his cock was like she milked him of his release.

He hadn’t worn a condom again.

“Fuck, baby,” he said.

His forehead pressed against hers.

“Nate, we have to start using condoms,” she said. Her body was a little shaken, not just from the sex, but also from the revelation of the fact she might be falling for him, but she had to refuse.

Neither of them did love.

“I know,” he said. “But I love the feel of your pussy on my cock.”

She laughed. Cupping his face, she pressed a kiss to his lips, not wanting to stop.

He kissed her back with a passion that stole her breath away. They had been having sex for a short time now, but it wasn't getting boring. If anything, it was getting more passionate with every passing day.

Was it love?

Was it lust?

She had no idea anymore.

Chapter Eight

It had taken a day to make Lemon's house spotless by changing the furniture and the carpet. They had to be careful to make the changes when she wasn't home, or her neighbors.

Nate supervised everything, and as he sat opposite her father in the very same café where they'd been not too long ago, all he wanted to do was be with Lemon.

"I've arranged a meeting with the O'Leaves. There will be an agreement worked out. That will happen this evening."

"Why are you telling me this, sir?" he asked.

"Simple. It is time for you to move on." Rocco pulled out an address. "I've got another job for you."

Nate didn't pick up the card. He wasn't interested in any other job. "I decline."

"I have Lemon's care handled."

"The O'Leaves are not the only ones after her, sir. With all due respect, I have killed some contract killers in the last few months. All of them with a vendetta against you. She is your weakness, and getting rid of me will only put her life at risk."

Rocco snapped his fingers. "Leave us."

One by one, the guards left, as did the workers. The café was owned by Rocco.

Nate tensed up as he reached into his jacket. He didn't calm down even as a file was on the table.

"I gave you permission to take care of my daughter, Evans. I did not give you permission to use her." Rocco opened the file, and Nate didn't need to glance down to see the pictures. "You're not going to look?"

"I don't need to look when I'm the one who sent them to you," Nate said.

He wasn't going to keep looking over his shoulder. Rocco was a powerful man. He put his fingers together and leaned forward, resting his hands on the table. "I know who you are, Rocco, and what you're capable of. I know you care very deeply about your daughter, and I admire you for it, but I also know that you cannot take care of her." He held his hands up. "I mean no disrespect. I'm stating a fact and the truth. You and I both know it."

"You know nothing."

“I know Lemon wants nothing to do with you. She never speaks of you. She talks about her mother all the time. You, not a mention. You have a real family. A wife and kids, and Lemon is never going to fit into that world. We both know this. It’s why you fell for her mother. She was never touched by darkness, and neither is Lemon.”

“Let’s cut the crap. What is it you want?”

“Lemon. She’s mine. I sent you those pictures to give you a chance to calm down. So we can talk like gentlemen.”

Rocco brandished a gun, aiming it at him. “And you think I negotiate with men like you?”

“I’m the best man there is. The threat to Lemon’s life will never go away. Do you think she will ever forgive you if you draw her into your life? She cannot stand you. That’s not going to change overnight, if at all.”

“What do you propose?” The gun was still pointed at him, but at least Rocco wasn’t losing his shit either.

Nate stayed perfectly still. This was a risk.

The pictures were not his finest work. He didn’t want anyone to see Lemon naked, and in truth, no one could. They just got the hint that she was. He covered her completely.

All the cameraman could see was her face, tilted back in rapture, looking so beautiful. He’d stared at them for a long time before he came up with this plan.

He hoped Rocco was a man of sense rather than shooting him. After years of proving his loyalty, he hoped it granted him some reprieve.

“I will stay with Lemon. My time as an acting hitman at your side is over. I will continue to take jobs, but they will be open and closed cases. I will do my job when you need it. The company will be set up permanently. That will be how we continue our business, through them so Lemon doesn’t ever get suspicious. I will devote my life to keeping her safe and in time, you might be able to come and see her.”

Rocco laughed. “You think you are going to be the one to bribe me with my daughter.”

“Not bribe, Rocco. The aim is to get her to see you in a way that makes her want to know her father. Not constantly distance herself from you. Did you know she still has pictures of you, but she bends them back so you’re not in them?”

Rocco put his gun away. “You planned this?”

“No, I didn’t plan anything. I had every intention of doing the job you set out for me to do, but shit happens.”

“I should kill you right now. Do you know why I won’t?” Rocco asked.

“You know what I’ve got to say makes sense?”

Rocco tutted. He lifted one of the pictures. “The way my daughter looks at you. I would kill you, Nate, for touching my daughter. For defying my orders, but this picture, this tells me many things. This tells me that my daughter is very much in love with you.”

Nate’s hand clenched at his sides. This wasn’t what he wanted to be talking about, but he couldn’t deny it.

With the way Lemon looked at him in that photo, he had to wonder if she did love him as well. If she had feelings for him.

There was no other explanation, and he liked that. He wanted her to like him. No, not like, love. He craved Lemon’s love more than anything else.

Gritting his teeth, he stared into her father’s eyes.

“I love my daughter, Nate. Tell me, do you love her?”

“I have feelings for her.” He didn’t know what love was.

Rocco laughed. “Feelings? You think I’m going to agree to this ridiculous plan just because you have feelings for my daughter? I’m not a fool, and I will not have my daughter taken as one either. There is far more to this than a mere like, Nate.”

“What do you want?”

“Lemon deserves love. She doesn’t need a hitman in her life. I have enemies, but so do you.”

“No, I don’t,” Nate said. “The only enemy I have is sitting right in front of me. Unlike you, I don’t leave any baggage lying around.”

Rocco shook his head.

“You and I both know that from looking at that picture. I’m the best shot you’ve got at me taking care of her, of giving her a life she deserves, and if that doesn’t convince you, she might already be pregnant with my child.”

He let that last piece of the puzzle slide into place.

Rocco acted as he expected, and Nate didn’t fight him as the blow to his face sent him falling back on his chair.

When Rocco went in for a second shot, Nate allowed that, but a third and fourth, he blocked. He wasn’t going to allow this man to pummel his

face. He had some self-respect.

“I will fucking end you,” Rocco said.

“No, you won’t. You will give Lemon to me because you know out of everyone here and in your life, I’m your best chance. Do you think the cops don’t know about her? Do you think it is just your enemies that know about her? Lemon is so fucking vulnerable right now, we shouldn’t be arguing about this. Give me your fucking blessing and your word that nothing will happen to me. Lemon will be so fucking happy, she will never question my feelings for her.”

He wasn’t going to admit to Rocco that he had a hunch he might love her. Love wasn’t something he was used to, but his feelings for Lemon were not normal. He was possessive, obsessive, and downright fucking besotted with this woman.

He would do anything for her.

Even go to her father with proof that he was fucking her and make this arrangement. Anyone else would be dead right now. Maybe he did have a death wish.

What he realized quite quickly was that he didn’t want to live in a world where Lemon wasn’t part of it.

Waking up the past few mornings with her in his bed, that was the dream come true for him. Lemon was his dream, and he wanted to keep her all to himself.

Rocco sat back down, but the anger rolled off him.

Nate sat opposite.

Neither of them spoke. The silence was awkward, almost deafening.

He waited.

Patience was a virtue, after all.

Right now, it felt like more of a fucking curse.

Time ticked on by, until eventually, Rocco nodded.

“I agree to this. Lemon can never know the truth, not once. She will only know you’re a man, her neighbor who has fallen in love with her.”

They shook hands on it, and it was a done deal.

“Why did you wait this long to get a tree?” Lemon asked.

“I don’t know. I guess seeing yours inspired me.” Nate held up some tinsel. “What do you think? Red? Purple? Gold?”

She laughed, putting down her hot chocolate. “You didn’t think of

color coordination when you got the decorations?”

“I didn’t even know you had to coordinate anything. What do you think?” He gave the tinsel a shake.

“You’re cute.” She took the tinsel and held it up. “What do you think? What is calling to you? What is screaming at you to put them on your tree?”

He pursed his lips. “I don’t have a clue.”

She laughed. “I love purple, but I think for your first year, let’s go with red and gold.”

“Do we just throw out the purple?” he asked.

“No. No. we can put it anywhere we want.” She took the purple from him, placing it on the counter. “Do not throw anything out.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Okay, let’s get to work on this thing.”

Nate had purchased an assortment of ornaments for his tree. Some baubles as well. They decorated the tree together. After the ornaments, it was the tinsel, followed by the lights.

“Are you ready?” Lemon asked, going toward the light switch.

“Hit it.”

She plunged the room into darkness, apart from the sparkle of the tree.

“Oh, wow,” she said. “It looks so beautiful.”

Nate wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing a kiss to her head. “I love it.”

She smiled up at him. “I better be heading home.”

He tightened his arm around her waist. “Or you could stay.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Yes. This is where you belong, Lemon.” His hand moved down toward her ass. She let out a gasp.

Sex hadn’t been on her mind.

As he touched her now, it was all he wanted.

“Nate?”

“You can say no, but I’d really like you to stay. To enjoy my first real Christmas with you.”

She caved even before his kiss.

The fairy lights were forgotten as Nate lifted her in his arms. No matter how many times she tried to tell him not to carry her, he seemed pretty insistent on doing exactly that. He was the one in charge as he laid her out on

his bed.

His hands went to her hips, and he pulled down the leggings she wore. Not the most attractive thing she owned.

Nate pulled the panties she wore right along with them.

He stepped back. "Spread your legs." His voice was dark, husky.

She opened her legs.

"Are you wet for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Show me. Put your fingers inside yourself and show me."

She touched her pussy, grazing over her clit and biting her lip before plunging down inside her.

She was soaking wet.

As she held her fingers for him to see, her cheeks were on fire, but she loved this dirty side of Nate. Where he gave orders, told her what he wanted.

He grabbed her wrist and took her fingers into his mouth, sucking her juices right off them.

Her mouth parted, a little in shock at what he did.

"Not enough."

He climbed on the bed and sank his fingers behind her ass, holding her tightly as he pressed his face against her pussy.

His tongue danced across her slit, taking her clit into his mouth, gliding down to stroke over her entrance. The tease of what was to come.

She whimpered as he filled her with his tongue. Not nearly as big as his dick, and it made her desperate for him to fuck her.

Nothing was ever going to be as good as his cock.

He moved up, circling her clit, going back and forth, and stroking over her nub until she couldn't think straight. This was what Nate did. He took control over her body.

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, crying out, hungry for him.

"Come for me, Lemon."

As if her body obeyed his command, she came, hard, feeling the release flood her body. She moaned his name as he took her over the edge, keeping her there for what felt like hours, but she knew it was only a matter of seconds.

He knew what he was doing with her body, better than she did.

When she couldn't take it anymore, he stopped and stood.

Lemon watched as he pulled his shirt over his head. Next, his jeans,

which he looked so sexy in, were gone.

His boxer briefs were the last things to go.

His cock fell out, long and hard, and she wanted it.

Moving from her position in the center of the bed, she went to the edge, reaching out to him.

Her gaze was on him as she wrapped her fingers around his length.

He growled. "Lemon!"

"Nate." She worked up and down his length, going from the root to the tip then back down again. "I want to taste you."

She didn't give him a chance to stop her.

Sliding her mouth over his length, she took him in deep. She continued to look at him as she did this, loving his reaction as she swallowed his length. Lemon didn't take him too far to the back of her throat, but she bobbed her head, sucking on his dick.

He wrapped her hair around his fist and began to rock into her mouth. Each thrust sent him a little deeper, but she wasn't afraid, never of him.

Suddenly, he pulled out of her mouth and grabbed her, putting her back on the bed, but this time, on her knees.

"I don't want to come in that pretty mouth of yours."

He spread her legs wide, putting her into position, and they both moaned as inch by inch, he sank inside her.

"But this is where I want to be." He spread the cheeks of her ass wide, and she gasped as he rocked inside her.

This angle was always deeper than any other. It was almost too much. The pain and pleasure combined, and she found herself addicted to the slight burn.

"Fuck, you feel so good." He growled the words against her flesh, and he brought her so close to the edge, but he held her still as he fucked her body, taking his own pleasure.

Nate reached between her thighs, stroking her clit, but he didn't stay there. His fingers moved back to her ass, and she tensed up as she teased her anus.

"I want to fuck every single hole you've got, Lemon. I want to own everything."

She wasn't turned off by it.

There was pain to start with as he pressed against her ass, but she wasn't used to anyone touching her there. It felt wrong and right all at the

same time. She whimpered as his finger penetrated her asshole.

“I feel how much you like that. Your pussy is tight around me, Lemon.”

“Please.” She didn’t know what she was begging for, only that she didn’t want it to stop.

“I’m going to give you everything you need. There’s no stopping me.” He pushed his finger inside her ass as he fucked her hard and fast. His balls slapped against her pussy with each thrust.

Nate added a second finger to her asshole, and she gasped at the sudden intrusion, but he knew what he was doing. He took his time, stretching out her asshole, making her beg for more.

She didn’t know how much more she could take until Nate tensed up, slammed deep inside her, and his cum filled her.

Once again, they hadn’t used a condom. She was going to have to get the morning-after pill. With the thought of going to the pharmacy to ask, she felt so nervous about. Also between Nate and work, she hadn’t found a spare minute. She asked Nate to get them, but each time, he forgot. This was not being responsible.

This was how babies were made.

The thought of being pregnant by Nate didn’t scare her. His reaction though, that terrified her. There was a huge difference between having fun and making this permanent.

“I think it’s time to shower,” Nate said.

He pulled out of her body, his cock and his fingers, and once again, she was in his arms.

“I can walk, you know.”

“I know, but that would take away all my enjoyment of carrying you, and Lemon, I love carrying you.”

She loved being in his arms as well, and that was what scared her.

The houses thing might not be a hoax after all.

She was scared that she might be the only one falling for Nate. He was the first guy in her whole life, but this was not lust anymore.

Lemon knew she’d been a fool to think it was just that.

These feelings were very real, and they scared her so much.

Chapter Nine

“This is rather romantic,” Lemon said, taking a sip of the red wine he’d purchased.

“I figured it was the best kind of date. Our kind of food. Dessert, a nice, roaring fire, Christmas all around us. Perfection.” Nate held his glass up to toast.

Lemon put her glass to his for the moment, and he watched her.

He had no problem taking Lemon out to dinner, or dancing. The truth was, going out to public places was great, if you needed a buffer or distractions. He didn’t want to share his woman with anyone. She was all his.

All his.

“It is perfect.” She took another sip of her wine. “I feel I can be myself here, you know. With you.”

He stroked her ankle. “I might have an ulterior motive,” he said.

She laughed. “What is it?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Odd kind of question, but strangely enough, I do.”

“Good.” He finished his wine, reaching back to put his glass back on the table. He held his hand out for her wine. She took another sip, but handed him back the glass. No questions asked.

Nate reached for Lemon, starting at her pants, and he pulled them down her thighs, along with her panties.

She didn’t ask questions, merely followed his direction, until he had her completely naked.

They were in the privacy of his own home.

Once she was stripped, he took care of his own clothes.

They were in front of the roaring fire. Not too close that it was uncomfortable.

He leaned over her, kissing her lips. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve thought about tonight?”

“At least once.”

“If I say once a second, it would be more accurate.” He pressed his lips to her neck, going to her pulse, biting down, and sucking on it just a little to make her moan. He loved how freely she gave herself to him.

She was so precious. All of her responses were.

He didn’t linger too long because her tits were calling to him.

Pressing them together, he flicked his tongue across each mound and heard her whimper.

He bit down on each bud before sucking it, then soothing out the slight pain he caused. Working down her body, he trailed his lips toward her pussy. With her legs spread open wide, he stared at her cunt.

So wet for him already.

This was what he loved about Lemon. Her body's responses to his touch. It was so fucking addictive. He couldn't get enough.

Holding her ass in the palm of his hands, he pressed his face against her pussy, licking at her, nibbling on her clit, driving her wild with his touch.

He didn't want her to come, not just yet, as he did have other plans.

Nate brought her to the edge but kept her close, not falling into climax, but hungry for it, desperate.

When he was sure she couldn't take anymore, he flipped her over so she was on her knees.

"Don't move," he said.

"Nate, what are you doing to me?" she asked.

He heard the need in her voice.

"I'm going to take care of you."

Reaching into his bag of goodies that he had kept hidden from her, he pulled out the cock he'd purchased. The dildo was long and thick, giving him plenty of length to hold on to.

He also grabbed the lubrication, but he didn't apply that straight away.

"I want you to trust me, Lemon."

He teased the fake cock at her entrance.

She gasped.

Slowly, he thrust the toy into her cunt. He'd already cleaned and sanitized it, ready for tonight.

"That's not you," she said.

"I know, but this is going to be for your ass, baby. I'm getting you used to it."

With his free hand, he stroked her clit, getting her arousal heightened even more. It didn't take long.

She rocked back against the cock, and when he thought she was close to coming, he pulled it out of her. He didn't want her to come yet.

She let out a growl. "Nate!"

“Soon.”

He opened the lubrication. The fake cock was covered in her pre-cum, but he wanted to make sure she was wet enough.

Coating the toy in lubrication, he also placed some at her anus, getting her nice and slick and ready.

She moaned his name.

“I’ve got you, baby. You can take this.” He had no doubt.

Holding the cock in his hand, slowly, he began to push against her anus. The tight ring of muscles was stubborn, but he never backed down.

Stroking her clit, he teased her, and in doing so, her tightness eased until she let go and he was able to push the dick into her anus. She took a couple of inches.

Nate stopped playing with her pussy, instead focusing on the dick in her ass.

After he pushed a little deeper, she took more. She gasped, and he stopped.

“How does it feel?” he asked.

“Strange.”

With the cock only partway inside her, Nate wanted to distract her, and so, holding his dick, he teased the entrance of her pussy with his dick.

The guttural moan fell from Lemon’s lips as he thrust shallowly in her cunt. As he did this, he worked the cock in and out of her, getting her used to the feel of the cock in her ass, spreading her open. Seeing her like this, Nate was close to blowing his load right then and there, but he held himself together, watching her.

It didn’t take long for her to start to thrust back on the cock, and as she did, he gave her time to enjoy it. To let the needs of her body take control. To be the one in command. It was a beautiful sight to see. One he never wanted to forget.

His own orgasm was so close, but he controlled it. He waited until he knew she was ready.

Nate removed the fake cock, spread lubrication on his own dick, and then he was the one at her anus that was still slightly open from the toy.

He took his time, in no rush to end this.

Slowly sinking in an inch at a time, he gave Lemon time to get used to the feel of his hard cock. He was bigger than the toy, but she could take him.

She was so fucking tight as well.

Finally, balls deep inside her, he counted to ten. Touched her pussy, and stroked her clit.

“Now, Lemon, I want you to come for me.”

He'd gotten her so primed and ready, it took only a few strokes and she came, screaming his name, begging him for more. While she came down from her first orgasm, he started to rock inside her, feeling her ass tighten around him with each flutter of her release.

It was so incredible. So tight. So perfect.

Just as he knew it would be.

When she was ready, he brought her to a second orgasm. This time, he didn't stop thrusting inside her, but as she came, he followed her, filling her tight asshole with his cum.

Nate stayed inside her, holding still as the aftershocks of their combined release faded away. He leaned over her, kissing her neck. “You are fucking amazing, Lemon. You're all mine. You know that?”

She chuckled. “Does that make you mine?”

“Yes.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Hold still,” he said.

Easing out of her anus, he grabbed the cheeks of her ass, holding them open.

“I want you to push out for me.”

“Why?”

“I want to see.”

“Nate?”

“I didn't tell you I was a gentleman.”

Lemon did as he asked, and he watched his cum spill from her anus. She was his. Watching this, he felt this primal need to mark her, to possess every single part of her.

He grabbed some tissue, wiping her ass and removing his cum, but knowing more of him was inside her.

“I've ... I've never done this with anyone before,” Lemon said as he moved her so she was no longer on her knees.

“Neither have I,” he said.

She opened her mouth, closed it, then licked her lips. “I think I need to use the shower.”

Lemon had been about to say something. He didn't know what exactly, but he was going to find out.

"I can walk," she said as he got to his feet.

Just as she got to her feet, he lifted her in his arms. "Not tonight. I get to take care of you all night."

He pressed a kiss to her lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Nate?"

"Yes."

"I want to keep you."

Nate paused.

As far as words went, there was nothing poetic about them.

He was a foster kid. No one had wanted him. No one had cared about him.

The job he was in, it was darkness and death every single day of his life. There was no room for emotions or feelings.

But Lemon's words struck him deeply and to the core.

She wanted to keep him, just as he did her.

He held on even tighter.

What Lemon didn't know was that he had no intention of ever letting her go. She was his now.

"You got me a present?" Nate asked.

Lemon held the wrapped gift and shook her head. "Technically no, I didn't buy you a present. I made one for you."

"You made me something?"

"Yes."

"Can I open it?"

She rolled her eyes. "On Christmas morning, yes, you can. Until then, it will be beneath this tree." She put the present under Nate's tree.

Because Nate had never celebrated a Christmas, they had agreed to spend it in his house. They were going to cook themselves a meal together and share the day.

The last week had been surreal for Lemon. It didn't matter which house they were in. Hers or Nate's, she was on cloud nine. She wondered if this was what her mother felt for her father. If so, she kind of understood why her mother stuck around.

It wasn't lust.

The sex was off the charts, but it was everything else.

Just thinking about Nate made her smile. Being in his company completed her. She wanted to make him happy. Her life was part of his, and it was so hard for her to understand because everything sounded so lame inside her head. She just knew right down to her core that she was in love with Nate Evans.

And that terrified her.

They hadn't talked about feelings.

Then, of course, there was the whole cursed houses thing. She had brought it up the other day, and Nate said he'd look into it.

"I do have a gift for you," Nate said.

She turned toward him. "Oh, you do?"

"You were staring at the tree a long time."

"No, I wasn't. I was looking at how beautiful it was." She chuckled, going to him.

Nate wrapped his arms around her, and she pressed her face against his neck, breathing him in. In his arms, she was complete.

"What do you want to do today?" he asked.

"There's a fair in town," she said. "It's a Christmas thing. A bunch of small businesses opening up, offering trinkets and stuff. They do it every year, or so I've heard."

Nate nodded. "That sounds good. I'll grab a jacket and we can head on out."

He pulled away from her, and Lemon hummed to herself as she grabbed her jacket. Should she tell Nate how she felt? Was it too soon?

Pulling on the jacket, she tried to run through a few ways of letting Nate know how she felt when there was a knock at the door.

She lifted her hair out of her jacket, walking toward the door. Just as she put her hand on the door handle about to open, Nate came charging down the stairs.

He grabbed her as she heard the first gunshot.

Fear raced down her spine as she was pushed to the floor. Nate's body covered hers.

Ringling filled her ears, and she was being pulled. Nate pushed her in front of him and during that time, he'd gotten a gun. More bullets came hurtling past, but Nate didn't slow down, not once.

He charged them both through the house, toward the garden.

“I’m surrounded. Get your ass here now,” Nate said. He shot his gun, and she heard the scream as the man went down. “Lemon, look at me.” He spun her so that she faced him. “I need you to get to your house right now. You go to your room, lock the door. There is a gun under your bed. Grab it. I know you know how to use it.”

“What? How do you know that?” Her mother had forced her to take lessons. She knew some defense moves as well.

Her mother had forced her to take them. She later learned it was her father who asked for her to take the lessons, and it was his men who’d been training her.

All her life, her father had been manipulating her.

Staring at Nate now, she knew. She just knew. “You work for him.”

“Go. Look, I will explain everything, but I have to protect you. Please, I cannot have anything happen to you.”

Her world shattered.

Lies.

This was all lies.

Did her father ask him to make her fall in love? To create this illusion of a life together?

Sickness filled her.

Nate nudged her toward the fence, and with a quick tug, he’d loosened one of the fence posts.

She wanted to run and hide.

“I will come and get you.”

He shoved her through the fence, and Lemon stared at the panel now slid into place, hearing Nate as he moved away.

Lemon stayed perfectly still.

Nate worked for her father.

She was going to die if she didn’t move.

The gun.

Rushing toward her house, she pulled her keys out of her jacket and entered her house. The moment she stepped foot inside, she knew something was wrong.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind, and instinct took over. Her father’s men had been brutal. They would attack her without care. They would do everything to show her the kind of world she was fighting in. They didn’t stop. Their mission was to help her to survive.

One of the lessons they taught her was to fight dirty. He had her hands trapped, but she moved easily, grabbing the man's junk hard and tugging. The action took her assailant by surprise, and he let her go.

The next trick they taught her. Everything was a weapon, including the vase on the table. Acting with speed, she picked it up, spun around, and hit him hard. The glass shattered. A few pieces were embedded into her hand, but she ignored the pain.

She was in the fight for her very survival. Each hit hadn't defeated her attacker. He wasn't down.

As she went to the kitchen, he followed her.

"You fucking bitch. I'm going to make you pay for that."

She screamed, grabbing plates, knives, bowls, whatever she could get her hands on, and she threw it at him. It was enough to slow him down for her to charge toward her room.

Lemon heard him on the stairs, following her up.

Her heart raced.

She had never been so afraid in all her life.

Locking her bedroom door, she didn't think, just acted. At the bed, she reached under, pulling out a gun.

Her hands shook, but all those lessons from years ago bombarded her all at once.

Locked and loaded, her door crashed open, and she fired.

The man stopped.

She fired a second time.

He fell to the floor, and when she heard another gunshot, she dropped her weapon to the floor and curled up, trying to protect herself.

"Lemon! I've got you. I've got you."

Arms surrounded her.

Tears fell from her eyes, but she made out Nate's form. He held her tightly. His warmth, his scent a comfort to her.

For a short minute, she rested her head on his shoulder, basking in the peace that came with his closeness, but it was all a lie.

"Lemon?"

The sound of her father's voice was enough to snap her out of her trance.

Drawing her hand up, she brought it down hard on Nate's cheek. "How dare you? How fucking dare you? All this time you knew. You knew

everything, and you didn't say a thing to me."

"Lemon, let me explain."

"What is there to explain? You work for my father. He sent you here, didn't he? To keep an eye on me."

Nate's gaze went past her shoulder, and she saw her father, the feared Alessandro Rocco.

She swiped at the tears that fell down her cheeks, hating herself for being so weak. "I need to leave."

"Lemon," Nate said. "It wasn't ... I ... this between us."

"What is there to say, Nate? You fucked your boss's daughter. Congratulations, but you don't need to keep up with the pretense anymore. I told you everything, and you lied to me." She got to her feet.

Her entire body shook as she moved toward her father. "I need a place to stay." She never for a second thought she would ever ask her father for anything. This man she had hated for so long, but right now, all she wanted was her dad.

In the back of her mind, she knew this was what her mother would have wanted.

"The car is waiting outside. I'll be there shortly," he said.

She nodded.

"Lemon, damn it, please, don't go."

She kept on walking. Whatever Nate had to say, she didn't want to hear it. He'd broken her heart.

Chapter Ten

Nate's heart shattered.

Watching Lemon walk away was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Rocco stood there.

Dead bodies covered the backyard and his house. It had been a blood bath. He didn't hear any sirens, and all he could figure out was most of their neighbors were in town.

Running fingers through his hair, he looked at Rocco. "I never meant to hurt her."

Rocco's lips were pursed. "You know, when I met her mother, she was a waitress. She served me breakfast, and I'd just come back from an attack similar to this one, only I was burying men I knew, men I cared about. Soldiers who had my back." Rocco smiled. "She told me I looked rough and I shouldn't have to pay for my breakfast, so, this poor woman probably used the tips that helped pay her rent to get me breakfast. I was married. I didn't have any feelings for my wife. This woman though, she was ... different. Sweet, young, and entirely innocent I'd later find out." Rocco clicked his tongue. "Finding out she was pregnant with Lemon was my salvation."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"When it came to Lemon's mother, I never gave up. I loved her with all my heart. I'd never believed in love. In our world, it doesn't exist. Fighting and fucking, that's what makes our worlds thrive. Yet, handed to me was a little piece of heaven. My heaven. What I'm saying to you, Evans, is simple. Lemon's a keeper. She deserves a man who will fight for her. Who won't back down from a fight no matter what. Do you love my daughter?"

Nate clenched his hands into fists. "I love her more than anything in the world. I'm not going to let her go, Rocco. I'm going to fight for her."

"Good. Then you won't have a problem cleaning this mess up while I take care of my daughter, will you?"

He didn't wait for a response. Turning on his heel, he left Nate with a dead man in Lemon's bedroom.

Getting to his feet, he rushed toward the window and looked out. The car had blacked out windows. He couldn't make her out, but damn it, he wanted to see her again.

Nate ran fingers through his hair.

Rocco got in the passenger side of the car, and it pulled away from the

curb, taking him and Lemon away from him.

A large cleanup van drove down the long road, parking up outside the houses, and six men climbed out. The cleaning crew were here.

Nate left the bedroom, heading to the crew. For the next three hours, he helped clean up the mess that had been left behind.

All of the marks were O'Leaves soldiers. He had no doubt Rocco already had a plan for retaliation, but with this kind of force, Lemon's home was no longer secured.

With the walls covered, and both houses looking pristine once again, he knew it wouldn't be long before they were put back up on the market.

Nate packed a bag, collecting everything he needed, and then went out to his car.

He was in love with Lemon Bosworth, and regardless of her father being Rocco, he wasn't going to allow her to be taken from him.

He'd fight for her.

After throwing his bags into the back of his car, he climbed in the driver's seat and took off. He'd worked for Rocco most of his life, and he knew there were only a few locations he'd take her.

She wouldn't go back to his home, that would be too risky, which left one of the ten safe houses Rocco owned. Seeing as there was one about a forty-minute drive from her home, he was going to take it.

Putting his foot down on the gas, he was thankful there were no cops on the road to stop him.

The ambush tonight had taken him by surprise, and he didn't like that. No one ever got the best of him, but he'd been so focused on Lemon, he hadn't taken the time to consider their surroundings, and it pissed him off.

He fucked up big time.

That wasn't going to happen again.

Gritting his teeth, he glanced at the time. It was late, but he had to see Lemon. He had to tell her how he felt. No matter how stupid it sounded. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

This was all messed up. Lemon wasn't supposed to find out this way, if at all. He'd put plans into place to build this life with her, away from Rocco.

As he drove toward his woman, intent on claiming her, Nate couldn't help but think back to the houses.

Was it true?

Did the houses bring couples together?
Soulmates?

It all seemed a little too farfetched to him, but now, as he broke the speed limit in an attempt to get to his woman, he couldn't help but wonder if there was an element of truth in it. There had to be. Right? He'd done his research, and all the previous couples were still together and happily in love, so that had to account for something.

He rubbed at his temple.

Everything was so fucked up, he was starting to see shit in nothing.

Nate didn't believe in the cursed houses. That was all fairy tales and crap that the locals had cooked up.

With his foot pressed to the gas, he stopped thinking about the houses, and instead focused on the woman he loved.

He had to get to her.

Nate couldn't help but hope she was pregnant. It would make his life so much easier if she was. She wouldn't have a reason to leave him, or at least she'd have a reason to keep him in her life.

He intended to be there for his kid, no matter what.

Forty minutes later, Nate pulled up into the safe house location. It wasn't obscured. Rocco believed there was a great benefit in hiding in plain sight, so this house was a terrace, and had nothing about it that stood out.

He spotted Rocco's car.

After parking in the only available space, he climbed out and went toward the house, stepping up the three short steps to get to the door.

Nate slammed his fist against the door, three times.

One. Two. Three.

He wanted to scream, to demand he saw Lemon.

Patience.

He didn't fucking have any.

Clenching his fist, he was about to slam it against the door again, but Rocco chose that moment to open the door.

"What are you doing here?" Rocco asked.

"I'm here to see Lemon. You know why I'm here."

"She doesn't want to see you right now."

"Look, Rocco, I know you just want to play concerned dad and I get that, but I need to see her."

Rocco stepped in Nate's way. "I think you're forgetting who the boss

is here, Nate. You should leave.”

“No,” Lemon said.

Nate looked over Rocco’s shoulder to see Lemon in the doorway.

“Lemon, you do not have to talk to him.”

“I know I don’t, but that’s why I should do it. I should just get this over with and then he can leave.”

He didn’t like that. There was no chance of him going anywhere.

Rocco stepped aside and Nate walked toward Lemon.

“I can explain.”

She held her hand up. “Don’t touch me.”

“Damn it, Lemon. You know I won’t hurt you.”

She licked her lips, looking up at him, and he saw the hurt in her eyes. She had never been able to hold anything back. “You lied to me.”

“I know, but I did it for your own good.”

“Wow, you’re going to play that card? It was okay to lie to me because you had a good reason?”

“There was never going to be a good reason,” he said. “Your life was in danger and your father wanted to take care of you. He loves you very much, and I’m damn good at what I do.”

“You’re a killer?”

He gritted his teeth. This wasn’t exactly going how he wanted.

“Not exactly.”

“But you’re not in security?”

“I am in a way. I’m a hitman, Lemon. I take care of your dad and the people within his organization, which includes you.”

She shook her head. “I’m not part of his life, Nate.”

“You are. Just by being his daughter, you’re part of this life. There is no getting away from that. The men that attacked tonight, they were after you in order to hurt him.”

“He told me that already.” She looked down at her hands. “I don’t know what you want from me, Nate, but I ... you’ve got to go. We can’t do this.”

“I’m in love with you.” He let the words spill out into the air.

“You don’t believe in love.”

“No. I don’t believe in cursed houses bringing people together, but what I do believe in is my love for you. You’re the one for me, Lemon. The woman I love. I would do anything for you. Be anything. Please.” He took a

step toward her, wanting nothing more than to cup her face, to touch her, to kiss her.

He was thankful she was alive, but not being able to touch her was the worst feeling in the world. It made him sick to his stomach.

“Please, Lemon, fuck. I have never begged a woman for anything. I’ve never cared enough to be with them. You, you’re different. You know this. I’m in love with you. I want to be with you.”

“You better go.”

“Lemon!”

She turned away from him, and as he went to grab her, Rocco stopped him.

“Don’t do it.”

“I love her.” He pulled out of Rocco’s hold and glared at him. “You can hunt me down, kill me, punish me, but I am in love with your daughter.”

“Good, then it means no matter what, you won’t give up.”

The following morning, Lemon entered the kitchen. It was late, a little after ten, and she was still so very tired, and hurting. For most of the night, she’d been crying. Her father had wanted to talk, but she’d just wanted to go to sleep.

She couldn’t believe she was staying in one of his safe houses. After the vows she had made, this was ridiculous.

Looking through the kitchen cupboards, she found the mugs and worked out how to brew the coffee machine. The scent of coffee was a welcome relief. Closing her eyes, she gripped her shoulders and stretched, trying not to think about Nate.

He loved her.

She couldn’t believe it, could she?

He was a liar.

“I thought I heard you awake,” her father said, coming into the kitchen.

He was dressed in a business suit, not a single hair out of place, while she was ... in pajamas, her hair was a mess, and she hadn’t washed her face, so there was probably sleep in her eyes.

“Do you want coffee?” she asked.

“I’d love some.”

She reached for another mug.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” he asked.

“No.”

“Lemon, it is important.”

“He’s on your payroll, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Does that mean you’re going to ... kill him?” she asked.

“Your mother told you everything about my life.”

“Yes, she had no choice. I think she did it to prove how amazing you were but I don’t know.” She rubbed at her temple. This was all too much. She hadn’t spent this much time with her father since before that day when he ignored her.

“I miss her,” Rocco said.

Lemon finished pouring them a coffee, stepping toward him, and placing the mug in front of him. “I bet you do. I do as well. At times, I swear I can still hear her. Giving me advice. Telling me what I’m doing wrong. Complaining about the type of stitching I’m using.” All of her equipment was back at the house. Everything. “I can’t go back there, can I?”

“Not for your safety, you can’t.”

She sighed. “Then I guess it’s up to you where I live.”

“Can I ask you something?” Rocco asked.

“Can I stop you?”

“Lemon, I’m not a bad man.”

“You’re a mafia guy, Dad. Forgive me for not thinking you’re a saint.”

He chuckled. “I’ve missed this too. You know that day at the mall, all I wanted to do was come with you. I was shopping for one of Isabella’s parties, and I hated it.”

“You hate your kids?” she asked.

“No. I don’t hate them, but it is different with them. It always has been. Their mother, my wife, it is an arranged marriage. Neither of us can stand one another, Lemon. Your mother, though, she was a ray of sunshine to me. I told Nate she was my piece of heaven. So are you. I didn’t want to reject you that day. I do love you and your mother very much.”

“You expect me to believe you haven’t found another mistress to replace her?” Lemon asked.

“You can believe what you want. I haven’t. There is no one else that I want. I loved your mother more than anything. I can’t be with anyone else. I

don't want to be.”

“I believe you,” she said.

“Are you in love with Nate?” Rocco asked.

Lemon lifted her gaze to look at her father. She nodded, unable to say the words out loud in case they doomed her.

“Then you need to go to him. You need to fix this. As a man who only got a short time with your mother, with love, do not let it go just because he hurt you.”

“Dad, I'm not a doormat.”

“Neither was your mother. Do you think once you were born, we were back together? That she forgave everything?”

“She didn't?” Lemon asked.

“Lemon, your mother and I didn't start dating until you were nearly three years old,” Rocco said. “And then it took her a long time to accept this life. It's why I worked so damn hard to make hers special. She gave me peace when no one else did. She was special. But you won't have to do that with Nate.”

“What?” she asked.

“Nate is not ... he's not a capo. He's a hitman, hired by us. His life is part of this world, but he hasn't got any woman arranged. If you love him, just as he loves you, there is nothing stopping you. You are both free to be together.”

“What about you?”

“I made a promise to your mother some time ago. She asked me that when you found the man you loved more than anything, I wasn't to interfere. I wasn't to scare him off. Nate's a good man. He's also a fucking asshole, but if there is ever a man who will keep you safe, and I know you'll be good with. It is him.”

Lemon nodded, sipping at the coffee.

“Also, you might want to drink tea, or one of those herbal things, because I have it on good authority you might be pregnant.”

Her mouth dropped open as she looked at her father. “You can not ... what the hell, Dad?”

Rocco got to his feet and surprised her as he pulled her into his arms. “Your mother said one day you would call me that again. I didn't realize how right she was, nor how desperately I wanted to hear it.”

Her father held her for the first time in years. She tensed up to begin

with, but slowly, as his warmth surrounded her, she smiled. It wasn't too bad getting a hug from her dad.

“I do love him, Dad.”

“I know you do. I'm not going to get in the way, no matter how desperately I want to.”

She giggled.

He kissed the top of her head.

“Don't let my screwups affect your life. That was all on me, no one else. Nate is not the same as me,” he said.

“You like him?”

“I respect him. There is a difference.”

She couldn't help but smile. This was the first time she'd been close with her dad, all of her own choice, but it was good to put the past to bed, to move on. For some reason, she knew deep down her mother was much happier with her being close to him than keeping him far away.

Chapter Eleven

The houses were up for sale.

Rocco had stopped by yesterday to show a potential buyer around Lemon's place. All of her stuff had been packed up, and from the *sold* sign out front, she was moving on with her life.

It was Christmas day.

It had been over a week since Lemon learned the truth.

She hadn't reached out to him.

Rocco had promised him he'd give her all the relevant information if she wanted to talk to him, but so far, nothing.

Sitting on the living room floor, he held the single gift in his hand that Lemon had placed beneath the tree. He hadn't opened it yet.

Nate remembered her smiling face. How she had looked at him, and he missed that. He missed her.

Holding the package in his hands, he couldn't believe it had come down to this. He hadn't sent flowers, chocolates, or jewelry to Lemon. All of them had felt tacky. Instead, he'd given her a real gift of time.

Time to get over him.

Time to think about him and to know where her thoughts were at.

Time was the most precious gift of all.

Still, no phone call. No visit. She didn't even come to show the guy around her place. He'd stayed at the houses, only leaving when Rocco had told him about the attack on the O'Leaves.

The threat to Lemon's life was gone.

After tearing open the package, he stared down and laughed.

A pair of Christmas shorts fell into his lap. Picking them up, he couldn't help but laugh. They were corny and he absolutely loved them.

Lemon had made him something.

The doorbell rang.

Getting to his feet, he held the shorts in his hands as he opened the door, then froze. Lemon stood, hand poised to knock again.

"Lemon," he said.

"Nate." She nibbled on her lip, and the smile he'd missed so much was on her face.

He reached for her, pulling her into his arms, pressing his face against her neck, and holding her close. He expected her to fight him, but Lemon put

her arms around him.

Taking advantage, he pulled her into his home, pressing her up against the door and kissing her like his life depended on it.

Drinking her in. Soaking her up.

“I missed you,” he said.

He stared into her eyes, and he just couldn’t wait another second. Slamming his lips down on hers, he kissed her back.

Lemon sank her fingers into his hair, moaning as he plunged inside her mouth, deepening the kiss.

Still with the shorts in his hands, but he also squeezed Lemon’s ass.

All of a sudden, she broke the kiss. “Wait. Wait.” She licked her lips. “I need to get this all out before anything else happens.”

She put her hand flat to his chest and he stayed perfectly still waiting for her to say whatever she needed to.

He would do anything for her.

Be anything.

“I love you, Lemon. So much and I know I fucked up big time, but I promise you, I will never do anything like that again. I will be open and honest with you. I will tell you everything.”

“I’m not pregnant,” Lemon said.

Now he was fucked.

Lemon could walk away.

“But I want to know why you refused to use a condom.”

This wasn’t good.

“Damn it, Lemon, you know why.”

“Tell me.”

“At first, it was because I didn’t think about it. Being inside you, it was ... I’ve never felt like that. Then after—” He stopped and took a breath. “Then after, I think I knew there was a chance of you finding out the truth and I didn’t want to lose you.” But he had.

“Nate, you don’t believe in love.”

“I know. That’s how I know these feelings are real. The thought of losing you. The past week, not being near you, that is what real torture is all about, and believe me, I’ve had my fair share of beatings, and I would take them all day, every single day, if it meant I got time with you, Lemon.” He cupped her face. “You own me. You have my heart. I am completely and totally in love with you.”

“But you don’t believe in the cursed houses?”

“I don’t know, because right now, you’re here with me, and I’ve got to hope that it’s because you feel for me the same way I feel for you.” It was all he had to hold on to.

“Nate Evans,” Lemon said, and much to his surprise she went down on one knee and he frowned. This wasn’t what he was expecting. “I am completely, totally in love with you. Will you marry me?”

He shook his head.

“Is that a no?”

“Shit, no, it’s not a no, it’s a ... I want to marry you.” He went down on his knees. “I should be the one proposing.”

“Well, I wanted to be the one to do it. Is that a yes?”

He saw the smile on her lips, and he pulled her in close, breathing her in. He ran his fingers through her hair, holding her as close as possible.

“I fucking love you, Lemon. Please, don’t leave, don’t turn your back on me.”

“I was angry at you,” Lemon said. “Then I spent some time with my dad. I went and visited my mother, and then I came to you. I don’t want us to start our lives together because I’m pregnant. I’m not ready to have a baby, but I do want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

He stroked her cheek. “I will never let you down.”

She laughed. “You probably will, but we’re going to be in this together. You and me, against the world.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Good, I was wondering, did you like your shorts?”

“Loved them.”

Lemon reached into her jacket. “I did make a matching pair. I don’t suppose you’ll model them for me?”

He took them from her, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Just so long as you model what I’ve got for you.”

“And what might that be?”

He reached into his pocket and held out a single diamond engagement ring. The moment he saw it in the shop, he knew it would be perfect for Lemon, for his wife, the mother of his children, and he wanted her to have it.

“Just this, nothing else.”

Her cheeks were a beautiful shade of red, but he loved her like that. For the rest of the day, he intended to do many more things to her that would

make her blush.

Epilogue

Six months later

The cursed houses were real.

Lemon stared at the two homes, and she just knew deep in her heart what the locals said about them was true. People who entered were each other's soulmate. It had to be true. Her father had sold this house months ago, but through one difficulty and another, it had taken a full six months, right on time with Nate's house to be sold.

She leaned against the hood of Nate's car as she watched him shake hands with both people.

Seeing as her house had been sold to a man, Nate hadn't liked the idea of her being alone with him, which was crazy.

The truth was Nate was jealous and she kind of liked it.

Nate gave the two people a wave and then he was heading back to her. She slid off the hood and Nate pulled her in close, kissing her.

The past six months had been the most amazing of her life. She and Nate had moved to one of his secure locations, where he'd shown her the true elements of his life. Her dad was still in the picture. She hadn't pushed him to one side or anything. They were learning how to get to know one another. It was what her mother would want.

"I think we made a big mistake," Nate said.

"You do?"

"Yep." He turned his head and they both looked toward the houses in time to see the girl throw some water at the guy's face.

"Oh, no. What do you think that is all about?"

"They went to school together and from my research, he was a complete asshole to her."

Lemon gasped. "Oh, my God, you're talking a bully? A bully and his victim?"

"Yep, that's what I'm saying, and no, we're not going to watch the fireworks on this one, Mrs. Evans. You and I are heading for our honeymoon. The ocean and our private villa are waiting for us. I intend to make love and to fuck you every single day and night for the next two weeks."

The new couple was forgotten as Nate moved her toward the passenger seat of the car.

As much as she'd love to see how the next couple would work out,

she wanted to be fucked by her husband so much more.

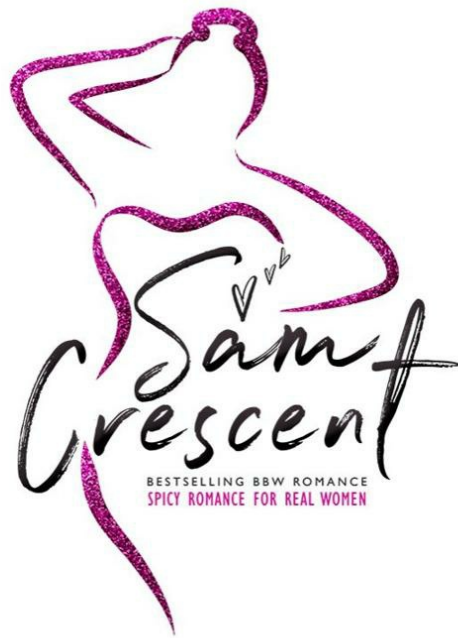
The End

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

SECOND BEST

Volkov Bratva, 1

Sam Crescent

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Sample Chapter

Aurora

The party was boring.

Women stood in their little groups, gossiping amongst themselves. Some of them glanced in my direction. The Italian mafia-made men mingling with the same version of the Russian ones. I wasn't exactly sure of the full details as to what they were all called. What I did know was Slavik Ivanov, my husband, was like the Capo in his world. Even though we were parted by twenty-one years. He was forty years old, and I was nineteen, but in this world, age didn't matter.

Sipping on my champagne, I held the glass in my hand, counting to ten repeatedly to try to calm my nerves.

I'd been married a week. The event had been a huge success. The press had been there to take pictures and to announce it in the paper. My father hadn't wanted to give my perfect, beautiful sister to such a man, but me, he had no problem. Put my hand in Slavik's and ignored me for the rest of the day.

Even the following morning, I'd done our family proud by bleeding. On our wedding night, my husband had made me bleed. I was sure a lot of virgins did on their first time.

The night itself was kind of a blur.

Slavik and I didn't talk.

No words were whispered or spoken out loud. To anyone who'd look at us, we'd been nothing more than perfect strangers. He hadn't touched me since, which was a blessing. In fact, at night, I slept alone.

The pain had been ... well, it wasn't something I wished to repeat.

When we'd gotten to the room, he'd pulled the covers back, tore my dress off with his knife, and I'd lain down and closed my eyes as he climbed on top.

The only sounds in the room had been his heavy panting.

I'd drawn blood on my lip.

Done.

Finished.

No longer a virgin.

The romance books I read were so far off the mark, it wasn't even funny.

Glancing at my husband, I saw he stood with his constant scowl, looking out over the room. I didn't know if he had the first clue of how to smile.

It wasn't my problem. That was the mantra I kept telling myself.

Every single night this past week, he'd arrived home, and each time I saw him, he'd been covered in blood. In our world, it was best not to ask any questions, so I didn't.

Some would call me a coward. My mother had once told me it was all about survival. As women, we were so easily replaced.

In fact, as the men were all cheering at Slavik's virgin, my mother was telling me he'd be bored now and would find other women to deal with his appetites.

What did I have to look forward to? The children he'd grant me unless he killed me first.

It didn't matter. No one cared. I sipped at my champagne and simply waited. This was an engagement party for one of the other bosses' brigadiers or whatever it was he called them. I didn't even know if he kept to these terms as Ivan Volkov was supposed to be taking his Bratva into another era. A modern era of peace, where he set the hierarchy and the new rules and terms for how things were run.

I came from tradition. Where everything was done via the book, including arranged marriages.

Standing at a party, surrounded by a bunch of Russians, well, it was

scary. They all spoke English. I knew my husband did speak Russian, or at least I thought he did. Sometimes I'd heard him in hushed tones. I didn't even dare to learn the language for fear of where that would leave me.

Finishing my champagne, I chanced another glance at my husband, and shame washed over me when I caught sight of a barely dressed woman hanging around him. Her head was tilted back and laughter spilled from her lips. The way she looked so calm and collected around him, I didn't get it.

He was scary as fuck.

Not that I'd say it aloud. In fact, over the years, I'd learned the fine art of saying stuff in my head. I'd even begun to cuss out my parents and tell the boss to fuck off. It was kind of fun. They controlled everything else around them, but not my thoughts. It was the one sense of freedom I got.

A waiter came by to offer me another flute of champagne, which I ignored. I didn't know when the polite time would come to make my excuses to leave. Rather than come with my guard and driver, Slavik had brought us. The moment we'd entered the party, he'd left me here all alone.

This was ... humiliating.

A week married and my husband couldn't even be bothered to stand with me. Not that it came as any surprise. I wasn't beautiful. All my life I'd been told I was the ugly one. The ugly, fat sister no one wanted. I had long, brown hair, the tips of which touched the curve of my ass, which again was another issue. I had a weight problem. On a good day, I fit into a size eighteen. I had huge tits, massive hips, a somewhat slender stomach in comparison, and chunky thighs. Even when I dieted and exercised, the curves stayed. It was something I had to live with.

Was it polite to fold my arms across my chest?

It was so hard to not show boredom when that was exactly what I was.

When the woman, whoever she was, seemed to be kissing my husband's neck, I'd had enough of the spectacle and decided to make my way outside. The doors were wide open, and the moment I was out in the fresh air, I took a deep, calming breath.

Tilting my head up to the sky, I saw it was a clear night, which explained the cold. The chill made me realize I was very much alive. Not a single part of me was dead, even though people seemed to pray for my death.

The idea of my marriage being a peace treaty was so fucking lame and stupid. They thought it was going to bring peace. The truth was it now

made more people hate me because they couldn't continue their bloodshed.

"It's a nice night out, isn't it?"

The deep rumble of a voice startled me, and I turned around to see none other than Ivan Volkov smoking a cigarette in the shadowed corner, slightly hidden away by the door. I hadn't known anyone else was out here.

"Do you speak?"

"Y-yes, sorry. You startled me."

He chuckled. "The party is not to your liking?"

I quickly glanced at the doors. Everything was an act of survival now. If I said the wrong thing, he'd kill me. If he wanted some entertainment with my screams, he'd kill me. There was no way to win.

"It's wonderful."

"And yet you escape to the cold outdoors." He tutted. His accent was rather nice.

"I just needed some air."

"Oh, please, I saw you in there." He chuckled. "I would have thought Slavik would have known better by now."

Crap! Was I going to get my husband in trouble? Did I care? He had another woman hanging off his arm. Girlfriends, mistresses, they weren't exactly unheard of in our circles. For many, it meant the husbands had other places to go for them to sate their appetite. For others, they were a pest and destroyers of loving relationships.

Love.

I didn't have love.

"He's perfect," I said. Internally, I cringed. I'd long ago developed the mask I wore now. Passive verging on submissive. They didn't know I had my thoughts. How I spoke my own mind. Staring at Ivan, though, I didn't like how he looked at me. It took every single ounce of control not to react.

He saw a hell of a lot more than most.

He chuckled. "You're a little spitfire. It almost makes me upset that I gave you to Slavik."

Pressing my lips together, I averted my gaze, bowing my head just slightly. More often than not, this appealed to men. It had worked to divert their attention.

Not Ivan.

He placed a finger beneath my chin and tilted my head back, looking into my eyes. "Such a shame. Slavik is usually a man who sees so much and

yet, he doesn't see you, does he?"

"He's the perfect husband and loyal to you, sir."

"Twenty years old and already know the way the world works. I don't get those mafia men. You see, submissive women have their qualities in the world, Aurora, but the women who know how to bite back, they're the ones who make our blood boil."

Why was he telling me this?

"Maybe one day, when you're not so afraid, we can have a proper conversation, don't you think?" He still had a finger beneath my chin. "And when you're dealing with Slavik, heed my advice."

"Sir," Slavik said, choosing that moment to interrupt.

I didn't jerk back, captivated by Ivan's gaze. I couldn't look away. It was like he was trying to tell me a million different things in his gaze alone, and I nodded. That was all I did.

"Charming." He released me and turned to look at Slavik. "You would be mindful to pay more attention to your wife than the whores who grace this place."

Slavik nodded his head.

It wasn't a warning or an order.

I got the sense Slavik and Ivan were more than just boss and employee. They were friends, which again was odd. Most bosses in our world didn't have friends. They made sure people feared them.

Learning the ever-changing dynamics that now surrounded me was difficult, but it was something I needed to master. Years of being around my own family had given me a lot of chances to watch, to listen, and to find out all the details I needed to survive even my father.

"Come," Slavik said, holding out his hand.

I moved toward his side.

He took my hand in his grip, and I expected us to leave. Instead, he led me inside and took me straight to the dance floor. One quick glance around the room and I saw we'd become the spectacle. I hated anyone's gaze on me, but it was easier to get this over with.

Slavik had been scorned. Would he beat me when I got home?

Once, when I was a child, my sister Isabella had embarrassed my father by playing the role of a spoiled brat. When we got home, rather than punish the perfect one, he'd turned his wrath on me, smacking me so hard I'd fallen into furniture. The blow had caused me to catch the skin across my

eyebrow. I still had the scar at the corner of my eyebrow. It had long faded, but if you looked closely, you'd see it. The slight imperfection. I had several marks from old punishments. All of which I had to take as my father wouldn't dream of hurting his precious daughter. The beautiful one.

Some would say I had every right to hate and resent my sister. I didn't. I loved Isabella. It wasn't her fault, but our family's. She'd been raised to believe she was a princess who deserved all the attention, while I'd been taught to expect what I got and to be grateful for it.

With Slavik's hand on my back, the other holding my hand, we danced. The tune was soft, not too slow that it required us to stand close to one another, but not fast enough to create a good distance. Being this close to him terrified me.

I'd heard the rumors of just how deadly this man was. He was feared far and wide. The women gossiped about how he had the ability to tear apart a man with his bare hands.

I didn't even know if that was possible. Fear ran down my back, and I tried to ignore it.

Ivan's words rang in my head about how men liked to have a woman who talked back. Not in my experience they didn't. They liked a quiet, submissive woman who was pretty and spat out sons. There, I'd said it, albeit in my head.

"What was Volkov talking to you about?" Slavik asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me."

I did, but I was buying time. This wasn't a conversation I wished to have with my husband. How did I get out of this?

"He talked about the party."

"And?"

"Nothing more." I wasn't about to tell him the man's advice.

Slavik's hand tightened at my waist. I didn't know if he was trying to warn me, or if he just had to hold me a little tighter.

"How are you enjoying the party?" I asked.

"It's a fucking party, Aurora. How do you think?"

His harsh tone had me flinching. Of course. I was being treated like a fucking dumb woman. Rather than look into his dark, almost black eyes, I went back to staring at his chest. Had Ivan given me that advice on purpose?

Either way, I wasn't going to use it.

Once the dance ended, Slavik told me that my driver, Sergei, was going to take me home.

Without another word, Slavik kissed my cheek and handed me to Sergei. No doubt he was going to be fucking the woman who had been hanging off his arm.

Against my better judgment, I looked toward Ivan, who watched me. He raised his glass in my direction, and I offered him a smile.

Staring down at the floor, I followed Sergei out to the waiting car. He held open the back passenger door, and I slid inside. The noise from the building seemed to grow louder, but I ignored it.

Parties had never been my thing. The fear of something bad happening always lingered in the air.

I was growing tired of living in fear. Resting my head back against the car seat, I didn't bother looking back to see the building. Instead, I stared out the window at the passing scenery.

The city in darkness always seemed to offer a sense of freedom. There were more shadows, places to hide. It would be so nice to run, to escape.

Now that I was married, my chances were gone. I was trapped in a loveless marriage to a man who clearly couldn't stand me. My days were numbered. Pressing my fingers to my temples, I tried to massage the pain that began to build.

Showing weakness would get me killed.

Being strong and loyal, that was what I needed to do.

To survive.

To one day earn my freedom.

I had a plan, I just hoped I knew what I was doing.

Slavik

The party had long ago ended. Wives were gone. Children were nowhere to be seen. The only people left were men, available women, and whores. Ivan sat at the head, looking like a king, which was exactly what he was. In front of him was the woman who had been hanging off me earlier.

Dana was her name, and he had proof of her treachery. No one could outrun the Volkov Bratva and they certainly couldn't betray it. There were many enemies of Ivan's wanting to take over. They didn't like the new era we all worked within. The treaties he built. The places he ran. The rules he implemented.

I did.

I was loyal to him.

My life was in his hands.

I'd die for this man. I owed him everything, and he knew I'd do anything for him. The moment he told me to marry Aurora Fredo, I'd done so without argument. My wife was different. The truth was in marrying Aurora to me, her father had given us the greatest of insults.

It was known far and wide the second daughter wasn't perfect. To many, she was the ugly, fat let-down. The real prize was her sister.

What Fredo didn't know was Ivan had wanted Aurora from the start. Again, I had no idea why he wanted her, only that he did. What I didn't like tonight was seeing them together.

I didn't love my wife.

Our wedding night had been a fucked-up mess.

My order from Ivan had been clear: consummate the marriage and produce the bloody sheets as per tradition in Aurora's family. I'd done that, and even the memory of it grated on my nerves.

She'd been terrified but duty-bound.

The moment I touched her, I found her so fucking dry, it didn't matter what way I'd taken her, she'd have been hurt. Getting it over with had been a challenge. I'd moistened her up with my saliva, pretending I was getting my dick ready as I'd done it.

I hadn't touched my wife in a week, and it wasn't like she complained. She slept stiffly on her side of the bed, rarely moving. I had to wonder if she slept at all.

Some nights, I found myself watching her.

She had long brown hair, a temptation I didn't allow myself to give in to. It would be so nice to run my fingers through the length, to wrap it around my fist, and to jerk her back against me as I fucked her long and hard. To show her what our wedding night should have been like.

Instead, I watched.

I craved.

But I didn't give in.

That would be pointless. At this time, I didn't even know if I liked my wife. We didn't talk.

I stared at the scene before me, and the truth was my dick was not getting hard.

Dana's face was already covered in cum. As per Ivan's instructions, we'd created an orgy. Fuck to your heart's content, and only when he had Dana where he wanted her would he strike.

That time was now.

One of the soldiers had his dick inside her ass. One of his hands gripped her hair, holding her head to the floor as he rode her anus. All the while, he had his gaze on Ivan, waiting for the signal.

The moment Ivan nodded, the soldier pulled her up against his chest, held her hair tightly, and placed the blade against her throat.

It took her several seconds to realize what was going on. Anger, fear, and sadness all danced across her eyes.

"Volkov, what is the meaning of this?"

"You think I wouldn't find out? First you steal from me, then you hand it straight to our enemies, and now I've got their fucking shit running in my clubs. In my city. You fucking dirty slut. You should know that I would find out. Nothing is ever hidden from me. Nothing."

"No, please. No. I don't want to die. They made me do it."

Ivan got up off his seat and walked down to where Dana knelt. Tears streamed from her eyes.

He got close. "You think I don't know about the payment? How you're a couple of mil up on takings?"

Dana's eyes closed as the reality of what she'd done and been caught doing finally sank in.

The blade swiped across Dana's neck, blood spilling from the wound. She cupped her neck as the soldier pulled out of her ass.

It was done. The deed was finished.

I watched, and I didn't care.

Greed got people killed. Far too many people were lured into a trap by the green stuff. Dana had taken a bag of our coke, our own special blend that was worth so much more money than she sold it for. Once they got the chemist on it, they adapted it and changed the formula. We'd been made truly aware of the damage when ten people had been found overdosed in our clubs within one night.

This was a new part of Ivan Volkov's era. He didn't want people dead. Dead clients meant product didn't move. He liked to keep people alive.

Again, a new first.

Ivan clicked his fingers, signaling the party was over. Dana's body

would be disposed of. Unclaimed. Dead and useless.

“You needed an elaborate party to do that?” I asked, following him out toward his car.

“No, I needed an elaborate party because it fucking entertains me.”

I only ever talked to him as a friend when we were alone. The moment we were surrounded by others, I was the loyal subject.

“You know your wife was so fucking bored tonight, don’t you?”

“Leave Aurora to me,” I said.

Ivan chuckled. “I think I made a mistake in allowing you to marry her. You clearly don’t see the wild woman waiting to be unleashed.”

This did make me snort. The soldiers were a close enough distance away that I didn’t have to play any other role. I could be myself. “Are you sure you’re looking at the same woman?”

“Are you sure you’re even looking at the right woman?”

This made me pause. “I know my wife. She’s submissive. That’s what they trained her for.”

Ivan clicked his tongue. “There you go again. I have to wonder if I should demote you and keep that wife of yours. Look into her eyes, my friend. You will see.”

He climbed into his car, bringing our conversation to a close.

We’d been friends for a lifetime already. Together, we’d grown up on the streets. I’d saved him from being killed more times than I could count.

We had a plan. A goal that would make this city ours. When we were kids, the Bratva were ... hot tempered, and in truth, their vision wasn’t big enough. They worked small. Petty criminals. They didn’t see the big picture.

Ivan Volkov had. He was the big picture, and now, he ran half of the country, which he divided into six areas. I controlled area one. The biggest with the main cities all bowing down to my rule. Ivan only ever dealt with his brigadiers, his main men.

I was aware of the men he sent out to all areas. The spies he used to control everyone. It was how he learned of betrayals, of the greed, and of course, the rats. Everyone was in his pocket.

Even though he was considered the fiercest and most evil person around, he was also fair. If you didn’t cross him, you lived. If you showed loyalty to him, then he took care of you.

The moment you turned your back on him, betrayed, or stole from him, well, your days were numbered.

Watching the car leave the parking lot, I stood there as the cleaning crew came. They nodded at me. I was on first-name terms with most people in Ivan's control. I made it my business to know everyone.

I'd always been a firm believer that knowledge was power, and when it came to keeping Ivan in control, I was willing to do whatever it took to keep him there, even marry a woman I didn't trust.

It was late when I arrived home. The guard I'd assigned to Aurora's care stood at the door, waiting for my signal to leave. I gave it to him. There were always guards around. Soldiers. Men designed to help us gain power and to forever grow stronger. They rose up the ranks, claiming to be the best everyone had to offer.

After taking a quick shot of the finest whiskey, I headed to the bedroom. Aurora was still awake, but the moment I entered the bedroom, she closed the book she'd been reading.

When all of her belongings arrived at my penthouse suite, I'd been surprised. She didn't have many.

Books.

She'd had close to three hundred books. All in paperback. I'd gotten the designers in, and one of the spare bedrooms had been converted into a library for her. I'd also granted her a credit card in my name to which she'd not spent a single penny. We'd been married a week, and I'd known other men in my position had been near bankrupt in that time by how wild their wives' spending could be.

I glanced at my wife. She wore a silk negligee that showed off her full tits. I hadn't given myself the pleasure of looking at her entirely, but one day soon, I intended to look to my heart's content.

Removing my jacket, I took my gun with me. I didn't go anywhere without at least two guns and three blades. I was a cautious man. I'd survived this long with them, and I wasn't about to ruin my chances by fucking it up and letting down my guard. I'd seen what happened firsthand to men who got sloppy. They ended up dead, and I knew because I'd been the one to kill them.

Once inside the bathroom, I stripped off my clothes and stepped beneath the cold water of the shower. I didn't like taking hot baths or showers. I liked the shock of the cold. It kept me alive and alert.

Also, I didn't linger too long doing one thing. Men struck during these times. I'd lost count of the number of men I'd taken out while in the

shower.

I turned off the water, wrapped a towel around me, picked up my gun, and walked back into the bedroom. With my back to Aurora, I put the gun beside my bed and checked the time to see it was a little after three.

“You need to be careful around Volkov,” I said.

I had no idea why I was giving her the warning. If she died doing something stupid, it was on her. I wouldn’t take responsibility for her mistakes. She was the enemy. A foreigner to me.

“I didn’t seek him out.”

Her voice was so low, I only just made it out.

I turned toward her, and she immediately shrank away. I didn’t need her fear. “Do as I say.”

She nodded her head after a few seconds’ hesitation, which pissed me off. While I’d been in the shower, she’d already put the book down and had sunk beneath the covers.

My dick was hard, but I was in no mood to fuck an ice queen.

I turned off my light, removed my towel, and climbed into bed.

The bed shook a little. I was sure she cried, but it wasn’t my problem. I had a lot of shit to do over the next few days, but sleep didn’t come to me.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I could make out her outline. A snuffle escaped her. Time ticked by, and she finally fell into a fitful sleep. It was while she slept that I moved in close. I didn’t touch her, but I felt her body heat and breathed in the heady scent of lemon.

It was just one of the many parts of Aurora I found ... intoxicating.

End of sample chapter

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