

- A SOUTH BEACH CRIME THRILLER -

SWEET DEMON LOVE BABY



- BOOK TWO -

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SWEET DEMON LOVE BABY

CHAPTER 1

Nora Montoya got onto her hands and knees naked. She picked up the dollar bills which had been tossed onto the stage around her. Collecting her earnings like this was a bit demeaning, but better than letting some sleaze trace your thigh with his dollar like this actually turned you on. She had her pride.

While making the one-on-one rounds afterwards, she noticed her boss Jason Shaw walk in. He glanced at her, smiled, winked. Even through a hive of patrons and nude dancers, everyone swathed in black light, he could pick her out. Her heart skipped. He kept looking

at her with this suspicious glare as if he knew what she was up to. Because of course he knew. How could she have hoped to date a cop without Shaw finding out?

She watched Shaw disappear around the corner of the hall. She crossed herself, then nudged her way to the dressing room. She opened the red door there and paused in front of the mirror inside. "Look at Yourself," a print-out read, taped above the frame. The mirror was meant as a last inspection point for dancers before hitting the stage, offering them a head-to-toe view. Nora found herself inspecting, even when her dance was over. She wasn't skinny but managed enough kickboxing and yoga to keep her Latina curves contained to her breasts and hips. She kept her olive skin at a level shade throughout her body, even her bikini area. No tan lines made for better tips for whatever stupid, psychological reason.

Nora parted the beaded curtains and entered the dressing room. Valerie sat in the closest chair, hunched over its dressing table, using her nail polish bottle to crush pills into a powder. Suzie touched noses with her reflection, applying lipstick, already high herself. Double-D Deborah came out from the bathroom, toilet draining noisily behind her.

Before Nora could organize and count her money, Lionel stabbed his immense head between the curtains. His hair was shaved into a cap, his lower face hidden by a fluffy neckbeard. Lionel was Shaw's head of security. "Yo, Nora! Boss wants to see you."

Here we go. Nora's knees tingled and her spine and chest became hot. She'd had nightmares over this moment.

She stepped into a G-string, not bothering with a top. She decided to hold her money. Let Shaw see it. Remind him what a good earner she was. She left the dressing room and weaved her way towards the office. A drunk man tried snatching her for a hug. He leaned in like he wanted to tell her a secret, but she peeled his arms away and kept walking. She ignored the snarky comments hurled at her back. She went through another set of beaded curtains, through the "Employees Only" door, down the next hall.

Lionel, all six feet-four inches of him, stood there waiting for her. He opened the door for her. He shut it after she walked in.

Shaw sat at his desk. The office was anal-retentive-tidy. The papers on his desk were stacked in such alignment as to resemble a solid box. His office looked more like a stock photo of an office, rather than an actual workspace. Shaw himself matched this motif, all smooth surfaces and sharp corners. His face was tan, but not overdoing it, like a lot of men in their forties. His beard was manicured so skin-short it appeared drawn there. A black, button-up shirt and black slacks wrapped his slim frame like a super villain uniform.

"Have a seat," he told her.

There was only a single, white, plastic chair available, so she pulled it up and sat in it.

"How have you been?" he asked her.

She smiled, coughed, laughed, caught off-guard. "Um, okay. Thanks. You?"

He lifted a clipboard from his desk and paused from the sight of it, as if it presented him with an unexpected math problem. He lay the clipboard down again. "Look, Nora, I need your help."

"Sure, anything. I'm always happy to help you."

"I have some new girls coming in Saturday night. Five of them."

He seemed to expect a response from her. She said, "Okay. Five girls. From where?"

"A couple of them are from China, I think. Not sure about the rest yet. They speak English, but it would be great for them to have an ambassador. Know what I mean?"

"You want me to chaperone."

He looked briefly at the ceiling while choosing his words. "A little more than that. I want you to teach them. Make them understand what's expected."

"Okay, but why me?"

"Dara doesn't like doing it anymore. I promised her I'd find someone else." Dara was his personal assistant who also happened to be Lionel's twin sister. For reasons no one could agree on, Dara was a maternal figure to Shaw, the only living being capable of influencing him. "Besides," Shaw said, "I want you to show them

what a success story you are. Show them what they have to look forward to. Can you do that for me?"

He searched her eyes and those ice-blue irises pierced icicles through her soul. Success story? *Her*? What the hell was he talking about? Evidently, for him, she was the most success any woman could ever hope for: work as a call girl for a few years, transfer to stripping when that wore out, keep your figure, or go work the register at some small business until you died. His restaurants always needed waitresses, so there was that too.

"Sure," she said, "I can do that. I'll teach them."

"Fantastic. That makes me happy, Nora. You're an angel."

"Anything else?"

He smirked, shrugged. "You tell me. Anything else? Everything all right?"

"Absolutely."

"You've been quiet and stand off-ish with me lately."

"Have I? Sorry. Didn't mean to."

"Don't I make you feel good?"

"Of course, yeah."

"Then we have no worries. I'm having a pool party in a couple of days. Why don't you come by?"

She agreed to do so, reminding him he'd already invited her.

"Cool, cool. See you there, Nora. I'll be in touch when the girls arrive, okay? Thank you again."

She left his office and stood outside with her hand on the doorknob. She released a big breath and used a hand against the wall to help herself walk. She still held her money. He hadn't even glanced at it.

Nora was scheduled for one more dance. Afterwards, she was going straight home. She would call her sexy, handsome cop boyfriend and dump him. She couldn't keep going like this, especially if Shaw was going to make her work more closely with him now. Also, he'd noted a difference in her behavior. No, her relationship with Trace had become far too dicey. She could no longer manage the pressure of a secret relationship with someone not even aware it was a secret.

Combined with Trace's tendency to sometimes over-drink, the situation had sparked plenty of fights between them, some loud and rageful enough to bring her neighbor knocking, threatening to call the police. The irony. It was time to end things with Trace the Detective. Even if it broke both their hearts to pieces.

Her apartment was only a dozen blocks to the north on Third Avenue between Collins and Washington. Nora lived in a two-story, renovated, multifamily building painted white to alleviate the uninhabitable heat of mid-summer South Beach. The studio apartment she rented was pricier than most, but its proximity to the club made this palatable. Best of all, her walk to and from work allowed her to cut through Lincoln Road, a palm tree promenade lined with shops and cafes.

When Nora reached home, she unlocked the front gate. She crossed the courtyard, a tropical landscape of bright foliage and flowers, including lots of bromeliads. She went to the far stairs to the second floor, her apartment nestled in the corner. She used a separate key to unlock the outswing, wrought-iron security door. She elbowed it open as she unlocked the main door.

She went in, turned on the lights, dropped her purse atop her bed. She sat at the chair by her desk and regarded her cellphone in her hands, distrustful of it. She called Trace, convinced he wouldn't answer this late, but he did. She flinched.

"You answered," she said.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"It's not that. Come on."

"Want me to come over?"

She took a moment. "We need to talk."

"Something wrong?"

"I have to come clean on some stuff...about me." Nora wondered at herself for saying this. Wasn't the purpose of her call to break up with him? Instead, she was confessing.

"I'm listening," he said.

She thought of where to start, but the best beginning for doing so kept changing itself. A minute went by and she hadn't said anything.

"Nora, why don't I come over?" he asked.

"No, I have to get this out first. It's about how I became a dancer. What I was doing before dancing."

"Okay, you don't have to do this. Maybe I don't want to know."

"I'm positive you don't, but probably you should."

"Seriously. Don't tell me. I don't want to hear this."

"You have to, Trace. It's the truth."

"I'm coming over then."

"No, don't. Don't make this harder? *Please?*"

"I'm hanging up." He hung up.

Nora started to curse, but her air became cut off. An arm had encircled her neck and was squeezing. She arched her back and pushed with her knees. She attempted to squirm away, but the arm had a strong hold, folded directly beneath her jaw. She tried screaming when she saw her attacker's other hand holding a butcher knife. She made a choking noise.

He jabbed the knife at her, but she moved, the blade slicing the back of the chair. Strengthened from panic, she twisted her head. She got sideways enough she could chuck an elbow into her assailant's temple. He cried out and let go. She raced for the front door, but the attacker caught her by her hair. When her extensions shredded free, she continued running. She clutched the doorknob and yanked the door open, but her attacker was right there. He slammed the door closed with both hands flat. She ducked out of his arms and ran back inside the apartment, though she didn't know where she might escape to anymore. She considered the bathroom where she might lock herself inside, but her bed was in the way. She wouldn't make it in time. She headed for the window instead. She was on the second floor. She could jump.

Nora only made it a few steps before he grabbed her around her waist. He lifted her and she felt the blade enter her stomach in rapid succession. She felt the blood wetting her clothing. She stood dripping until her assailant let go and she ran for the window again.

The effort of unlatching the window and forcing it open caused her legs to give out beneath her and she collapsed.

She tried to get up again, but she could only turn over onto her back. She lay looking at her ceiling fan, the blades caked with dust. How could she have let them get so filthy? She'd just never had a reason to look up there before. She closed her eyes because they felt heavy. Nora Montoya took her last breath and died.

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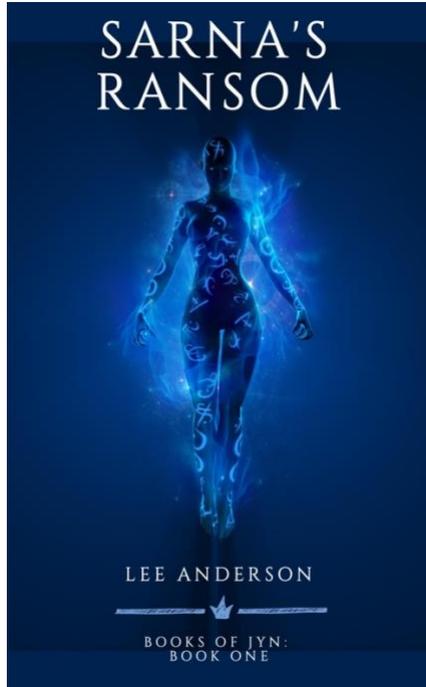
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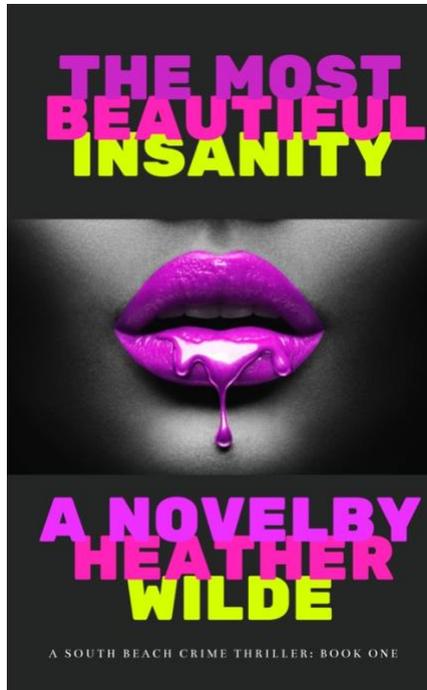
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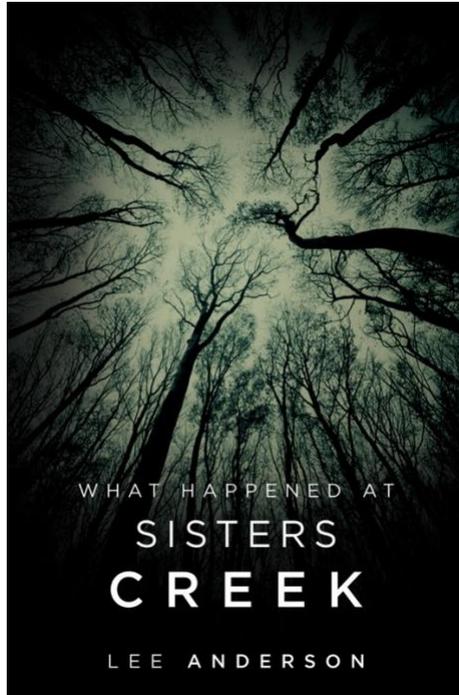
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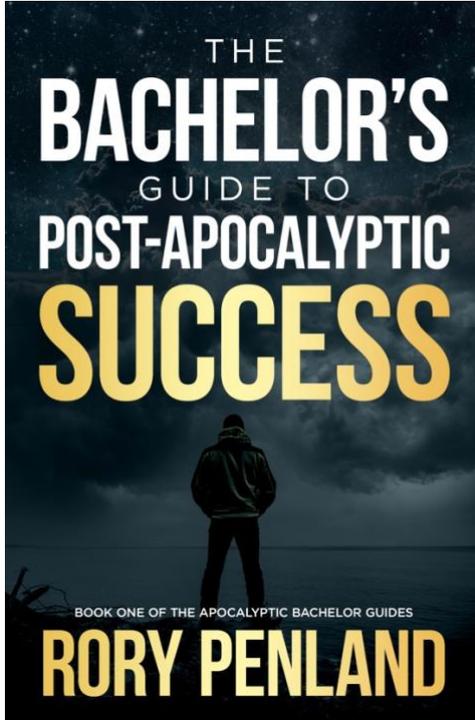
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