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# UNDER OFFER

Guarded Love - Book One

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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*Sophie*

October always made Sophie North feel like an excited child. Hopeful. Inspired. Enchanted. Any given autumn day with a chill in the air was an excuse for a warm coat and a smile. Nipping out of work mid-morning to grab a hot chocolate, or drinks around an open fire at her local pub in the evening, either way she loved what the season promised. Friday started just like that, cookies and coffees supplied by the retro food cart that traded fifty yards from her office. New guy Simon—who would hold that oh-so original title until a new, new guy presented himself—treated the old guard to a sugary brunch before morning viewings scattered seasoned real estate agents across London like the haphazard hand-sowing of wildflower seeds in a meadow. Simon had been her trusty side-kick all week, and she enjoyed showing him the ropes. Today it was Justin's turn to mentor him, but Justin was a douche, so poor

Simon's private school sensibilities and swear-jar morals were about to take one serious battering.

By late afternoon, in the midst of her showing a property, the sugar high of forgotten cookies had worn off and Sophie felt the hunger pangs of skipping lunch grip her stomach and demand she listen. Would opening someone's fridge and grabbing a snack be totally wrong? She eyed the abundant fruit bowl on the far side of the room... a handful of grapes...

Concentrate.

"A very well-appointed kitchen, every modern convenience you would expect and desire from an amazing home like this. Massive central island. Oh, and this Carrara marble you see was sourced by the present owner whilst on a trip to Tuscany. Beautiful, isn't it? Rub your palm over it, it's exceptional." Sophie swept a manicured hand over the cool, hard surface and her spellbound clients followed her lead.

"Oh yes, that's a proper worktop." The pleasant, new-money woman leaned in closer to inspect it.

"You're right. The question is will you keep this one clutter-free so we can truly appreciate it?" her husband said and laughed.

*Brilliant, they've moved in already...*

"Cheeky so and so," she said, tapping his arm.

"Shall I give you a few minutes to take another look around and maybe go upstairs on your own?" Sophie motioned to the living room. "I'll wait in here for you, take as long as you need, I'm in no hurry."

"Does the house come with cleaning staff?" the man teased. "My wife will never manage it all on her own."

Sophie smiled sweetly and bowed her head. "That can be arranged, Mr Rowlands. That can certainly be arranged."

Instead of raiding the fridge for snacks, Sophie perched herself on the edge of the eight-seat leather corner sofa as the couple disappeared upstairs. How a house like this could ever feel

homey, escaped her. More and more people lived in these big white boxes, and even more seemed desperate to buy them. She pulled her phone from her jacket pocket and brought up her appointment calendar. One more stop to make and then her week was over. Her first weekend off in two months and she was determined to enjoy it. She may not have two million pounds to spend on a house like this, but commissions were good, and she could possibly stretch to treat herself to the new Mulberry tote bag that was calling to her from Selfridges' window. Her job didn't allow for shorter than short dresses, five-inch Louboutin heels and a face of perfect make-up. Her business dress was professional and practical. She was on her feet all day, so she wore trainers between appointments. *Selling Sunset*, this was not... but a nice handbag was her weakness.

"Where do we sign?" Mr Rowlands asked as he bounced back into the room. Mrs Rowlands scurrying behind him with a huge grin on her expertly Botox-filled face.

"Seriously?" she asked as they eagerly nodded. "Good decision guys, congratulations." Sophie smiled, genuinely thrilled for them. "I think you'll be really happy here."

A phone call to her office and two or three sets of handshakes and hugs later, she grabbed her coat and bag and flung them onto the passenger seat of her cream Fiat 500, flipped on her sat-nav and waved at the departing Rowlands through the pocket-sized windscreen.

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Right, what was that address? She checked the paperwork on her dashboard. Yes, this could be an interesting one. Virginia Water, Surrey. One of the most expensive houses Newman & Foster had ever been instructed to represent. Gerald Foster, the senior partner, had presented her with his serious face when he asked her to go there tonight to photograph, detail and value it.

*“The house is worth well over fifteen million, Sophie. We want it sold before they get dual agents on it.”*

She carefully weaved her way through village, after small village, until she reached the beautiful, Virginia Water. One of the most affluent places to live in England. Famed for Wentworth Golf Club on the private Wentworth Estate and all the rich and famous people who lived in the area. Elton John and Cliff Richard to name but a few.

She was looking for Sycamore House, a six-bedroom manor set on seven acres of parkland. The current owners moved to South Africa nine months ago with their business and had wanted to keep the property until their return. Now they, looking like they may have to stay permanently, had decided to sell. Their solicitor had sent the keys over by courier along with a letter of instruction yesterday morning.

The day’s remaining light was fading, the nights were drawing in, and Christmas was just around the corner. She made a mental note to get the cleaning contractors in to give the house a good spritzing. She would get a tree delivered and decorate it herself at the end of November if it hadn’t had an offer by then.

Nothing sells a house like Christmas.

The electronic voice cut into her thoughts and told her to take the next right. She swung her small car through the brick columns that announced the long sweeping driveway. It’s block paving almost fully covered by a beautiful orange and red carpet of crunchy leaves that seemed to stretch on forever. Eventually she reached the house and parked her car a few metres from the large double-fronted oak doors.

Huge. Somewhat murder mystery in style. She smiled at the thought of writing that on the listing particulars. *“If you’re looking for a house to invite Ms Scarlet and Professor Plum to dinner, then look no further as this place is perfect. See attached floorplan for an array of ideal homicide spots. NB currently no billiard room, but plenty of scope to add one if required.”*

Sophie carried the brown manila folder to the door, fished in and pulled out the keys to the property. She smiled, shaking her head, even the keys looked oversized, ornate, and uppity.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She turned to the right where the alarm panel was located and checked the code on the information she had been given. Just as she was about to punch in the series of letters and numbers, she stopped, noticing there was no alarm sounding to turn off and the little LED panel was displaying a 'Deactivated' message.

Strange. Surely, they couldn't have forgotten to set it. Maybe there had been a power cut in the last nine months, and it had reset itself or something. That had to be it, no one in their right mind would leave a fully loaded house unprotected for that long.

Sophie scanned the vast, darkened hall for the light-switch. She couldn't see one. Maybe it was voice controlled? She was about to shout "lights" but stopped abruptly as her gaze suddenly fell to a thin strip of light coming from a gap under the doorway a few metres to her left. She looked around, half-expecting to see a masked killer with a hunting knife waiting to strike, or worse still, Colonel Mustard brandishing his lead pipe.

*Shit. Was that a bang?*

She must stop winding herself up. A creeping apprehension began to crawl over her shoulders, grouping together millimetres above her skin, luring the hairs on her neck skywards, calling them to attention. She was overthinking, she knew she was. Imagining things that weren't there. Yet she stood immobile, held her breath and listened.

The owners must have left a light on, people do it all the time when they go away on holiday, right? Make thieves believe someone is home and dissuade them from attempting to break in.

Why so jumpy?

*Because you're in a big, strange house and you're on your own. Plus, it's*

*dark outside and you've watched way too many horror movies you regret. Way too many.*

Idiot.

She had to check it out. Mr Foster would be so pissed if she didn't get the details taken care of tonight. She really didn't fancy driving all the way out here again tomorrow in daylight just because she was too scared to walk into an empty room with a light on.

She moved to the door, her modest heels echoing off the highly polished floors and unwittingly announcing her arrival to any murderers that lurked behind it. She glanced quickly over her shoulder. There was a sweeping staircase to her right, no one in sight. Okay, no sounds either. She pushed the door open with as much force as she could muster, trying to assert authority and at the same time make herself believe she could handle stuff like this.

It swung back soundlessly.

The kitchen.

She breathed out and scanned the room. It was the size of a small tennis court. The light was coming from underneath a bank of cupboards in the far corner, but she was alone.

She stepped inside. The whole room was painted brilliant white, aside from the polished dark wood of the kitchen cupboards and the tarnished silvery shine from the steel cooker-hood and refrigerator.

Sophie held her breath and stopped. She thought she heard a click and a strange whir from somewhere nearby, that's when she turned and saw it. A laptop, sitting open on the large kitchen table. It wouldn't have overly concerned her if it hadn't been for the glowing apple on its lid and the carefully placed handgun lying just to the side of it.

She grabbed her mouth just before any sound escaped. Wildly she reached into her bag, trying to find her phone. *Where is it? Where is it?* That's when she felt two large hands grab her



shoulders. They dug into her skin and pushed her forward with unrelenting speed sending her crashing against the hard flat surface of a kitchen cupboard. Her cheek hit the edge of the it, and she cried out in pain, then dropped her bag onto the floor with the contents spilling noisily around her feet in all directions.

He was behind her, gripping her, so close she could feel the heat of his body. She froze. She was going to die, here and now, this was it. She looked down and she could see his boots, the bottom of his jeans. Was this man going to end her short life?

*Please, no.*

Sophie tried to scream. He tightened his fingers around her upper arms and whispered close to her ear, “Silence, stay looking ahead, don’t turn around.”

She began to cry. Oh my god, fight, or something? She struggled but it was pointless, she was five foot three and a hundred and twenty pounds. The man loomed over her with a power she didn’t stand a chance against. If she fought him, he would hurt her, she sensed it. Knew it, even.

“Please, let me go,” she begged. “I’m just an estate agent, please. I don’t live here... this isn’t my house.”

“Shush,” he growled.

He smelled clean, like he had just showered. An odd thing to notice, yet she couldn’t stop the crazy thought pinging inside her head.

“What’s your business here?” His voice was low and steely.

Sophie sniffed. “Taking pictures, the house is going on the market in a few weeks, we got instructed yesterday. Look, just let me go, please... I’ll just go, and I’ll never come back or tell anyone.”

“Fucking hell.” He let his grip slacken on her arms. The blood rushed back through them with a prickly sting, making her flinch.

“Who do you work for?”

“Newman and Foster, London branch, off Old Kent Road,”

she answered clearly, looking directly at the kitchen cupboard that she had been pushed into.

“Don’t move,” he whispered, his voice commanding.

She nodded. He traced his firm hands from her arms and ran them down the centre of her back, outwards to her shoulder blades and then over her hips. She began to shake uncontrollably. She felt him crouch behind her. Felt his breath on her lower back and then his fingertips on her legs, running up over her stockings and under her knee-length skirt. Hot tears trailed down her face and an audible sob escaped her throat. She felt him freeze.

“Don’t cry.”

“It’s hard not to,” she snapped back. Lifting her hand to her face to check she wasn’t bleeding.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said and stood up.

She wanted to see his face, but on the other hand she really didn’t. Knowing what he looked like wouldn’t change what he was going to do to her, it would just make it more real.

“Really?”

“I’m not going to kill you,” he repeated in the same low voice.

“Please don’t rape me.” She tried to make her voice sound assertive and controlled. She stopped suddenly as she thought she heard him snicker at her words.

“Okay.”

“Please,” she begged.

“I said, okay.” He bent down and she saw his hand by her shoe. He picked up her phone and purse from where they had fallen from her bag.

“So, will you let me go? I don’t care what you’re doing here. I honestly couldn’t care less. You might live here. You probably have a licence for that gun, right? I just want to leave quietly and—”

“Just because I’m not going to kill you, or I don’t want to rape you...” His voice caught again as if he were finding the

whole thing amusing. “Doesn’t mean I can let you go; you’ve walked in here and put yourself right in the middle of something, Mrs—?”

“Miss North,” she corrected him.

*Why the hell are you telling him accurate information?*

“Okay then *Miss North*. You’ve seen... Well, what you’ve seen means, unfortunately, you’re a loose end with too much information.” His voice trailed off as if he were half-talking to himself, like this conversation could be about sandwich fillings, like she might not even be in the room. It scared her that he was so casual.

“So, what then?” she asked more carefully.

“I don’t know yet.”

“You’re not going to torture me, are you? Because that’s not rape nor murder.” God, she was babbling, giving him ideas, whetting his appetite for blood. The fear and reality of the situation gripped her, and the sadistic part of her own human nature needed to know her fate. Not to mention her cheek was burning with the pain of being slammed against a cupboard and, to make matters worse, she desperately needed to pee.

“Thanks for clarifying that for me, *Miss North*,” he replied and sighed.

“What? Sorry for asking so many silly questions, I’m sure you find it so amusing! What am I supposed to think after having my face flung into a kitchen cupboard and my bits felt up and groped?” She seethed with anger at his dismissive attitude, suddenly unable to keep a lid on it.

He smothered another laugh. “I didn’t feel your *bits* up. I frisked you. Checked you for a weapon or wire.”

“Oh, is that what you call it?” Where was this stupid confidence coming from? “Why would I have a weapon? Be serious!”

“Careful, *Miss North*.” He placed his right hand on her shoulder and squeezed it.

“Sorry, I’m sorry.” She was silently crying and shaking, both

anger and fear coming at her in rolling waves of uncapped emotion. “I’m scared. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Look, relax, I need to think for a moment.”

“Okay.”

“Good.” He breathed out heavily. “Just relax.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“I said I need to think. Be quiet,” he ordered.

“Sorry. I... really need to use the bathroom,” she whispered.

She felt him tense behind her and he gripped the edge of the worktop with his fingers.

“Please don’t make me wet myself.” She let her forehead fall against the cupboard.

He grabbed for her left wrist, then the right, he held them together at the small of her back as if she were wearing handcuffs.

“What are you doing?”

He walked her past the computer and gun, towards the utility room and toilet at the back of the kitchen. She glanced at the computer as they passed.

“Eyes facing forward.”

Sophie nodded. “Sorry.”

He pushed her into the small room and closed the door. “Forty seconds and don’t try anything stupid.”

Inside she sat. Hands shaking. Now she was here, why couldn’t she pee? Damn it, this can’t be happening.

He tapped on the door after about a minute. “Time’s up.”

“Hold on, I can’t go, I’m too nervous, just wait.” Why was she just saying out loud everything that came into her head? “Just give me another minute or two.”

“Twenty seconds, sweetheart, that’s it,” he said through the door.

*Sweetheart!*

She wanted to hurt him. Sophie stood and tried the small window, but found it locked. She eased open the drawer under

the sink and looked for anything she could use as a weapon... cotton wool and baby wipes.

*No.*

“Now.” The word made her jump. “Back your way out to me, same as before. Don’t look at me. Don’t turn around,” he warned.

She did as she was told, and once again he grabbed her arms and walked her over to a kitchen chair, forcing her to sit, like a perp being interviewed by the cops. She noticed there was a large glass of water in front of her.

“Drink. You’ll need it, the adrenaline will pass soon,” he ordered.

“What if it’s drugged?”

“Why are you asking me that question?” He laughed.

“Is it drugged?” she asked.

“No. It’s water.”

“Fuck off.” She was getting sick of his sarcasm. “If you’re going to hurt me, just hurry up and do it already. Stop playing games.” She looked at her hands, they were shaking so bad, and she felt the sudden urge to just turn around and face him, so she started to move.

He touched the back of her head with his fingers. “Don’t do anything silly. I’ve told you on a few occasions that I don’t intend to hurt you. So, please be good and I can keep to my word.”

“If you’re some kind of sex trafficker you won’t get very much money for me. I might look a bit younger than twenty-eight but I’m not a nubile eighteen-year-old,” she stopped and corrected her statement. “Shit... not that I want you to abduct an eighteen-year-old either.”

“Drink the water.”

“No.”

“Drink the water.”

“No.”

“Okay, be like that. Don’t drink it. You won’t get another offer.”

She took the glass to her lips and drained it in about three seconds. She had needed it and more besides.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I didn’t do it for you,” she snapped back.

“I know.”

“I hate you.”

“I know that too. What’s your full name? I need to make a call.”

“Sa... Sophie North.” She considered lying this time but chickened out at the last moment.

“What?”

“Sophie,” she repeated. “North.”

She thought she heard him curse. Then she heard her purse snap open, she recognised the sound, and hated the image of him touching her private things.

She waited. What was he doing?

He pulled her up suddenly and marched her back to the toilet and pushed her forwards. “Stay in there until I tell you to come out.”

She stumbled into the small room, sat back onto the closed lid of the toilet, feeling dumbfounded. *What the hell?*