



The Zebra Wore Fishnets

Pepper Espinoza

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the loyal readers who have supported my fledgling career.
Thank you.

Chapter 1

Belle munched on chips as she listened to Willow ramble about her day, school, her horrid professors, and the bug she thought she was coming down with. Belle didn't mind acting as a sounding board. That's what best friends do, after all. But she wished Willow would regale her with sexy adventures, tales of excitement and intrigue, maybe something involving pirates.

Belle crumpled the now empty bag of chips and began to wander around her large loft as she listened to Willow's ramblings, picking up trash and clothes as she went. Her mother would die if she saw the state of her apartment. She didn't even own a vacuum, though she did borrow one from the nice old lady downstairs for special occasions. How much did vacuums cost these days, anyway? Were they major investments? Target probably had some...

"Belle!"

"What? What? I'm here."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Um, which part?" Belle looped a curl of hair around her finger and studied the ends. They looked awful. She would have to visit the salon soon.

"You always do this."

The clear anger in Willow's voice made her perk up and pay attention. The topic had apparently shifted to something important. "I was listening! Okay, so, what were you saying?"

"Daniel asked me out."

Belle blinked, drawing a blank on the name. "Um ... good?"

"Good? How can you say that? I knew you were the wrong person to talk to about this."

"Me? Your best friend? The wrong person? What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, ever since Paul dumped you, you've been completely useless when it comes to men."

Belle frowned, blinked, stung. "First, Paul did not dump me. I dumped him. Second, just because I've been looking doesn't mean I haven't been *looking*, you know? Now, tell me about Daniel. He's the TA, right?"

"Yes, he's the TA. Anyway, he asked me to the graduation bash next week."

"And this is a problem ... because?" Belle really didn't remember Daniel. She supposed it meant he didn't have any horrendous birth defects or horns or something.

As she tried to place the name with a face, she opened the blinds and surveyed the dark apartment across the alley. She hadn't seen anybody there for at least two weeks, maybe longer. A rather pathetic situation all around because she missed the two strangers. She didn't mean to spy on her neighbors, and she would never pry, but life was sweeter when they were there.

"It's a problem because ... well ... I kinda like him."

"I see."

"You know what happens when a really great, good-looking guy likes you?"

Belle snorted. "No, what? There seems to be a dearth of great, good-looking men

around these parts.”

“Everything gets weird.”

Belle shrugged. That was true. Things *could* get weird. “So what? You just want to be friends with this guy?”

“No, I want to rip his pants off with my teeth.”

“I know the feeling.”

Belle was familiar with that particular urge. She eyed the empty apartment across the alley again. She had spent many long nights battling that very urge. Sooner or later, she’d have to move for her very piece of mind. Her mind darted back to the previous month when she had been up with a bad cold and happened to look out the window. There, as larger than life...

The lights across the street turned on. And there they were. An inadvertent squeal escaped Belle’s lips. She covered her mouth in horror.

“What’s wrong with you?” Willow asked.

“Oh, the Dynamic Duo is back,” Belle sighed. “They’ve been on vacation for like, ever.”

They looked to be in their late twenties, but Belle didn’t know for sure. She couldn’t decide which one was her favorite. The tall, dark, and handsome one definitely had several things going for him. Amazing build, good-looking face, great smile, nice hair. She wanted to lick him all over.

Not that she didn’t want to lick the blonde one. A bit shorter than his statuesque roommate, he had a lean, swimmer’s body. Whip-chord thin, but well-muscled. And so good-looking he bordered on pretty, with a killer smile.

“Who?” Willow asked.

She grabbed the chair and pulled it over to the window. Rather shameless, she knew. They were both carrying large suitcases, with garment bags slung over their shoulders. She couldn’t help but notice how tan and healthy they looked. She imagined them stretched out on a sandy beach, the sun on their fine bodies. In Speedos. They would definitely wear tiny little briefs. And wet. Sun glistening off well-toned, muscled, wet, sand-covered bodies. Oh, the world could be so cruel. Why they had been gallivanting like Greek Gods on some exotic beach, she had been stuck in a boring job and a dead social life.

“My neighbors across the alley,” Belle explained. “Two of the most gorgeous men I have ever seen. I mean, really.”

“So you’re spying on them?”

“No. I’m not *spying*. Sheesh. But is it my problem if they don’t close their blinds? And did I mention they walk around in their underwear? Did I mention they don’t always *wear* underwear?”

In the beginning, Belle had felt guilty about her tendency to stare at them for hours. Just because they walked around naked in front of their window didn’t mean she had the right to look. But as her own love life spiraled into a dark abyss from whence no light could escape and no living thing could survive, she got over her inhibitions.

Willow whistled softly. “No you didn’t mention that part. You should go introduce yourself.”

Belle snorted. “No.” She could just imagine that conversation. *Hi, my name is Belle. I’m the creepy girl from across the alley that stares through the window at you all the*

time. But I really am harmless. No really. Who would bail her out if they called the cops? And they would.

“Oh! Give them a show! See if they look!” Willow suggested. Belle couldn't tell if she was teasing or not.

“Why would I do that?” Not that she hadn't considered it, once or twice. But Belle wasn't all convinced *anybody* would want to look at her naked body again, let alone two super-hot strangers.

“Well if they stare at you, they're probably not gay.”

“I don't think that's a very accurate test. I mean, if somebody was parading naked in front of your face without warning, wouldn't you look?”

“Well ... maybe ... but do it anyway,” she encouraged.

Belle looked out the window again. They were undressing. Talking while removing one layer at a time. This part never got old. First, the jackets, then the ties, then the shoes, shirts, pants, and socks. She wasn't proud that she had this knowledge. It wasn't something she shared.

Belle had a good view of their entire apartment. The only rooms she couldn't see were the bedrooms, which, as it turned out, were the only rooms she *wanted* to see. The blonde one with the tight body sprawled out on the couch, flipping through a magazine. The tall, dark and handsome one was cooking in the kitchen—cooking actual food. Belle couldn't help but be impressed—her kitchen was where the chips and diet Coke lived.

“Can I assume from the long silence that they're doing something interesting?” Willow asked.

“What? No, they aren't doing anything.” *Except making me die a little.* “I'm just ... admiring the view, really.”

“Well, I've got to go, though I do love to listen to you admire the view. I have a ten page paper due tomorrow afternoon that I haven't even started yet,” Willow sighed.

“Thank God this whole college thing is almost over.”

“Yeah, I'll catch you tomorrow for lunch.”

“Don't do anything to crazy.”

“I never do,” Belle muttered as she hung up the phone. Tall Dark and Handsome had left the kitchen and carried two plates into the living room. Blonde and Lean took his plate without looking up. “God,” she sighed. They were *so pretty*.

They could be straight as an arrow and it wouldn't have mattered, anyway. Their paths never crossed and she would never have the courage to introduce herself to them either. Something insanely stupid would come flying out of her mouth, she was sure. She noticed Blonde and Lean sneer at something Dark and Handsome said. He did that a lot—sneer. He had a good mouth for sneering. A good mouth for smiling. A good mouth for many things, she suspected.

Belle thought about what Willow suggested. Tease them a little. She couldn't walk around naked but ... there was that little red thing she never wore that was so gauzy it appeared to be made entirely out of dental floss. She had bought it for Paul, but that relationship headed south, past the equator, before she ever had a chance to use it. Not something she usually lounged around the house in, not even something she wanted to own, but maybe...

And the black fishnets that were buried in her sock drawer.

Belle rolled her eyes. She was being silly. She could probably walk around the house

butt-naked and they wouldn't notice. Or if they did notice—hey, naked woman right in front of their face—they wouldn't care. What had Paul told her? “Lose weight or no one will ever fuck you again?” He had been a prince of a guy. “How did I let him slip away,” she muttered.

She dug around her kitchen until she found her bottle of Bacardi. Bacardi was good. An old friend, she always kept a bottle or two on hand. Unfortunately, she didn't have any tequila. Her first choice when it came to liquid courage. Clutching the bottle, she went to her room, found the little red number, and after some consideration, the fishnets as well.

Belle undressed and studied herself in the mirror. In the past six months, she had definitely filled out. There were several pairs of pants that no longer fit, including her favorite pair of jeans, which was unfortunate. She didn't think she looked that bad though. If anything, she looked *curvy*.

Curvy. She liked that. She had curves.

She ran her hands down her legs. They were still smooth from the last waxing. Not that it mattered, of course. She didn't need to impress anybody. But if she were trying to impress somebody, she might consider painting her toenails. They always looked so cute after a pedicure.

Belle pulled the chemise over her head and admired the effect. The ruffles at the top accented her tits without looking silly. She could see the outline of her body through the almost-sheer red material. She stepped into the matching pair of underwear. She held her hair up, then let it fall, deciding which would work best. Ultimately, she chose to leave her dark hair tumble free around her shoulders.

The fishnet stockings did not quite complete the outfit. Something was missing, but Belle couldn't decide what. Did she need make-up? Maybe some cherry-red lipstick and some dark eye shadow. It would help, but it didn't quite round the outfit out.

Biting her lip, Belle studied her closet. A robe? Jewelry? The pink boa she bought last year for Halloween? Her eyes fell on her red stiletto heels she had bought years ago. A bell dinged in her head. Perfect.

Once the shoes were strapped on, she paraded in front of the mirror, Bacardi in hand. Sashaying and wiggling her ass, she couldn't help but wonder who that hot chick in the mirror was. Dressed to kill, but no prey in sight.

Belle pursed her lips and batted her eyes. “Maybe it's time to introduce myself after all.”

Chapter 2

Belle sashayed into the living room, prepared to be cute and flirty and bouncy and irresistible, only to find the apartment across the way dark. “Figures,” she muttered. “I’m ready to party and they turn in early.”

Belle collapsed on the couch in front of the window and sipped her rum. She didn’t feel like changing. In fact, she didn’t feel like moving at all. She pretended to watch TV, but was more absorbed in keeping an eye on their apartment. They might come back into view at any time, and she didn’t want to miss a second. Feeling silly in her ridiculous get-up, she pulled a blanket over herself, snuggling with the bottle.

Belle was half-listening to the Daily Show when she noticed the light turn on across the alley. She turned to watch them, her vision blurry. She thought she saw Blonde and Lean wave at her. She blinked and did a double take. He was standing by the window, smiling. *Waving at her*. She stood up and wrapped the blanket around herself, embarrassed at having been caught. How long had she been gawking at them without moving?

Blonde and Lean turned his head and said something to Tall and Handsome, who then joined him at the window. Belle was frozen to the spot, but her head was clearing fast. First, she needed to run to her room. Then she needed to change into something flannel, long and modest. She imagined them calling the police—she probably would if some drunk, half-naked, pervert were leering at her in the privacy of her own home. When the police came, she would have to look respectable and innocent. Before she could move, Tall and Handsome waved at her too, wiggling his fingers. Blonde and Lean pointed at her, and then beckoned for her. *Did he just really do that?*

Belle’s eyes widened as he ran his finger gently down Tall and Dark’s arm—caressing him. Dark and Handsome wore black, silk briefs. Belle could see him outlined clearly, could see the way his cock jumped as Blonde and Lean’s hand moved lower and lower. *I’m drunk. I’m hallucinating. I should probably call 911 because I have extreme alcohol poisoning and it’s destroying my brain.*

She should look away. She should close the curtains and go to bed. But then, if it really was some wonderful hallucination, she should probably enjoy it while she could. She’d hallucinated before. It was never this pleasant.

She thought she would die when Lean and Blonde pressed his lips against Dark and Handsome’s shoulder then bit it while his hand covered Handsome’s chest. Handsome looked at her and lifted an eyebrow. She had no idea what the hell was going on. *What are they doing? What are they doing?*

With nerveless fingers she reached for the phone and dialed Willow’s number without looking at the pad. This had to be documented, put on record. Either the best hallucination ever or a miracle on par with changing water into wine. Either way, she needed a witness. In a daze, she raised it to her ear and watched as Blonde and Lean’s hand brushed over Handsome’s chest, then over his hip. Blondie’s fingers paused at the waistband. Belle’s mouth ran dry.

“Hello?” Willow said. It took several seconds for Belle to find her voice.

“They’re standing in front of the window, and I think they’re going to have sex.” No

doubt, they both wanted to have sex. Their cocks were hard and almost bursting through their briefs.

“Um, are you watching?”

“I think they're ... I think they want me to.” What else was she supposed to think? They were both staring at her with intense eyes.

“They want you to watch? What are they doing?”

“Um...” Belle nearly whimpered. “The blonde is licking the brunette's chest. Oh my God, he's licking his chest and around the nipple...now he's stopping ... and ... Looking at me again. He's like ... smiling at me. They're both smiling at me and... Oh Willow.”

“What? What?”

“He's...” Belle caught her breath. “He put his hand down Handsome's shorts and he's stroking him ... really, really slowly. And he's ... waving me over with his other hand. Willow, are we awake?” She cradled the phone against her shoulder and pinched her arm. Definite pain there. And *definite* pain between her legs. Her clit throbbed and her pussy ached. All the blood rushed south, leaving her light-headed and tipsy.

“I'm definitely awake, which means you're awake, and why are you still talking to me?”

“Holy fuck, what is he doing with his tongue?” Belle asked.

“I don't know ... go over and *find out*.” Sure, Willow made it sound so easy.

Belle walked slowly over to the window and breathed heavily against the glass. She had to pause and wipe the fog away. Blonde and Lean's hand moved faster beneath the black silk, and though she couldn't *see* anything, it was still enough to make her panties moist and her knees weak. They weren't looking at her anymore, their attention focused on each other. Handsome ran his hands down Blondie's back, and pushed Blondie's sweats down and revealed his smooth, perfect ass.

Handsome slid his finger between Blondie's cheeks, and she could easily see him shudder in response, his wrist working faster as he knelt in front of Handsome. Belle dropped the phone heedlessly and slipped her hand down her stomach, then between her thighs. She watched as Blondie teased Handsome's thighs with his mouth, sucking and biting. He moved his head closer and closer to Handsome's cock, and slowly started to pull the briefs down.

Before he revealed anything, Blonde and Lean turned around and winked at her. She almost dropped to her knees. He freed Handsome's hard-on and held it up to his lips. Belle's mouth dropped open and her brain misfired. No way this was happening. No way, no way, no way. Her wrist moved in jerky circles and her clit was hard and throbbing against her finger.

Blondie licked the head of Handsome's cock and then pulled its considerable length into his mouth. Handsome gripped the back of Blondie's head and pumped his hips forward, forcing his cock deep into the other man's mouth. Blondie cupped Handsome's ass, and Belle could see the muscles of his back flexing as he moved his head.

Belle's hand was moving furiously now. She had never given much thought to watching two men have sex. But this little show turned her on more than anything else. A guilty thrill raced down her spine as Handsome looked up and made eye contact again. She slid her slick fingers into her pussy, imagining his cock thrusting into her, hitting her g-spot. She fell forward, unable to remain standing, and caught herself on the chair.

Handsome closed his eyes and his head dropped back. He jerked his hips against

Blondie's face, and Belle could taste his sticky-salty come on her lips. She used her other hand on her clit, pinching it slightly between her fingers. Her muscles tensed and snapped as she reached climax.

Belle thought they would both leave, go into their bedroom and out of sight. She'd hate to see them go, but Blondie was already standing up and scrambling across the room. He grabbed something—she couldn't see what. He turned his back to the window and she pulled her eyes over to Dark and Handsome, who was still standing naked in the window with an impressive hard-on.

Blondie returned to the window and held a piece of paper. In big, bold letters, it said "Come Over—#19".

Come over? Come over? Oh God ... Oh God ... I can't go over there ... oh God... Lean and Blonde tilted his head and smiled inquisitively. Belle didn't give herself a moment to think. She didn't second guess herself or analyze the situation to death. She couldn't turn them down, couldn't even pretend she wanted to. Belle nodded, and in response, they both smiled widely. Beautiful, bright smiles that made her heart stop.

Dizzy from the alcohol and the pure lust, it took several tries to walk across the room. She didn't want to turn her back on them; she didn't want to stop looking at them. She was scared if she looked away, even for a second, they would disappear like wisps of a sweet dream. Belle kept looking over her shoulder as she crossed her apartment, and they hadn't moved. The sign was still up against the window. She blinked her eyes and the sign was still there. She grabbed her coat and the sign was still there. She turned her lights off and the sign was still there. Burned into her brain.

It only took minutes to get downstairs and duck out the side door into the alley. Once she was outside, the cold air slapped her across the face and cleared her head. Belle sucked her breath in and braced herself against the door jam, weak and indecisive. This wasn't normal. She wasn't supposed to do this. What if they were psychos? What if they hurt her? What if she couldn't get away? What if this was all a sick, twisted game?

Belle turned and opened the door, prepared to return to her loft. It just didn't make any sense. Hadn't she been raised to be a smart, sensible girl? Was this a smart, sensible sort of thing to do? No, it was not. Besides, she was drunk. Drunken women shouldn't go unescorted to the apartment of two handsome, well-endowed, gorgeous men...

She closed her eyes and pictured their perfect bodies ... and smiles ... and the invitation...

Squaring her shoulders, she turned around and crossed the narrow alley and let herself into the building's side door. What if she didn't go up there, live to be one hundred, and regret the missed opportunity every day? Did she really want to be on her deathbed and obsess over what she had missed out on?

She climbed the long flight of steps slowly, focusing on each one. If she didn't, she'd probably miss her step and fall down and break her neck. The shoes didn't help.

Apartment #19 was half way down a long hall. She stood outside of it for several seconds, her hands raised to knock. *Should I knock? Oh God, what if he opens the door? What if he opens the door? What if he doesn't open the door? What do I say? Hi? Hi I'm Belle? Hi, I'm Belle can you fuck me now?* Somehow, none of those seemed quite right.

Finally, her knuckles came down against the door and she bit her lower lip. The door opened immediately, and before she could say anything, Blondie grabbed her hand, dragged her into the room, and slammed the door shut behind her. He lifted her hand to

his mouth and smiled wickedly.

“What's your name, pet?”

“Belle,” she answered.

“I'm Aden; the one with the funny hair is Kevin.” He backed her up against the door, and smoothed his fingers down her bare arm. His chest was close enough to kiss. He ducked his head and breathed softly, the whisper tickling her skin and sending the shivers down her spine. “We're glad you could make it.”

“I'm ... uh...” She didn't know what to say, but she didn't have to say anything. He kissed her neck, just below her ear, then playfully nibbled on the skin while he ran his hands up her arms and around her shoulders.

Belle brushed her fingertips against his chest. He felt insanely hot. She buried her face against his shoulder and inhaled deeply as he continued to kiss, lick, and nibble her neck. He smelled like spicy cologne and sweat, and just below that, faint cigarette smoke. Somehow, that masculine scent made her realize this was all very real. She didn't know what to think, but she knew what to do.

Her hands were hungry for his body and she no longer hesitated. She touched him everywhere she could reach, and almost forgot about the other man in the room until she noticed he had stepped behind Aden, and his hands joined Aden's on her body.

“You need to learn to share, Aden.”

Aden obliged and stepped to the side, giving Kevin room. Now they both pinned her against the door. She felt overwhelmed by their smell, heat, mouths, fingers and the sounds they made when she touched them. She didn't know what she expected, but it wasn't this suffocating pressure. She put a hand on each of them and pushed.

They both stepped back, with nearly identical questioning looks. “What's wrong pet?”

“I need ... to breathe...” Belle needed to make a decision. If she ran now, they would let her go. If she remained, she would be turning herself over to them. Surrendering herself to their mouths and hands.

“Hear that?” Aden hit Kevin in the chest good-naturedly. “Back off.” He looked back at Belle with a serious expression. “Don't be afraid to speak up, yeah?”

She nodded, her decision irrevocably made when she looked into his stunning blue eyes. “Just needed to catch my breath.” Belle flashed them a shy smile, “I'm better now.”

“Good.” Without warning, Kevin scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom, Aden following behind. She ran her hands across his chest and shoulders, down his back, up his neck, and through his short, soft hair. She kissed his shoulders—he tasted salty and smelled remarkably like Aden.

Kevin laid her on the bed, and pulled her chemise over her head. She resisted the urge to cover her chest with her arms. Aden linked his fingers around her pants and pulled them down. The backs of his knuckles dragged down her thighs slowly. She watched with fascination as he exposed her naked body to their hungry eyes.

Kevin removed her shoes, rolled the stockings off her legs, and then started at her instep with his mouth, trailing wet, hot kisses up her leg, along her calf, to the back of her thigh. Aden returned his attention to her neck, one hand cupping her breast lightly. His mouth was as hot and demanding as Kevin's, and it felt like his lips were burning her, leaving a sizzling trail across her neck, shoulders and chest.

Belle turned her head and caught Aden's mouth. She took him by surprise with her

hungry kiss, but he kissed her back without hesitation. Belle clutched the back of his head so he couldn't pull away and kissed him fiercely. Aden was excellent and tasted delicious, and she didn't think she could get enough of the way he felt against her mouth. She increased the pressure, holding his head even tighter, and felt the sharp points of his teeth dig into her lips.

Kevin continued his exploration up her thigh, his fingers following his mouth. His lips brushed against the curve of her thigh, and he gently pushed her legs open. Belle opened them and nearly jumped off the bed when his fingers brushed against her wet, aching lips. She felt him move his head between her thighs, and thought he would go right for the center of her, but instead he turned his head, gently sucking on the delicate skin on the inside of her thigh.

Aden lifted his head only for a moment to catch his breath, and she immediately reached for him again. He massaged her breast, and his palm worked against her nipple until it was hard as a pebble.

Belle felt like she was being torn between their mouths and hands. Her blood rushed south, and she ached for them to stop teasing her. Aden's kisses made her lightheaded, and the way Kevin kissed and licked her everywhere *except* where she wanted him to almost made her scream with frustration. She would have if Aden's tongue wasn't plunged down her throat. The bright tendrils of pleasure rolling from her breasts up her throat almost choked her, and she thought for sure she had to be dreaming. Or dying.

Belle moaned and bucked her hips, shamelessly grabbing the back of Kevin's head and guiding it to where she wanted it. With her other hand, she reached blindly for Aden's cock, until she found it and curled her fingers around the hard, thick shaft. She stroked him and was rewarded with a low moan from deep in his throat.

Kevin spread her lips open and found the head of her clit with his tongue, flicking it over her quickly. Belle screamed into Aden's mouth with surprise, her hand jerking on his cock. She tensed, almost ready to come again from the minimum contact. Aden's hands were all over her body now, rubbing and pinching her nipples, caressing her stomach, finding each sensitive and delicate spot, rubbing it with just the right amount of pressure. He eased up on her mouth, the hard kisses becoming sensuous and searching, gentle.

Kevin started licking her faster, his tongue moving over her expertly. The each time he touched her clit, it sent a shockwave all the way through her body, from the back of her teeth to her toes. Belle closed her eyes, and pulled back from Aden to catch her breath. She panted for air, more and more lightheaded with each passing second. Her body tensed and she bucked against his face, trying to create more friction.

Aden leaned forward, and whispered in her ear as he continued to rub her body. "We watched you too, Belle. Watched you and talked about how much we both wanted to meet you, to feel your hot, beautiful body. Fantasized about you—we missed you while we were away? Did you miss us?"

She nodded. Kevin slowed his movements, but to compensate, licked her harder.

"I want to see you come, Belle." Aden pinched her nipple, and her eyes shot open as pleasure-pain roared to her head.

Her body tensed and she opened her mouth to scream, but all the air was knocked out of her body. The best she could do as the world shook around her was whimper and gasp desperately for breath.

As soon as she relaxed against the bed, Kevin lifted his head and stood up. Belle

watched him with curious, heavy-lidded eyes, but Aden distracted her when he rolled onto her body. He kissed her again and then smiled against her lips. "My turn to feel you come around me."

Belle could only nod. She was in full agreement with taking turns. Taking turns would be super. Great. Fantastic. As long as they didn't stop.

Aden knelt between her legs and positioned himself. She braced herself, but wasn't anywhere close to prepared for the way he felt inside of her. He stretched her and touched her everywhere. Before she even had a chance to catch her breath, she was breathless again.

Aden rested his forehead against hers, and all she could see were his bright blue eyes reflecting in the moonlight. He started to move, pushing deeper into her, then pulling back ever so slightly. Pushing deep, pulling back just a little bit more each time. She didn't try to make him go faster, she just ran her hands down his back and clutched him tightly. Belle was so engrossed in the measured, careful way he moved in her that she didn't even notice Kevin kneel behind Aden.

Aden pulled out of her all the way, and when he did, Kevin slid his cock into Aden's ass. Aden thrust forward and Kevin moved with him. Belle's eyes flew open when she felt Kevin's added weight and the force of his thrust push Aden even deeper into her. Kevin grabbed one of her hands and held it tightly as he continued pushing into Aden, not breaking the rhythm.

Belle's eyes moved from Aden's face to Kevin's and back again. Even through the growing, murky fog of pleasure she couldn't help but be fascinated by the way they looked together. Aden's eyes were screwed shut, his breath coming in harsh gasps, the muscles in his neck standing out. Kevin had a look of extreme concentration, his face devoid of any other expression. She thought maybe he was holding himself back.

Belle put her hand on the back of Aden's head and brought his ear to her mouth. "Faster," she breathed. "Please, please faster..."

He picked up the speed, thrusting faster and faster. His breathing quickened and so did Kevin's. She couldn't even hear her own moans and pleas above them. Aden finally moaned low in his throat again, almost a growl. The growl sent shocks through her system. She answered with a growl of her own.

Kevin gave her hand a squeeze, his grip tightened and tightened, and she realized they were both close to coming. She could feel her own orgasm, growing, growing with each thrust. The force of it almost terrified her, the feelings becoming more and more intense. She didn't know what it would take to push over the edge but when she did...

Aden ducked his head and gently bit her nipple. As before, the pleasure-pain that bloomed through her body was the final shove she needed. She howled and shook with the force of her relief. She could feel her muscles clench Aden tightly, feel him shake, heard the slight moans that turned into a howl as well, both of their voices rising to the ceiling and then crashing around them as Kevin thrust into Aden for one final time.

Aden rolled off of her and Kevin fell forward, landing on Aden's chest. Aden grunted, but didn't push the other man off. Belle wanted to do more, but suddenly, she was exhausted. She struggled to keep her eyes open and she seemed to have lost all ability to control her muscles. All she could do was lay in the middle of the bed and wait until the blood flowed through her body again and her breath came easily.

She felt, rather than saw, Kevin finally straighten and stand up. He didn't try to move

either one of them, but pulled a few blankets out of the closet. She opened her eyes and saw him spread the blankets over them, then noticed that Aden had already dropped off.

“You can sleep too,” Kevin said softly.

Belle nodded. “Do you want me to move?”

Kevin waved his hand. “Whatever is comfortable.”

She turned over and faced Aden, resting her head on his shoulder, curling against him, and leaving plenty of room for Kevin on the other side. Soon she felt the dip in the bed as Kevin stretched out next to her on his back. One hand rubbed her back until she started to drift again. She closed her eyes, satisfied and content.

Chapter 3

The morning after The Night, she had beaten a hasty retreat; gathering up her lingerie and coat and fleeing across the alley, lest somebody see her. They had invited her to stay for breakfast, and Kevin was already cooking some sort of egg thing that smelled delicious. Aden told her she could even have breakfast in bed, if she wanted.

Indulging in the fantasy would have been nice, but the real world pressed in and she couldn't stay. Of course, the recriminations began immediately. Had Aden used a condom? She didn't remember. How many times had they actually had sex? She couldn't remember. Most of the night was a blur after she arrived. That not only made her feel guilty, it made her sad. The night of her life and she barely remembered any of it.

Too bad they didn't record it. Of course, if they had recorded it, she wouldn't have even noticed.

Three weeks after the fact, she alternately regretted it and longed for another opportunity. She couldn't remember the details, but she thought about it every day. Even at work.

Belle shoveled her salad into her mouth as she checked her email and scanned the worksheets in front of her. She was supposed to have a leisurely hour for lunch, but that hour usually morphed into thirty quick minutes at her desk. Thirty minutes she spent surreptitiously looking over her shoulder, waiting for Ms. Redding to bustle out of her office and grill Belle about all of her activities. Ms. Redding didn't bother her every day, but enough to put Belle on edge and make her stomach grumble with nerves as the lunch hour approached.

She forgot about Ms. Redding as she scrolled through her email. Most of the messages were work related or obnoxious spam, but one name jumped off the screen. Abigail Jones. A woman she hadn't seen or talked to in at least six months, if not more.

What could she want? Belle thought with a twinge of dread. Abigail had been a good friend of hers when she had been dating Paul, but once they broke it off, Abigail had cut off all contact. Abby had always liked Paul more anyway.

Belle, the brief message started, I thought I should email you and let you know that Paul is working out a publishing contract. Maybe you'd like to know. Abby.

Belle frowned at the cryptic letter. Paul was signing a publishing contract for what? Did he write a book? The only time he was interested in writing a book was when she had been writing a book...

Her eyes widened. He wouldn't, would he? Had he stolen her book? The book had been a labor of love that had consumed most of her college career. She had shown it to a few professors, and they were all encouraging about her chances to get it published, but she had been too shy to pursue it further.

The reminder of the book prompted memories that should have remained dead. Memories of a glorious, brilliant, creative time. Despite the crash and burn that came later, it had been the happiest time of her life. She had been in love with a wonderful man, and that love had somehow tapped previously unknown depths of creativity. Those hours hunched over Paul's laptop had been full of magic and exhilaration. And later, still on a high from her accomplishments, Paul would take her to bed and show her other

realms of magic.

She had been twenty and dabbling in creative writing when she met Paul in Advanced Prose. The most attractive young man in the class, Belle had thought he could easily be the most gorgeous guy on campus. She had been smitten with him from the first day of class, and she was thrilled when he asked her out.

Their mutual love of writing led them to the first conversations about the book. They started by bouncing ideas back and forth, mostly trying to make each other laugh. But something began to form, taking shape in her mind. Belle had been compelled to type out a rough draft of the first chapter. Paul had loved it, and she had been overjoyed with the praise he bestowed on her and her work. So the second chapter followed, then another, and another...

In her mind, that manuscript was tied completely and irrevocably to her relationship with Paul. When their relationship spun out of control, she lost all the passion and devotion she had put into it. She didn't want to see the book ever again, much less pour her heart and soul into revising it and selling it.

If he did intend to publish it under his name, what could she do about it? Hire an attorney? She didn't have that kind of money lying around. Besides, did she even have proof that it was her book and not his?

Belle shook her head. No, she was jumping to conclusions. Paul loved to write. He was never a particularly great or innovative author, but he was competent and could think of good stories. Maybe Abigail just wanted to rub it in Belle's face. Maybe even at Paul's request. They could both be rather petty people.

She wouldn't let it upset her. So what if he was publishing a book? Belle had given up on that dream a long time ago. Despite her resolution, she couldn't silence the voice in the back of her head that screamed with the injustice of the situation. She knew she was a better writer, more creative, smarter, and well rounded.

What if he stole her book? Could she take on *the* Paul Dobin and win? Not only good-looking, easy-going, and an all around talented guy—a wide receiver for the Trojan football team but also the star of the track team—he also came from money. Serious money. Over the past several decades, his father had rose to prominence through shrewd real estate deals that left him wealthy and his name well known. He was a major player in the housing boom of the nineties and now Dobin Sr. had moved on to his first love, movies. He had produced several independent films in the last five years. Everybody in California knew his name, and soon, everybody in California would know his son's name as well.

"Ms. Sterling! What are you doing?"

Belle jumped, quickly closing the browser window before turning in her chair to face Ms. Redding.

"I don't pay you to check your email, Ms. Sterling."

Belle nodded. "I was on my lunch..."

"Your lunch ended five minutes ago."

Belle glanced at the clock on the wall behind Ms. Redding. Technically, she had ten minutes left of the thirty-minutes that Ms. Redding now allowed. But she knew that look in her boss's eye. It would be best to nod and apologize.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I must have let the time slip away from me."

"Maybe you should buy an alarm clock, or learn how to pay attention. This is a fast-

paced environment. If you slack off, you harm the entire office. Do you understand?"

Belle nodded. "It won't happen again."

"I think you should stay an extra hour tonight to make up for the lost time," Ms. Redding announced. "I'll be working late as well."

Belle forced herself to smile and nod, as though Ms. Redding was doing her a favor. "That sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

Ms. Redding studied her for a few more minutes with shrewish, gray eyes. Belle waited for her to add something else. Perhaps they were out of coffee in the break room? Maybe her cat had a hairball that morning? She braced herself, but Ms. Redding only wrinkled her nose, as though she just discovered dog shit on the bottom of her shoe, and marched back to her office.

"I can't believe you let her treat you like that," Jim muttered, peeking over the short wall that separated their desks.

"It's not a big deal."

"Didn't you just go get your salad like fifteen minutes ago?"

"Twenty," Belle corrected.

"If she treated me like that, I'd file a complaint with HR, or her supervisor."

"What happens to me if she finds out I went over her head?" Belle asked. "I'm lucky to have this job. I don't want to mess things up."

"Did you kill her dog or something?" Jim asked. "She doesn't treat anybody else like that."

Belle only shrugged. She didn't know why Ms. Redding hated her so much. She had never had this sort of problem before. She always got along great with her previous employers, and she had filled the role of teacher's pet when she was still in school. Belle had experience working with tough or difficult people, but never anybody as cruel or vindictive.

Pushing thoughts of Paul aside, she opened her latest project. When she landed the job as a junior copywriter, she thought it was a gift from heaven. She had only just graduated, and she hadn't expected to be offered a job so quickly. They mentioned in the interview that the junior copywriter position had a high turnover rate. What had they told her? Everybody they hired had been a slacker with no drive or motivation. Belle knew she had both drive and motivation. She vowed that she wouldn't have a problem.

It only occurred to her later that the common denominator between all the previous employees was Ms. Redding.

But Belle knew that determination and confidence would eventually win Ms. Redding over. It would just take a little bit of time.

* * * *

Aden knocked on Kevin's door, but didn't wait for a response before pushing it open and stepping into the large office. Kevin didn't look up from the desk, but he motioned Aden to close the door. Aden took a moment to admire the tableau in front of him. Kevin looked every bit the powerful, confident attorney as he studied the computer screen, his hands resting on a stack of legal briefs.

"Don't you have work to do?" Kevin asked after a few moments of silence.

"Not really." Aden settled on the corner of the desk. "Busy tonight?"

"Are you asking me out?"

“Actually Tamara is going to be in town. She thought you might want to catch a movie or something,” Aden explained, idly running his fingers through his hair. “She said it’ll be awhile before she’s back in Los Angeles.”

“By catch a movie, you mean fuck our brains out?” Kevin asked, finally shifting his eyes from the computer screen to Aden’s face.

Aden smirked, “Of course.”

“Can’t tonight. I’m meeting with a potential client.”

“Who?”

“Paul Dobin.” Kevin sighed. “He’s dragging his feet.”

Aden grimaced. He thought the worst part of working as an entertainment lawyer was the clients. Most of the time, they didn’t have the common sense God gave a duck. The best clients were the ones that recognized they were clueless and allowed their lawyers to handle their affairs without muss or protest. Aden had only met Paul Dobin once since he hired Kevin, but he was confident that Dobin did not fall under that category.

“So you’re going to wine and dine him?” Aden asked.

“I’m going to convince him if he wants the best deal in the auction, he’ll hire me. Most people already have a lawyer lined up before they get to this point. I don’t know what his problem is,” Kevin said.

“Too bad. I don’t think you can get a rain check with Tamara.”

Kevin shrugged. “She never liked me much anyway. Now, if you were meeting with Belle...”

Aden smiled. “She’s quite the little number, isn’t she?”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe I’ll invite her over tonight as well.”

Kevin snorted. “Good luck. She’s been doing a great job of avoiding us.”

Aden knew Kevin was right, but it didn’t concern him. They had shared something explosive and unique. He couldn’t forget it, and she wouldn’t be able to either. “She’s just a little shy. She’ll need some time.”

“I don’t think inviting her over with Tamara is a good idea,” Kevin said. “It might confuse her. Or upset her.”

“I’m not going to drag her over by the hair,” Aden said. “If she’s not interested, she’s not interested.”

Kevin’s eyes darted back to the computer. Growling, he slammed the laptop closed.

“This shit is driving me crazy.”

“Do you want to go to lunch?” Aden invited.

“You buying?”

Aden laughed. “Sure. Come on.”

Chapter 4

Belle thought about knocking on their door again a million times. Especially when she came home after a long, hard day at work and felt not only exhausted but subhuman. She longed for positive attention, love, and companionship. Anything other than emptiness. Aden had told her they'd be happy to see her "any time". She was tempted to take him up on the open invitation. But after the initial alcohol induced insanity, she felt abnormally shy. So she stayed in her apartment.

With the blinds closed.

She could imagine them across the way, parading around the house naked, shamelessly begging for her attention. And she wanted to give it to them. But what must they think of her? She went over there and did ... really wonderful things... Belle sighed. Maybe she'd just open the blinds long enough to see if they were home.

Belle pulled the blinds open and saw they were gone. The lights were off, and nothing moved in the apartment. Disappointed, she left the blinds open in case they came home before she went to bed. She settled in front of the TV with one eye trained on the window. The memories of that night drove her to distraction during the day and haunted her dreams every night. It drove her crazy that they were just across the way and she couldn't find the combination of courage and wicked lust that initially drove her to them again.

A light came on, catching her eye. She looked over and saw Aden enter the apartment, then hold the door open for the person with him. She expected to see Kevin's hulking figure, but instead a light, delicate woman walked out of the dim shadows of the hall into the bright light. She smiled up at Aden, and Belle's breath caught. The mystery woman was very beautiful. Fine, pale features and long raven hair that went almost down to her hips.

Belle watched as he gestured toward the living room, and Mystery Woman sat on the couch, then removed her shoes. Aden moved into the kitchen and Belle thought for a moment maybe she was only a friend, or a cousin, or a Jehovah's Witness. All of those hopes were dashed when she saw Mystery Woman stand up and slowly shimmy out of her black, silk dress, revealing a gorgeous body.

Belle didn't normally check out women, but you'd have to be a blind, gay, dead man to not appreciate her delicate beauty. Her firm breasts were held high in a red, lacy bra, and when she turned around, Belle couldn't look away from her beautifully shaped ass. She had expected Mystery Woman to wear a thong, but she wore a red, silk bikini that left just enough to the imagination. Her legs looked to be about a mile long and were covered in sheer black stockings. She looked so graceful, and beautiful, and *feminine*, that Belle was immediately self-conscious. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Aden returned to the living room. He didn't seem the least surprised to see his guest nearly naked. Instead, he smiled and pulled her into his arms. That's when Belle closed the blinds. She couldn't watch Aden pleasure the strange woman with his lips, tongue, hands and body the way he had covered her three weeks before.

Belle wasn't jealous. Of course not. Why should she be jealous? She had *one* night with them. *One*. And she had turned down their open invitation implicitly by not ever

taking them up on it. Did she expect the two of them to sit at home, night after night, pining after her and all they lost? Because she was just that amazing?

Maybe a small part of her expected just that. A small part. Not the logical, sane part of her.

Belle busied herself around the apartment, and tried to ignore the closed blinds that taunted her. A million times, she walked by them, her hand reaching out to the cord, only to stop at the last second and turn around. Finally she decided she couldn't stay in the apartment—as long as she was just feet away from them, her morbid curiosity would get the better of her. If she couldn't see what they were up to, she'd imagine it. She had an excellent imagination.

For instance, she could imagine Aden sucking Mystery Woman's nipples through her lacy bra, and Mystery Woman moaning with satisfaction. She could imagine Aden's fingers delving into her slick pussy, finding her hard clit. She could imagine his cock, large and hard. Which wasn't unusual. She thought about it a lot.

Belle didn't bother to change her t-shirt and sweats or even run a brush through her hair. She didn't plan to hide anywhere fancy. Maybe Willow's. Or Denny's. Either way, she'd give them plenty of time and by the time she got back they would be... She grabbed her coat and her purse and fled the building and temptation.

Belle ducked out of the door into the cool, misty night, and ran right into a hard chest. She muttered an apology and tried to pass him, but he grabbed her arm and she looked up—right into Aden's blue eyes.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, pet?"

Belle looked up at him with startled, wide eyes. Why did he have to touch her? She'd be able to come up with a great excuse if he wasn't touching her and frying her brain.

"Um ... the store, I need ... shampoo."

"It's kind of late to go shampoo shopping, don't you think?"

"Well ... what are you doing out this time of night?"

Aden held up the bag from the local drug store. "Had to pick up a few things."

Yeah, I bet you did, Belle thought. "That's great ... I've got to be going now..."

"You're in such a hurry to leave me then?" He sounded hurt, that slight tinge making his voice even sexier. Did he do this on purpose? Accost innocent girls with his voice and his hands until they were nothing more than his willing slaves? Because it wasn't fair. She knew she shouldn't feel this way, this affected, but it was as if he had cast a spell over her. One of pure unadulterated lust.

Belle opened her mouth to answer but before she could he pulled her close to him and with his other hand brushed her hair away from her face. "I know you saw us," he whispered in her ear.

"S-so?"

"So," he continued in a silky, warm voice. "Why not come upstairs with me?"

Belle shook her head and tried to take a step back. "I can't ... I really can't. But um ... thanks for asking."

He kissed her cheek, then her jaw, and then met her lips gently. "Why not?"

Yes, why not? Because she didn't like to have sex with strangers? Obviously, not a problem anymore. Because she wasn't interested in women? Belle didn't want to admit it, but she thought she could make an exception for anybody as hot as Mystery Woman. "I'd hate to intrude."

"It won't be an intrusion," he promised.

Did the three of them decide to form a club? A Torment-Belle-With-Sexy-Bodies-and-Sexy-Promises club? Because that wasn't fair either.

Her token protest ignored, she allowed him to slip his fingers between hers and guide her. She followed him with halting steps into his apartment building and to the elevator. As soon as the door closed, Aden pushed her against the wall and kissed her. She responded eagerly, wrapping her arms around him. He buried his hands in her hair, holding her head as he devoured her mouth.

She practically melted beneath him, but the kiss wasn't enough to drive away her doubts. It lit her body on fire, but she couldn't stop thinking about the other woman in his apartment. How would she react when Aden dragged her through the door? She didn't think Mystery Woman would be as accommodating as Kevin had been...

"Aden," she moaned.

"What pet?"

She broke away from him and turned his head. "What about ... her?"

"Tamara? She won't mind. She's very ... adventurous."

"Do you know her ... well?" *Do you fuck her all the time? Is she your girlfriend? What the fuck am I getting myself into here?*

"She's an old friend," he explained as he kissed her neck. The elevator chimed and the doors open. "Come on."

Belle couldn't help but notice his excited, bright smile. *Probably the same smile you had last week.* She followed behind him hesitantly, but that didn't slow him down. At the door, he stopped and turned around, his smile not faltering.

"Are you nervous, pet?"

Belle nodded.

He trailed his fingertips across her lips. "Don't be."

But that was easier said than done. Even if she had ever thought about having sex with a woman, she would have never imagined being with such a beautiful, stunning woman. She didn't feel comfortable sharing with her either, especially since she looked and felt dowdy and dumpy. She wasn't so pleased with her curves anymore.

Aden opened the door with the announcement of their arrival. Tamara emerged from the hallway wearing a short, silk robe that ended mid-thigh. It wasn't tied shut, and Belle could see her stomach and the swell of her breasts.

"You brought us a play-mate, Aden," she said, clapping her hands with delight.

Aden grabbed Tamara without letting go of Belle. "Yes, I did Tamara." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek. "This is Belle."

Tamara cupped the side of Belle's face, then trailed her fingers down her cheek. She took Belle by surprise when she leaned forward and kissed her softly. Tamara's lips were soft and moved over Belle's tentatively, as though she was searching for something. Belle couldn't stop herself from responding, opening her mouth and allowing Tamara to slip her tongue between her lips. The soft exploration made her heart stop and she shivered.

Tamara pulled back, her face only two or three inches from Belle's. Tamara's dark eyes sparked with lust and she smiled. "You taste like candy."

Belle opened her mouth to say ... something. Maybe *thank you*. Tamara moved quickly and kissed her again, this time more demanding than before. Belle hesitated for a moment, but her soft lips drew a response from her, and she kissed Tamara back with

passion. She felt rather than saw Aden move, then he was standing behind her. His cock pressed against her, his hands working the front of her pants.

"Touch her," he whispered in her ear as he dipped his fingers into her sweats.

Belle hesitantly reached forward and the very tips of her fingers brushed against Tamara's soft skin. The feel of her soft and delicate skin shocked her. It was like touching herself. Delighted, Belle lost her hesitance and touched Tamara boldly. She trailed her fingers from her neck, down her chest to her stomach, then back up to her breasts. Belle traced the outline of each tit, not quite touching her nipples. In response, Tamara deepened the kiss, moaning.

"That's it," Aden encouraged as he pushed her pants down. His hands smoothed over her hips and down her thighs as he pushed her pants lower and lower. "No panties tonight?" He murmured.

Belle barely heard him. Tamara's hands were on her face and Aden's lips were on her neck. She moved her hands over Tamara's body, getting closer and closer to her nipples, but not quite touching them. Aden's long fingers curled around her wrist and she didn't resist him when he guided her hand over Tamara's breast. Tamara moaned again and they broke apart, gasping for breath.

"Lift your arms," Tamara purred.

Belle complied and Tamara pulled the t-shirt over her head, exposing her body completely. Tamara smiled and attacked Belle's neck with her lips and teeth. Belle gasped, tipping her head back. Aden smoothed his fingers through her hair and pulled her head back further, exposing her neck completely. He moved his mouth over the other side, mimicking Tamara's movements.

Belle's head swam. She kept touching Tamara everywhere she could reach. She returned again and again to Tamara's nipples, rolling the soft buds between her fingers. Aden paused occasionally to whisper encouragement in her ear, but she didn't need any more encouragement from him. She wanted to feel Tamara's body everywhere, touch it and taste it and explore it in every way.

"Aden," Tamara said against Belle's skin. Her voice vibrated down her back. "Take us to bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Aden took Belle's hand and looped his arm around Tamara's waist. Belle followed him into the bedroom, her fingers itching to return to Tamara's body. Aden spun her onto the bed, and then whisked Tamara's robe off. She let it fall from her shoulders, then shivered with delight as Aden rubbed his hands up her ribs and cupped both of her breasts. He smiled as he looked at Belle over Tamara's shoulder.

Belle swallowed hard as she watched the two of them. Tamara spun around and started to undress Aden. She unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down, revealing his muscled thighs and hard cock. Tamara lifted the shirt over his head. Aden clenched his jaw as she caressed his shaft and gently gripped his balls.

Belle *almost* felt left out, but then they both focused on her at the same time, and instead of feeling like a third wheel, she felt like their prey. She froze under their stare and barely had a chance to brace herself before they both pounced on the bed. Belle's hands immediately found Tamara's body again with something like relief.

Belle didn't know exactly what she should do. She just followed her instincts, and her instincts told her how to touch Tamara and where. But as before, her hands stalled

before she reached the critical point.

Without warning, Aden thrust into her from behind. Gasping in pleasure and shock, she froze.

"Don't stop moving," Aden said in her ear. "Keep touching her. I'll tell you how."

Belle nodded and put her hands back on Tamara's thighs. She lay beside them on her back, her legs open, her hair spread out around her face. Belle took a moment to look at the smooth curves of her body, admiring it.

Aden cupped her mound with one hand. "Hold her like this."

Belle did as she was told, surprised by how hot Tamara was to the touch. Hot and wet and silky soft.

"Now slide your finger in ... yeah pet ... just like that."

Belle slipped one finger between Tamara's hot lips and slid it up and down. Belle leaned over and kissed Tamara's breasts, her tongue lapping at her nipples.

"Rub her clit," Aden instructed as he thrust into her. "Lightly."

Belle lightly caressed Tamara's clit, and she jumped beneath her hand. Pleased with the response, Belle rubbed the hard nub faster. Tamara moaned and thrust her hips forward. Belle couldn't believe how excited it made her to hear Tamara moan. Between the feel of her and the sound of her and the way Aden slid into her so slowly she thought she would pass out from the pleasure.

"Now inside ... slide your finger inside..."

Belle nodded and gently slid one finger into Tamara. Both women gasped.

"Turn your hand palm side up ... now..."

Belle didn't need to hear more. She knew what was there. She eagerly rubbed Tamara's g-spot, and Tamara screamed in response. Belle's breath quickened, and she gasped for air. She heard Aden pant in her ear, and Tamara kept screaming and moaning Belle's name. "Don't ... stop..." she begged. "Don't ... stop..."

If she keeps screaming like that, I'm going to come ... right now ... if she doesn't stop I'll...

"Use ... your ... other ... hand..." Aden instructed between deep breaths.

Belle found the energy and the focus to use her other hand to start rubbing Tamara's clit, the combined effort made her scream louder. Aden moved faster and faster and Belle bit Tamara's sensitive shoulder to keep from joining the chorus of screams and moans. She tasted as good as she felt.

Aden slipped his hand between Belle's legs, and delicately touched her clit. It was just enough to push her over, and she bit down hard as the orgasm pulsed through her body. Distantly she could hear Tamara moan again, then felt her clench around her hand, felt her entire body tremble. Tamara's loud, shuddering orgasm sent Belle spiraling into a second one, while Aden growled in her ear.

"Oh God, Belle..."

He gripped her hip tightly and slammed into her one more time. Tamara went limp on the bed and Belle slumped over her as soon as Aden released his hold on her. She felt him fall away and collapse on the bed.

Belle sighed. "That was..."

Aden nodded. "Yeah."

He curled against her, and she slid into the curve of his body. Comfortable and intimate, it surprised Belle. The biggest surprise was how good it felt. She missed being

this close to a man, missed the way a man's hard body felt against her back, missed the smell of musk and sweat as she drifted off to sleep.

"I thought we'd see you again," Aden murmured. "Where were you?"

Belle shifted. "Busy. Just busy."

"Kevin thought we scared you away."

"No, no," she said quickly. "Nothing like that."

"Belle, I want to be clear about something. We didn't mean for it to be just a one-night stand."

Belle could hear her heart pound. "Oh?" She looked at Tamara's sleeping form, but she didn't seem disturbed by their conversation.

"If you don't want to see us anymore, just tell me now. We'll leave you alone."

"What about Tamara?"

"She's an old friend, in town for the night. We usually meet when she's here."

"This is ... really weird..."

Aden chuckled softly. "We went about this backwards, it's true. Usually we try to woo the girl with our charm, you know, take her out and show her a good time before going to bed, but you ... you're different."

"You mean easy?"

"No!"

Belle smiled in the dark. She knew that wasn't what he meant, but when was the last time any guy had lavished attention on her? She rolled over. "I want to be wooed."

"Oh?"

"I want you to seduce me. Impress me. Charm me. You'll have to work for me."

Aden cocked an eyebrow. "Are you issuing an ultimatum?"

Her smile widened. "I think it's more of a challenge."

"Aden? You home?" Kevin opened the door and turned on the light, blinding both of them.

"Shut that off, jerk."

"Sorry, sorry. And little Belle? I see you were having quite the party without me."

"What can I say, mate? The ladies can't resist me."

"Whatever. I'm going to make myself dinner. Did you get a chance to eat tonight?"

"I didn't," Belle blurted, her stomach rumbling at the mention of food. "I mean ... well ... never mind."

"We'll be out in a few minutes," Aden whispered. "Now go before you wake her up, yeah?"

Kevin nodded, ducking out of the room.

"Do the same rules apply to ol' Kev?" He asked.

"Absolutely."

"Well then, let's go let him know." Aden rolled out of bed and walked over to the closet. He pulled on a t-shirt and sweats and handed a robe to Belle. She accepted it without questioning who it belonged to. Wasn't any of her business anyway.

Chapter 5

Belle agonized over her outfit, pulling every item out of her closet, inspecting it, and tossing it on the bed with disgust. How could she be a grown woman, with a full-time job and a college degree, and not own a single nice dress? Oh, she owned a million dresses. But they were all too ugly. This one too long, this one too short, this one too tight, this one too conservative, this one too cheap. This one perfect but she didn't have the shoes to match.

She knew it was stupid to freak out over her clothes. They had seen her in a sheer chemise, in a dumpy t-shirt, and naked, and they still wanted to sleep with her. If she showed up to their first official date in a dress that was less than perfect, would they even notice or care?

She would notice. She would care.

To make matters worse, she had no idea what they had planned. Kevin had simply told her that they would pick her up at eight sharp. No dress code, no clues, and she had been too dumb and too excited to ask.

Belle finally picked a tight, jade green dress that accentuated her best assets, brought out the color of her eyes, had a slimming effect on her hips, and went to just below her knees. She pulled her hair up into a clip then found matching jade earrings and a bracelet. She dabbed a bit of perfume behind her ears and kept her make-up light and tasteful. They knocked on the door just as she slipped into her shoes.

"Coming!"

Belle paused at the door and took a deep breath to ease the butterflies in her stomach. She needed to breathe. She needed to relax. This wasn't a first date ... well, it was technically the first date, but they had already taken care of the hard stuff. Literally and figuratively.

She smiled and opened the door to Aden. He was wearing a blue silk shirt, a black sports jacket, and black pants. "You look beautiful."

Belle could feel the blush reach the tip of her ears at his appreciative look. "Would you like to come in?"

"Kevin's waiting downstairs with the car."

Belle lifted her leather jacket from the hook beside the door and smiled. "Then let's go."

She expected him to try to kiss her in the elevator. Hoped he would, actually. But he kept his hands to himself and behaved as a perfect gentleman. Exactly like she asked him to behave. Which was sweet and everything, but couldn't he try to steal at least one kiss?

A new silver BMW convertible was idling in front of the door, illegally parked in a red zone. Belle stopped in her tracks. "Is that your car?"

"Ours," Aden confirmed, opening the passenger door for her. "My lady."

A little shell-shocked, Belle got into the car. Normally, cars didn't really impress her. She had a very utilitarian view of vehicles. Besides, Paul had driven a BMW and a Mercedes.

"You look stunning," Kevin complimented as Aden climbed into the backseat. "Here, let me put the top up."

"I could have sat in the backseat," she blurted.

"Nonsense. That's not how one treats guests," Kevin said with a smile. "I hope you're hungry."

Belle nodded, keeping her mouth shut, lest something even more inane fly out to catch her unawares. She buckled her seatbelt and resisted the urge to fidget with all the buttons on the door.

"We didn't know what kind of food you liked..." Kevin started.

"So Kev made a reservation at his favorite place, and to hell with our opinions," Aden cut in.

"I *asked* you several times where you'd like to eat."

"No, you asked me where I thought Belle wanted to eat. There's a difference."

"You should have spoken up if you had a problem. Wait, look who I'm talking to. You never stop talking."

Belle's eyes widened. "I really don't mind where we eat."

Aden hit Kevin on the shoulder. "Idiot. Belle, love, don't mind him. He had a bad day at the office."

Kevin glanced at Aden. "Will you put your seatbelt on, please?"

Aden rolled his eyes and sat back, but they could distinctly hear the click of the belt.

"So ... um ... anything you'd like to talk about?" Belle asked.

"What? Oh, you mean about the office? It's nothing. Just typical stuff."

"Where do you work?"

"We're lawyers," Aden provided.

"Entertainment law," Kevin added.

"Do you work together?"

"That would be highly unprofessional," Aden said in a serious tone. "It could cost us our careers and professional reputations. Of course we work together."

Belle smiled. "That's quite the risk you're taking."

"It's not as dangerous as that," Kevin said. "What about you? What do you do?"

"Advertising."

"That must be why you can afford to live alone in that loft," Aden observed.

Belle shrugged, uncomfortable talking about her own professional life. "I got a good job right after graduation. I was lucky."

"Told you she was older than she looked," Aden muttered.

Kevin looked at Belle sideways smiling. "Do you like Italian?"

"I love it."

"Great. We're here."

"That didn't take long," Belle said, surprised.

"That's why it's his favorite place," Aden muttered.

"Will you stop?" Kevin smiled apologetically. "We both had a rough day at the office. I'm sorry."

"No, don't worry about it. I understand." Aden opened her door for her and helped her out.

They flanked her, one on either side, but neither touching her. She noticed that both of them looked tense, their jaws tight. Belle frowned. She didn't want to make them entertain her if they had other things on their minds. It wasn't fair to them. But how could she call off the date without looking like a freak?

“Your name, sir?” The perky hostess asked, after eying both men.

“Lane.”

Kevin Lane, huh? It didn’t suit him. Far too mundane.

“Right this way.”

The Hostess led them to a quiet corner, away from the other patrons. A single candle in the middle of the table provided most of the light, and soft music drifted from overhead. “Your server will be with you in a moment.”

Aden held her chair out, and sat on the left of her, Kevin on the right. It occurred to Belle that she didn’t have a thing to say to either one of them.

“What sort of wine do you like?” Kevin asked.

Belle’s mind blanked. She couldn’t even remember the last time she drank wine. Her cousin’s wedding, maybe? Nothing like revealing you’re culturally ignorant on the first date. “Whatever you choose will be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

They surveyed the menus in silence. The hour dragged on as they waited for their food, and Belle looked for something to say. She could tell they both had other things on their minds, and she couldn’t but feel a twinge of disappointment. They had all been electric in bed, but couldn’t seem to find anything interesting out of bed.

Well, what did she expect? They never promised her anything else. After all, this had been her idea.

Belle’s feelings sunk as the food arrived and they ate in relative silence, only commenting occasionally on the quality, the wine, and the speed of the service. They both had claimed rough days, but she couldn’t help but suspect it was her fault.

Aden startled her by sighing and pushing away his nearly empty plate. “Well tonight’s been a bit shitty, hasn’t it?”

Belle looked up from her ravioli, surprised to hear him echo her thoughts. Kevin sighed as well.

“We’re usually not this boring. It’s just...” Kevin started.

“We lost a client today.”

“A big one.”

“It’s the kind of thing that eats at you, you know?”

“Guys, we don’t have to stay here for my sake if you don’t feel like it,” Belle said, relieved she could finally say something. Perhaps there was a way to end this disaster gracefully.

“No, no, no, don’t misunderstand,” Aden said. “We want to spend time with you. But I suppose I wouldn’t be surprised if you didn’t want to spend time with us.”

Belle nodded. “Why don’t we just get the check and go back to my place?”

“It wouldn’t be fair if we didn’t hold up our end of the ... bargain.”

Belle smiled, “There are other things at my loft besides a bed.”

“Like a couch?” Aden asked.

“A few chairs too. Come on.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kevin said. “I’ll meet you out in the car.”

* * * *

The two men seemed more relaxed once they were sprawled on her couch, beer in

hand, and chips within reach. She couldn't help the twinge of pleasure when Aden complimented her on her taste in beer.

"Most people just buy the cheap, American stuff," he said, taking a Pacifico from her. "What else do you have in there?"

"Some Belgian blondes and a few German stouts." Belle shrugged. "I may not know grapes, but I can hold my own when it comes to hops."

Aden smiled and put his arm around her shoulders, touching the rim of his glass to hers. "You know, I think I could fall in love with you. Cheers."

Belle knew he was joking, but the thought of Aden falling in love with her sent unfamiliar chills down her back. Could he fall in love with her? It seemed a bit early to worry about such things. Of course, that begged the question. Could she fall in love with him?

Afraid of that train of thought, Belle downed her beer and reached for another one. She had changed into a t-shirt and shorts—a tight t-shirt and short shorts. They had each removed their jackets and unbuttoned the top three buttons of their shirts, exposing a tantalizing bit of skin.

With the beer making her feel warm and secure, she asked the question that had been on her mind since she first saw them. "So, uh, what's going on with you two?"

"Kev, you take that one."

"Well, what do you want to know?"

"How did you meet?" Belle asked.

"Kevin put an ad in the school newspaper for naked men," Aden started.

"Male nudes," Kevin interjected. "For an art project."

"Well, being a poor law student, and a rather good looking one at that, I responded. Of course, it was lust at first sight."

Kevin shook his head. "He wasn't the body type I wanted at all. His coloring was wrong. And he makes a horrible model. He fidgets. Look, he's fidgeting right now."

Aden folded his hands in his lap. "Am not."

"What happened?" Belle asked.

"Well, I paid him about two hundred dollars to model for me for a week. Afterward, we stayed in touch and when he got kicked out of his apartment..."

"I was not kicked out."

"I offered him a place to stay." Kevin shrugged, as if to say, *what can you do?*

"So you guys have been together ever since?" Belle asked.

"More or less," Aden downed his beer and held up his empty bottle. "Do you have another?"

"Yeah, I'll get it."

"No, no, don't worry about it. You look comfortable. I'll get it." Aden said, standing. "It'll give you two a chance to talk about me."

Belle didn't miss the way Kevin smiled at Aden as he walked past. "And me?" She asked. "Where do I fit in the equation?"

Kevin left the couch and settled beside her chair, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "We found we both shared certain ... tastes..." He said, cupping her bare foot. "Tastes in food, in wine, in women." He began rubbing the bottom of her foot. "Which is rather nice for us. And we couldn't help but notice you."

"Me? Why?"

Kevin rubbed her calf with his fingers, moving them lightly over her smooth skin. "I guess we just have a soft spot for beautiful women with dark hair..." His fingers reached her knee. She wondered if he would continue up her thigh, but instead, he slid his hand back down to her ankle.

"I wished you had done something about it sooner," she said.

Kevin chuckled. "We had an emergency trip to New York, and we knew it would take some time. Otherwise, we would have introduced ourselves a month ago."

"New York? That's where you were?" Belle couldn't help but be disappointed. And how did they get so tan in New York? It ruined her beach fantasy. "I thought you were on vacation."

Kevin trailed kisses down her leg. She tensed and bit her tongue to stop from begging him for more. Her body reacted quickly to his lips, her blood running hot, and she just wanted to strip her clothes off right there.

"Kevin never takes vacations," Aden said, returning with two bottles. "And stop that."

Kevin looked up at Aden without removing his mouth from her leg. "I'm not doing anything." His breath tickled, making her squirm. "Just talking."

"Come sit over here with me if you can't keep your hands to yourself," Aden said, stretching out on the floor, his back against the couch. "Here, have another beer."

"Here," Belle said to Kevin. "Sit between my legs."

"Well, if you insist."

"No, with your back to me. Yeah, like that."

"What are you doing?" Kevin asked.

"You're tense. Can you feel the knots in your neck? That must hurt." Belle began massaging one large knot at the base of his neck. "I took a few courses to learn how to be a masseuse. It was a few years ago, but I think I might remember how to do this."

"Oh... Oh, that's good," Kevin murmured, dropping his head forward.

Belle looked at Aden and winked. "Don't be jealous. You're next."

"This is really good."

"I aim to please."

"You'll never get him to relax," Aden said. "Not our Kevin. I don't think he knows how."

"When *was* the last time you took a break?" Belle asked, appalled by the tension in his muscles. It would take much more than a good massage to relieve the pain he must be in. She imagined he had terrible tension headaches.

Aden shook his head. "Don't even remember."

"Take the day off with me tomorrow," she suggested, the idea suddenly coming to her.

"I can't," Kevin started. "We've got an important meeting tomorrow..."

"We have an important meeting every day," Aden interjected.

Belle changed her technique, focusing on the next knot with more pressure. "One day off won't hurt anything."

Kevin moaned. Aden looked encouraged.

"I can make it worth your while," she said. "It'll be fun."

"Yeah, okay," he breathed.

Aden's eyes widened. "You'll have to show me how you did that."

Belle shrugged, satisfied. “It’s just a gift, I guess.” She kissed the top of Kevin’s head, already turning ideas over in her mind.

Chapter 6

Belle was pulled from sleep by very loud, very insistent knocking. She tried to resist the sound, convinced it was just part of her dream. But when it didn't stop, she knew it wasn't just an auditory hallucination. She forced her eyes open and looked around. What was she doing on the couch?

Belle looked down and saw two half-naked men sprawled across the floor, their legs entangled, their faces relaxed and peaceful. The fog in her brain cleared and she jumped to her feet. They didn't seem disturbed by the knocking at the door, but she didn't want them to wake up yet.

She stepped around their bodies and hurried to the door. "What do you want?" She asked as she opened it.

Willow stood there, her fist poised to knock again, taken aback from Belle's tone. "We were supposed to meet today, remember? I thought something had happened to you."

Belle brushed her hand across her forehead, grimacing. "Sorry. What time is it?"

"A little after ten. You look like you had a late night."

"Um ... yeah. Pretty late."

"Can I come in?"

Belle's eyes widened. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea right now."

"Why?" Willow narrowed her eyes. "What are you hiding in there?"

"Hiding? Nothing. Why don't we have coffee tomorrow?"

"Why aren't you at work?" Willow asked. "What's going on?" She pushed past Belle and into the loft.

"Shit," Belle cursed. She had planned to call in sick, but not at ten in the morning. *Great, this'll look real good in front of Ms. Redding.* "I've got to call them right now."

"Oh my God!" Willow exclaimed, staring open mouthed at the two men. "Oh my God, what did you do?"

"Shhh! Lower your voice. Please. And I didn't do anything."

"What are they doing here?" Willow asked.

Belle went into the kitchen to grab the phone. "Sleeping. They won't be for long if you don't stop shouting."

"I'm not shouting." Willow backed away from them. "Just tell me what happened."

"I went out with them on a date..."

"Both of them at the same time?"

"Yes, okay? Then we came back here and drank some beer and gave each other back massages. It's not really a big deal." Belle shuffled around her papers for Redding's phone number. Why didn't she have that memorized by now?

"Did you sleep with them?"

"Last night? No."

"Have you *ever* slept with them?"

Belle didn't answer. Instead, she tried to think of a good excuse. "Ms. Redding? It's Belle Sterling. I'm not going to be able to make it today ... yes, I'm sorry I didn't call sooner ... no it won't happen again ... a virus, I think ... I should be in tomorrow... I'm

sorry... Thanks. Have a nice day."

Belle hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. It hadn't been as horrible as she thought it would be, but she thought she might pay for it later.

"Have you ever slept with them?" Willow asked again.

"Once."

"Once?"

"Okay, twice."

"*Twice? Twice?* Why didn't you tell me? How could you keep something like that a secret?" Willow demanded.

"I'm sorry I don't want to broadcast every private moment of my life to the world," Belle said as she wrestled with the coffee maker. She needed caffeine.

"I'm not asking you to broadcast it to the world, but how could you neglect to tell me you're sleeping with two men?"

"Because," Belle whispered, "I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know if it was a one-time thing or what."

"Well, is it?"

"I don't know." She flipped the switch of the coffeemaker then stared at it, waiting for it to brew.

"Are they good?" Willow asked in a low voice.

"God, you have no idea."

"I think I'm jealous."

Belle smiled. "A perfectly natural reaction." The wonderful aroma of dark roasted French coffee beans filled the loft. Belle inhaled deeply. "Ah. Perfect."

"Should you wake them up?" Willow asked.

"Yeah ... they probably need to call their boss too..."

Belle walked over to Aden and tapped his shoulder. He didn't respond. She grabbed his shoulder and shook it slightly. Still no response. "Aden? Aden, it's time to wake up. Come on."

Without opening his eyes, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her down on top of him. Before she could protest, he covered her mouth with his and kissed her languidly, his lips moving slowly. Belle forgot about the other people in the room and kissed him back, enjoying the way his body felt beneath hers. His cock was hard against her thigh, and she thought Kevin might have the same problem.

A problem she was more than prepared to help them with.

"Ahem."

Belle's eyes flew open. Willow. *Dammit*. It took a great deal of willpower and force, but she managed to separate herself from Aden, despite his protest.

"Come on, I've got some coffee and painkillers," Belle whispered. "Maybe even a bagel."

Aden looked at her with clear blue eyes. "That's nice, but I want you."

"We have company," Belle said, nodding over her shoulder.

Aden pushed himself up onto his elbows and looked into the kitchen. Willow waved, he nodded in turn. "Who's that, then?"

"It's my friend, Willow."

"I was just heading out," Willow said.

"Wait, you don't have to go," Belle protested. "I mean, I'm sorry Aden wanted to

suck face, but it won't happen again."

Willow smiled. "I didn't mind the show, but I do have class in about 45 minutes. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You don't usually blow me off."

"I really am sorry."

Willow waved her hand. "Please. Like I wouldn't blow you off if I had two hot guys on my floor? Have fun."

Belle returned her smile. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"I'm looking forward to it. I'll show myself out." Willow hugged Belle and then waved to Aden before letting herself out the door.

Belle quickly poured two cups of coffee, put four aspirin on a small saucer, filled two glasses with water, and carried it all over to Aden and Kevin on a tray. She also brought them the phone.

"It's a little late," Belle said apologetically. "I hope there won't be a problem or anything."

Aden took the tray from her and set it on the floor beside them. "It won't be. So, what do you want to do today?"

Belle's eyes lit with excitement. "We're going to the beach."

Kevin cracked an eye open. "The beach?"

"Yes, the beach. Have you ever been to the beach?"

"Once or twice," Kevin answered, his eyes closed again. "The sand gets everywhere."

"He really doesn't like to have fun," Belle commented to Aden.

He shrugged. "That's what I tried to tell you." He stood up and kicked Kevin in the thigh. "Come on, get up."

Kevin pushed himself to his feet, moving stiffly. She noticed his hard-on as well, and she wanted to shout after them, "We don't have to go anywhere yet," but they were already moving to the door.

"We'll meet you downstairs in thirty minutes."

"How about forty-five," Belle suggested.

"See you then."

* * * *

Belle had ulterior motives for suggesting the beach, so she thought it was only fair to give them a bit of eye-candy as well. She chose a blue matt bikini. Another sexy bit of clothing she bought for Paul's sake that found a home in the back of her closet, untouched and unused.

She knew she made the right decision when they reached the beach and she stripped her clothes. Neither Kevin nor Aden could take their eyes off her. She preened under their appreciative gaze, soaking up the attention. Until it was her turn to stare.

Belle had seen them naked many times before, covertly and overtly. It shouldn't have been any different. But it was. Perhaps things had changed because now she was allowed to look. She could gawk and gape as much as she wanted without that twinge of guilt. Perhaps it was because everybody else looked. She knew every woman within a thousand feet was stealing furtive glances at the men, but she was the only one who could touch them.

And she did.

Belle first volunteered to put lotion on their backs. She sat behind them and took turns smoothing the cold lotion over their backs. She took her time with each one, making sure the lotion covered every inch of their bodies, from their necks to below their brief suits. She thought about them rubbing lotion into her skin, focusing on her back, then her legs and her stomach and her arms. She imagined four hands, working her skin and flesh like clay until she was pliant and warm.

Despite the vivid fantasy, Belle wasn't prepared for the reality. She stretched out on a towel, resting her head against her arms. She let the sound of the waves and the seagulls and the heat from the high sun lull her into almost a doze. The first bit of cold lotion against her skin made her jump. The pair of large, powerful hands that rubbed it into her skin made her melt.

She couldn't tell purely from touch whether it was Kevin or Aden. She didn't really care about the distinction either, as long as whoever it was didn't stop. He started with her shoulders, using the heel of his hand to work the muscles while his fingers caressed her skin.

"Mmmmm." God, she could let him massage her shoulders all day. Simple skin-to-skin contact was enough to send her mind reeling, but the expert way he kneaded her flesh was enough to make her wet.

He moved lower and hit the back of her bikini. She expected him to simply skip over it and move along, but instead, he unclasped it.

"Hey, what are you..." She forgot the rest of her question when he kissed the sensitive spot just below her shoulder blades. He smoothed his hands up and down her ribs as his mouth moved lower.

Belle didn't know how he knew, but he hit every single spot that made her tingle. Or maybe he just made her tingle regardless of how or where he touched her. Either way, her skin was covered in goose bumps and chills raced down her back legs, despite the relentless sun overhead.

He straddled her legs, his inner-thighs resting against her hips. His cock pushed against her buttocks, and the thin material of their swimsuits didn't act as much of a barrier. A little nudge in the right direction, and his dick would be out, proud, and waving to all the people on the beach.

He put more lotion on her lower back and began rubbing her again. Just as she relaxed, convinced that he would try anything more, he slid his hands up the back of her thighs and beneath her bikini bottom. His finger slid between her ass cheeks, shocking her with the boldness. She would have protested, but her throat was closed. It was hard to sound appalled when she was tilting her ass back in encouragement.

His finger moved down her ass and to the sensitive skin below it. She thrust against his hand, urging him to move on to her slick hole. Her eyes closed and pleasure fogging her brain, she completely forgot where they were until Aden said from beside them, "Somebody's going to call the cops."

Belle's eyes flew open and she looked up, her eyes darting around. Nobody was staring at them, but she knew Aden had a point. Kevin pulled his hand away from her and readjusted her bikini bottom. "Just wanted to be thorough."

"Move over. It's my turn," Aden said, pushing Kevin's shoulder.

"Your turn?" Belle asked, fixing her top.

"Don't want those lovely tits of yours to turn all red, do we?" Aden asked as Belle

turned over.

“That would be bad,” Belle agreed.

Aden smoothed lotion over her stomach, and Belle resisted the urge to pull away from him. He didn’t try to molest her like she expected—and hoped—he would. His hands stayed above the cloth at all times, though she wouldn’t have objected if he made the attempt.

“Why did you choose the beach?” Kevin asked, standing above her and looking out over the water.

Belle looked up, her eyes devouring every inch of his toned body. He seemed impossibly tall from her position. Her mouth actually started to water. “Um ... I need a drink...”

Aden looked over at the small concession stand. “You want a Coke?”

“I can get it.”

“No, I’ll get it,” Aden offered.

Belle sat up and watched him trot over to the empty stand. Within seconds, several women were waiting in line behind them. Belle’s eyes widened as they swarmed him.

“It happens everywhere we go,” Kevin said, sitting beside her.

“Are you serious?”

“Oh yes.”

“Just to him?”

“Most of the time if people see us together they’ll leave us alone. But if he goes anywhere by himself...”

“It looks like they’ll keep him there for awhile. You wanna go for a swim?” The sun-dappled water sparkled with invitation. “The water is warm this time of year.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

Belle dove into the water without hesitation. She knew if she didn’t just jump right in, she would never find the courage. Now it washed over her head and pulled her farther out. A powerful swimmer, she moved with the water, unafraid.

“Wait up,” Kevin called when she was about chest-deep. “Are you sure it’s safe out here?”

“Safe?”

“We’re not going to get attacked by a shark or something, are we?”

Belle laughed. “I come here all the time. There are no sharks.”

They both looked back to shore and noticed Aden was still talking to his admirers. “He probably hasn’t even noticed we’re gone,” Kevin said. “Wait, what’s that on your cheek?”

“What?” Belle asked, stepping closer to him and looking up.

“Oh, it’s just a bit of sand.” He brushed it away with his thumb and tilted his head toward hers. He kissed her, his lips hot and a bit salty.

She pulled away. “You’re making me crazy.”

“I am?”

“Yes. First the massage and the ... the ... touching, and now kissing.” Belle shook her head. “I want to fuck you, God knows I do, but winding me up in a public place isn’t going to do anybody any good.”

Kevin pulled her against him. “Why don’t we then?”

“Why don’t we what? Here?”

He reached between them and pushed her bikini bottoms aside. "Nobody will notice."

Belle looked toward the beach. Nobody was paying them any attention. Not even Aden. "I don't know..."

"Come out a bit deeper ... wrap your legs around me ... like that..." Kevin wrapped his arms around her and slid into her. "Oh God, Belle."

Belle couldn't even talk. Kevin was a bit bigger than she expected, but the initial pain diffused very quickly into pleasure and her eyes rolled to the back of her head as he moved his hips against her. The tug and pull of the water forced an erratic rhythm. At that moment, she just wanted to call off the whole day, go home, and let Kevin fuck her into a wall.

"Wanted to do this last night," Kevin gasped. "After Aden fell asleep, I thought about waking you up."

"Why didn't you?"

"I thought you wanted to make us work for it," he said, pushing his cock deep into her, against her g-spot.

"No, no, I wanted you to fuck me," Belle gasped. "All night."

"Just me?" He asked, hitting her g-spot, making her head spin. At that moment, she would have agreed to anything he said, anything he suggested, anything he wanted. At that moment, the only real thing in the Universe was his cock, stretching her, pushing into her, and everything else was just a dream, imaginary.

"Oh, just you. Wanted you." Her stomach tightened and her toes curled. She rocked against him faster, increasing the tension between them.

"You can have me anytime," he said, thrusting into her one finally time. She bit her tongue to keep from crying out and attracting attention. It felt like a million fingers were pulling at her and caressing her as the water surged around them and her body surged with the waves.

"I don't think we should mention this to Aden," Belle said, resting her forehead against his shoulder. She didn't want to keep secrets from him, but she also didn't know if it would open a can of worms she didn't know how to deal with.

"Okay."

Belle untangled herself from him and let the water support her weight as she slowly paddled toward the shore, letting the waves carry her forward.

"Your soda is getting warm," Aden said when she stepped out of the water.

"Thanks." Belle accepted the can from him and took a deep swallow.

"Is the water nice?"

"Mmmm." Belle stretched out on her towel. "Very." She could already feel herself dropping into sleep. Just a short nap, she decided. Just a short one. She thought she heard Aden say something else, but she couldn't sort out the words before she drifted away.

* * * *

People and loud music poured out of the club Aden chose, and even more people waited to get in. Aden led Kevin and Belle past the long line, and with a nod to the bouncer, right through the door. Belle heard a chorus of complaints behind her, and she couldn't help but smile. She had always been one of those poor saps stopped at the door, waiting until it wasn't worth it anymore.

“What do you want to drink?” Aden shouted when they reached the bar. She could still barely hear him above the music.

“Rum!”

She noticed he didn’t ask Kevin, but he probably already knew. The heavy industrial music vibrated in her chest and through her body. She could feel the rhythm in her blood, encouraging her to move, and her toes tapped with impatience. “Who’s going to dance with me?” She asked as Aden handed her the drink.

Kevin put his hands up, shook his head, and pointed to an empty table away from the floor. Aden nodded and took her hand, leading her out to the floor. Belle hadn’t been dancing since college. She was worried she’d look like a spaz on the floor. But Aden took charge and showed her how to move.

After a few moments on the floor, Belle realized she didn’t want to dance at all. She wanted to watch Aden. And as he moved, he garnered attention. It wasn’t like the movies where everybody formed a circle and clapped their hands, but men and women were taking their turns with him, their bodies damp and slick with sweat. Belle backed away from the crowd, afraid of getting in their way, and watched, fascinated. It seemed primal to her, like they were all responding to ancient drums and forgotten tempos that they could no longer hear, but could certainly feel.

Paralyzed with lust, her eyes never left his body. Could he feel the weight of her stare? She felt like she was touching him. She could feel the energy radiating from his hard, hot body. It hit her in the chest, a red and silver rope that stretched between them and pulled her forward, one shuffled step at a time.

The song ended. In the pause between the music, an eerie silence descended on the club. Nobody talked or laughed. Not a single glass clinked. The pause seemed to last hours but in reality seconds had passed, and she was drawn to him. She reached him, touched his chest, and didn’t remember moving at all.

What is he doing to me? She thought of asking him, but his hand was on her arm, burning her skin, and he was directing her off the dance floor. He covered his mouth with hers as soon as they reached the dark perimeter of the club. They stumbled backwards against the wall. The music started again, and it felt like it would split her brain.

Belle looked up, dazed, and realized they were in the corner behind the speakers. How did they get back there? Aden kissed her again, holding her against the wall, until she was breathless. Even then, he didn’t let her stop. She kissed him until her lips were swollen and sensitive. She gyrated her hips as he thrust against her, creating a slick sort of friction that made her sensitive clit ache.

Belle was only aware of two things. The blistering need to be fucked ... the sort of need that singed her flesh and burned her mind, until she was just one solid ache. And the curtain of sound that surrounded them. The bass vibrated in her chest, echoed in his body, returned to hers, amplified. It felt as though he was touching her from the inside out, caressing her skin, making it vibrate, reaching every inch of her.

She pawed at his pants, working his fly free with clammy hands, her thumb repeatedly slipping on his zipper. He attacked her neck while she struggled with that, making it impossible for her to concentrate on task. She flung her head back. The harder he sucked, the sharper he bit, the more she wanted. He bruised her delicate skin with a hard, demanding mouth, and she squirmed and writhed, desperate to relieve the tension building between her legs.

Finally, she got a good grip on the zipper and pulled it down. He wasn't even wearing boxers, his cock free and in her hands, throbbing, already slick with desire and ready to push into her.

Aden lifted her. She wrapped her legs around him. He slid his finger up her thigh, beneath her skirt, and he smiled when he realized she wasn't wearing panties either. He pushed into her, her flesh yielding to his cock. The music stopped as he moved his hips, and they both froze, biting their tongues, mindful of their precarious positions.

It couldn't have been more than ten seconds, and probably less than that, between the two songs, but Belle thought she would die from her lust and impatience. Her heart pounded so loudly she thought the entire club would be able to hear it. Her breath came in shaky gasps and gulps, the more she tried to repress her panting, the louder it became.

She could see the strain on Aden's face as he tried to keep himself silent and immobile during the silent pause. Belle knew that people probably wouldn't be able to hear them anyway, but there was still that chance, and neither wanted to risk discovery.

The song finally began with a driving drum solo, and Aden's hips moved with the beat. Before Belle's brain stank into a sticky red abyss, she thought she'd try to find the name of the song and buy the CD. And maybe write a letter to the band, commending them on their fine, fine work.

They were so in sync with the music, it felt like they were dancing. She imagined the sound waves bending around them, breaking like the waves in the ocean, moving with their bodies. The music built around them, making her teeth rattle, the pressure swelled inside of her, and he moved faster, driven by the drums reverberating through their feet.

Belle's body was so assaulted by sounds and sensations that she couldn't tell exactly when the orgasm began, couldn't tell if there were multiple mini-quakes, or just one long, drawn out chord of pleasure that made her body vibrate like a violin string.

Aden slammed her into the wall one final time, and the surprising pain cleared her mind as her teeth came down on her lips. She felt his body flex and tense as he came. She licked her lips, tasting a bit of blood.

"Think Kev missed us?" Aden asked, as he lowered her to the ground.

Belle leaned against the wall and wiped the sweat from her eyes. "He probably just thinks we're dancing."

"Probably. I need a smoke. Join me?"

Belle shook her head. "No, not me... I think I need another drink."

Aden put his hand in the small of her back and guided her out of the corner, around the large speakers. She thought she'd probably be deaf the next day. Maybe even the week after that too. Her ears were already ringing.

"You look exhausted," Kevin shouted when they found his table.

Aden pointed to his breast pocket and then outside. Kevin nodded. Belle could feel the beginning of a headache form at the base of her skull. She noticed Kevin staring at her neck. Self-conscious, she rubbed the skin and winced at the bruise's sensitivity. He arched an eyebrow, but she looked away, unable and unwilling to explain over the pounding music.

As they waited for Aden to return, her stomach twisted and her chest constricted. She couldn't meet Kevin's eyes, and she just wanted to escape to the bathroom. Or maybe duck out the fire exit and take a taxi home.

When she caught sight of Aden's blonde hair, she finally put a name to the odd

feeling making her sick to her stomach. Guilt.

“I think I want to go home,” Belle shouted.

Aden frowned. “You sure?”

She nodded and he beckoned for Kevin. They trooped out of the club, and she stood outside the door taking a great gulp of the fresh air. The ache in her neck spread up her skull to behind her eyes. She climbed into the back seat without speaking and rested her head against the cool glass.

“Belle? Are you okay?” Kevin asked.

She tried to smile. “I have a headache. Must have got too much sun.”

He nodded and started the car, though she noticed he kept looking at her through the mirror. When they reached her building, she pointedly didn’t invite them in. She forced a smile, thanked them for the wonderful day and fled, too exhausted, confused, and pained to be with them for another minute.

Chapter 7

Aden collapsed against the bed and let out a long breath. "Jesus."

"Not my name," Kevin said, stretching out beside him, "but it'll do."

Aden grabbed the back of Kevin's neck and pulled him into a kiss. His cock stirred, rising for more action, and he could feel Kevin's against his leg. He had a lot of energy to work off. The beach would have been problem enough, but the club on top of that made his balls ache.

As soon as they had dropped off Belle, they rushed home and went straight to bed. He regretted that Belle couldn't join them. Especially since he couldn't stop thinking of her tight little body, the way she moved it against their bodies, sweaty and graceful. His cock jumped at the memory, and he sighed with relief when Kevin gripped it and began stroking.

"Wow, already up for another go?" Kevin asked against his mouth.

"It's been an exciting day."

Kevin paused mid-stroke. "I think we need to talk about that."

"Can we please talk about it another time?" Aden asked, thrusting his hips forward. "We're in the middle of something now."

"No, because you'll probably fall asleep on me." Kevin said, releasing him and rolling onto his back.

"Fine," Aden said, sitting up and pulling a pack of cigarettes from the nightstand drawer. "And don't start with me about this either."

"I didn't say anything." Kevin pulled the sheet up over his hips. "What do you think of her?"

"I like her. You?"

"Yeah, me too." Kevin rubbed the back of his head. "I liked her a lot more than I expected to. I mean, she's cute and everything, but I didn't expect more than a pretty face."

Aden nodded, smoke hovering around his head. "She's a little spitfire isn't she? Oh come on, what's with the serious face?"

"You were thinking about her just now, weren't you?" Kevin asked.

"I ... well, yeah, I was." Aden sat on the edge of the bed and flicked his ash into the tray. "I mean, how could I not?"

"I know. I was thinking about her too."

"That's good, isn't it?" Aden asked.

"It's great if we want the added complication in our life," Kevin said. He reached around Aden and plucked the cigarette from his fingers. "But is that what we need right now? The distraction?"

"She's not bad, as far as distractions go. I've had worse." He took his cigarette back. "Like the week I took my Bar."

Kevin smiled. "That was a good week."

"It was a bloody awful week. I didn't sleep *once*." He put his cigarette out and relaxed against the pillows. "Not even for a minute."

"It didn't kill you," Kevin pointed out. "You survived."

“Barely,” Aden muttered. “So how are we going to do this, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well the last time we both liked the same girl, things didn’t go so well, did they?”

“Are you still blaming me for what happened with Tamara?” Kevin asked.

“No, I’m just saying ... we were lucky to get out of that mess in one piece. I don’t want to do that again.”

“Good point. I fucked her at the beach today.”

Aden rolled his eyes. “What? Did you think I was blind?”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew, idiot. I have eyes, you know. But you should have said something. Don’t like you sneaking around my back ... even if it’s not very sneaky.”

“Sorry.”

“I fucked her today too,” Aden admitted.

“What? When?”

“At the club.”

“At the club? When you were dancing?” Kevin asked, appalled.

“Not on the dance floor. I figured we’d be square then.”

Kevin shook his head. “Okay, we’re going to have to do something. You want to establish stipulations?”

“Stipulations? Fuck. The job’s eating your brain.”

“Well?”

“Yeah, I guess. We’ll see if she agrees with the idea first. Let her know why it’s important. If she even wants to talk to us again. She was acting kinda weird tonight.”

Kevin shrugged. “I think she probably just had a headache. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Yeah, probably.”

They lapsed into silence, both adrift in their own thoughts. Aden thought that the first stipulation should be no lying and no sneaking. It did kind of hurt when he knew what they were both up to, and they behaved as though nothing had happened. Why bother hiding it from him?

A part of him whispered that this could be a bad idea. A very bad idea. How many times did they have to be burned before they learned their lesson? Once should have been enough. Aden had never met anybody worth jeopardizing his relationship with Kevin over.

But...

He could not get enough of Belle. The night he spent with her and Kevin had been un-fucking-believable. He was a greedy bastard, he knew it, and he wanted more. And she was so at ease with them. He knew that was fairly rare. Oh, sure, they met lots of women who fantasized about being with two men, but they freaked out at the thought of anything more than a one-night stand.

Aden didn’t mind admitting that he wanted more than a one-night stand. He knew it would be hard to fit a third person into their world, trying to wedge her into a space only meant for two people, but as far as he was concerned, the challenge was part of the fun.

Aden was thankful that Kevin was agreeable to the idea. He had been the one to first broach it, months ago, when they noticed the pretty stranger who couldn’t seem to keep her eyes off them. He didn’t really expect Kevin to agree, or at least agree to the first suggestion, but he had been surprisingly receptive, though not exactly eager.

Of course, their timing wasn't great. Shit was poised to hit the fan any day now, the pressure was mounting on both of them, careers were at stake, and they took a whole day off to chase pussy. Aden was glad that Kevin was the responsible adult in the relationship. He could worry about that, and leave Aden to think about more pleasant things.

"I have an idea for the first stipulation," Kevin said suddenly, his voice loud in the darkness.

"Hmm?"

"I think the first stipulation should be that you give me daily blowjobs."

Aden turned to face him. "Don't I do that already?"

"Twice daily."

"You're lucky I love you," Aden said as he moved down Kevin's body.

"Do that thing ... with your tongue... Oh yeah ... like that..."

* * * *

Belle lowered herself into the tub and sighed. The hot water immediately began easing her sore muscles and headache, like a hundred little fingers massaging her body. She had taken two extra-strength pain relievers and chased that with a mug of warm milk. The tight band of pain around her head steadily eased, but the churning in her stomach didn't stop.

She couldn't help but feel like she cheated. Well, *she* didn't cheat on anybody, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she had somehow made Aden and Kevin cheat on each other. There they were, perfectly happy in a strong relationship, and she spends one day with them—one day—and already they're fucking her behind each other's backs.

Belle didn't know for sure, but she doubted that was standard operating procedure. It seemed that inviting a third person into their world wasn't uncommon—Tamara for example. Would it be out of place to assume they also had their own rules, unspoken or otherwise, that governed those relationships?

They drove her to distraction with desire. No doubt about that. She wanted them both all the time, but she did not want to disrupt their lives or hurt them in any way.

And now that she opened the door a crack, a whole world of doubt flooded in. Realistically, what did she expect from them? What could she expect from them? What *should* she expect from them? A fun fling until one of them got tired of it and moved on? That would be perfectly acceptable to her if she was the one declaring when it was time to move on. Was it something serious? Something long term?

Belle didn't have any previous first-hand experience, but she suspected there were relatively few successful, long-term relationships involving more than two people. The chemistry in the group could change; the dynamics could shift; wants, desires, and even love could alter in one person and upset the delicate balance of all three. Wouldn't two men mean twice as much work?

Was she *ready* for twice as much work?

The whole problem made her headache return. All of the speculation left her head spinning. She needed to narrow it down to what she knew, for a fact, beyond question.

First, on the most basic level, she wanted them. She knew that she wanted their bodies against her, their mouths on hers, their cocks inside of her. Everything. She wanted it all. Pure, primal, undeniable lust coursed through her veins every time she saw

them or even thought about them.

Second, beyond the lust, she cared for them. Why else would she feel guilty about setting up a dishonest situation that could lead to a lot of pain and hurt feelings all around? If they were just good fucks, and God knew they were, she wouldn't have given a second thought to what her actions might do to their relationship.

Belle sunk deeper in the water, until it came over her chin. She wished she had a nice chocolate sundae. That always made thinking easier, always helped smooth over the hard parts.

Third, she knew this was not going to get easier. If she allowed herself to be sucked deeper into their lives, and somehow became integrated into their relationship, it would not get easier.

Fourth, she knew she had no idea what they thought, wanted, felt, desired, or planned.

Belle rubbed the bridge of her nose. So what did that leave? Besides the real possibility of walking away with a broken heart?

She could walk away now, before getting her heart broken, or hurting one of them. If there were ever a time for a clean break, it would be now. The longer she put it off, the messier it would be. She had been down that road before. Belle bit her lip as the old pain stirred in her chest. She figured she could survive one messy break-up in her life, two tops, but she preferred to stick with one.

So where did that leave her?

"Am I just never going to see them again?" Belle asked herself. Because that didn't sound like a good option either.

Belle knew she had to stop thinking about it or she'd tie herself up in knots and never get to sleep. She didn't have the luxury of staying up all night and sleeping in. She had to get to work early the next morning, which meant *leaving* at six in the morning. She needed to put the whole day behind her and get some sleep.

Belle stood up, out of the warm water and into the cool air. Shivering, she wrapped a towel around herself and wiped the fog off the mirror. The purple hickey on her neck jumped out against her pale skin. She looked like somebody had assaulted her or tried to choke her. A scarf might work to cover that up.

She examined her face and body for any other signs of the day's adventures. Other than the hideous bruise on her neck, she looked normal. Mundane, even. There wasn't a woman on the planet more commonplace than her. Average in every way.

Belle was thankful her exterior gave an air of normalcy, because on the inside, she was a shaking, twisty, Jackson Pollack-styled mess.

She set the clock for five and fell into bed without pulling on her t-shirt. Counting down from two thousand, she willed herself to focus on the numbers and not on the two men less than a hundred yards away.

Chapter 8

Belle walked in her door at 9:34, precisely sixteen hours after she left her apartment. Her feet ached from her toes up to her calves. Her head throbbed from hours of staring into a computer screen, working with small pictures and even smaller text. Her boss had made it a point to stop by every hour and offer “helpful advice,” stinging her self-confidence. “We normally don’t do it like that. Do you need another training session, Belle? There’s one scheduled next week.”

And she hadn’t even finished the project. She had another long day ahead of her, and another, until she got it finished, and finished right.

Belle had planned to run across the street to the Deli to buy a sandwich at some point, but Ms. Redding had kept her over the lunch hour, critiquing her copy and making subtle and not-so-subtle jabs about her professionalism. “Honestly, Belle, we expected you could handle this job when we hired you, despite your age,” she had said at one point. “We’re going to have to hire another person just to clean up after your mistakes.”

Now, weak with hunger, she didn’t have the energy to call for take-out, much less make her own dinner.

She pulled her clothes away as she walked, collapsing half-naked when she reached the couch. She rested her head in her hands, and tears of exhaustion and frustration clogged her throat, tasting the tears, like bile, on her tongue. The phone rang, drilling into her brain like a woodpecker, but she didn’t even look up.

If this had been the first night she arrived home late, depleted, and near tears, it wouldn’t have been so bad. But it was becoming routine. She couldn’t do this for the rest of her life.

The phone finally stopped ringing, her voicemail picking it up. She sighed with relief. Her stomach nearly roared with hunger, fresh pains piercing her abdomen. Moving with more will power than energy, she stumbled into the kitchen and opened the fridge. Not the best selection in the world, but she had enough to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Better than nothing.

Belle tucked the loaf of bread beneath her arm, and grabbed the jars of peanut butter and strawberry jam. She turned to kick the fridge closed behind her, and the slick, full jam jar slipped from her tired fingers. It crashed to the floor. Belle watched it with wide eyes, unable to do anything but let it fall. She winced as the glass shattered, scattering across the floor, the jam as red as blood congealed at her feet.

Belle blinked, promptly bursting into tears. The phone started ringing again. Mascara ran into her eyes and down her face, her stomach cramped, and the vice around her head tightened until she thought her eyes would pop out.

Trying unsuccessfully to stem the flow of tears, Belle grabbed a handful of paper towels and tried to clean up the mess, spreading sticky jam all over the linoleum floor. A large shard of glass ripped through the paper towel, spearing the skin on two of her fingers. She held her hand up and watched the blood began to well and pour down her skin in rivulets.

Her body shaking with sobs, she ran her hand under the sink, careful to side-step the mess. It didn’t really hurt, and the jam on the floor wasn’t the end of the world. She could

sleep off the headache then treat herself to an extra-big breakfast in the morning. Despite explaining this to herself reasonably, she couldn't stop crying. If anything, the tears came harder.

A loud knock on the door made her jump. She wrapped a towel around her hand and tried to get herself under control. She grabbed another paper towel to wipe the snot from her nose, but she knew there wasn't anything she could do. Sniffing and hiccupping, an occasional sob still bursting from her chest, she approached the door.

"Who is it?" She called.

"It's us," Aden answered.

She just didn't have the energy to deal with them. "I'm not really ready for company," Belle yelled back, her voice breaking on the last word.

"Belle? Please let us in?" Kevin said.

Why fight with them over it? Sighing, she opened the door. Aden's eyes widened when he saw the blood soaked towel wrapped around her hand.

"What happened to you?" He took her arm and led her over to the couch. "Sit down here, pet, let me see."

Belle allowed him to unwrap the towel—so red now! She didn't remember bleeding that much. "Some glass," she mumbled.

"Where do you keep your Band-Aids, Sweetheart?"

"There's a first aid kit under the bathroom sink." She looked up at Aden. "I dropped a jar of jam in the kitchen."

"Is that why you're crying?"

Her chest hitched. "N-no."

Kevin returned with the first aid kit and handed it to Aden. They both watched as Aden cleaned her fingers—the cuts were deceptively small—and wrapped them with bandages. "There now, got that taken care of."

"Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm such a mess." She sniffed and wiped her nose. "A really gross mess."

Aden wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. She rested her head on his shoulder, the stray sobs beginning to subside.

"I was trying to make a sandwich," she explained. "And it slipped from my fingers ... and it made such a mess..."

"Shhh, Kevin will clean it up. Don't worry. We tried to call you earlier for dinner. Where were you?"

"Work."

"Work? At seven?"

She nodded. "I just got home."

"When did you leave? We noticed your car was gone this morning when we left..."

Belle sat up. "5:30."

Aden gaped. "What are you? A farmer?"

The story poured out of her, words tumbling out of her mouth. She told him how she had to go in early and work long after everybody left and how she missed lunch and everything Ms. Redding had said to her and how all she wanted was a sandwich and she broke the jar and cut her fingers and couldn't stop crying though she knew it was stupid and she was so tired and so hungry and how was she supposed to do this for another day and for the rest of her life, huh?

Aden listened in silence, allowing her to speak with interruption. When she finished, he pulled her against him, holding her and stroking her hair. "My poor girl. Kevin?"

"Yeah, I'm on it," he responded from the kitchen.

"I'm sorry for freaking out on you," she said, wiping her eyes. "I normally don't ... do ... this..."

"What? Cry at the end of the day? I've done it once or twice myself."

"It's true," Kevin said.

"Shit, it usually takes much less than what you've been through."

Belle pushed herself away from Aden and tried to stand. "I need to get cleaned up." She looked down at herself and grimaced. Her slacks were unzipped but still on, and she wore nothing but her bra on top. "And change."

"Let me help you," Aden said, standing as well.

"You don't really..."

"I want to."

Belle shrugged one shoulder and stumbled into the bathroom. She blanched when she saw her hideous reflections. Red and swollen eyes, black streaked face, dried snot below her nose. "Christ," she muttered.

"Where do you keep your night clothes?" Aden asked.

"There should be a t-shirt in the top drawer," Belle said as she scrubbed her face. As least the tears had stopped and she felt like she was under control again.

Aden stepped behind her and started removing her clothes in a quick, clinical way. She leaned over to rinse her face, her bra falling to the floor. She sighed with relief.

"Alright," he said, "lift your arms."

She did so, and he slid an over-sized Betty Boop shirt over her head. He leaned over to kiss her neck, but there was nothing sexual about it. Just a sweet kiss that made her warm.

"Feeling better?"

Belle nodded.

"Good, let's see what Kevin's cooked up, shall we?"

Curious, Belle followed Aden into the kitchen, where Kevin was dishing up a large plate of pasta with tomato sauce. Belle balked. "I can't eat that much food."

"Try for me," Kevin said, setting the plate on the table.

"Thank you," she whispered, feeling overwhelmed by her emotions again. "You didn't have to do this."

"What were we going to do?" Kevin asked. "Leave you hungry and bleeding?"

Aden sat down and looked at her with serious eyes. "Is this a normal work day for you?"

"Which part?" Belle asked, digging into the spaghetti.

"The verbal abuse, for starters."

Belle grimaced. "It's not that bad."

"She left you in tears."

"Ms. Redding ... has a temper. It doesn't really take much to push her over the edge," Belle admitted.

"Does she routinely make you work sixteen hour days?"

"Not *routinely* ... a few times a week."

Kevin and Aden looked at each other, and she expected one or both of them to jump

in with advice to quit. Thankfully, they kept their opinions to themselves. Belle knew she needed to quit, that the place was toxic, but she needed the money. At the end of the day, that's what it came down to. She needed the money.

"And then there's the book," Belle added, her throat clenching.

"What book?" Aden asked.

Belle wiped her eyes. "I wrote a book ... when I was in college. I think my ex-boyfriend might be trying to publish it. But I can't call him and ask because he ... well ... it was ugly. And I know I can't stop him."

"How did you find out?" Kevin asked.

"A mutual friend emailed me a few days ago. I forgot about it because of everything, you know? But when I went back to work this morning, there was that email. If I just *knew*. I think he's stealing my book," she finished softly.

"Look, I can help with this," Aden told her. "It's what I do, right? I'll look into it."

She smiled through her tears. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course. I'm busy tomorrow ... really busy ... but I can help you the day after. How's that sound?"

Her smile widened. "Perfect. What did you guys come over for?" Belle asked. Her headache abating and her stomach no longer twisting with hunger, she felt ten times better.

"We ... wanted to talk about something," Kevin started.

"But it can wait," Aden cut in.

"Yeah, it can wait." Kevin smiled. "It's not a big deal."

Belle blinked her gritty eyes and shook her head. "I'd love to finish this, but I can't keep my eyes open."

"No problem. I'll just put it in the fridge, okay?"

Belle nodded and rose from her seat. Aden swooped in and scooped her into his arms, taking her by surprise. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you to bed."

"I could have walked."

"But I wanted to carry you."

As much as Belle enjoyed having sex with them, she was relieved when Aden placed her on the bed. He didn't begin undressing her or himself. But she realized as he turned for the door that she didn't want to be alone either.

"Aden? If it's not too much trouble... I mean, could you ... stay with me a bit?"

"Sure, pet."

He stretched out on the bed. She curled around him, content. His steady breath had nearly lulled her to sleep when Kevin walked in.

"Hey, what..."

"Shhh." Aden lifted his hand and beckoned Kevin over. Behind her, she could feel the bed dip with his weight. His strong warmth settled over her back.

"What did you guys want to talk about?" She asked.

"It was nothing ... just try to get some sleep," Aden murmured.

"I want to know."

"We wanted to talk about what happened yesterday," Kevin answered. "At the beach and the club."

She had forgotten to feel guilty during the day, and now it hit her again. "I'm so

sorry, I didn't mean for it to happen and I..."

"Hey, calm down. It's cool," Aden said. "But we thought if this ... continued, we should have some ground rules, that's all."

"Oh. What are they?" Belle asked, relieved. While she had considered dumping them, they had been making rules? She couldn't help but feel relieved, especially since they didn't seem angry over her ... slip-ups.

"Pretty basic," Kevin said, his hand moving over her stomach. "No sneaking, no lying. Just honesty. We're a package deal, here."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much. We can play it by ear."

Belle yawned. "I can live with that."

"Good," Aden said. "Now, go to sleep."

Belle drifted off, tethered to the world by two solid bodies.

*

"You didn't give her all the stipulations," Aden said softly, watching her sleep. She looked relaxed, and very different from the pitiful, soggy girl who had opened the door to them.

"She didn't need to hear them. That's what they boiled down to, right?"

"That and the blowjobs."

Kevin smiled.

Silence settled over them as they both watched her. "It feels nice, doesn't it?" Aden finally said.

"She's very soft."

"I wouldn't mind giving her boss a piece of my mind."

"Yeah, I'm sure Belle would be thrilled with that."

"Well, I didn't say I was going to march into her office and tear her head off. But she's got to know this shit isn't acceptable." Aden didn't care what this Redding woman did to everybody else, but the things she had said to Belle.

"I don't know if there's really anything we can do about it, Aden. Belle is a big girl, after all."

"We could write a letter threatening litigation. Those almost always work." Aden smiled at the thought of what he would write. He could turn that bitch's hair white.

"We could," Kevin agreed. "If she asked us to."

"I just really hated to see her like that," Aden admitted. "I mean, I just... Why does she stand for it?" He shook his head.

"I know. I felt the same way. Why do most people put up with their pigfucker bosses?"

Aden sighed and smoothed her hair.

"We should probably go home." Kevin carefully moved away from her and stood up.

Aden nodded. He rolled her onto her back and kissed the top of her head. She mumbled in her sleep and stirred when he stood, but she didn't wake up. He turned on the alarm and pulled the blanket over her legs.

"Why don't you invite her over tomorrow and cook her dinner," Aden suggested.

"Where will you be?"

"Dinner with Chandra. And you know how she is. I'll be out until after midnight, probably."

Kevin rolled his eyes. "What does she want now?"

"Who knows, I don't bother to ask anymore. It's easier just to have Cindy make reservations."

Kevin turned off the lights and made sure the door was locked. "Just make her dinner?"

"Well you know," Aden said, shutting the door behind him. "You can make her happy too."

Chapter 9

"I can help you cook," Belle offered. "I could at least chop the onions." She felt a bit guilty watching him do all the work. Especially since it was his food and he'd probably end up doing the dishes as well.

"It's not necessary," Kevin said, looking over his shoulder. "I said I'd cook dinner, and that's what I'm doing."

"All I'm saying is you had a long day too. You don't need to cook for me..." He had whisked her away from her loft as soon as she got home, and she was happy to let him. The day had been horrendous, but it was Friday, and the witch wasn't expecting her to come in on her day off. She had the whole weekend to relax and regroup.

"I knew you'd be tired and I thought you didn't need to worry about dinner too..."

"That's what delivery is for," Belle pointed out as she slid down from the barstool. "Let me chop something."

Kevin pulled carrots and cucumbers from the fridge, handing them to her. "You can work on those, if it'll make you happy."

Belle picked a large knife and started chopping, imagining the long carrots were Ms. Redding's fingers. She sliced and diced with glee until Kevin put a gentle hand on her arm. "We're still going to eat those, you know."

Belle looked at the mess she made sheepishly. The carrots were nearly obliterated, and the pieces ranged from tiny slivers to large chunks. "Sorry. I guess I got a little carried away."

Kevin took the knife from her and set it out of reach. "Do you work out?"

"What?"

"Do you ever go to the gym?"

Belle's eyes widened. "Are you saying I need to go to the gym?"

"What? No. I mean, you've obviously got some pent up aggression..."

"I don't."

"What did those carrots ever do to you?"

"Okay, maybe a little..."

"Working out is a great way to let off steam. Especially the punching bag." Kevin took the carrots and pushed them into a pan. "It always helps me anyway."

"When do you have time to work out?"

"Our firm has a gym. We tend to work out at lunch," Kevin answered.

Her interest in the kitchen and dinner waning, she drifted into the living room, noticing the décor for the first time. She had always been too distracted to care before. Leather chairs and a sofa dominated the living room, and the white walls were decorated with black and white photos of landscapes and people.

The photos extended to the dining area that featured a large, mahogany table, covered in files, folders, pictures, newspapers, mail, and documents. She noticed one glossy photo of a man she vaguely recognized and held it up to the light.

"Is this a picture of Aden with Ford Wickham?" Belle asked, shocked. A popular but reclusive actor, there were very few sightings of him outside of his own movies. Belle sometimes suspected that Wickham didn't really exist; it was just part of an elaborate

scheme to sell movies.

“Yeah,” Kevin answered from the kitchen. “He’s one of our clients.”

“Wow, what’s he like?”

“He’s alright, I guess.”

“Wow,” Belle said, setting down the picture, “what a glowing endorsement of the man’s personality.”

“He’s not as eccentric as the gossip columnists would have you believe,” Kevin said. “But he has his moments.”

“So do you just hobnob with famous people all day?” Belle asked as she wandered down the hall. “Hey, you guys have another bedroom.”

“Yeah, it’s our office.”

Two desks, two desktop computers, one laptop—she assumed Aden had his laptop with him—a large stereo system, and about a half dozen filing cabinets cluttered the room. A very utilitarian, masculine room, it fit well with the rest of the apartment.

She noticed a thick piece of white paper on one of the desks and picked it up for a closer look. It was a remarkably accurate sketch of Aden. He had his back to the viewer, but he was glancing over his shoulder, his eyes half-closed. He was leaning against the window, and the background featured the Los Angeles skyline. Each muscle and curve of Aden’s back and buttocks were carefully outlined. Belle thought her fingers would fall right into the sketch, it looked so real. Either she would fall in, or the charcoal Aden would step out, naked and magnificent.

“Belle?”

Belle jumped. She quickly put the sketch down. Embarrassed, she hurried out of the office and took a seat on the barstool again. “Dinner almost ready?” She asked.

“Almost. Why is your face red?”

She touched her cheek with the back of her hand. Definitely warm. And she knew it wasn’t completely from shame for snooping through their office. She couldn’t stop thinking about the sketch of Aden. She couldn’t help imagining Kevin studying his model and then lovingly mimicking each line on the paper.

“I don’t know,” Belle answered.

Did they do that often? Was one of those desk drawers full of sketches of Aden in a variety of poses and situations? She thought there was. Which meant somewhere in the apartment was a cache of porn that could keep anybody happy for a very long time. If she asked about it, would they show her?

Belle knew how self-conscious artists could be, and she could imagine Kevin turning down her request, though he didn’t really seem the type of person to be shy. She suspected Aden would happily turn all the sketches over to her for her perusal and approval. He might even allow her to see them over Kevin’s protests.

“Kevin? Aden said that you guys met when you put an ad in the paper for a model, right?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Were you an art major or something?”

Kevin poured a bottle of beer into a chilled glass and set it in front of her. “I was pursuing a career in art, until I decided to go into law school.”

“Why did you decide to go to law school?”

Kevin looked up briefly. “Aden.”

“Do you still draw?”

“Sometimes. Enjoy,” he said, placing the plate in front of her—sirloin steak, au gratin potatoes, and her decimated carrots. Belle’s stomach grumbled and the sketches were temporarily forgotten.

Belle was just swallowing the final, succulent bit of sirloin when the door opened, and an exhausted looking Aden entered. He smiled at them in greeting, but didn’t speak until after he poured himself a shot of whiskey. “That woman makes me crazy.”

“That bad?” Kevin asked.

“Worse. For one thing, she’s got me confused with her agent and her therapist. I don’t know why she’s dumping all her shit on me.” Aden shook his head. “I don’t care who she is, I’m not working with her anymore.”

He collapsed on the sofa and Kevin went over to him, sitting on the arm of the sofa and running his fingers through Aden’s hair. “I suppose we could pass her on to Tom.”

“Good, we’ll do that.”

Aden tilted his head and pulled Kevin into a kiss. Belle found it difficult to look away, but she also felt like she shouldn’t be watching. To busy herself, she put the dirty dishes in the sink, filling it with hot water and soap. She scrubbed the plates, focused on her work so she wouldn’t turn around gawk at the two men. If she went over there and jumped right in, would either one of them appreciate the intrusion?

“Tell me you at least had a good day,” she heard Aden say.

“Paul Dobin finally came around. I honestly believe he just wanted to get a few free dinners out of me.”

Belle’s fingers went numb, the plate in her hands tumbling into the water with a splash. She spun around her, the color leaving her face. “Paul Dobin? Your new client is Paul Dobin?”

“Yeah.”

“About my age, black hair, medium build, tall, good-looking Paul Dobin?” Belle asked, hoping there was more than one *Paul Dobin* in Los Angeles.

“You know him?” Kevin asked.

“What...” Belle shook her head, swallowing hard. “Why does he need a lawyer?”

“A multi-book contract with a major house. The auction isn’t over yet, but negotiations start soon.”

“The auction?” The walls were spinning around her. Nothing Paul could write would force an auction between publishing houses.

“His agent says he’s looking at a hundred-grand advance for his first book,” Kevin added, as if to add insult to injury. “If we can’t negotiate a higher one. And I think we can.”

“What’s the book?” Would he be smart enough to change the title?

“*The Digital Spear*, I think it’s called.”

“Oh God,” she whispered.

“Who is he to you?” Aden asked, directing his question to Belle.

“He’s ... my ex. We collaborated on a book... I did most of the work. He provided the idea I did all the writing ... we broke up and things were ugly. He’s the one I told you about last night...” Belle explained, still trying to catch her breath.

“Maybe it’s a different book,” Kevin suggested.

Belle shook her head. “No, he wouldn’t have had time to write and polish a new

book. He doesn't even know how to write a book. Like I said, he just gave me the idea. If he has one ready to sell right now, it's ours."

Her heart broke. Now that she had confirmation, it felt as though he had stolen her child. He hadn't even bothered to change the title. "Did he think I wouldn't find out?" Belle asked. "Did he think he could sell my book and I would never know?"

"Belle, do you have proof that you helped write it?" Kevin asked.

"I didn't *help* write it. I wrote it all, myself. Every word came from me. I worked on it for over four years. Then he dumped me, and I gave up on it, really. I don't even know if I still have my notes. They might have been thrown out when I moved. He must have had a copy of it on his computer."

"If you don't have proof, there's not much we can do," Kevin said.

"So you're saying that I'm supposed to sit here and watch while you get him a shit-load of money that *I* deserve?" Belle demanded, her face flushed. Her skin felt tight.

"No, no, but you'll have to find proof. You're making the accusation so the burden of proof is on you," Kevin explained.

Belle shuffled into the living room and sat beside Aden. "I can't believe he did that. I mean, I know we had our disagreements ... but ... how could he steal my book?"

"Hey, we'll take care of it," Aden promised. He pulled her onto his lap and brushed the hair from her face. "I promised you last night I'd look into it. I intend to keep my promise."

Belle nodded. She didn't resist when he pulled her close and kissed her slowly, his lips tender and searching. He buried his hands in her hair and held her in place, exploring her mouth with his tongue. He teased the fear, anger, and confusion from her one bit at a time, replacing it with desire. An odd mix of comfort and sexuality, her entire body responded, including her heart. She believed Aden.

Aden broke the kiss and Belle lifted her head, breathless and dazed. The kiss had given her a mellow buzz. She willingly lifted her arms when Aden tugged on her shirt. He sucked on her nipple through her silk bra, making it hard and full against the wet material. He moved from one to other and back again, causing her breath to come in short, fast gasps.

Belle looked up and noticed Kevin watching them with half-lidded eyes, his arms folded, just out of her reach. She put her hand out to him and wiggled her fingers until he wrapped his around her palm. She pulled him to them and tilted her head to kiss him. His kiss was hard, his mouth almost bruising. Unexpected slivers of heat shot from her chest to her pussy.

Wet, aching, and uncomfortable, she tried to push her shorts away without standing and breaking Aden's concentrating.

"Watch it, pet," Aden warned. "I need that equipment in good working order."

Belle couldn't help the giggle. "Sorry. Let me..." She pushed herself off his lap and made short work of the rest of her clothes, leaving her naked and the center of attention. Both men were looking at her with hungry eyes, and again, she felt like their prey.

Aden unzipped his pants and pulled his cock free, then hooked his fingers through Kevin's waistband, pulling him close enough to do the same. Belle hesitated for a moment, unsure of what she wanted to do, and who she wanted to do it to. It was worse than being undecided at Starbucks when she was already running ten minutes late.

Finally, she dropped to her knees between Aden's legs and experimentally licked his

cock, from the tip of the head to his balls, running the tip of her tongue in a straight line. He hissed, his muscles flexing as he gripped the couch. Pleased with the reaction, she flicked her tongue over his head, lapping the clear, salty pre-come.

“God,” he muttered. “God, Belle...”

She sensed Kevin’s large frame standing over hers, and Aden leaned forward, pulling Kevin’s cock into his mouth. She did the same with Aden’s cock, sucking it between her lips and then deep into her mouth. Both men moaned, and the sound hit her in the groin. She squeezed her thighs together in an attempt to ease the throbbing, but it didn’t help.

Belle wrapped one hand around Aden’s shaft and stroked it fast, but she moved her mouth over and around him slowly, letting her tongue linger on his flesh to tease his sensitive skin. Every time he moaned, her clit pulsed. It made her dizzy. Hearing Kevin above her, listening to his soft groans, didn’t help.

Desperate, she reached between her thighs with free hand and rubbed her clit, until the twinges of pained desire began to abate. As soon as she felt the orgasm approaching, she moved her hand, unwilling to come so quickly. She cupped Aden’s balls and rolled them gently in her fingers, his response making her shiver with pleasure.

Aden put his free hand on top of her head, squeezing it slightly. She took his cock as deep into her mouth as she could, until it brushed the back of her throat. He held her there, thrusting his hips forward, his slick come coating her throat. He released her and leaned against the back of couch, pulling Kevin with him.

Belle looked on as Kevin pulled his cock out of Aden’s mouth and pumped it quickly, his hips jerking forward and his knees buckling as he shot his come onto Aden’s chest. Belle’s face and legs twisted as fresh lust spiraled through her, causing her physical pain. She hurt everywhere, the center of the throbbing between her legs.

Aden noticed her discomfort and twirled his hand. “Turn around,” he said hoarsely.

She obliged, turning her back to him.

“On your hands and knees.”

Belle dropped to all fours, her ass in the air. He kneeled behind her and thrust into her without warning. She didn’t know how he could be ready to go again so quickly, and she didn’t care. Belle took control, pushing herself against him to create the fast and hard pace she craved, but she nearly collapsed when he reached around her and massaged her clit.

Her orgasm was as fast and hard as his thrusts, and a garbled cry for more and of relief came from the back of her throat. Her knees were already burning, but the pure relief that overtook her was far more important.

Aden pulled out of her and stood up. Belle fell to the floor and rolled to her side, sated until she saw the two of them standing over her again. A new yearning ripped through her chest. She put her hand out. “Somebody help me up.”

They each took a hand and pulled her to her feet. She looked down at her red knees and shins and grimaced. “That’s going to hurt like a fucker.”

Aden snorted. “It’ll clear up. It’s not too bad.” He took her hand and led her into the bedroom.

Belle sat on the edge of the bed and watched the two men undress. The room was dark except for the orange light from the street below. She could only see their silhouettes, like shadows. The shadows solidified as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

She couldn't help but smile.

Aden stretched out on the bed, his body flexing like a big cat. "C'mere. No ... higher."

"Where do you want me?" Belle asked, confused.

He tapped his upper-chest. "Come up here."

Hesitantly, Belle moved up the bed and put one leg over his body. Aden gripped her ass and pulled her forward until she was straddling his head. He held her there, giving her a thorough working over with his tongue.

The shock almost sent her reeling back, but Kevin wrapped his arms around her from behind, and she relaxed against his hard chest. He cupped her breasts, his fingers gently kneading her flesh. She arched her back. Aden focused on her clit, dragging his tongue over it and around it until her entire body vibrated. She could feel the muscles in her stomach and legs tighten and tremble.

Kevin brushed the hair away from her neck and nibbled on the skin beneath her ear, using his tongue and teeth, but not hard enough to leave a single mark. Her back and neck tingled with arousal, her skin flushed from her scalp to her thighs, and she fell in love with Aden's tongue. It was the most perfect thing in the world. The perfect size, the perfect shape, the perfect pressure, perfectly skilled...

The evening's second orgasm would have made her double over as pleasure as heat exploded between her legs and made all her muscles melt, but Kevin kept his arm around her, leaving her sitting straight, sobbing for air, her thighs quivering.

Kevin gently lifted her away from Aden and she fell backwards on the bed.

"Ready for another go?" Kevin asked.

She looked at his engorged cock and she didn't know whether to nod and hold her arms open or shake her head and go to sleep. "So tired..."

"I understand," Kevin said, pushing her legs apart. He slid one finger into her slick passage and massaged her g-spot. "If you've had enough..."

Belle's whole body lit up, each never-ending glowing with energy, her blood singing hallelujahs.

"I ... I ... Oh God..."

"Do you want to stop?" Kevin asked, stilling his hand.

"No ... no ... no..."

Kevin lay down behind her and pulled her against him, spooning her. His cock slipped inside of her with slow, long strokes.

Aden faced her and reached between her legs, but she grabbed his hand and stopped him. "I'm too ... too sensitive there..." She gasped, barely able to speak. Kevin's thrusts were hypnotic and electrifying.

Instead, she gripped Aden's hot cock and stroked him with the same calm, slow assurance that Kevin pushed into her with. The minutes slipped into the night, and nobody showed any signs of stopping. Belle didn't want to stop. She wanted the minutes to stretch into hours and the hours to pass into the dawn, with the three of them curled around each other.

Aden rested his forehead against hers and their lips met in soft silence. Kevin's hand was on her hip, and Aden's hand was everywhere, caressing her skin with deft fingers. She could hear Kevin's breath quicken behind her. He tensed and gasped. The sound triggered something in Aden, and they climaxed within seconds of each other.

Kevin didn't pull out of her, and Aden didn't roll away from her. She listened to Kevin's breathing slow until she was sure he was asleep. Aden seemed to be asleep as well, and she longed to drift off as well, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw Paul's face.

Now that the blood was allowed to return to her brain, the fury also returned. Her exhaustion could not overcome her anger. *How could he?* The question circled her mind so many times that it became a mantra. *How could he? How could he?*

Did she have proof? She might have *some* proof, but she didn't know if it was enough to prove he was a thief.

"Belle?" Aden whispered.

"Hmmm?"

"You're still awake?"

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was listening to the wheels spinning in your head. I told you not to worry about it."

"I appreciate your help, but I just don't know if it'll be enough."

"We'll do whatever we can for you."

"Do you think Kevin will drop Paul as a client?" Belle's stomach twisted. If he didn't, every time she looked at him she would see Paul, and Paul's twisted, ugly, angry face.

"I'm sure he will," Aden said, but Belle didn't miss his hesitation.

"Really?"

"Belle ... sometimes Kevin can be ... very career minded."

"You're saying he won't drop Paul, then."

"I don't know, honestly."

Kevin stirred and Belle froze, afraid that they had pulled him from sleep. But he only turned over and started to snore lightly.

"He stole my book," Belle said, her voice raw. "He stole a part of me and now he's going to sell it to the highest bidder."

Aden wrapped his arms around her. "I know. It was a damned despicable thing to do. We'll have a friendly meeting on Tuesday to see if we can clear this whole thing up."

Pacified, Belle relaxed against him and the memory of the sketch returned. "Aden? Do you still model for Kevin?"

"Why?"

Belle yawned. "Just curious."

"Sometimes."

"He said he went to law school because of you." Her eyes were feeling fuzzy.

"Yeah, he did. We're both originally from Chicago, but I wanted to go to law school out here. He didn't have to go to school with me but ... well, that's just the way it worked out."

"He must love you a lot," she said, and suddenly she felt very lonely. She was there on their invitation, for fun and excitement and a good time, but ultimately, they didn't belong to her. They belonged to each other.

"He does." Aden's voice was soft against her ear.

"I wish I had that," she whispered.

Aden didn't respond, but she didn't think he was asleep.

“I thought I had it with Paul, but that was just a joke. Like those plastic flowers. It looked real, but that’s all.” *Nobody’s ever loved me*, she thought, but didn’t say. She still had a bit of pride left.

“Try to get some sleep, pet.”

Belle bit her lip, stung by his dismissal. The loneliness intensified, and she didn’t want to be there anymore. She wanted to be alone in her own room, alone in her own bed, alone by herself. She couldn’t even call Willow with this misery. Her best friend was supportive and loved her, but even she was growing weary of the pain that never quite went away.

Belle was growing weary of it too. If she could squash it, she would in a second. But every time she thought she was over him, something brought him back into her life. She knew Paul, and she knew he wouldn’t let the book go if he thought he had the chance of winning. Which meant she might be forced to see him several times a week; every day even.

Nobody could take the hurt away from her. Nobody wanted to help.

Belle turned over and molded her body against Aden’s, resting her head on his shoulder. He held her against him. She closed her eyes. In the dark, in his arms, enveloped by the warmth, she could pretend the loneliness away. A poor substitute for genuine love and companionship, but she knew Aden cared for her in some way, even if just as a really good friend. She believed he would do whatever he could to help her.

Belle counted the beats of his heart until she finally fell into sleep.

Chapter 10

“Kevin? Are you coming to lunch?” Aden asked, ducking his head into Kevin’s office.

Kevin looked up, surprised. “Is it lunch time already?” He had been distracted all morning, unable to focus on his work.

“A bit after, in fact,” Aden said, stepping in and shutting the door behind him. “What’s going on?”

Kevin gestured at the desk and shook his head. “I just have a lot of work.”

Aden perched on the side of the desk and lifted a few of the papers to study. “Dobin’s contracts?”

“I told him I’d go over a few of the clauses today. He doesn’t like some of the language they’re using.”

“I see.” Aden put the papers down and stood up. “You’re going forward with this, then?”

“I have to, Aden. This is a big deal and it’s worth a lot of money.”

“No, you don’t.” Aden shook his head. “You’re going to help him steal from Belle? Don’t the words ‘intellectual property’ mean anything to you?”

“Doesn’t the word *proof* mean anything to you?” Kevin asked, already sick of the conversation. He couldn’t just drop Dobin. A high-profile, up-and-coming author that the entire publishing world was paying attention to was not the type of client you wanted to let slip through your fingers.

“Why would Belle lie about that?” Aden asked. “It’s a hell of a strange thing to say if it’s not true.”

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s bitter because an ex is successful and isn’t stuck in a shitty job? Maybe she’s lying? Maybe she thinks she sees a chance to make some money. I don’t know, Aden, and neither do you.”

“You’re not even willing to give her the benefit of the doubt?”

“Why? Because she’s a good lay?” Kevin stood up and busied his hands with the papers on his desk. “When it’s my job on the line, I need a bit more than that.”

“I see.”

Kevin looked up and his resolve weakened. “Don’t look at me like that, Aden. She can find herself a good lawyer if she’s telling the truth.”

“She already has.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “You?”

“Yes.”

“You told her you’d represent her?”

“*Pro bono*, even.”

“Aden, don’t you think there’s a bit of a conflict of interest there?” Kevin’s mind raced, trying to find an argument to convince Aden to drop the case. They had never faced each other as opposing counsel, and he didn’t want to start now.

“It doesn’t seem to bother you. You could call Dobin right now and say, ‘Hey, sorry, banging your ex, I’ve got to pass on the case.’”

“I could,” Kevin said. “But I won’t.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Look, do you want to be stuck here for the rest of your life?” Kevin approached Aden until they were just inches apart. “You may not mind being nothing here, but I want to be a partner some day, and that’s not going to happen unless I have these sorts of cases. Why don’t you understand?”

“I *do* understand, Kevin. But believe it or not, I think doing the morally right thing is more important than doing the right thing for my career.”

“Oh, don’t you get all high and mighty on me, Aden. That shit isn’t going to fly with me. You’ll do whatever you have to do to win. Right now, you’re just focusing on a different prize,” Kevin said, his blood pounding in his ears. He didn’t want to get into a shouting match with Aden in his office, but he didn’t know if he could avoid one.

“And what prize is that? She’s already in our bed.”

“Yeah, she is, and maybe you want more than that.”

“Like what?” Aden took a step closer, looking at him with fierce blue eyes.

“Come on, you can’t resist being the Knight in Shining Armor. Have you ever been able to ignore a Damsel In Distress, Aden?”

“That’s not you want to say, Kevin. What more do you think I want from her? What do you think I’m after, in all your wisdom? Is this about her and Dobin, or is this about us?”

“It’s not about us,” Kevin whispered. “It’s not about us, and lower your voice.”

“Are you jealous?” Aden asked. “Are you jealous of her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Maybe that’s why you won’t let Dobin go, huh? It’s a perfect way to drive her away, and you won’t really have to look like the bad guy, because you’re just doing your job, right?”

“I am not trying to drive her away, but even if I did, so what? She’s a bit of fun.”

“Is that all you see her as? You don’t enjoy spending time with her?”

“Why are you so fucking defensive?”

“I’m not defensive, I’m just... You know, fuck it. I’m going to lunch.” He marched over to the door and yanked on it. The door flew open, smashing into the wall.

Kevin winced. Fortunately, the glass in the door didn’t break. “Aden ... wait...”

He spun around. “What?”

The vein on his forehead stood out, and Kevin noticed the small tick in his jaw. The obvious anger confused and concerned Kevin. Dobin wasn’t worth this much energy. He must have struck another nerve, but he didn’t know which one.

“I’ll buy you lunch.” Kevin smiled, trying to charm Aden into staying.

“You know, I’m really not hungry anymore.”

He didn’t want Aden to storm out of his office angry. For one thing, it wouldn’t look very good, and there would be questions. But, most of all, he hated it when Aden was angry with him. His temper ran hot, but left unchecked, it could burn for hours or even days.

“Then I’ll buy you coffee.” Kevin held his breath. He could see Aden weakening. He didn’t know if Aden would agree to lunch or just start the next round of shouting, but he wasn’t going to leave either.

Aden shut the door behind him and leaned against it. “I was going to ask if you wanted a sandwich.”

Kevin frowned. "From where? Not Subway, right?"

"No, not Subway. I know you have a completely illogical aversion to the place. I was thinking of that little Italian shop a few blocks west."

"We can go to Subway if you want. It's closer."

Aden shrugged. "We've missed the lunch rush. It'll be okay."

"What's your afternoon like?"

"I don't have any meetings until three."

"Maybe we can have lunch at home."

"I'll drive."

* * * *

Every time somebody walked past Belle's cubicle, she winced, expecting Ms. Redding to descend on her with the force of a tornado. Despite her best efforts, she could not stay focused on the Wayne account. The copy was a mess, and she wasted precious time deleting it and starting over again.

She decided to work through lunch, intent to finish it before Ms. Redding cornered her for the day. It may not be perfect, but it would be finished, and that might save her from Redding's wrath.

Belle stared at the computer screen until her eyes crossed. She couldn't force a single thought. Nothing made sense, nothing sounded good. The phone rang. She answered it without looking away from her computer.

"Yes?"

"Belle, you will not believe what I just saw," Willow's voice was breathless and high pitched.

"What?" Belle asked, alert and sitting straight.

"Paul. I just saw Paul."

Expecting a bigger revelation, Belle sunk back in her chair, uninterested. "Oh."

"You don't understand. I saw him on T.V.!"

"What?"

"He was on that FOX morning show. They were interviewing him ... about his book."

"Oh," Belle breathed, her heart sinking. "*The Digital Spear*, right?"

"Right. That's your book, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is." He was already getting media attention? He didn't even have a publisher, why would they want to interview him? She wouldn't be surprised if he hired a publicist. Maybe it was part of his strategy to grab the highest bidder?

"What is he doing? How did he get his hands on it?"

"I wrote a lot of it on his computer. He probably stole the rest from my laptop or something. I don't know."

"You don't sound very surprised," Willow said. "I thought you'd be freaking out."

"I found out on Friday."

"What are you doing about it?"

"I've got a lawyer. Look, Willow, I've got to go. If my boss catches me on the phone, she'll be pissed. I'll call you when I get home."

"Right. Bye."

Belle hung up the phone and waited for the familiar, cold hand to fall on her

shoulder. When nothing happened, she tried to focus on her work again. What would he do next? More television programs? A few radio shows? Newspaper stories? Was he sticking to local media, or did he plan to go national soon?

Belle could understand why Paul was so marketable, but she couldn't understand why her book was getting so much attention. Most of the shock stemmed from the fact that editors were actually bidding on it, not that Paul had stolen it. Warm pride suffused her chest every time she thought about an editor reading and enjoying her humble manuscript, but that pride turned cold and cutting when she thought of Paul reaping the rewards of her hard work.

Knowing Paul, it never would have occurred to him that she would fight back. How could it? He was spoiled, but he was smart enough to earn or steal anything his father couldn't provide. He probably assumed she wouldn't have the money to fight him, and he would have been right. If Aden hadn't agreed to help her, she would have been forced to watch him become a best seller and a media darling.

"Hey," Rich said, sticking his head over the cubicle wall. "Redding wants to see you."

Belle frowned. "Why?"

"She didn't say. She might want the Wayne copy."

"I don't have it," Belle whispered.

"She's not going to want to hear that." Rich smiled sympathetically. "She seemed to be in a good mood though."

That didn't encourage Belle. Redding seemed to enjoy cutting into her the most when she was having a good day. She pushed away from her desk and straightened her skirt and shirt. "Wish me luck."

"Break a leg."

"I'd like to break her leg," Belle muttered.

Belle could see Ms. Redding on the phone through her open door. She hesitated in the doorway. Redding waved her in and turned her chair, putting her back to her. Belle didn't sit, hoping the meeting would be short and to the point.

"Ah, Belle. Have a seat."

Belle didn't move. "Rich said you wanted to see me."

"I do. Please, sit down."

Belle perched on the edge of the seat, defeated. She waited silently for Redding to start her lecture.

"How is the Wayne copy coming?"

"Great," Belle lied.

"Will you be finished with it today?"

"Yes."

"Good, I want it on my desk by 4:30."

Belle looked at the clock over Redding's shoulder. It was just after three. "Yes, ma'am."

She shuffled back to her seat and wondered what Aden and Kevin were doing. *If you finish this on time, you can spend the whole evening with them*, she promised herself. She re-focused her energy, and the words began to make sense.

* * * *

Kevin slammed Aden against the door, their mouths fused, their blood still running hot from the fight. Aden grabbed a handful of Kevin's hair and pulled his head back, attacking Kevin's neck with his mouth. Kevin fumbled with their pants, working the flies free, while Aden tore at his shirt, sending his buttons flying to the floor.

Aden moved his mouth down Kevin's neck and chest to find his nipple. He bit it, hard. Kevin gasped and wrapped his fingers around Aden's cock, squeezing it and increasing the pressure until Aden freed his nipple and ran his tongue over the tooth marks.

Kevin released him and spun him around, pushing Aden's chest against the door. Aden braced himself, his muscles taut, his skin tight. Anger intensified his desire, and his balls ached. He knew Kevin felt the same way. He could feel the heat radiate off his body, see the red emotions flashing in his eyes.

Kevin slid the tip of his cock between Aden's ass cheeks, teasing him with it. "Now," Aden said through gritted teeth.

Kevin pushed into him. Aden willed himself to relax, his muscles loosening. He pushed back against Kevin, and they both paused, taking deep breaths. Aden's head spun and his eyes watered and everything was gone or forgotten except the way Kevin felt inside of him.

The moment crashed around them as Kevin pulled out and thrust into him again, and again, and again, pounding him into the door.

Chapter 11

Belle checked her watch for the tenth time and crossed her legs, pulling her skirt down over her knees. She longed for a glass of water to ease her dry throat and sooth her churning stomach. Aden had told her she needed to be in his office by one, which meant she had to take the afternoon off from work. Belle hoped it would be the first and last time, because Redding hadn't given her the requested time off without a fight.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Aden said, stepping into the office. "Something came up."

"It's okay."

Aden looked at her, frowning. "Are *you* okay? You don't look so hot."

Belle tried to smile. "I'm great, just great. Super, in fact. So, this is your office, huh?"

"Yeah, it is." He crossed over to the water cooler she hadn't noticed and poured her a cup. "Here."

"Thanks." She thought of asking him if his door locked. He looked unbelievable in his suit and tie, almost amazing enough to distract her completely from the task at hand.

"Dobin is here."

Belle nodded.

"You don't need to say anything to him. I'll do all the talking."

Belle nodded again, her stomach doing slow somersaults.

"This is only a meeting. We're going to try to compromise ... wait. I know. You don't want to compromise. I don't blame you, but I don't want this to drag out for weeks or months. I don't think any of us is up for that, okay?"

"I understand."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No. I just really wish I didn't have to do this."

"I know, but it'll be over before you know it." He pulled her to her feet and kissed her forehead. "Smile, yeah? Don't let him know you're nervous."

"*I am* nervous."

"Come on, they're waiting for us in the conference room."

"I think I need more water." She hurried over to the cooler and downed a full cup.

"Ready now?"

She squared her shoulders and nodded. She knew this wouldn't be painless, but it would be short, and best to get it out of the way. He held the door open for her, smiling at her encouragingly as she walked by. *I can do this. I can do this.*

Aden led her to a large room at the end of the hall. She could see Kevin and Paul through the window, and her heart hurt. She hated the way Paul made her feel. Always a rush of longing and adrenalin first, and right after, a wave of pain that turned everything gray. She thought if she lived to be one hundred and happened to pass him on the street, her first reaction would still be sharp desire.

Paul watched her as she walked in, but he didn't acknowledge her at all. She looked at Kevin and Aden. For the first time, she didn't feel that spark of chemistry between them. Cool and professional, they gave no hint of what they felt. Belle took her seat and

tried to look as unruffled as three men, but she knew she wore her emotions on her face.

“What do you want?” Paul asked.

“My client wants you to withdraw *The Digital Spear* from consideration at all publishers as well as agents.”

“No,” Paul answered.

“If you do not, we’ll be forced to sue you for copyright infringement and theft of intellectual property,” Aden explained.

Paul sat back in his chair and smiled calmly. “Do you have proof?”

Belle looked to Kevin, waiting for him to speak, but he remained silent.

“Yes,” Aden answered, looking equally at ease.

Paul waved his hand. “This is just another one of her stunts to get money. She’s been looking for a pay off since we broke up.”

Belle sat up. “That’s not true!”

Aden put a reassuring hand on her arm. She sat back, but her blood boiled. How dare he? She had never asked for, demanded, or otherwise indicated she wanted one red cent from him.

“This is just like the time she told me she was pregnant.” He leered at her. “And it’ll end the same way.”

“Mr. Dobin, we’re offering you the chance to avoid litigation.”

“Hey, take your best shot. You’ll never get in front of a judge.”

Aden stood up and offered his hand. Kevin and Paul both rose, but neither one of them shook Aden’s hand. “Well, I’m sorry you feel that way. You’ll be served with papers tomorrow morning.”

Belle shot one last worried look at Kevin, but he didn’t notice. His face was impassive, his lips compressed in a thin line. Aden opened the door and Belle hurried to follow him out.

“Is that all?” She asked in the hallway.

“Is that all? You want more?” Aden asked.

“No, no. I just thought there would be more ... negotiating...”

Aden shook his head. Belle almost had to jog to keep up with his long strides. “No, it wouldn’t have done any good. He wants this to go to court. So we’ll give him what he wants.”

“Why? Does he think he’ll win?”

“Do you even have to ask? Of course, he thinks he’ll win. He doesn’t see this as anything more than a publicity stunt. If we sue him, his face will be on the news and all over newspapers and there’s no such thing as bad press, right?” Aden pushed his office door opened. “He thinks this is a joke.”

“What can I do?”

“Well, what evidence have you got.”

“I don’t know,” Belle admitted, looking at her toes.

Aden rubbed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“When I moved to the loft from the dorms, I threw out a lot of old stuff and put the rest in boxes. Some of it might have been thrown out. Some of it might be in storage.” Belle shrugged. “I didn’t know this would ever come up. I put the novel away. I just wanted to forget about it.”

“Come on. We’re going to go through every single box tonight. Meet me

downstairs.”

Belle nodded. “Thanks ... for all this.”

“Don’t thank me yet, sweetheart. Going to court wasn’t exactly our best option. Go on, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Belle looked both ways before leaving Aden’s office, afraid to run into Paul, but the hall was empty. She hurried over to the elevators and repeatedly pushed the down button. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kevin and Paul approaching. She pushed the button again, praying it would call the elevator quickly, but it didn’t work.

They reached her side just as the elevator opened, and they followed her in. She pushed the button for the ground floor, then studied her fingernails, pointedly ignoring the two men.

“Oh, Belle, why can’t you just let me go?” Paul asked, leaning against the wall next to her.

“I’m not talking to you,” Belle said, remembering Aden’s advice that all communication should go through him.

Paul caressed the side of her face and smiled. “If you wanted to see me again, you could have called. I would have made time for that fine ass of yours.”

Belle slapped his hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

“You’re going to be sorry you did this, Belle. But there’s still time. Save yourself the embarrassment.” He touched her face again, making her skin crawl.

“Touch me again, and I’ll press charges,” she warned, pushing him away. Kevin remained silent in the corner. She wanted to slap him.

The bell dinged and the doors opened to the building’s lobby. Belle hurried out and took refuge in the bathroom, her heart pounding in her ears, her face a hectic shade of red. She waited until her breathing and color returned to normal before she left the bathroom. Aden was waiting for her.

“Thought you left,” he said.

She wanted to tell him what happened in the elevator, but decided to keep it to herself for the moment. She longed to ask him why Kevin would just stand there and let Paul invade her personal space and touch her. He couldn’t have told him to back off?

“Did you see Kevin?” Aden asked, pulling her from her thoughts as they walked through the parking garage.

“Um ... when?”

“Just now. I went to his office to tell him I was leaving for the day. He wasn’t there.”

“I saw him in the elevator. He was with Paul.”

Aden stopped short. “In the elevator with you?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

Belle shrugged and tried to act nonchalant. “Paul just told me to drop it, is all.”

“Really?”

“Pretty much.”

“What did Kevin do?”

“Nothing.”

Aden frowned and put his hand on her back. “Come on. Where do you keep those boxes?”

“There’s a storage place about a block from my place...”

“On that little side street?”

“That’s the one.”

“Great, we’ll stop there, get the boxes, and then have some food delivered.”

Belle smiled. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

* * * *

Aden carried six large, heavy boxes up the stairs one at a time, depositing them in her living room. He prayed that this wasn’t all in vain. If they didn’t have something solid to support her assertion, there wouldn’t be any point in going to court. Paul would certainly hire a team of lawyers for the case, and Kevin would just be one of many sharks.

“We’re looking for notes, rough drafts, disks, anything like that, okay? Also, did you ever show the book to anybody?”

“Yeah, a few people.”

“While I look through the boxes, I want you to make a list of everybody who saw it, okay? When they saw it, what they saw, what they said, their contact information, anything you can remember.”

“Right.”

“What about the computer? Do you still have the machine you wrote it on?”

“Well, I wrote most of it on his computer. I didn’t have a reliable computer while I was in college and I didn’t want to use the university’s labs,” Belle explained.

“What about the first chapter? Where did you write that?”

“I still have that computer and a few back-ups as well. But the CPU gave up the ghost about a year ago and I don’t know if we’ll be able to recover anything.”

“Give it to me tonight. I’ll take it to my computer guru. If it’s on there, he’ll be able to find it.”

“I ordered some pizza while you were bringing up the boxes,” Belle said.

“Sounds good.”

They lapsed into silence as Belle made her list and Aden looked through the history of her life. He set aside each disc and CD that he found, as well as all the short stories and poetry she wrote for her creative writing courses. He was a little shocked by the sheer amount of garbage she kept in storage. Did she really need twenty stapled pages of notes from the Sociology course she took five years ago?

Aden was happy to sort through the trash, though. If he focused on that, he wouldn’t be focused on Kevin. He could see the light was on in their apartment, so he knew he was home. What was his game? Why did he let Paul do all the talking? He had been almost passive during the meeting. Aden hoped it meant that he didn’t want to be there, but he suspected there was another motive behind his silence.

He had just finished the second box when the pizza arrived. They both paused to eat. Belle was in the kitchen, opening their beers, when she asked, “Is Kevin pissed at me?”

Aden looked up. “Why?”

“When we were in the elevator, Paul got in my face, and Kevin didn’t say anything. Not even when he...” Belle grimaced, “Caressed my face.”

Aden cocked an eyebrow. “He touched you? And Kevin didn’t do anything?”

Belle handed him a beer and sat down beside him. “He didn’t say a word. I mean, I understand why he has to pretend he doesn’t know me, or whatever. But couldn’t he have

told Paul to back off?”

Aden frowned. “Yeah. He shouldn’t have let Paul talk to you at all.”

“So I thought he was mad at me.”

“I don’t know what’s going on in Kevin’s head right now,” Aden admitted. And that bothered him. He had always been able to read Kevin before, but now he was having difficulty getting a fix on him at all.

“Aden, if this is going to cause problems, I can find another lawyer.”

“No.”

“It’s not worth it,” Belle said. “There are a million attorneys in the city. You could give me a referral.”

“Could you afford an attorney?”

Belle shrugged. “I’d find a way...”

“You sound real sure of that,” Aden said.

“You know I’m grateful to you. I know Paul didn’t think I could afford a decent lawyer. He didn’t think I would take the time or the money to fight him. But...”

“But what?” Aden put his pizza down.

“But you and Kevin kinda freaked me out today.”

Aden couldn’t help but laugh. “Freaked you out? How?”

“You were all distant and cold ... it was weird.”

“It was being professional,” Aden said, taking the beer and pizza from her hands.

“That’s all. No need to be worried.”

“Are you sure?”

Aden nodded, leaning back and pulling her with him. His back hit the floor and she settled on his chest. “Positive.”

Her hair fell in his face and he pushed it aside to kiss her. He pulled her skirt up her thighs and dipped his fingers beneath her panties. She gasped, squirming on top of him, and his cock hardened.

“We’re supposed to be working,” she said against his mouth.

Aden groaned. “I’d rather be doing this.”

“Me too, but...”

Aden slid his out from between her legs and straightened her skirt. “If you insist.”

“Just for now.”

“One more kiss...” Aden muttered, putting his hand on the back of her head and kissing her deeply.

“Am I interrupting anything?” Kevin asked from above them. “I mean, other than your research.”

Belle scrambled to her feet, but Aden didn’t sit up from his position on the floor.

“Not at all. What do you want?”

“Wanted to know where you were.”

“I tried to leave a message,” Aden said, “but you sure beat a hasty retreat this afternoon. Where did you run off to?”

Aden could see Belle moving out the corner of his eye, leaving the living room.

“I had more things to discuss with Paul.”

Aden did sit up now. “Oh yes, Paul. Is there a reason why you allowed your client to not only talk to Belle, but *touch* her?”

“He didn’t do anything.”

“I want to make something clear, Kevin. Dobin is to have no direct contact or communication with Belle. There’s no reason for it. If he has something to say to her, he can tell you or he can tell me.”

“Fine.”

Aden narrowed his eyes. He didn’t like Kevin’s tone. He wasn’t agreeing with him, he was granting a favor. Dismissively. Like Aden didn’t have the right to make the request.

“Is there something on your mind, Kev?” Aden asked, trying to sound pleasant, but the hair on the back of his neck was on end, and the tension in the air was thick.

“I’m going out to dinner.” It didn’t sound like an invitation to Aden. More like an order or a challenge.

“I already ate. Plus, I have work to do.”

“I see that.” Kevin spun on his heel and went to the door without acknowledging Belle at all, who was standing in the kitchen by now.

Aden frowned and let him walk out, resisting the urge to call out and ask him to wait. The door slammed behind him.

“I’m almost done with the list,” Belle said softly.

“Right,” Aden said, grabbing box three. “Back to work.”

Chapter 12

Kevin sat in the dark waiting for Aden to come home. He watched them sorting through boxes looking for evidence, and he wished he could join them. As soon as Aden had stepped into the conference room that afternoon, Kevin regretted his decision. But now things had gone too far.

After the meeting, Paul had invited him to have a drink. Kevin had accepted, but he did not expect that drinks included the opportunity to meet Paul's father, James. James had bemoaned the fact that Paul was such a target for women like Belle.

"They always want something, don't they?" James had asked. "She's been going after his money since they met."

The conversation was eventually redirected to James' most recent movie, one that was garnering major raves from film festivals across the world. "I'm looking to start my own studio," James had told him. "And I'm going to need somebody to head the legal department. Somebody young enough to keep up with me. Somebody we can trust."

Kevin understood the implication. If he did right by Paul, they'd do right by him. Kevin had fantasized about that sort of conversation for the past decade. It seemed too good to be true. Finally, a chance to move up in the world to bigger and better things. Winning one case might not be enough to land the promotion, but becoming Paul's private lawyer and fighting his battles would pay off in the long run. He could win this case.

Kevin had been eager to share the news with Aden, until he saw him helping Belle sort through a mountain of garbage. For free. Because it was the right thing to do. Aden wouldn't see an exciting opportunity for advancement; he would see Kevin selling out a friend. And he would be right.

Kevin couldn't stand to see himself through Aden's disappointed eyes, so he fled. He knew he'd have to keep running if he went forward with the plan.

Aden came home long after midnight, but Kevin was still waiting for him.

"Oh, you're still up," Aden greeted.

"I needed to talk to you."

"Well talk to me in the bedroom. I'm exhausted."

Kevin followed Aden down the hall, trying to rehearse the words in his mind, but they didn't come easy. This would be difficult, bordering on impossible. But it was necessary, wasn't it?

"Did you find anything useful?"

Aden shrugged as he unbuttoned his shirt. "I think so. She's such a pack rat." Aden rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I need to shave."

Kevin leaned on the bathroom door and watched Aden lather up. "I think I need to move out," he blurted.

Aden froze, the razor partway up his chin. "What?"

"Just for the duration of the case," Kevin added. "Just until it's resolved."

Aden dropped the razor in the sink. "Move out?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to..."

"Are you leaving?"

“No, no,” Kevin assured him. “No, of course not. I just think it might be difficult for us...”

“For you. It’s difficult for you,” Aden said. “I don’t have a problem.”

Kevin reached around Aden and grabbed the razor. “Turn around here.” He ran the razor up Aden’s cheek, trying to find the right words. “I think it might be better for *us* if we aren’t dealing with this conflict all day, every day. We might need a break.”

“Where are you going?”

“I thought I’d say at the Hilton.”

Aden swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “When?”

“Tomorrow. After work.” Kevin rinsed the razor in the sink. “Turn your head.”

“I’ll finish it.”

“No, I want to.”

Aden didn’t try to take the razor from him, but he didn’t speak either. Kevin already regretted his announcement, and he wanted to take it back. It had been a stupid idea, he didn’t know what he was thinking; he was under a lot of stress. “All done,” Kevin said.

Aden rinsed his face, dried it, and went back into the bedroom. Kevin noticed that he kept his boxers on, instead of crawling into bed naked like he always did. Kevin stripped and slid under the covers next to him, wrapping his arm around him.

“Ten years,” Aden muttered.

“I’m not disappearing. I’ll be ten minutes away,” Kevin pointed out. “Besides, Belle can keep you company.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know.”

“Is it worth it Kevin? Whatever you’re getting out of this, is it worth it?”

Kevin didn’t answer. He didn’t know the answer. But then, what was he really losing? A few nights with Aden? He would miss Aden, but it wasn’t the end of the world. They had spent a few nights apart before. Belle? He liked her. He did. Perhaps as much as Aden liked her. But was she offering him the chance of a lifetime?

Kevin kissed the back of Aden’s head and pulled him closer, relieved that Aden didn’t try to pull away from him. This would all be over in a matter of weeks, maybe sooner. Then life could go back to normal. Normal or better.

* * * *

Belle noticed Kevin’s absence as soon as Aden let her into the apartment, but she didn’t comment on it. She assumed he was running an errand or at a meeting, and Aden didn’t mention anything.

Belle handed him a stack of printed papers with a smile. “I’ve compiled the list of people who have seen the manuscript. I’ve also included everything you asked for. Dates, phone numbers, and a description of what they saw ... as near as I could remember. Some of this stuff was three or four years ago.”

Aden looked it over and smiled. “It’s a great start.”

“I also went through all my discs today at lunch. These four contain bits of the manuscript,” she said, passing them to him. “And this one actually has about ten email exchanges between me and Paul. We’re talking about the direction of a sub-plot, mostly.”

“Great work. Let’s go have a look-see, shall we?”

When Aden turned the light on in the office, she noticed Kevin’s laptop and the

sketch of Aden were both missing.

"Have a seat," Aden said, gesturing to Kevin's chair.

"There's one more thing..."

"What's that?" Aden asked, turning to face her.

Something in his eyes struck her, causing her to forget how to breathe for a moment. She couldn't put her finger on what she saw, and it was gone in a flash, but it made her a little dizzy. She didn't want to work anymore, she wanted to crawl on his lap and cover his face with kisses. "I ... found this under my door..."

Belle handed him the sealed envelope. Her name was scrawled across the front in big, loopy letters.

"It's from Paul," Belle said as Aden examined it. "I recognize his hand-writing. I didn't open it because..." She shrugged. "I didn't really want to see it."

Aden sighed and pulled a letter opener out of the jar by his hand. She watched him slice the envelope open and pull out a single piece of paper. Aden read it over, his face remaining expressionless.

"What does it say?" She asked.

Aden looked at her and then his eyes returned to the page in front of him. "Nothing you need to see. You can read it if you want, of course, but..."

Belle put her hand up. "I don't want to know ... unless ... is it a threat?"

"No, not a threat. Just some childish name-calling." The tone of his voice implied it was a bit more than that. "We'll file this away for future reference."

Unable to resist any longer, Belle leaned forward and left a lingering kiss on Aden's cheek. She slid her lips down to his neck, and buried her face in his shoulder, inhaling his familiar comforting scent. Her fingers moved to the buttons of his shirt, and she popped the top one open before he put his hand on hers, holding her fingers.

"Not right now, Belle."

She pulled her head back, surprised. "What?"

"We've got work to do." He grabbed her shoulders and guided her back to the chair.

Belle frowned. She understood they had work to do, but she didn't want to fuck right there on the computer desk. Well, they didn't *have* to fuck right there on the computer desk. Belle folded her arms and leaned back, watching Aden sort through the new information she brought.

He went over each thing carefully, making notes on his computer, and then went over everything again. Belle watched, bored, and listened for Kevin to return.

"So, did you find anything useful?" Belle finally asked, unable to sit still for another second.

"I think so." Aden rubbed his eyes. "You know, you don't have to sit here and watch me. You can go home if you want."

Belle checked her watch. It wasn't too late. "I could stay if you want..."

Aden shook his head. "You'd better go. I have a lot of other work to do. It's going to be a long night for me."

Belle stood up, confused. He had already turned his back to her, dismissing her.

"Then ... I guess I'll be going. If you need anything, feel free to call me."

Aden nodded, but didn't look up. She hesitated another moment, waiting for him to tell her goodbye, or at least tell her when he wanted to see her again. But he was lost in his own world, and she was shut out.

“I’ll let myself out.”

Belle understood he had work to do, but it still hurt. As she walked through the apartment to the door, she couldn’t help but think it looked empty. Like something was gone, but everything looked the same. She couldn’t see anything out of place or missing.

She opened the door and paused, looking around the apartment one more time. Had she done something to make Aden angry? It would be stupid to run back into the office and ask him, but that was exactly what she wanted to do. But she didn’t. She turned into the hallway and shut the door behind her.

“I’ll see him tomorrow,” she told herself. “He’ll be his normal self. He’s just busy tonight.” Belle knew she wouldn’t exactly be lovable if she had to bring her work home with her. She would want her space, and it was only right to give him his...

Somehow, all the explanation and justification did not lessen the sting of rejection.

She heard a door open behind her as she shuffled down the hallway, but she didn’t look. The hand that fell on her shoulder shaved a decade from her life and she spun around, her eyes wide.

“Belle, don’t leave.” Aden shook his head. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I...”

Aden cupped her face and kissed her, pulling her against him. She thought he was trying to devour her. Like a thirsty man discovering an oasis, he came back for more and more as he backed her down the hallway and into his apartment. She moved her feet quickly to keep from tripping over him. He kicked the door shut behind them.

“Stay with me,” he said against her mouth. “Stay with me.”

Belle noticed the pronoun use. Stay with *me*, not stay with *us*. She knew it was late. Sometime after ten. Understanding struck her, knocking the air out of her chest. Belle lifted her head and looked at him with dazed eyes. “Aden, where’s Kevin?”

Chapter 13

Aden heard the question, but he didn't want to answer it. He didn't want to talk about it at all. Aden had watched him pack two suitcases worth of clothes, take his shaver and his toothbrush and the extra bottle of shampoo from beneath the sink, re-direct his call-forwarding, and gather all the important files in the office. Neither one of them spoke. Aden sat and watched as long as he could stand before leaving the apartment, preferring to walk in the late summer heat. When he returned, Kevin was gone. He had left a note in the kitchen with his phone number.

He tried to distract her with a series of kisses across her neck, pausing to lick her pulse point and nibble on all her sensitive spots that he had mapped out in his mind. She responded like he knew she would, gripping his shoulders and dropping her head back.

Aden lifted her shirt over her head, then made short work of her bra. He loved her body. He loved to look at her body, to touch her body. He loved to kiss her and lick her and taste her. He ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass, pulling her against him, her breasts rubbing against his chest. He ran the tip of his tongue from her jaw and down her neck. She arched her back. He continued his path down her body, his tongue skimming the center of her chest.

"Come to bed with me," Aden whispered against her skin.

"Yeah," she breathed.

Aden lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He stripped her pants away and slid her underwear down her thighs. He loved the delicate things she wore, always lacy and feminine. Her black panties matched the bra on the floor in the living room. His mouth fluttered on her tummy. She smelled of apples and cinnamon and sex.

Aden noted every detail as he explored her with his mouth and fingers. He catalogued every noise she made, when she made it, how she sounded, and what he was doing. He moved methodically, with a purpose, concentrating hard on the task before him. He didn't want to think about anybody else ... he didn't want to think about anything else...

"Aden?"

"Hmmm?" He looked up and was surprised to see her eyes wide and clear.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"Come up here ... lay down..."

Belle kneeled above him. "What's going on in your head?" She kissed his jaw.

"What are you thinking about?" She kissed his lips. "Where are you?" She kissed his forehead, his temple, below his eye, his chin.

Belle began working on his buttons, removing one at a time. She kissed each patch of skin she revealed, her lips feathers against his chest. She pushed the shirt over his shoulders, and the tips of her hair brushed against his chest, tickling and arousing him.

Aden closed his eyes while she pushed his pants out of the way, leaving him naked and hard. He sighed when she slid her mouth around his cock and moaned in protest when she let him go almost immediately. She pushed his thighs open and used her mouth everywhere. He felt her hot lips on his balls, on the sensitive skin of his thigh, on the base

of his cock, on his hip, and his waist, and his stomach as she crawled up his body.

Belle straddled him and flattened her body on his, her breasts pressing into his chest. His mind was spinning with thoughts and images and memories, and he tried to snag one and focus on her, but each time his mind touched one thing, it would bounce off and fly into another tangent.

Belle reached between them and adjusted his cock, then slid onto it. She rocked forward, and pleasure squeezed his body in a vice. He wrapped his hands around her hips and rocked with her. She clutched his cock tighter and tighter, pushing her legs closed and flexing her muscles.

“Aden...” She gasped. “Look at me.”

He pushed his eyes open and stared deeply into hers.

“This isn’t working is it?” She asked.

“What?”

Belle stopped. “You’re just not here.”

“I’m here,” Aden insisted. “Come on, let me show you...”

Belle pushed his hands away and rolled off him. “No. Where’s Kevin?”

That question again. Aden stood up, his flesh buzzing with nervous energy. Pacing and itching for a cigarette, he said, “Kevin left this afternoon.”

She lifted herself on her elbow. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Aden said. The excuse Kevin had given him was meaningless and nonsensical. But did it matter? Kevin wanted to be somewhere else, wanted to spend his nights somewhere else ... with someone else? No, he didn’t think that was the problem.

“He said he couldn’t be here while we worked on the case. I don’t know.”

“He just ... up and left?”

“Pretty much. He told me last night.” Aden opened the closet and started going through his jacket pockets. There had to be a smoke somewhere.

“Where did he go?”

“The Hilton...”

“The one near the 10?”

“Yeah.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. Why would he...” Belle fell back against the bed. “How long is he going to be gone?”

“Just until the case is over ... that’s what he said.”

“But you don’t believe him?” Belle asked.

Aden tapped an old pack against his hand and a single cigarette fell into his palm. “Belle, I don’t know what to believe. Kevin doesn’t run away from shit. He’s never...” Aden took a deep breath and reached in the nightstand for his lighter. “He’s never shut me out. I don’t know what’s going on. And you want the truth?”

Belle opened her mouth, but he cut her off.

“The truth is, I don’t know if he’s coming back.” Aden lit his cigarette, but he knew the stinging in the back of his throat wasn’t from the smoke.

“Why wouldn’t he come back?” Belle asked.

“Because he...” Aden puffed on his cigarette, smoke coming from his nose. He ducked into the bathroom and tapped the ash into the bathroom. “Because he might not know I need him to come back.”

Aden dropped the cigarette in the toilet and watched it float. “It’s a shitty thing to do

to someone,” he finally said. “It’s a shitty thing to do to someone you love.”

“Leaving?” Belle asked.

“No,” Aden said, stepping out of the bathroom, “shutting me out. He shut me out.”

“Come here,” she said, holding her hand out to him. She moved over and pulled him onto the bed next to her. He lay on his side, his back facing her. She wrapped her arms and a leg around him, her mouth near his ear. “Kevin will be back.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am. Do you want me to stay with you tonight?”

“Yeah,” Aden said hoarsely. “I think you should.” He put a hand on her arm and was reassured by her weight and warmth.

“He’ll be back,” she murmured again. It sounded like a vow. The promise echoed in his mind until it soothed him to sleep.

* * * *

Belle watched him sleep, her heart aching for him. She didn’t think for a minute that Kevin would leave him and not come back. But she suspected that the longer he stayed away, the more hurt and anger he would generate. Would it reach critical mass and cause irreparable damage to their relationship?

To her, the book represented the rotten, bloated remains of a relationship that had disintegrated from the inside out. It wasn’t his to steal and he shouldn’t try to intimidate her. But what they had was already dead. What if the book came to represent the death knell of one of the best relationships she had ever witnessed?

Aden wanted Kevin to come home. Belle knew she was a poor substitute in his life. Belle also knew that she wanted Aden to be happy, because it hurt too much when he wasn’t. She needed to bring Kevin home.

Belle kissed Aden’s neck, resting her lips against his hot skin and listening to his breath. The simple act thrilled her. That she could kiss him, touch him, wrap her body around his. It all thrilled her. She couldn’t get enough of him.

Do you love him? A strange voice asked. *Do you love them?*

Belle didn’t know, but she thought she might. She thought the chance was worth exploring. She thought she deserved the chance to explore the possibility. Kevin would be there, holding her and being his sweet, considerate self if it wasn’t for Paul. She’d be moving deeper and deeper into a dream that she never thought possible if it wasn’t for Paul.

What right did Paul have to hurt her again? What right did Paul have to control her life, directly or indirectly? He had always been an obstacle between her and success. Every bit of happiness she had frightened him. Every time she won, it intimidated him. Every time she smiled, it challenged him. And he swoops into her life again just when things were starting to get good?

Belle knew he hadn’t done it on purpose. He couldn’t have known that she was involved with Kevin. He couldn’t have known the shitstorm he would cause, but what if he had? Would he have done anything differently? He would have done whatever he could to spite her.

“I can’t let him control my life anymore,” Belle whispered. “I have to get over him. I have to cut the ties.”

A victory over him and his lies would be most satisfying. A very public victory in

court would be sweet. Watching him beaten, trying to smile a broken smile, as his credibility plummeted... Belle could savor that for the rest of her life. Especially if it were Aden *and* Kevin, working as a team, bringing him down together. Their victory combined with Paul's defeat would be her dream come true.

But pushing for that fantasy—as beautiful as it was—might be pushing for too much. She might not be able to crush him, but she could kick him out of her life.

But dropping the case is exactly what he wants you to do.

“So? Let him win. Let him win if it means I get a chance with Aden and Kevin.”

You'll lose your book.

“I could write another one.” The moment the words left her mouth, her heart swelled. Of course, she could write another one. She could do whatever she wanted. One book was a relatively small price to pay to get Paul out of her life, forever.

She thought she would never be able to get over him, and now she was on the brink of doing just that. The final joke would be on him, wouldn't it? All the contracts were multi-book deals, and what would he do when he didn't have her anymore? Do it himself? Paul had never been a very good writer, and he knew it. His prose was too heavy and awkward, his ideas too mundane. He would have to hire a ghostwriter or risk complete humiliation.

The more she thought about that, the better she felt. Whatever fame and fortune he had would be short lived. He thought this was a victory? Let him win.

Belle knew exactly what she needed to do. She wouldn't talk to Aden first. He was committed to this case, and he would try to convince her to fight the good fight until the end. She knew he was ready to do just that, for the sake of his own pride.

She would have to go to Kevin and lay it all out for him. She would tell him everything and leave it up to him. He could drop the case and go home, or he could keep up the fight. But Belle thought he would choose to go home. She was giving him a default victory, a chance to save face, and a chance to get back to where he belonged.

And maybe they would decide there was room for her in their lives and not just their bed.

Chapter 14

Belle knocked on Kevin's door and held her breath. She didn't know if he was there or still at the office, but she would wait for him in the hallway if necessary. Aden had wanted her to come over after work, but she had given him a lame excuse and left for the Hilton as soon as she thought Kevin should be getting back from work.

She knocked again and the door swung open. "Hi," she greeted, trying to quell the butterflies in her stomach. Why was she nervous?

"What are you doing here?" Kevin frowned. "Is it Aden?"

"No, no. Aden's fine. Can I come in?"

Kevin silently held the door open for her and she ducked under his arm. "Drink?" He asked.

"No, I'm good," she said, her tongue like sandpaper in her mouth. "I needed to talk to you about ... about the case..."

"If it's about Dobin, you should probably talk with your own attorney," Kevin said.

"I need to talk to you."

Kevin leaned against the door and crossed his arms. "I'm listening."

"I've been thinking about this whole thing... I went to see Aden last night and he ... he's worried that you're gone..."

"If this is about me and Aden, it's not really any of your business."

Belle swallowed past the sting in her throat. "Right, of course. I'll just get to the point, then." She took a deep breath and said in a rush, "I want to drop the case."

"What?" Kevin asked, straightening.

"I want to drop the case. He can have it. He can have the book, the publishing deal, and the money and the movie rights ... everything. He can have everything. I want to put it behind me."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"And what brought about the change of heart?"

Belle closed her eyes. She vowed she would tell him everything and now was her chance. "Before this whole mess with Paul started, we were having a good time together, weren't we? I like you two, and you both seem to like me. Now everybody is all divided and serious and hurt. I don't know what happened. I don't know what's going on. All I know is that Paul is ruining my life *again*. I'm not going to let him. He wants the book? Fine. Fuck him. It's his. I don't want the book anymore."

Her breath was coming in short quick gasps now. She felt a bit dizzy. She opened her eyes and watched him. He took a step toward her and stopped. "What do you want?"

"I want to be with you and Aden," she answered, her voice steady. "I want both of you. That's all."

"You're willing to let it all go?"

Belle nodded.

"Have you talked to Aden about this?"

"No. He wants it to go to trial and he wants to win." Belle shrugged. "I want to win too, but it's not worth it to me. It's just not worth it." She took a halting step toward

Kevin and hoped that he would close the distance.

"James Dobin wanted me to do everything I could to humiliate and destroy you in open court. He said those words."

"I'm not surprised. James never liked me," Belle said with a dry throat.

"I knew I could do it. I *would* do it."

Belle's tongue felt heavy in her mouth and her throat was lined with shards of glass. "If you're telling me you want me gone ... I'll go. If you..." She took a deep breath.

"Just drop the case. I'm going to move on with my life either way."

Kevin finally closed the distance between them. "No, no, I don't want you to go." He took her arms. "But you need to know. You need to know before you..."

Belle touched his rough cheek, cupping his face with her fingers. "Tell me you want me to stay, and that'll be enough."

He nodded. "I want you to stay."

"You'll tell Paul tomorrow morning that it's all over?"

"First thing."

Belle smiled and tilted her head. "Can you kiss me now?"

Kevin smiled and dipped his head, his lips brushing against her. A spark jumped between them, and the kiss quickly turned from gentle to ferocious. Latent anger and relief fueled her passion. She gripped his head, smashing his mouth against hers. They moved toward the bed together only breaking the kiss for a second, long enough to gasp for air.

They tripped around each other's feet and fell onto the bed, their hands flying around like birds between their bodies. Her body throbbed like a toothache, and her flesh seemed to melt beneath his hands. She kicked off her pants and pulled him on top of her.

"I do want you," he said, his voice harsh in her ear.

Something snapped inside of her and she pushed against his chest. "Wait, wait, wait."

"What?" He asked, confused.

"We can't ... can't right now..." *Though God help me I want to.*

"What? Why?"

"You need to go home."

Kevin blinked and his eyes cleared.

"You need to go to Aden," Belle said softly. "He misses you."

"Are you going to come with me?"

Belle shook her head. "No."

Kevin stood up and straightened his pants, his hard-on already dying. Belle sat up and did the same, but her fingers were clumsy. For the second night in a row, she was left all revved up with nowhere to go.

"Do you want me to give you a lift home?" Kevin asked.

"I'm going to walk." Belle smiled. "It's not that far, and I need to clear my head."

"Belle, I..." Kevin shook his head. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah, well you know where to find me."

"The room is paid up if you want to say," Kevin invited. "Order room service. It's all on me."

Belle looked around the posh room. She was about to turn down the offer when her eyes fell on the large whirlpool tub. "I think I could stand to spend an evening here. Give

me the key. I'll go get my clothes and everything."

Kevin kissed the corner of her mouth. "Have a good night."

"You too."

Belle buried her face in her hands as soon as the door shut. Everything hadn't been wrapped up in a neat little bow. She still needed to know what Aden thought. Hopefully sending Kevin home first would make him see the wisdom of her decision.

* * * *

Forty minutes later, after a quick shower to wash her hair and the day's grit away, Belle eased herself into the swirling water of the hot tub with a sigh of relief. Her clothes were hanging in the closet; she had a bottle of wine and a big chocolate sundae, covered in fresh strawberries and chopped nuts, from room service. She had even arranged a limo to pick her up in the morning and take her to work.

Belle sipped her wine with a sighed. The alcohol raced to her head until she felt mellow and sweet. It didn't hurt that the wine was the most expensive on the list. Confident she could pay back the debt in full, if not in money, then in other satisfactory ways, she didn't fret over what she owed Kevin. Instead, she reached for the bowl of ice cream, and let the divine, melted chocolate slide down her throat.

Belle poured herself more wine and swirled it in the glass, hypnotized by the color. She sniffed it daintily like wine snobs always did in the movies, then downed it in one swallow. Good, good stuff.

She was holding a strawberry between her teeth when she heard the lock of the door click in the silent room. She froze, staring at the doorknob. When it started to move, she tried to scramble for a towel, but the hot water and expensive wine made her limbs loose and unresponsive.

"Belle? What the hell did you do?" Aden demanded, storming into the room, Kevin right on his heels.

Belle sunk back in the water, her buzz gone. "What?"

"What did you do? Did you tell him you're dropping the case?"

"Yes."

"Without informing me? Didn't you think I'd like to know?"

Uncomfortable and vulnerable, Belle tried for the towel again, but she couldn't quite reach it. "I was going to tell you."

"When? Before I took it to trial, I hope."

Kevin helpfully handed her a robe. She smiled at him and turned to face Aden. "I thought I would..."

"You thought? That's what I'm here for. To do the thinking."

Belle blinked. "It's my book, my case, my decision. I wanted to drop it."

"Did Kevin talk you into that?" Aden demanded, stepping forward.

"What? No. No, I decided on my own. Kevin had nothing to do with it."

"You got another love letter from Paul today," Aden said, taking an envelope from his back pocket. "Maybe you'd like to hear it."

"Aden, don't," Kevin said, putting a hand on his arm.

Aden shrugged it off and tore the letter from the envelope. "You're about to make this guy rich, Belle. He's about to make a fool of you, and don't think he doesn't love every minute of it. Let's start at the beginning, shall we? *Dearest Belle, when you didn't*

respond to my first letter, I thought I would try again. I have spent the last several nights trying to figure out why you're back in my life."

"Aden, I wish you'd listen to me..." Belle started, but Aden cut her off.

"What do you miss the most about me? I thought it was my money at first. How I used to buy you clothes to hide that ever-growing gut of yours, or the way I paid for your endless salon visits, even though I always said you were past hope, you never listened."

"Aden," Kevin warned, his voice low.

Belle bit her lip, willing the words to pass over her harmlessly. She was not going to give in to rage or spite.

"But then I realized you probably just need the attention. I remember when I first met you. A shy little girl nobody wanted then, and probably nobody wants now. My mother always said I had a thing for strays. Well, if you want me again, you know I can't refuse a girl on her knees..."

Aden's voice tapered off, and the three stood in heavy silence. Belle stepped out of the tub, almost slipping but she found her feet.

"I'm sorry, Belle, I don't..." Aden started.

Belle snatched the letter out of his hand and ripped it up into tiny pieces. They fluttered to the ground around her feet. "He wants to hurt me, Aden. Are you going to help him? Is that what you want to?"

"I want to fight him."

"I don't want to fight anybody anymore," Belle countered. "I've been fighting him for nearly five years now, and I've got to stop."

"You're just going to let him get away with this shit?"

"Why is it so important to you? Do you get this worked up over all your clients?"

"It's important to me because he hurt *you*!" Aden shouted. He shook his head and said in a lower voice, "He hurt you. I want him to pay for that."

"And I don't want him to hurt you," Belle said, taking his hand. "Splitting the two of you up? That's the sort of thing he gets off on. And if he knew what he was responsible for, he'd only find more ways to tighten the screws."

"Belle, we can..."

Belle put her other hand up. "No, please. I don't want to talk about him or this or the damned book ever again. I made this decision because it's what's best for me. I'd rather spend my time and energy on you and Kevin. He's stolen enough of my life."

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Aden asked.

Belle nodded. "I'm sure. Now, what do you want?"

Aden smiled.

"I've got wine, strawberries, ice cream," Belle continued. "The water in the bath is still hot..."

"I want to make up for some lost time," Aden said, pulling her against him. He reached behind her and took Kevin's hand, and Belle found herself caught between two very hard men.

"I understand if you two want to be alone," Belle started.

"Nonsense," Kevin said, kissing the top of her head.

Aden put his finger beneath her chin and lifted her head. He looked her in the eyes and said, "We want to be with you."

Her heart fluttered and a hard lump formed in her throat. She nodded and met his lips

with hers.

Chapter 15

Aden pulled Belle's robe open and she let it slip down her shoulders to the floor. Kevin stepped away to adjust the lights, turning them down low and unplugging the phone.

"My calls are still being forwarded," he explained. He also cleaned her food from the floor, setting it on the table and safely out of the way. Aden watched, a smile twisting his lips.

"Are you finished?" He asked.

Kevin grabbed Aden from behind and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm sorry I didn't want to interrupt the night with an emergency room visit."

"What kind of acrobatics do you have planned?" Aden asked, stepping back into Kevin's body and pulling Belle closer to him.

Belle smiled at the exchange, her hands fumbling with Aden's clothes. She could feel his cock through his pants, and it fell into her hands as she unzipped his fly. Belle wrapped her fingers around his shaft and stroked him until he was rigid.

"Just the usual..." Kevin muttered, removing his own clothes.

"There's something I've wanted to do for awhile now..." Aden said, putting his hands on her hips and walking her backwards until the back of her knees touched the bed. "But I think we need to get you ready first."

Belle's eyes widened. "How?"

Aden dropped to his knees in front of her and pushed her legs open. He ran his finger down her pussy, then held it up, glistening in the dim light. He licked it, rolling his finger around his tongue. "You're already wet for us."

Belle nodded, watching Kevin out of the corner of her eye. He knelt to the side of her and pulled on her hips. "Turn your feet ... yeah ... like that..."

She didn't know what to expect, but her clit was already throbbing. She skimmed her palms over her breasts, her nipples hardening. She licked her lower lip and she thought she could hear all three of their hearts beating in unison.

Aden took her wrists and put her hands against his shoulders. Another, larger lump formed in her throat, excitement warring with fear in her stomach. She knew she didn't have anything to be afraid of, but she didn't know what they were thinking, what they had planned for her...

Aden spread her lips and licked her hard clit as Kevin slid two fingers into her from behind, hitting her g-spot directly. "Oh shit," she gasped, her knees buckling, and she understood why Aden had her brace herself on his shoulders.

Aden's tongue moved quickly while Kevin's fingers moved slowly. She thought of the night before, when Aden had asked her to stay with him. She thought of earlier that afternoon, when Kevin had almost fucked her right there on the bed, both of them wired with unexpected desire. They both *wanted* her. The epiphany sent electricity racing down her back. Her orgasm hit her hard and fast. She tensed around Kevin's fingers and thrust against Aden's face.

Aden straightened and wrapped his arm around her waist, but Kevin didn't move. "Did that feel good?"

Belle nodded, leaning against his shoulder. It had been very good, but not satisfying. Like a good appetizer after a long fast, it only made her hungry for more. Kevin pulled his fingers out of her, and her eyes widened as she felt him slightly push her buttocks open.

“Good,” Aden murmured, reaching between her legs with his free hand. “Now ... just relax, okay?”

Belle nodded again, and he slid two fingers into her as Kevin had done earlier. She closed her eyes with satisfaction, but they flew open again when she felt Kevin gradually push one finger into her ass.

Her breath caught and she looked to Aden, but his eyes were on Kevin. Kevin pulled his finger out and pushed it in again, creating a steady rhythm.

Belle had never had anal sex, or allowed anybody to play with her “back door”. It just wasn’t something she had ever been interested in. It took her several moments to relax, but once she did, she realized two things. It didn’t really hurt, and it felt pretty good.

“You doin’ okay?” Aden asked against her shoulder.

She could only nod, too caught up in and enraptured with the new sensations quickly overtaking her body to speak. Intense. More intense than anything she had ever experienced.

Belle’s thighs were slick, her juices drenching her and Aden’s hand as he continued to thrust his fingers into her. Kevin pulled his finger out of her. She could feel him rubbing her pussy, touching and caressing her around Aden’s hand. Confused, she turned her head to ask him what he was doing. But he stopped her words in her throat when he slid two fingers inside of her.

It hurt ... but it didn’t hurt. Belle’s brain was shutting down, unneeded and useless, but before it did, she registered the fact that it should have hurt. It should have been painful. In another context, it would have been painful and uncomfortable. But now instead of trying to escape, she wanted more. Each physical sensation sent her closer to another hard orgasm, each feeling created more desire, each nerve ending firing and responding, and she was scared to let it stop, scared to let them stop.

“Are you about to come?” Aden asked.

“Heh!hehhh...”

Somehow, Aden understood that meant: *Yes, I will orgasm any moment now.* He pulled his fingers from her and Kevin did the same. They also both moved away, leaving her alone and feeling oddly empty in the middle of the room.

“Let’s try this again, yeah?” Aden said, stretching out on the bed and putting his hand out to her.

Belle understood, and she scrambled onto the bed and straddled him without hesitation. His cock slipped into her easily and she started rocking, trying to clear the edge they left her dangling from.

“Now, now ... stretch out ... that’s right, lay flat...” Aden said, gripping her hips to stop her from moving.

Belle did as she was told, stretching out on his body, her legs between his thighs. He buried his hand in her hair and kissed her thoroughly, his tongue exploring her mouth. She inched forward, but he held her in place so she couldn’t move and he remained still.

Aden broke the kiss and she rested her forehead against his. “Do you trust us?” He

asked.

“Yeah,” Belle whispered.

She felt the mattress compress as Kevin joined them on the bed, and she realized he was kneeling behind her.

“Relax,” Aden murmured. “Look at me.”

She felt the tip of Kevin’s cock nudge her buttocks and her pulse quickened. “I can feel you tensing,” Aden said. “Relax. Don’t look away from me.”

He’s too big, she wanted to say.

But she did trust them.

Belle kept her eyes glued to Aden’s and her breath came in short, sharp gasps as Kevin eased his cock into her ass. She didn’t have words for how it felt, no point of reference, nothing to compare it to. She didn’t know if it felt normal, or wrong, or good, or bad. She just *felt*. Pure physical awareness. She was aware of every thing in her body. She could feel Aden’s cock twitching and straining in her pussy. She could feel the cloud of alarm and yearning in her stomach. She could feel the blood rushing from her head. She could feel the sharp prick of tears in the back of her eyes. She could feel the wave of sound building in her chest. She didn’t know if it was shout or a scream or a sob, but she could feel it growing, prepared to spill out of her lips in a rush of nonsensical syllables.

Finally, he was all the way inside of her, and Aden was inside of her, and she was inside of his eyes, and she couldn’t breathe.

“I can’t...I can’t...” *I can’t breathe* she tried to say.

Aden rubbed the back of her head soothingly. “Shhh. You okay?”

Belle opened her mouth to speak, but instead sucked in a huge lungful of air. It cleared her head and she exhaled normally. “Fine,” she gasped. “Fine.”

Now they both moved, pulling out a bit and pushing forward. Belle buried her head against Aden’s shoulder, gasping, and then sobbing, for breath. It was too much. Too much physical sensation could kill a person, couldn’t it? Her whole body was suffused and radiating the pleasure-pain, making her scream and sob. She thought she heard Aden asking her if she was still okay, but she couldn’t be sure. She could only hear herself, and her heart, and her blood roaring like the ocean.

I can’t take it, she wanted to say. *Don’t stop, please. You’re killing me. This feels so good.* But it didn’t feel good. It didn’t feel great. It was a new level of feeling she didn’t understand and couldn’t name. It overwhelmed everything, even the orgasm that shook her frame. She felt the second one like after-shocks of an earthquake.

Both orgasms pushed her body to new heights of sensations, and when she reached the top of her ecstasy, she knew it would be a long, hard fall back to Earth. She bit Aden’s shoulder unconsciously, muffling the howls that started in her tight chest and flew from her mouth. She could feel both cocks pulled out of her and then push home. The final jolt sent her spiraling out of control, away from her body. Her vision blurred, no more sound escaping her raw throat and she could feel Aden, and then Kevin, tense, their cocks twitching as they came, moaning simultaneously.

Kevin moved off the bed, stumbling back to the chair. Aden gently rolled her onto the bed and she could see him, but she couldn’t really see anything.

“Did that feel good too?”

She nodded dumbly.

He kissed her forehead and she fell in love.

It didn't hurt like she thought it would.

Chapter 16

Kevin helped Belle into the fresh bath and settled in the water behind her. She relaxed against his hard chest, resting the back of her head on his shoulder. The hot water swirled and bubbled around her, alleviating any tenderness she may have experienced.

Kevin brushed the hair away from her neck and kissed her. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Belle considered telling him the truth, but she didn't think he would understand. She wasn't even sure she understood what she had just experienced. She shook her head and smiled. "No."

She dropped her head to the side and watched Aden flip through the room service menu. "What happened?" Belle asked softly. "Did you fight?"

Kevin shifted beneath her and said in a low voice, "We didn't so much fight as he shouted a lot. And then stormed out."

"I wasn't really expecting that."

"Yeah, me neither. I'm sorry about the letter," Kevin said. "I didn't know about it..."

"I know he didn't mean anything by it."

"What do you guys want?" Aden asked, the phone resting on his shoulder.

"I'm fine," Belle said.

"Whatever you're having."

Belle stretched and sighed with satisfaction. Lying in a Jacuzzi tub with Kevin, listening to Aden order room service, made her forget that the rest of the world existed. In just a few short hours, she would be back at work, hunched over in her cubicle, terrified Ms. Redding would pounce on her without warning. She would have bills to pay, errands to run, email to catch up on, phone calls to return. Paul was still at large, spiteful and spoiled.

But none of it seemed real.

Belle wished they could all take a week—a month even—and go on vacation. It didn't have to be anywhere fancy or exotic, as long as she had enough time to explore them thoroughly. Their bodies, their minds, their hearts.

"What are you thinking about?" Kevin asked.

"Us," she answered.

"Hey, you guys aren't over there having fun without me, are you?" Aden asked.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."

"So what about us?" Kevin pressed.

"Just ... you know ... that this is nice." Belle said, suddenly shy. "I could get used to this."

"Which part?" He asked, cupping her breasts. He kissed her neck and trailed his lips along the top of her shoulder.

"All of it," she said, closing her eyes and smiling.

But one thing nagged the back of her mind, making her a little sick. She could forgive Kevin, and she had, but she wished she knew what they had offered him. What was she worth to him? How high were the stakes? Should she even worry about it?

She hoped they knew now what they were worth to her, and she longed to ask Kevin

to explain everything. *What did Paul offer you that I couldn't?* She didn't think it was about money, *per se*. Some sort of promotion? Prestige? Belle hated to destroy the moment with such thoughts, but they crept up on her and refused to leave.

It would be so easy if she could just *ask*. And if he could just be honest with her. But maybe she didn't want to know. Maybe the prize for betraying her had been small and it would only hurt her more to learn the truth.

Belle wanted to trust him. She glanced at Aden, and her heart swelled. Nothing stood between Aden and her love. No doubts or concerns or fears. She wanted to feel the same for Kevin, she wanted to let go of all her reservations, but she didn't know how.

"Finally," Aden exclaimed when a knock on the door interrupted the silence. "What did they have to do? Kill the cow first? I just wanted a burger."

He opened the door, tipped the man, and took the tray, careful to block Kevin and Belle from view. Belle blinked. When she opened her eyes again, Aden was sitting on the edge of the tub, his empty plate in front of him.

"Did I fall asleep?" Belle asked, sitting up. "How long was I asleep?"

"A few minutes."

Belle yawned and stood up. "It's late. I've got to go to sleep."

"Are you sure?" Kevin asked.

She nodded and wrapped a towel around herself. "I can barely keep my eyes open. Besides, you two probably have ... things to talk over."

Belle stumbled over to the king-size bed, asleep almost as soon as she pulled the covers up to her chin.

* * * *

Belle woke up disoriented in the darkness. She put her arm across the unfamiliar bed and touched nothing but air. She turned over onto her back and looked at the ceiling, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. She heard quick murmurs, but she couldn't make out the words.

Belle gradually made out the room and the memories of the night crashed around her. She turned over on her side and found the outlines of Kevin and Aden on the couch, their heads close together, their voices low. She decided not to disturb them, but rather watched, curious.

The room fell into silence as Kevin covered Aden's face with tiny kisses. Aden seemed reluctant at first, but he soon moved forward and tilted his head. Kevin paused and whispered in his ear. Aden nodded. Kevin stood up and pulled Aden to his feet, and then embraced him. Belle closed her eyes when they broke apart and moved toward the bed. She didn't want them to know she was awake.

Belle could hear them near the bed, and she could sense they were moving, but she didn't know what they were doing. The mattress dipped with somebody's weight—Aden's she thought—and there was another pause. A greedy part of her wanted to roll over into their space and slide between them and take all their attention, demand it. A jealous part of her was hurt that they didn't automatically include her, didn't reach for her.

She cracked open one eye and watched Kevin rub his hands over Aden's back and thighs. The temptation to join them lessened as she watched Kevin's hands flow over the skin he knew so well, covering marks he must have touched a thousand times, rising and

falling over familiar bumps. Belle closed her eyes again. She knew she shouldn't be watching. They thought she was asleep, and they deserved a bit of privacy ... even if mere feet separated them. She could feel Kevin kneeling on the mattress.

Belle stole another look, watching as Kevin lowered himself onto Aden's back, sliding his cock into his lover. Aden moaned and pushed his hips back. Kevin fell forward, bracing himself on the bed, his hands on either side of Aden's head. She could only see their outlines in the dim gray and orange light, but they were beautiful.

Normally, a kiss between the two of them would be enough to get her juices flowing. The *thought* of a kiss between them would turn her on. They were always electrifying when they touched, but now she didn't feel the same. She didn't want to jump in and demand attention, she didn't want to pleasure herself, she didn't want to do anything except watch them make love.

Kevin moved deliberately, his whole body moving with each thrust. His mouth was near Aden's ear, and she could see his lips moving, but she didn't hear a word. Aden seemed to be listening and responding, nodding as though answering questions or agreeing with Kevin's words.

Their muscles flexed, their skin glistened, their faces reflected their joy at the union, the pleasure of flesh meeting flesh and yielding to each other. They looked perfect ... were perfect. They moved in harmony to the sound of skin rubbing against skin.

Entranced, Belle didn't remember to be covert. Aden turned his head. His eyes met hers. She opened her mouth to apologize, but he didn't look like he wanted an apology. He stared at her. She looked back without blinking, and she felt phantom hands on her body.

Now desire hit her low in the gut, but it was not the same lust that had driven her into Kevin and Aden's bed before. She didn't slip her fingers between her legs. She didn't move at all, she just concentrated on them. She concentrated on Aden's eyes, and the way they flashed in the darkness, and the way they looked through her and into her. She focused on Kevin, the way he made love with his entire body, flexing every muscle, the way he whispered Aden's name.

Belle took several deep breaths, as though she could inhale their love and let it burn her from the inside. It cleared the sleep from her head, yet her conscious mind seemed to shut down, leaving her wide-awake yet dreaming. She remained motionless, her body cool except for the growing warmth between her thighs. She didn't think about that. She thought about what Aden was experiencing, because she knew now. She knew the landscape: the mountains, the valleys, the crevices, and how deep and how high it all went.

Aden continued to look at her, and she watched him, but his face began to blur, and she didn't quite see him. She didn't quite see Kevin either. They seemed to merge into one shape in front of her, and she couldn't tell where one began and one ended. She blinked her eyes to clear them, but it didn't work.

Belle could hear both of them now. Kevin praying with Aden's name, Aden moaning from deep in his throat. She thought she heard a third sound—one that was a bit higher pitched and closer—but she didn't know for sure. Her fingers and toes tingled. It wasn't cold, but she shivered.

Belle knew when they reached their breaking point, though neither indicated it physically or vocally. Her body reacted strongly, the heat erupting from her pussy and

spreading through her limbs, and something like an earthquake rolled through her body just as Kevin stiffened. Aden closed his eyes and buried his face in the pillow. Lights and colors danced in front of her eyes as Kevin collapsed on Aden's back, both of them breathing hard.

Belle heard herself panting and held her breath, trying to remain unobtrusive and silent on her side of the bed. The room spun around her. She closed her eyes to try to steady it. She exhaled as quietly as she could, pushing the air out of her lungs. She felt a hand on her arm, and when she opened her eyes, the room was in its proper place again and Kevin was looking at her.

She opened her mouth, but she couldn't speak. She knew what she wanted to say. *Please don't make me leave you, because I don't think I could stand it.* But she only whispered his name.

Belle expected Kevin to lay with Aden, folding their bodies together. But instead, he nudged her to the middle of the bed, and Aden wrapped his arms around her.

"You watched us," he said in her ear, an observation.

"I did."

"Did you come?"

"I ... I don't know..." She admitted. "I mean ... I don't know..."

"It sounded like it," Kevin said, and Belle could feel a deep blush crawl up her cheeks.

She was caught between their bodies again, pressed on either side by hard flesh. Aden reached across her stomach and twined his fingers with Kevin's.

"Oh Belle," he breathed. "I feel like you belong here."

Her heart thudded against her chest. They were both holding her now, their long arms looped across her body. Sleep was already pulling on her mind again, but she resisted. She didn't want to slip off and miss being cradled between the two of them.

"Do you mind that I watched?" She asked, her words heavy with fatigue.

"No," Aden answered, his lips near her ear. "No."

Even so, it somehow seemed terribly important that she explain everything. "I couldn't help it..." Belle sighed and could already see the shapes and colors of a dream before her eyes. "You're like chocolate."

Kevin touched her lips with a short, sweet kiss. "Goodnight," he whispered. "Pleasant dreams."

"You too," she murmured.

As she fell back into her dreams, she thought she heard someone say *I love you* and she thought she said *I love you too*.

Chapter 17

Belle stared at her watch and groaned. She couldn't believe her eyes. How could it already be after seven? For the fourth night in a row, she had stayed long past everybody else left. She knew they were all talking about her. Why couldn't she get her work done by five like everybody else?

Redding had doubled her workload after firing another junior copywriter, requiring her to work well into the night for the past week. Belle shook her head and shut down her computer. The past week had been nothing but work and sleep. She didn't even have the chance to spend time with Kevin and Aden. Work and then sleep, sleep and then work.

Belle cleared her desk and grabbed her coat. There was no way she would survive another night without seeing the two of them. Everything reminded Belle of her two lovers. She spent long hours in her cubicle fantasizing about taking a quick trip to their offices for lunch. She considered calling them when everybody left for the night just to hear their voices.

When Belle reached the alley between their buildings, she hesitated. She wanted to go straight to their apartment and into their arms and allow them to take the burden of the world from her shoulders for a few short hours. On the other hand, she needed to shower, change her clothes, check her messages...

Grimacing, she studied her filthy, wrinkled clothes, the deciding factor. It also wouldn't hurt to pick up a change of clothes, in case she didn't make it back to her apartment.

Belle hurried up to her loft. She could be dressed in fifteen minutes from now and undressed in twenty-five. Her skin flushed with excitement. She knew exactly what she was going to do them, and what they were going to do to her. There was a certain fantasy she had been dying to try, something that had been haunting her day and night for almost a week. Something, she was sure, they would accommodate.

Humming a silly tune, she unlocked her door and kicked her shoes off. How would she approach the topic? Bluntly? *Aden, I want to use your big dining room table...* Maybe she wouldn't need to say anything at all. Both men were remarkable when it came to giving her exactly what she needed.

Belle didn't like coming home to an empty loft. She had spent the last six months isolating herself, going out of her way to avoid a roommate, and even choosing against adopting a cat. What used to be a comfortable haven to rehabilitate after a long day now seemed too quiet, too empty, and even too dark.

Belle wouldn't suggest moving into their apartment, but the idea certainly had its allure. Especially since she missed them every minute they were separated, a new and disconcerting experience. She had a real, physical need to be with them, as real as the need for food or the need for sleep.

"Must be love," she muttered. Now all the dumb songs about losing sleep, losing weight and pining away made sense.

Longing for them, she moved to her covered window. A good look at them now would sustain her through the shower. She opened the blinds, her stomach twisting with anticipation and then suddenly folded with shock.

Belle stared, paralyzed. Everything dimmed and blurred. Her eyes throbbed. She didn't know what to do with her hands. They fluttered to her throat and to her side and to her head, her fingers heavy. Her mouth fell open, she closed it with a snap; it fell open again.

She blinked.

Nothing changed.

Belle took a step back, and then another, as if she could backtrack through time. She would trace her steps out of the loft, down the stairs, through the alley, and back to the office, and everything would go back to normal. She hit the chair with the back of her knees, and it stopped her backward momentum. Stuck in place, she couldn't lift her feet again.

"Oh, God," she whispered, covering her mouth. "Oh, God." Belle closed her eyes. "God, no."

Her prayer had no effect. The scene before her didn't change. Aden and Tamara were standing in the middle of the living room, wrapped in each other's arms, and kissing fervently. Kevin was watching on the couch.

Her stomach clenched. She doubled over and dry-heaved. Retching and choking, she stumbled into the bathroom and collapsed in front of the toilet. Her stomach continued to heave for several minutes. Nothing came out of her but bile. When it finally stopped, she rolled away from the toilet, and fell face-first to the floor, her cheek hot against the cool tile.

What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Tamara. Everywhere she looked, she saw Kevin and Aden.

What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?

"How could I have been so stupid?" Belle whispered. Slow tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. She didn't want to cry for them, but she could feel the pressure building in her chest, and she knew she'd be sobbing soon.

Belle pushed herself to her hands and knees, gripped the side of the sink, and pulled herself to her feet. She leaned heavily against the sink, and stared at herself in the mirror. She watched the first fat tear roll down her cheek. Followed by another. And another.

"What am I going to do?" She asked her reflection.

No answer was forthcoming.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know..." Belle shook her head. "I don't know what..." Her voice cracked.

She covered her mouth with both hands to keep the dam from bursting, but there were already too many leaks. Her body flooded with water, and great sobs gushed from her mouth. She leaned over and her tears seemed to fill the sink.

Belle cried until she ran out of breath and her body was depleted.

"What am I going to do?"

The answer to the question would solve everything. Crawl into bed and sob until she puked? Confront them? Run? Pretend she never saw it?

"Later," she muttered. "Later."

The tears had washed away the shock, and now her heart hurt. The literal pain crippled her. She couldn't breathe around it. She couldn't think around it. And like a masochist who couldn't resist poking at a rotten tooth, she couldn't resist the window.

Her feet carried her into the living room before she realized it, and she watched somebody else open the blinds again. It couldn't have been her hand. She didn't feel anything.

They were still in the living room, still mostly dressed. All three were on the couch, Tamara comfortably between them, exchanging kisses and caresses. Belle stood in the shadows and peeked around the blinds and tried not to see everything she couldn't stop seeing. It could have been a dream. Everybody moved in slow motion, every color was so bright and so wrong, every light hurt her eyes. It could have been a nightmare, but for the pain that radiated from the center of her body.

Aden looked up. Did he see her? Each excruciating second that passed between them could have been their last. She understood. She didn't know him. She didn't know either of them. She understood what she had to do.

The blinds fell closed. She ripped the phone chord from the wall, turned off her cell phone, locked the door and killed all the lights. They may or may not try to talk to her. She didn't know what they would do, but she knew she wouldn't talk to them. And she knew she couldn't stand to see them again.

The next morning, she'd begin moving. It would cost her a substantial amount of money to cancel her lease, but she would pay it with a smile. She wouldn't have time to find an ideal place, but it didn't really matter. Her ideal apartment was any one on the other side of the city. She'd have to take time off work to pack, but facing down the bitch from hell would be a minor annoyance.

Yes, in the morning, she'd get her life back on track. It would be easier with the sun on her face and the night behind her.

But she would allow herself the night.

Belle went to the bedroom, shut and locked the door behind her. She pulled the blinds on her window and stood in the middle of the dark room.

"I can't stand it."

But she would survive, wouldn't she? The moon wasn't bloody; there was no rain of fire. The clock on her wall marched forward.

In the privacy of her bedroom and the comfort of her own bed, Belle turned herself over to the pain. She allowed every bit of it to suffuse her body, welcoming it as she had once welcomed *their* mouths. She didn't turn away from a single twinge or hide from the guilt and remorse.

Her body rocked with anger and denial. She raged at herself. She raged at them. Tears soaked the front of her shirt.

Belle fell asleep with a sob lodged in her throat.

* * * *

Aden jumped to his feet, startling Kevin. "What's wrong?"

"Belle..."

Tamara stood up and clapped her hands together. "Belle? Is she coming over too?"

"No, she was ... in the window..."

Kevin stood up and straightened his shirt. "You mean she saw us just now?"

"Yeah, and she didn't look happy."

Kevin sighed. Of course, she wouldn't look happy. "Tamara, you need to leave."

Tamara turned to face him, her eyes wide. "Leave?" The word sounded foreign in

her mouth.

Kevin glanced at Aden and saw that he would be no help. He wasn't paying attention to them. He reminded Kevin of somebody who just woke from a deep sleep or a trance. Shocked and a bit off-balance.

"Yes, leave." Kevin took her elbow and guided her to the door. "Grab your purse and go."

She hit his arm and laughed. "Leave? I just got here. What's going on here?"

"Aden, call Belle. Maybe if we talk to her..."

"Kevin, let go of me. You're just going to kick me out?" She pulled her arm away and frowned. "I flew in a day early to spend time with you two, and this is how I'm treated?"

"She's not answering," Aden said.

Kevin opened the door. "Tamara, we've known each other for a long time..."

"Yes, we have."

"I think it's best if you don't stop by to visit anymore."

Tamara looked over his shoulder to Aden. He was searching through his address book, for Belle's cell phone Kevin assumed.

"Aden?" She asked. "Do you feel the same way?"

"What?" He asked, looking up.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Aden met Kevin's eyes and a long second passed between them. Kevin understood the hesitation. There had always been room for Tamara, one way or the other. It didn't work when they tried an equal relationship, but they were still close.

"Yeah," Aden said. "Yeah, you should."

"What is going on here?" Tamara demanded.

"It's not just about the two of us and what we want anymore," Kevin said.

"Dammit, why won't she answer the phone?" Aden exclaimed.

"I see."

"I'm sorry it happened this way, Tamara. I really am."

Tamara touched his chest and smiled. "We're still friends though, aren't we?"

"Of course. But I don't think it's wise to spend time together ... for now. We've got..." Kevin took a deep breath. "We have another priority now."

"I know you both too well to argue with you now. Call me when your priorities shift."

"You know, I don't think they will," he said, as he shut the door.

"We've got to go over there," Aden said. "She may not take our calls, but she might talk to us in person."

Kevin didn't think she would open her door, and he didn't think she had any reason to. But he nodded and grabbed his jacket. They had to try.

Chapter 18

Belle opened her eyes to darkness. She wiped her damp face and sat up. Her head throbbed and her eyes ached. What had pulled her from sleep?

Uncomfortable and itchy, she undressed and pulled her bathrobe on. She felt oddly calm ... and empty. Belle had nothing more to say, nothing more to shout, nothing more to cry. She glanced out the window and looked at the sky. No hint of light, dawn was still hours away.

Belle clutched her head and grabbed the flashlight from her dresser, afraid to turn on the lights. She needed a drink for her dry mouth and something for her pounding head and...

What's that?

She opened her bedroom door and listened for the sound again. Knocking. Somebody was knocking on her door.

Belle cocked her head and listened, recognizing the sound and yet not recognizing it. She knew what it meant—somebody wanted in—but she didn't know what to do about it. Who would want her in the middle of the night? Why would anybody pound on her door?

Curious and perplexed, she crossed the loft and looked through the peephole.

Aden.

"Belle? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

Her heart twisted, trying to squeeze more tears from her eyes, but she was dry. She didn't answer him. Instead, she went into the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and drank the entire thing without taking a breath.

"Belle?"

Belle pulled the bottle of aspirin from the cupboard above the sink and pried the lid off the bottle. She counted out three, filled another glass, and downed them. He continued to pound on the door. She considered ignoring him, but he would wake the neighbors.

She didn't have to remind herself to be strong. There wasn't anything left for him to take, wasn't anything left for him to break. She wouldn't fall back into his arms if he tried to charm her, if he tried to apologize. Shattered, her heart couldn't be rebuilt or broken again.

Belle unlocked the door but let it chain. "Yes?" She said through the two-inch crack the chain allowed.

"Belle? I tried to call you but ... is your phone off the hook?"

"Yes."

"I saw you ... and I thought..." Aden tried to look through the door. She didn't move. "Can I come in?"

"No."

"I need to talk to you about what we ... about what you saw."

Belle responded with silence.

"Can I talk to you?"

"No."

"I need to explain..."

Belle cut in. "You don't need to explain anything to me, Aden. I'm not your wife."

You don't answer to me."

"I think I should still..."

"Aden, I don't want to see either of you again. Please don't come here. Don't call me." She tried to shut the door, but Aden slid his foot into the space and stopped it.

"Belle, please don't do this." His voice rose a notch, and Belle thought he sounded distressed. "Please don't shut the door."

Belle stared at him.

"Open the door so we can talk about this."

"I don't think we have anything to talk about, Aden. Good-bye." She kicked his foot away and shut the door.

"Belle! Belle!" He pounded on the door and she was forced to open it again.

"Leave."

"Belle, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry too. I clearly misunderstood the situation, and I've wasted everybody's time."

"You didn't misunderstand, Belle. We fucked up. You didn't..."

"But I can't do this. We had different expectations. It's good we all see that now rather than later."

"Belle, no." He shook his head. "No. We can discuss this."

"Go home, Aden. I'll call the cops." She shut the door again. This time he didn't try to make her open it.

She leaned against the door, and listened for his steps in the hallway. When she didn't hear them, she resisted the temptation to open the door and tell him to go home. Instead, she went back to her room, crawled into bed, and stared at the ceiling.

* * * *

Aden stared at the door as though he could force it open with his will alone. He would have called to her again, but he believed she would call the police. She had a glassy-eyed determination, her voice devoid of expression.

"She's not going to let us in," Kevin said. "We might as well go home."

Aden shifted his eyes over. "We can't just go home."

"What are you going to do? Sit out here all night?"

Aden put his back against the door and slid to the floor. "Maybe she'll talk to us tomorrow."

Kevin sat against the opposite wall. "Yeah, maybe. She might forgive us ... she might ... fuck."

Aden couldn't stop thinking about her face. When he had looked up and caught her watching them, he didn't understand what she was doing. Why was she just looking at them? Why was she just staring? Why did it look like she was breaking?

"I thought she understood," Aden whispered. "I mean, I thought..."

His brain had caught up with his eyes, then he realized his mistake. When she stepped away from the window, it hit him like lightning. *Oh my God, we've lost her.*

"You thought what?" Kevin asked.

"She knows Tamara. She knows ... I mean, we all... I told her she was just a friend. Just somebody we know, you know?" Aden shook his head.

"She's not going to forgive us."

“She won’t even let us talk to her.”

“And if she did?” Kevin asked. “If she opened the door right now, what would you tell her?”

Aden didn’t know what he would say, or what he could say. He rejected everything that came to mind as completely asinine. Had he actually believed that if Belle saw them, she’d want to join them? At the time, it seemed a reasonable fantasy. Hadn’t she enjoyed Tamara before? Didn’t they have a great time together?

“Do you have anything to say?” Aden asked.

“Beyond groveling and begging for forgiveness? No. What the hell was going through your head?”

“I don’t know. What was going on in yours?” Aden snapped.

“Honesty.” Kevin shook his head. “We had one rule, Aden. We *made* the fucking rule. All we had to do was tell her.” Kevin hit the floor with his fist. “Call her on the fucking phone and...”

“And what? No, we should have sent Tamara away as soon as she knocked on the door.”

Kevin nodded.

“I can’t believe we did this. This is not what you do to someone you...”

“She came to me because she wanted to be with us. We knew what that meant. You knew what that meant. I knew what she meant. *Fuck.*”

“Maybe we don’t deserve her.”

“No, we don’t.”

They looked at each other. Aden thought he could see his own thoughts reflected in Kevin’s eyes. It hadn’t even occurred to him until he called and she didn’t answer. It never crossed his mind until he knocked on the door and prayed she would open it. He knew he missed her when she was trapped at work. He knew he hated to see her hurt. He knew he would fight for her against any foe.

But he didn’t know how he felt about her until he saw himself through her eyes. And what did he see there? A sorry excuse for a man. He had never cheated on anybody before. Never even considered it. He thought he was better than that.

The guilt tried to force a justification. Anything to ease his mind. *You never promised her anything. You never made any vows. Maybe she did misunderstand, and whose problem is that? Yours?* But he didn’t buy it.

“Do we love her, Kev?”

Kevin nodded slowly.

“Then we’ve got to do something.”

“We betrayed her trust, Aden. What could we do to make up for that?”

“Probably nothing, but we could at least do something to apologize,” Aden pointed out.

“What are you thinking of?”

Aden took a deep breath. He didn’t know how Kevin would react to his suggestion, but he didn’t know what else they could do. She may never want to see them again, but he didn’t want her to hate them.

“Let’s get her book back.”

Kevin arched an eyebrow but he didn’t say anything.

“If you’re still hung up on proof, I have enough evidence to convince any judge.

Witnesses, notes, saved copies on her old computer. Everything but a signed confession from Dobin himself.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“You’re sure?” Aden asked, surprised by the quick agreement. He expected at least a token argument to save face.

“I’m sure. It’s probably the least we could do. But it could take a long time to win, Aden. Weeks, months. Maybe years.”

“I don’t even think we’ll have to take it court,” Aden said.

“Your evidence is that persuasive?”

“I might have a few secrets he’d like to keep out of the public eye. It’s worth a shot, anyway.”

Kevin nodded. “Let’s do it.” He stood and offered his hand. “We should go home.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t want to leave the hallway. He wanted to be as close to her as possible.

“She’s not going to let you in.”

Kevin reached out his hand. Aden took it and he pulled Aden to his feet.

“Maybe if she knows how we feel,” Aden said.

“Would you believe it if you were her?”

Aden’s shoulders slumped and they shuffled down the hallway together.

* * * *

Belle didn’t sleep after Aden’s visit. She stayed in bed and tried not to think. At six, she crawled out of bed and went to the window, watching the sunrise on a fresh day. Her fresh start.

Belle moved on autopilot, behaving as though everything was normal. She showered, dressed, and made her coffee without any variation to her routine. She focused on the necessary daily tasks. First, she would need to call Ms. Redding and get the day off. Once she completed that unpleasant task, she would call the agent that helped her find her loft and arrange to lease the first available space. She needed to call her landlord and inform him she planned to move as soon as she found a new place.

As Belle dialed Ms. Redding’s number, she expected the same painful sort of conversation that the old bat had mastered. Nothing more than that.

“Ms. Redding? Good morning, it’s Belle Sterling...”

“Ah, Ms. Sterling. I was just about to call you.”

Belle blinked. “You were?”

“Oh yes.”

“Is there a problem?” Belle’s stomach sank. She knew. The cow didn’t have to tell her. She knew.

“I was going over the work you put on my desk yesterday. Sloppy, sloppy. It is just not acceptable.”

“I see.”

“We’ll mail you your check with a month’s severance, of course. I’m sorry we weren’t a good fit for you, Ms. Sterling. Good luck with your future work.” The phone went dead in her ear.

Belle expected pain, shock, and disappointment. She thought more tears would flood her eyes. Her first job as an adult, and she had been fired. *Fired*. She didn’t expect the

sweet flood of relief that washed over her. She didn't expect to smile.

Belle didn't expect to be happy.

"Well," she said, replacing the phone. "That changes everything, doesn't it?"

Belle dialed Willow's number and greeted her with an invitation to breakfast.

"Oh, I have class this morning; I was just walking out the door..."

"I think we need to meet for breakfast," Belle said. "It's important."

"Belle, I..."

"It's important," Belle interjected.

"Yeah, okay. I can be at the diner in about ten minutes."

"Great."

Belle left her building and navigated the streets without thinking. *I'm free. I'm free.* She couldn't think of anything else. *I'm free. I'm free.* Her heart pounded the rhythm of the words. Once she got out of her lease, there would be nothing binding her to Los Angeles. She could go anywhere in the world.

The possibilities overwhelmed her. Belle never felt like she had a real choice before. She started working right after school, desperate for financial independence. She would have liked to have gone to Chicago, or New York, or even London, but it was never feasible. Now she had money saved, experience, and nothing to stop her.

No, nothing to stop you from running away.

Belle shook her head. "No," she muttered. "I'm not running away. I'm living my life."

As far away from Kevin and Aden as possible.

"A little distance won't hurt," she said as she pushed open the diner door.

Belle chose a booth near the door and rested her head against the window, watching the mass of humanity flood the sidewalk and streets. They all had a job. Somewhere to be. Something important to do with their time and their lives. Did she have anything important in her life? Had she ever done anything important?

The bell above the door jingled. Belle looked up and waved Willow over.

"What is it?" Willow asked, sliding into the booth. "You sounded upset on the phone."

"My world has fallen apart," Belle said. "And I've got to figure out a way to rebuild it. Are you going to help me?"

Chapter 19

Kevin leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. Aden had been right about the evidence. He knew that if Belle took it to court, she would only need a semi-competent attorney to win the case. Aden would have walked away with a clear and easy victory.

Kevin felt like a fool. He couldn't believe that he had almost sacrificed everything for the losing team. Belle had unknowingly saved him from himself. Now he needed to repay the favor, even if she wouldn't let them tell her the plan.

Belle had been incommunicado for the past three days, and when they left the apartment that morning, they had seen a moving van. Ominous and orange, Kevin slowed the car and stared at it. "Is it hers?" He asked.

Aden hadn't answered.

He didn't really need to.

"Mr. Lane? You're two-thirty appointment is here."

Kevin pushed the button on the intercom. "Send him in."

Dobin. Aden wanted to be present for the meeting, but Kevin convinced him it wasn't necessary. Dobin would be put on the defensive if he saw Aden, and Kevin didn't want that to happen. He knew better, but he hoped if he presented the evidence in a calm, precise manner, Dobin would be reasonable.

Given what he knew about Dobin, he didn't think a reasonable response would be very likely.

"Hey there, Kev. What's new?"

Kevin gritted his teeth at the familiar nickname. He didn't mind when Aden used it, but otherwise it grated on his nerves. "Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?"

"Black, one sugar."

Kevin crossed the office to the coffee pot and poured two mugs. "I need to talk to you about *The Digital Spear*."

"I thought you cleaned up that mess."

A sliver of guilt wiggled in his gut. He never told Dobin that Belle had decided to drop the case on her own. Instead, he implied that he was responsible for the cessation of litigation.

"Something else came up. Something unexpected." Kevin poured a packet of sugar into Paul's coffee.

"What?"

"Evidence," Kevin said, stirring the coffee. "Evidence. She has it and we don't."

Dobin rolled his eyes. "Please, what am I paying you for?"

"You want me to win this case without evidence? Paul, I'm good, but I'm not that good." He handed Dobin the coffee and sat across the desk from him. "You haven't been very cooperative with me."

"You make it sound like she's got a chance."

Kevin shrugged and gestured at the papers and discs on his desk. "Do you know what this is? Notes. Signed affidavits. Dated documents. Dated emails."

"What's your point? All of this shit could be forged."

"But it wasn't," Kevin said quietly. "And you know it. Be honest with me, Paul. I'm

your lawyer; I have to know the truth.”

“She may have helped.”

“May have? What does that mean, Paul? Does that mean she came up with the idea? Proofread the chapters? Took dictation? How did she help?” Kevin pressed.

“She helped with the basic outline. But I wrote the book,” Paul insisted.

“That’s all she did?”

“What? Are you calling me a liar?”

Kevin studied Dobin’s face, noting the signs of anger. His eyes flashed, his face flushed, and he suddenly acquired a nervous tick. Kevin knew the problem. The kid wasn’t used to being called on his lies. Now, as Kevin set the trap, he became defensive and agitated.

Kevin shifted direction. “Have you had any contact with Ms. Sterling in the past several weeks?”

“I don’t talk to that bitch anymore. The last time I saw her was in the elevator.”

Another sliver of guilt. He had seen Belle’s discomfort. What had he done about it? Nothing. But she had forgiven him for that too.

“No phone calls? No chance meetings? No emails? No letters?” Kevin left the last question dangling in the air between them.

“Nothing.”

“Paul, I must remind you that, as your attorney, I need to be privy to certain information. If you contacted her...”

“Letters, okay? I sent her a few letters.”

“How many?”

“Three.”

Kevin frowned. Three? Aden only had copies of two. When did he send the third one? “Why did you send her letters, Paul?”

“I wanted to try to talk some sense into her. Settle this shit out of court, you know?”

“You didn’t want this to go to court? I thought you instructed me to resist settling and force her hand,” Kevin said.

“I wanted to save time.”

“Save time? You could have just asked me to open communication with her attorney. We might have settled this in mere days.”

“I didn’t want her to settle! I wanted her to drop the case. Which she did,” he added.

“Did you harass her into dropping the case?” Kevin asked.

“Harass? I didn’t harass her. I just pointed out it might be in her best interests...”

Paul smiled. “You know?”

“Did you threaten her?”

“Threaten is such a strong word, don’t you think?”

“Did you threaten her?” Kevin repeated.

“Yes, okay?”

Kevin shook his head. “You threatened Ms. Sterling in order to force her to drop the case because you didn’t want it to go to trial and you didn’t want to settle? Why, Paul? Why not let me do my job? Were you afraid?”

“What the fuck is with the third degree? You sound like I’m on trial.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair, smiled pleasantly, and gestured to the glass jar on the corner of his desk. “Would you like a chocolate?”

“No, I don’t want any fucking chocolate,” Paul snarled. “Do you have a fucking point?”

“Paul, my associate, Mr. Scott has informed me that due to certain new evidence, recently brought to light, his client has decided to sue for copyright infringement and theft of intellectual property. I’m fighting a defensive battle. Any surprises could be fatal. What are you so afraid of? If there is something to fear, rest assured, Mr. Scott will find it. Do you want to be blindsided in front of a judge?”

“I want to know what new evidence has come to light.”

“So do I,” Kevin said. “I haven’t been informed of the specifics.”

“There could be one thing, but that...” Paul shook her head. “She wouldn’t...”

“Wouldn’t what, Paul?”

“I wrote her a check.”

Kevin blinked. He had been fishing, but he didn’t know what lurked beneath the water. “What? You wrote her a check.”

“I tried to buy the novel from her.”

“Did she cash the check?”

“No.”

“She has the uncashed check?”

Paul shrugged. “I don’t know. She told me she’d tear it up and flush it down the toilet. I suppose it’s possible she saved it. Possible, but not likely. I mean, why would she keep it?”

“How much was it for?”

“A couple grand, I guess.”

Kevin loosened his tie and stood up. He walked around the desk and perched on the corner. “Paul, I’m going to level with you because I’m your attorney and I care about your best interests.”

“I’m not going to settle!”

Kevin held up his hand and smiled again. *I’m on your side*, the smile said. *Help me help you*. “Paul, Paul, Paul, I don’t want to settle either. But if this comes up in court, and I’m sure it will, you’ll lose. Very publicly. It will be extremely embarrassing to you, your father, and me.”

Paul shifted and averted his eyes.

“You will be marked in the public eye as a thief. Somebody who disregards intellectual property—a very hot debate in general right now. And with your father starting a studio?” Kevin shook his head. “That’s the sort of black mark nobody wants attached to their name.”

“We can fight it,” Paul insisted. “You don’t think you can win? Fine, I’ll get a dozen, two dozen lawyers who can. Anything can be bought, everybody has a price.”

“What was Ms. Sterling’s price, Paul? You tried once and it didn’t make the problem go away. I have a suggestion for you, Paul. Are you ready to hear it?”

“What?”

Kevin ignored the hostility in his voice. “Let’s make all this go away.” He blew on the tips of his fingers. “Poof.”

“I don’t want to let this go.”

“Paul, I want you to ask yourself something. Is she worth it? Is *she* worth a very public humiliation? You can’t win this one. The best you can do is to decide how to lose.

Publicly, with the whole nation looking on? Or privately?"

Paul glared at him, and looked very much like a petulant five-year-old.

"Why don't I give you some time to think about that?" Kevin said, standing up.

Aden was waiting when Kevin opened the door. "Let's talk in your office," he muttered.

"How's it going?" Aden asked, as soon he shut the office door behind him.

"I think he's cornered," Kevin said. "He doesn't like to lose but ... well, I think we might have him."

"Good, because I don't think we have a lot of time."

"Why, what happened?" Kevin asked, sitting down.

"I went home for lunch today," Aden said, "and I noticed Belle's place is almost empty. She could be gone in just a few days. What's going on in there?"

"You won't believe this. He wrote Belle a check to buy the novel."

Aden gaped. "He admitted to that?"

"He thinks you already have it. Do you think Belle saved it? She told him she ripped it up and flushed it down the toilet."

Aden shook his head. "She never mentioned it to me at all."

"Maybe she didn't have a chance. Either way, he thinks you're holding the trump card."

"Great. How do you want to tell Belle?"

Kevin shook his head. He had considered several options, but only one appealed to him. He wanted to announce the victory face to face, but he suspected that would be impossible. "Honestly, I think registered letter."

Aden grimaced. "How 'bout personal courier? It'll be faster."

"Have you tried to call her at all?"

"She hung up on me."

Kevin checked his watch. "I think I've left Paul stewing in his own juices long enough."

"Good luck."

"Hey, Aden, why don't we do something tonight? To celebrate?" Kevin suggested.

"Yeah, if you want."

"Aden, look, I know that you..."

"Hey, just go take care of Dobin, okay?"

Kevin nodded. When he returned to his office, he found Paul where he left him, his arms folded, his forehead furrowed.

"Have you made your decision?" Kevin asked.

"On one condition. She can't publish it either."

Kevin resisted rolling his eyes. The little shit was starting to get on his last nerve. He knew he needed to keep his cool, to remain friendly. Paul had to think they were on the same team, but he wanted to scream and shake him and tell him to grow the fuck up.

"Paul, I understand your frustration. This is a frustrating situation. The problem with that condition is that it's simply not enforceable. You're not in a winning situation," Kevin explained. "I can guarantee one thing. She won't sue for damages if you quietly withdraw the novel from all consideration."

"What if she does sue for damages?"

"Mr. Scott will take you to the cleaners on behalf of Ms. Sterling," Kevin stated.

Paul's hand shot out and knocked the glass container off the desk. Candy went flying, but the glass didn't shatter. Kevin didn't move. "Fine, okay? Fine. The bitch can have the fucking book."

Kevin sat down and lifted his phone. "Should I start with your agent?"

"Do we have to do this now?" Paul asked.

"Yes. The sooner it's taken care of, the better it will be for you."

Paul took a card from his wallet and tossed it at Kevin. "Here is his private number."

Kevin dialed the number and watched Paul carefully while he waited for the agent—Zak Andrews—to answer the phone. He still didn't quite believe that Paul was going to give in after only one meeting.

"This is Zak Andrews."

"Mr. Andrews? This is Kevin Lane, Paul Dobin's attorney."

"Mr. Lane. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Dobin would like to withdraw *The Digital Spear* from all publishers' consideration. He also no longer requires representation for that manuscript."

"What happened?" Andrews asked. "I deserve to know."

"You can speak with Dobin about the details later. Right now, I need your guarantee that the book will be withdrawn from all publishing houses and you will cease to represent it."

"Is Paul there?"

Kevin handed Paul the phone. "Tell him."

"Zak? Do it."

Kevin took back the phone and smiled. "You heard the man."

"You're fired as well," Paul said, standing up.

Kevin stood and put his hand out. "It's been a pleasure working with you."

Paul marched out of the room, his fists swinging at his sides, and slammed the door. Kevin collapsed in his chair. After a moment's consideration, dialed Belle's number.

"Hello?"

"Belle, it's me. Don't hang up."

"What do you want, Kevin?"

His stomach dropped. He couldn't believe she was still on the phone. "I have important information for you regarding Paul Dobin and your book."

"I'm not interested..."

"Belle, wait. You should be interested. Please come to the office so I can give you the proper paperwork."

"Is that all you wanted to talk about?" Belle asked.

"Yes."

"Are you available this afternoon?"

"Yes," he answered quickly. "Yes. When is a good time for you?"

"I can be down in about thirty minutes," Belle said, and then hung up.

Kevin dialed Aden's extension. "Guess who's coming to visit?"

Chapter 20

The secretary directed Belle to Kevin's office when she arrived just a little over thirty minutes later. "They're expecting you. Go right on in."

She gripped her purse with clammy hands and tried to smile. A part of her feared that Paul himself would be waiting for her. But would that be worse than facing Kevin and Aden?

She didn't know why she agreed to meet them. Curiosity, perhaps. What could have happened? Did Paul want to sue her now? Did she simply need to see them? She missed them. She missed seeing them, even if thinking about them still hurt. Maybe she just wanted to tell them she was leaving. Leaving Los Angeles, leaving California, leaving them.

Belle paused outside Kevin's door and took several breaths. *We're only discussing business*, she assured herself. *We're only discussing business; I have nothing to worry about.*

Unless the business happened to be about bad news. And when it came to Paul, was there any such thing as good news?

Belle squared her shoulders and turned the knob. They were behind Kevin's desk, waiting for her. They both wore serious expressions to match their serious suits. Belle called on all the strength she had to harden her fragile heart and focused on the memory of them with Tamara.

"Have a seat," Kevin invited.

"I'd rather stand."

Kevin and Aden glanced at each other, then Kevin slid a piece of paper across the desk. "That's for you."

Belle picked it up and studied it. The words blurred. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"The book's yours. Publish it, burn it, bury it. It's all up to you," Aden said.

"How..." Belle shook her head and forced the tears down her throat. "I thought it was over." She looked at Aden. "Did you do this?"

"I had a small discussion with my client," Kevin explained. "Eventually he agreed that it would be in his best interest to let it go."

"And he let Kevin go in the process," Aden added.

"That's it, then?" Belle asked. "That's it?"

"The book is yours and Paul shouldn't bother you anymore," Kevin said.

Belle needed to get out of the office and away from them. She backed to the door and tried to smile. "Thanks. Thank you. I'm... I'm moving this weekend."

Aden nodded. "We saw the van."

"Do I... Do I owe you anything?"

"No, it was on Paul's dime," Kevin answered.

"I hope you know this doesn't change anything," she said in a rush, more for her benefit than theirs.

"We know," Aden said. "We didn't expect it to change anything."

"Right. Well. Goodbye," Belle blurted as she pushed the door open. She hurried

across the lobby to the elevator and blindly pushed buttons until the door closed.

She tried to read the paper again, but the words wouldn't stay in place on the page. What had they done? She knew Paul wouldn't give up on a fight. What did Kevin do? What did he sacrifice for her?

When the doors opened on the downstairs lobby, she nearly ran a man over in her dash to get out of the building. She needed room to think. She made it as far as the nearest bus stop. Ignoring the handful of people milling around the area, she sat on the edge of the bench and didn't fight the tears rolling down her face.

Relieved, confused, frustrated ... she didn't know what to do. She knew she could sell the book for a comfortable sum, and any money right now would be good. She knew she could see the book in bookstores and hold her head up, proud of herself. And she knew that the men she loved were responsible...

Was it enough to forgive them? Or enough to take their calls? Did they mean for this gesture to be an apology or a farewell gift?

"How could it be enough?" Belle asked herself. "How could it be, when I can't trust them?"

Every time she turned her back, she would wonder if they were with somebody else. Tamara or a new conquest. She didn't want to live like that. She couldn't live like that. It would be easier to live without them.

And how could she be with not one, but two, men who didn't love her? Double the pain, double the misery, double the hurt. Belle knew she couldn't accept anything less than love from them, and if they couldn't or they wouldn't, than she shouldn't waste her time with them or wondering what might have been.

The sound of screeching breaks and shattered glass exploded around her. Belle looked up, saw one car on the curb just yards in front of her, another car swerving wildly. A third car slammed to a halt. Oncoming traffic veered to the right and slowed.

"What happened?" Somebody shouted, a crowd already forming. Before they closed around the car, Belle saw Kevin's familiar face, twisted with fear.

"Somebody call 911! A man's been hit!"

Belle pushed through the people, trying to reach Kevin.

"He's still breathing!" Somebody else shouted. "Call an ambulance!"

"Man, he came out of nowhere! Did you see that motherfucker? I can't believe he just hit that guy."

"Everybody, get back. Give him some room!"

Belle ignored the voices around her and pushed forward, finally reaching the edge of the circle. Kevin was crouched on the curb, a cell phone in one hand. She couldn't see what he was looking at, the wrecked car blocking her view. She tried to say his name, but she couldn't find her voice.

Please, please, please. Please don't be Aden. Not Aden.

Belle sidestepped the bumper of the car and she could only see Aden's white-blonde hair stained red with blood.

"The ambulance is on its way," somebody shouted, their words nearly lost in the approaching sirens of the police cars.

Kevin, Belle tried to say. *Kevin, what happened?* But she didn't speak and she didn't move and she didn't blink. She stared with wide-eyed, open-mouthed horror. A cop tried to get her attention, but she couldn't look away from the blood. *Where did it all come*

from? How did it get so red? The cop pushed her back, away from Kevin, and into the crowd.

"No, no," she gasped. "No, I've got to see him. You don't understand."

"You need to stay back, Miss."

The EMTs arrived and tumbled out of the ambulance. "We have two unconscious men!"

Unconscious. Unconscious. Not dead. Please, God.

Belle didn't hear anything else. Everything moved too fast, and words became meaningless sound. She didn't see anything, except blurred colors and the world turned gray. She had never fainted, but she thought she might fall face-first onto the pavement.

Somebody touched her arm. Belle looked up and tried to focus her eyes. "Kevin?"

"Come on, they're taking him to the hospital."

"He's..."

"They won't let me ride with him." Kevin took her elbow and dragged her through the onlookers.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I didn't... I didn't see anything."

"Do you want me to drive?" Belle asked when they reached his car. She could feel her hands again.

"I'll do it. I can do it."

Belle studied his ashen face and nodded. "Let's go then."

Kevin gunned the engine and they tore down the road.

* * * *

Belle watched Kevin pace in the waiting room, following him with her eyes until she felt dizzy. Children screamed and ran around them and their tired, worried parents didn't try to stop them. Two blaring televisions with competing channels fixated several people, and the rest were trying to read out-dated magazines, or staring at the wall, their eyes distant and faces drawn.

Belle stood up and grabbed Kevin's hand when he passed her. "Let's go get some coffee."

"No, I'm fine."

"Kevin, they said it could be hours. We have time to go buy a cup. Come on," she said, pulling him away from the lobby. "The cafeteria is on the floor below us."

Kevin followed, but she could tell he didn't want to leave. They found the empty cafeteria and Belle wasn't surprised to see a Starbucks vender. "Two coffees. Um, house blend," She ordered, fishing the money from her purse.

"I didn't see what happened," Kevin said. "He rushed out to look for you and somebody grabbed my arm and wanted to talk."

"I didn't see it either. I was at the bus stop." Belle handed him the large cup of coffee. "It's hot," she warned, wary of the distracted look in his eye. He may not have been aware he was even holding coffee.

"He didn't want you to go without telling you..." Kevin's voice faded and he looked at his feet. She put a hand on his arm and guided him to a chair.

"Without telling me what?" Belle asked, her hand still on his arm.

"He loves you."

Belle shook her head. "No, he..."

"He thought you'd probably leave anyway, but he thought it was important that you know how he ... how we ... feel."

Belle covered her face with her hands. "I wouldn't have left. If he ... if you both ... I won't leave."

Kevin stood up. "Let's get back upstairs."

Belle followed him, her fingers and toes numb. Every time she heard of a friend forgiving a cheating boyfriend or husband, she cringed. She didn't understand those women. How could somebody come back from that? How could you ever look that person in the face again with trust? Cheating, betrayal, negated everything. Belle believed that. Why was she ready to forgive it now?

Kevin took a seat and Belle sat down beside him. They both stared at the floor. "Tell me what happened with Tamara," she said, without looking at him.

"She came over and..."

"No," Belle cut in. "No, I mean, tell me what happened between the three of you."

"I really don't remember who met her first. We'd been together for a couple of years, but until Tamara, we never even considered ... well, a trio. But she was beautiful, fun, and exciting. We made room for her in our lives and she moved in with us. Unfortunately, while the sex was always great, we couldn't stand living together.

"Also, there was always an undercurrent of jealousy. I mean, I got along well with her, but all three of us knew she'd rather be with Aden. Resentment grew. When she was offered a job back East, we agreed it was for the best.

"But the break-up wasn't really acrimonious. She just stopped living with us. She travels for her job a lot, and when she comes to Los Angeles, we meet up for a night or two."

Kevin fell silent, and Belle had several questions, but she waited to see if he would continue.

"We don't love her, if that's what you want to know. And I don't think we ever did. Maybe that's why she left. I don't know. She is ... she *was* ... a friend with benefits. Aden thought you understood the situation and, well, I'm an idiot."

"Was?" Belle asked.

"We kicked her out."

"You didn't sleep with her, then?"

"No."

Belle sipped from her cooling coffee and waited for that to sink in. She had tortured herself with the images of Aden, Tamara, and Kevin in bed so many times that now they didn't want to leave her mind. They were more vivid than reality.

"And ... it's over?"

"Yes."

Belle folded her fingers through his and squeezed his hand. Just as she opened her mouth, the doors opened and a doctor came out.

"Scott family?"

Kevin jumped to his feet without releasing Belle's hand. "We're here."

"Well, I've got some good news. Mr. Scott has a rather serious fracture just above his elbow, and his back is sprained; however, those are his only severe injuries."

"What about all the blood?" Kevin asked, his fingers tightening around hers.

“He’s going to have a scar on his temple. It’s a rather ugly looking wound and it bled profusely, as head-wounds tend to do, but there was no trauma or serious damage. Mr. Scott will have to stay the night here, possibly two.”

“Can we see him?” Belle asked.

“You can, but he’s not very lucid. Follow me.”

Belle fell in step behind Kevin as they followed the doctor down a long corridor, but he paused and put his hand out. She took it, and they walked side by side until the doctor paused at the door. “You can both go in, but again, I’m afraid he isn’t very lucid.”

Kevin nodded and pushed open the door. “Let’s go.”

Belle bit her lip as they stepped into the room. Aden lay on the bed, his eyes closed. She knew what the doctor had said, but Aden looked much worse. His eyes were both black and swollen, and red marks and cuts littered his face, including a large, raw scrape across his cheek. His arm was in a cast at his side, and a bandage circled his head.

Kevin closed the curtain around the bed, and gave them a modicum of privacy. They stood on opposite sides, their eyes glued to the injured man between them. Kevin took Aden’s hand between his and held it there, his eyes searching Aden’s face. Belle didn’t think he would wake up, but he thought Kevin would stand there and wait as long as necessary.

Belle wanted to touch Aden too, but something held her back. She gripped the bars on the side of the bed and waited. For Kevin to speak, for Aden to move, for things to change, for time to march backwards so she could get the past week back.

Aden’s eyes fluttered and he moved his head. Kevin squeezed his hand. She watched Aden open his eyes and focus on Kevin. A smile lit his bruised face. “Hey.”

“How are you feeling?” Kevin asked.

“Like I got hit by a fucking truck.”

“It was only a little Honda.”

“What happened?” Aden asked, his voice hoarse. “I can’t feel anything.”

“That’d be the morphine. You have a broken arm and a sprained back, but other than that, you should be fine.” Kevin tried to smile. “Your face is all messed up.”

Aden sighed. “Now I’ll never be a big time movie star.”

“Maybe if they’re casting for some sort of horrible monster.”

Aden laughed softly and grimace. “Wow, felt that.” He rubbed his throat. “Can I have some water?”

Belle watched the exchange without speaking or moving. She didn’t want to attract any attention to herself, feeling uncomfortable and out of place.

Kevin poured a small cup of water and handed it to him. Aden closed his eyes and downed the water. “That’s good,” he said, resting the cup on his lap.

Kevin looked up at Belle and raised an eyebrow. *Don’t you have anything to say?*

Aden rolled his head over and faced her. “Hi, pet.”

Belle swallowed hard. “Hi.”

“You came to visit me.”

She nodded. “I came with Kevin to the hospital.”

“Thank you.”

Belle leaned over, careful of his arm, and kissed his cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Hey, not your fault I ran into the middle of the road.”

It wasn't what she meant, but she nodded. He closed his eyes again and seemed to doze.

"Aden?" Kevin whispered.

"What? I'm awake."

Kevin nodded towards the door. "We should go and let you get some sleep."

"No, I don't want you to leave and I'm not very ... tired ... I'm..." Aden yawned and closed his eyes again. "Fine."

"Let's go," Kevin mouthed.

Belle nodded and slid the curtain open. At the door, she paused and turned around in time to catch Kevin kissing Aden's lips. Her heart twisted and she ducked out of the room.

Belle hurried down the hall, her steps echoing on the tile. She heard the door to Aden's room open and close behind her, but she didn't turn around until she felt Kevin's hand on her shoulder.

"Belle? Come home with me."

His voice more than his words undid her. The fear hadn't subsided, despite the doctor's—and the visual—assurances. She could hear it and she could see it in his eyes, and she knew it echoed her own. She couldn't stand to spend the night by herself. In a way, his request relieved her, because she didn't have to make it.

Belle nodded. "I will."

Chapter 21

Kevin nodded at the window. "You keep your blinds closed now."

Belle lifted her head from his shoulder. "It's easier that way." She studied his serious face in the dim light. "I saw everything I needed to see."

He rested his hand on her leg. She wanted to go into the bedroom, but Kevin seemed comfortable on the couch. He wanted to stay awake and near the phone in case the hospital called.

"When are you moving?"

Belle bit her lip. "The beginning of next week. To New York."

Kevin looked at her. "New York? That's ... why New York? I mean, we didn't force you to flee California did we?"

"No, no. I lost my job ... well, I didn't lose it. I know where it is. I'm just not welcome there anymore," Belle explained. "I mean, otherwise, I was thinking of Santa Monica. Find a nice place near the beach."

"I see. You were fired?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because she doesn't like me?" Belle shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm not sorry about it."

"What are you going to do in New York?"

"I don't know yet." Belle kept her eyes on the floor. She wanted him to ask her to stay, but she didn't think he would. Not because he didn't want to, but because he didn't think she would say yes. "I was just looking for a change of scenery."

"New York is a nice place..."

"I don't want to go," Belle whispered. "Not like this."

"Ultimately, Belle, you have to do what's right for you. I mean, you could have a great life there."

"I could have a great life here," Belle pointed out.

He didn't respond. She leaned against his shoulder, soaking in the heat from his body, and wondering why everything seemed so hard. Was it her fault? She should have let them explain instead of making immediate plans to run away. And what if the car that hit Aden had been going a bit faster? What if Aden had hit his head on the curb, or was crushed beneath the tires?

Belle closed her eyes and imagined a different scenario, one where she didn't run out of the office, hurt and confused. In this version of events, she listened to what they had to tell her. In this version, she forgave them and she apologized. They would be together and Aden wouldn't be in the hospital.

"God, I'm sorry," Belle breathed. "*Fuck.*" She pushed away from him and stood up. "I'm sorry. I should have talked to you. I should have let you in. I shouldn't have run away. I was just... I mean... It's my fault that Aden..."

Kevin jumped to his feet and grabbed her shoulders. "No, it's not. Stop it. Just..." He kissed her. She responded immediately, opening herself to him and clutching his shoulders.

"Do you still want me?" She asked against his mouth.

"Of course," Kevin said, lifting his head. "Do you want us?"

"I want to stay... But I..." Belle sighed. "I really wish we had this conversation before I went and bought out my lease."

"Stay here."

Belle's mouth dropped. "Stay here? Like, here, in your apartment?"

Kevin nodded.

"Move in? Like, until I could find another place?" Belle asked.

"No. Live with us."

"Well, what about ... what about Aden?"

Kevin cocked his eyebrow. "What about him? You think *he* won't want you here?"

Belle knew Aden wouldn't have a problem with it. If he returned from the hospital and found her there, he'd be ecstatic. But would she be ecstatic?

She had been living on her own for a long time. She had her own life, her own routine, and her own private needs. How would all of that fit with not one, but two, men? Two men who were set in routines they had developed over a decade?

"This is a big step," Belle said, stepping away from him and falling on the couch.

"I'm not proposing marriage, Belle," he said, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"I know. It's just ... I mean. Wow. I have to think about this."

"Well, I'm in no hurry, but how many days have you got left to decide? Three?"

"Three. But that's another thing. I don't have a job. I'm looking for a job. But who knows how long it'll be until I find one?"

"So? It's not like we need your money to pay the rent, Belle. Besides, you have a big seller on your hands now, remember?"

"That's true," Belle muttered.

"Somebody is going to have to take care of Aden while I'm at work."

Belle smiled. "That's true too." The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. How hard could it be to move in? People in relationships took that step all the time and survived. Waking up beside them, coming home to them, eating with them, showering with them...

"He's quite the handful when he's sick," Kevin warned. "Like a five-year-old. He'll take advantage of you if he can."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"You can have the spare bedroom."

"Your office? Don't you guys kinda need that?"

Kevin shrugged. "So we'll have to move some things. It's not a big deal."

"This is insane. It's insane, do you know that? No matter how you look at it, it's crazy," Belle said.

"No, it would be crazy to let you move to New York. I almost lost Aden today. I don't want to lose either one of you, for any reason."

Tears stung the back of her eyes. "I don't want to lose you either."

"So that's settled then?"

Belle nodded. "Yeah ... yeah, it is. I've never done this before, you know."

"Which part?" Kevin asked, sitting beside her and pulling her into his arms.

"Any of it," she breathed as he lowered his mouth to hers. *How did this happen*, she asked as he kissed her. *How did any of this happen?*

Kevin pulled her shirt up, exposing her back. His hands covered her skin and he caressed the sensitive skin just beneath her waistband. Belle pressed herself against him and put one leg over his. She wanted as much contact as possible, as soon as possible.

Kevin apparently felt the same way. He pulled her onto his lap, her crotch against his cock. She rocked forward, creating friction between them, and her clit throbbed in response. He pulled her shirt off, and his quickly joined it on the floor. She pressed her chest against his, enjoying the way his skin, slick and soft, electrified hers.

But something was off. Something was missing. Another pair of hands on her breasts, another pair of lips against her neck, another cock pressed against her thigh.

"Oh," she groaned, pulling away from Kevin and putting space between their bare torsos. "We can't do this right now."

Kevin blinked. "Can't do what?"

"*This*." She gestured to her naked body and his hard cock. "Together. Right now."

Kevin sighed. "You're right. You're right."

"Though... Aden wouldn't want us to deprive ourselves for his sake," Belle said.

"That's a good point. He's very ... charitable."

Belle nodded, leaning forward, her body drawn to his. "I'm sure he won't mind." Her lips touched Kevin's, her tongue slipped into his mouth, tasting him. She noticed he always had a vague taste of peppermint, like he kept a dish of after-dinner mints on hand. She loved that about him. Her blood rushed from her head and nearly washed her sense away with it.

"No, he won't," Kevin said, breaking the kiss.

"But you think we should hold off anyway?"

Kevin nodded.

Belle sighed and pushed off his lap. "Yeah, I know." She eyed his muscled chest and shook her head. "We're going to have to find a way to distract ourselves."

"Let's get you moved in."

"Tonight?" Belle pulled on her shirt.

"Sure. We'll get it done before Aden comes home. Give him the surprise of his life."

Belle smiled. "Let's do it."

* * * *

"I really don't need the wheelchair," Aden grumbled. "I can walk with a broken arm."

"But you can't walk with a sprained back," Kevin reminded him. "The doctor wants you to stay off your feet for the next couple of weeks."

Aden clutched the armrests. "Hey, watch where you're going. You nearly pushed me off the curb."

"You're fine."

"I hate this fucking thing," Aden muttered.

"It's just temporary. You shouldn't be bitching anyway. It could be worse. Much worse," Kevin said, guiding the chair through a crowd of people.

"I know." Aden's back ached. His arm ached. His head ached. The food they gave him that morning had been inedible, and he had to fight with the doctor to be discharged. They wanted to keep an eye on him. All he wanted was his own bed. "Where's Belle?"

"I don't know."

"Is she gone?" Aden asked, his stomach turning.

"No, no, she's not gone."

"I wasn't just hallucinating her last night? She actually came to the hospital?"

"She was there," Kevin said. "She was worried about you."

They hit a bump on the sidewalk and Aden hissed as fresh pain shot through his back. The doctor said sprained, but he wondered if it wasn't broken. How could something hurt so much and not be broken?

"Are you okay?" Kevin asked.

"Just fine," Aden gasped. "Just fine."

"Maybe you should have stayed another night."

"No." He didn't care how much it hurt, he didn't want to spend another minute in the hospital. For one thing, it was lonely. He woke up in the middle of the night confused and alone and in pain. He had reached for Kevin and found nothing but darkness and it wasn't until a monitor beeped that he remembered. "I'll take some Vicodin or something when I get home. I'll be fine."

"Do you want me to get a taxi? I thought you might enjoy the fresh air..."

Aden waved his hand. "Would you stop fussing over me? No, don't get a cab, yes I do enjoy the fresh air. Any other questions?"

"What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"I don't care."

Aden only cared about one thing besides sleeping in his own bed. He wanted to talk to Belle. As he drifted in and out of consciousness the night before, losing and then finding the pain in his back, and thinking about his life, he realized he needed to talk to her. He didn't care what he had to do. She would listen to him and hear him out. He would not let another day pass without speaking his piece.

Kevin filled his life and he didn't think there were any empty spaces for Belle. But he realized that didn't matter. He didn't have a limited capacity for love. His feelings were not finite and his needs weren't limit fixed. He hated sleeping by himself. He hated reaching for Kevin and finding nothing. And he hated reaching for Belle and grabbing disappointment.

"I want to talk to Belle," Aden announced.

"I thought you would."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"She wanted to know why you ran into the middle of the road."

"Anything else?"

"She said she wanted to talk to you too."

"Steak."

"Steak?"

"And a baked potato."

"I don't think your stomach could handle that right now."

"I want it anyway."

"Fine with me."

They continued the final leg of their journey in silence. Aden focused on the city around him, looking at it with new eyes. The sky was a shocking blue and the sun mellow against his face, a cool breeze keeping the air fresh. Unseasonably cool for a summer day, Aden wanted to enjoy it.

The first day of the rest of his life.

Aden wasn't one for dramatics, but that's how he felt. When he saw the car careening toward him, everything moved in slow motion. He had tried to jump out of the way, but he didn't have the time or the room. And he remembered thinking it was over. He wouldn't wake up. His heart quickened at the memory, and he could feel a sheen of cold sweat on his forehead.

Kevin squeezed his shoulder softly. "You're okay."

Aden nodded. "Yeah."

As they neared their building, he looked around for the familiar moving van, but it wasn't there. Had she already left? No, Kevin said she wasn't gone. But still, a tremor of fear moved down his spine.

"I already called the office for you," Kevin said. "They don't expect you back for another couple of weeks."

Aden grimaced. "Great." What was he supposed to do at home for a couple of weeks? Lie in bed and watch television? Sure, it sounded ideal, but he knew he would be bored out of his mind within hours.

"It won't be too bad. I'm sure you can find something to occupy your time."

"Well, there's that book of crossword puzzles I've been meaning to get to."

Kevin backed the wheelchair into the elevator. "There you go."

"Maybe I can do a bit of work..."

"No."

"It won't kill me, Kevin."

"No. The doctor says you need to rest, so that's what you're going to do." Kevin leaned over and pushed the button for their floor. "Okay?"

"You're not the boss of me," Aden said.

Kevin chuckled. "Humor me. I can make it worth your while."

The bell dinged and the door opened. "For one week. Not two."

"We'll see."

"And pudding."

"I bought some today."

Aden frowned as they approached their door. "Is that music coming from our place? Did you leave the stereo on?"

Kevin fished the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. "Doesn't sound like something I'd do, does it?"

Aden frowned in confusion as Kevin pushed the door open. He didn't recognize the music ... but he did recognize the voice singing loudly and off-key from the kitchen.

"What..."

Kevin pushed him into the living room and Belle looked up from the stove. "I think I've ruined the pudding."

Chapter 22

Belle couldn't help but smile at Aden's shocked face. "Didn't expect to see me, did you?"

Aden shook his head. "No, I did not."

"We thought we'd surprise you."

Aden looked around the apartment and his eyes fell on his desk and computer, against the wall beside the dining room table. "What's going on?"

"Belle, why don't you take care of Aden while I start his dinner?" Kevin suggested.

Belle nodded. "Come on, let's get you into bed." She stepped behind him and pushed the chair. It was lighter than she expected.

"Belle, what's going..." His words faded away as they passed the spare bedroom, now *her* bedroom. "Is that your bed?"

"Yep."

Aden put his hand out against the door and stopped her. "Why is your bed in there?"

She grabbed his hand and continued down the hall. "We'll talk about that later.

Come on, you're not supposed to stay in the chair too long."

"I think I want to talk about it now."

Belle parked the chair beside the bed. "Can you stand up?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? Or should I get Kevin?"

"I can stand." He demonstrated by pushing himself to his feet.

"Here ... let me help make you more comfortable..." She said, pulling on the zipper of his pants. She worked quickly and focused on the task, rather than his body. If she looked at his arm and his face, her heart twisted. If she looked at his body, her skin flushed with desire.

"There," she muttered, once he stood naked in front of her. "What would you like to wear?"

"Nothing."

Her throat tightened. "Okay."

Aden grabbed her arm. "Belle, what the hell is going on here?"

"Let's get you into bed..." She helped him onto the bed and propped him up with pillows. She pulled the sheet over him and settled on the edge of the mattress. "Yesterday after we left the hospital, we talked."

"And?"

"Well, we talked about Tamara and what happened and what didn't happen ... and I told him I wanted to stay, but I already sold out my lease and I didn't have anywhere to stay and he told me I could stay here and I thought it was crazy at first, I mean, really insane, but then he talked me into it and well ... we wanted it to be a surprise," Belle blurted. She held her breath, waiting for his response.

He brushed his knuckles across her arm. "You're staying with us?"

She nodded. "Looks like it."

"I thought you were already gone."

Belle leaned forward and kissed him. "I was so scared," she whispered. "I was so

scared that you were ... dead ... and I... I never told you that I love you. Then I realized I couldn't leave you and never see you again."

"Never see me again? How far were you going?"

"New York."

He grabbed the back of her head, buried his hand in her hair, and pulled her closer, resting his forehead against hers. "I'm so sorry if we hurt you."

"Kevin told me what happened. Told me you two asked Tamara to leave. I should have given you a chance to explain."

"Hey, you know something?" Aden said, his voice low.

"What?"

"I love you, too."

Belle sniffed and looked away from him. "I just didn't really expect you to say that."

"I didn't really expect you to be here. I guess we're both full of surprises tonight."

Belle pulled away and wiped the corners of her eyes. She needed to get some distance and some air, or she'd start bawling right there in front of him. His admission overwhelmed her. She teetered on the edge of emotional Armageddon. The anger and betrayal she felt when she saw Tamara, the disappointment and shocked relief of losing her job, the joy of having her book returned, the horror of seeing Aden's bloody body on the street, and now his confession ... it was all too much and ready to break to the surface in torrent.

"I'm going to help Kevin... Do you need anything while I'm up?" Her words were coarse.

Aden grabbed her arm. "Don't go yet."

"But I..."

He pulled her against him again and captured her mouth. "Don't go," he said against her lips. "Not yet."

She moaned and opened her mouth to his. He loosened her grip on his arm, and instead of taking the opportunity to flee, she moved closer, pressing her chest against his. The kiss was slow and coaxing, drawing a heated response from her. She didn't know when they reversed roles and she became the aggressor, but suddenly her mouth was on his neck, and then his chest.

Belle savored the taste and heat of his skin against her lips. Salty and hot. He flexed beneath her, his body tightening as she moved lower. She inhaled deeply, and below the antiseptic smell of the hospital, she could smell him.

Aden cupped the back of her head and moaned. "God..."

She moved back up his chest and pulled one of his nipples between her lips. He sucked his breath sharply and held it as she toyed with the sensitive skin, using her tongue and teeth. Belle didn't know if he would like it, but she could feel his cock twitching against her leg.

Belle didn't plan to start anything. She knew she wanted to wait for Kevin. She knew Aden needed to eat before he could take more pain medication. She knew he was still sore and tired, and perhaps not physically up to the task. She really only wanted to reassure herself he was there, in front of her, solid. She wanted to taste his sweat as she slid the tip of her tongue across his chest. She wanted to hear his heart thumping, wanted to feel it beating against her. She wanted to feel the heat of his blood against his skin, hear the rush of breath, capture each small moan and hold it.

Now she allowed herself to study every inch of him. She moved from the edge of the bed to between his legs, kneeling in front of him. She would stop and dress him again after she surveyed his body, committed each bit of it to memory by touch.

She caressed his forehead, running the tips of her fingers across the scrapes and bruises. He bit his lip, but didn't pull away from her, allowing her to explore the marks on his face. Belle leaned forward and kissed each one, her lips butterfly soft.

"Am I hurting you?" She murmured.

"No."

Belle ran her hands up and down his chest, smoothing her palms across his skin, as she found his lips with hers. *This is the last kiss*, she promised. *Then I can pull myself away*. But he deepened the kiss, and she lost herself again.

"I want you," Aden rasped. "Right now."

Belle moaned. She could feel fresh moisture between her legs, soaking her panties, and making her uncomfortable. She longed to pull her pants off and press her naked body against his, straddling his hips and sliding onto his cock.

"Your back..."

"I don't care."

Belle couldn't help but smile. "Yes you do. And so do I."

"I need you," Aden stressed. "Right now."

She looked down between them and saw his cock, hard and straining and slick with pre-come. "Maybe I can find another way to help you..."

He needs a bit of relief is all, she reasoned. *It would be unfair to leave him like this*. Belle slid down the bed until she was flat on her stomach between his legs. She licked the tip of his cock, swirling her tongue around his head, teasing him with her lips. She slid her tongue down his shaft and circled his balls. She felt him moan, and it vibrated through her body.

Belle wrapped her fingers around his shaft and pumped her wrist as she explored him with her mouth. She sucked on his balls, pulling them between her lips and rolling them around her tongue. When she felt him tense, she redirected her attention to the sensitive flesh of his inner-thighs, lapping and biting until he squirmed.

"When you injure him, don't expect me to help you," Kevin said from behind her.

Belle jumped and looked over her shoulder. Kevin leaned against the door, his arms crossed, a slight smile on his lips. Her stomach dropped and her skin tightened. "I was just..." She couldn't finish her thought, her throat too dry to speak, her pussy too wet to concentrate. "Need you over here..."

Kevin was already unbuckling his pants, and watching him undress so casually made her tingle, made her toes curl. Naked from the waist down by the time he reached them, he pulled Belle's pants from her body without ceremony.

Belle slid her knees forward and lifted her ass into the air. Kevin settled behind her and slid the tip of his cock between her lips.

"Seeing you two ... it makes me so hard," Kevin said as he slid into her.

Belle moaned and wrapped her mouth around Aden's cock. He pushed his hips forward until the tip of his cock brushed back of her throat. She froze, tightening her muscles around Kevin, and resisted when he tried to move. She needed to be in control of this, at the very least to keep from injuring Aden.

Belle pushed back against Kevin and held her position for several seconds, enjoying

the pressure of his cock against her g-spot, and the way he trembled against her slick walls. She moved forward, and Aden's cock jerked against her tongue. She could hear them both, their breath fast and heavy.

Belle slowly rocked, pushing and sucking. Kevin's hands were on her hips, Aden's hand on her head. She closed her eyes and concentrated on their bodies, their differences and similarities. Her senses absorbed their presence until everything seemed to merge, and she couldn't tell one from another. They sounded and felt and smelled the same, above her and below her, inside her, behind her, in front of her.

Aden tensed and her own body constricted in response. Kevin tightened his grip on her and surprised her by pulling out of her completely. Surprised, she wanted to ask him what he thought he was doing, but Aden's grip also tightened. He held her head down and thrust his cock down her throat, shuddering with his release.

Belle lifted her head and gasped for breath just as Kevin pushed into her again. He thrust into her with short, sharp jerks of his hips, making her teeth rattle. She closed her eyes and dropped her forehead to her arm, focusing on everything and nothing. Belle felt Aden grip his cock and start stroking it again. She looked up at him with heavy eyes and met his half-closed stare.

Belle reached between her legs and fingered her hard clit. Her body instantly reacted. Her heart pounded in her ears and her muscles ached and her lungs tightened and she hovered just above her orgasm waiting for Kevin. "Now ... now..." she moaned.

"That's it, Baby. Come now," Kevin said, hitting her g-spot. "Come on."

"Oh ... God!" Everything burst to life, unfurled, and surrounded her. Kevin groaned and plunged into her one final time.

Belle collapsed onto her stomach, her head resting on Aden's thigh. She looked up at him and he smiled and she felt fresh warmth in her chest. Kevin trailed his hand down her back and traced the curve of her ass.

"I actually came in here to tell you it's time to eat," Kevin said.

"Good, I'm famished. We'll take our meal in here."

Belle glanced up and smiled. "Sounds good to me."

Kevin dropped a kiss on the top of her head. His breath tickled her temple, and he mouthed something against her skin. The simple words seared her flesh. *I love you*. She watched him lean over Aden and kiss his mouth softly, and the warmth in her chest intensified and spread through her body.

"We're gonna need a bigger bed," Aden said as Kevin left the room.

Belle moved from between his legs to his side and rested her head against his chest. "We'll go shopping tomorrow."

The End

About the Author:

The Zebra Wore Fishnets is Pepper Espinoza's second full length novel with Liquid Silver Books. She is currently working on three other full length projects that she hopes to publish in the near future. She lives with her husband and three cats in southern California.

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