



THE
Belle
SERIES



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SUGAR AND SPICE PRESS

The Belle Series

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Sugar and Spice Press

North Carolina, USA

www.sugarnspicepress.com

Belle and Valentine



A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray, some solid and some dotted, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The swirls are arranged in a roughly circular pattern, with some ending in small dots.

CHAPTER ONE

Zuria watched the sign that read “Welcome to Aves, North Carolina, Population 9,000”, pass by the taxi’s side window, and her stomach dropped. She’d thought she never had to return here, that she had escaped, and now she was a big city girl, cut off from the ties of small town living. Why did circumstances have to be this way? *Why did my lying, cheating almost-ex-husband have to go and die before I could cut him loose?*

Her eyes burned, and she pressed her lips together while blinking rapidly. She had shed enough tears for that bastard before he and his blonde bimbo of a mistress had drowned together on his yacht. Besides, now was not the time to look a hot mess when she arrived in her hometown.

As the taxi turned onto Main and headed into the downtown area, tension between her shoulders increased, and pain crept up her neck toward her head. For the millionth time, she debated whether she would play the part of grieving widow or just admit she'd been talking to a lawyer before Richard died. Did it even matter? She wasn't here to impress anyone, and the only person who counted was her brother, Sam. He had told her to come on home when she found herself destitute and alone.

His fault!

Tears pricked at the backs of her eyes, and she cursed Richard again, but before she could humiliate herself in front of the cabbie, who kept darting glances at her in the rearview mirror, he slammed on the breaks and screeched to a halt. The sudden stop threw Zuria forward, and she bumped her nose on the seat in front of her.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" the driver hurried to ask.

Zuria straightened, frowning. "I'm fine. What happened?"

She looked past him through the windshield to spot a man speeding off atop his sleek black motorcycle. He held a hand up as if in apology, but he never looked around. Zuria threw a few muttered curses at the back of his head and assured her driver once again that she was fine, and no she didn't need to detour to the local hospital.

"No harm done," she said, but recognized the ass occupying the motorcycle seat. She'd let him know what she thought of his driving when she saw him face-to-face.

A short while later the taxi pulled off Main Street and turned onto J Avenue. The eccentric red brick building on the corner with the license plate welcome sign was her destination. Her brother Sam and his best friend, Fane Valentine, owned the coffee shop, and she had made the unwise decision to stay with Sam until she could get on her feet.

Zuria paid the driver and waited while he unloaded her luggage from the trunk. If her stomach hadn't knotted enough already, it did somersaults when she spotted Fane's motorcycle parked on the sidewalk just outside the door. *Probably still hot from almost running me off the road.*

The coffee shop door banged open. Dixie Ann Wilkes burst through the opening. "Oh my goodness, why if it ain't Zuria Mae Belle come back home!"

Zuria cringed. Mae Belle. What had her mother been thinking? Zuria never told anyone her middle name in the big city. She'd left it off all documentation and the second Richard had slapped a ring on her finger, she took advantage of the right to change her name. She had kept the last name of Belle but dropped Mae all together. Now her legal name was Zuria Belle. Period. Maybe it was a bad sign that Richard had never cared that she didn't take his last name. Of course, all of her choices became meaningless the moment she set foot in Aves.

"Hello, Dixie Ann," she said with little enthusiasm.

A beat after Dixie appeared, Sam stepped into doorway, and a rush of love came over Zuria. She'd missed her brother, the quiet, sweet man who never spoke much but when he did, everyone listened. Zuria took in the almost white-blond hair, baby-blue eyes and the smooth, tanned skin. Sam looked nothing like anyone in her family given the fact that he was Caucasian and she was African American. Her dad had found him alone on the road, cold and crying at about two years old. No one was surprised her dad wanted to raise him as his own, but everyone was surprised the county allowed him to. Ever since then, Zuria had seen Sam as her little brother, two years younger, even if he did act like the older sibling.

"Sam!" A smile broke out on her face, and she ran across the sidewalk to jump into his arms. He held her tight and

kissed her cheek then put her from him to look at her. His blue eyes twinkled, and she thought she saw a twitch at his lips, but he hardly smiled.

“It’s good to see you, sis,” he said.

“Good to see you too. I see nothing’s changed.” She tried not to cut her eyes at Dixie Ann, but Sam knew what she meant, and he shrugged.

He stepped past her to grab her bags, and she moved into the coffee shop. Right away, the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg assaulted her nose, along with the familiar aroma of coffee. Behind the wide wooden counter to the right, a blender churned, and the *shoosh* from a canister of whipped cream stirred her appetite. Memories of buttery croissants made her bite her bottom lip.

“Oh goodness,” she moaned. “I feel myself gaining weight stepping in here.”

“Looks like you already put on a little, girl,” Dixie commented. Zuria ground her teeth, two seconds from telling the hairspray queen about herself.

“She looks good to me,” came a deep, rumbling voice, and all thoughts of coffee, croissants, and Dixie left Zuria’s mind.

Zuria turned to find Fane had stepped around the counter. Black jeans clung to narrow hips, a black T-Shirt defined a powerful chest, and the man had the nerve to be just removing dark sunglasses that had hidden mocking green eyes she knew all too well. His gaze slid from her face to her breasts and lingered a beat before sliding over her hips and thighs. Her stupid heart raced, and she found herself short of breath.

“Hello, Zuria,” he intoned. Heat scorched her mind and her body.

She reminded herself that she hated Fane for his irresponsibility. Not to mention the time she walked in on him and Dixie getting

it on in the back of the coffee shop. Dixie was now in her brother's face as a means toward trying to get Fane's attention again.

"Don't 'hello, Zuria' me. You almost ran my taxi off the road, and you didn't even stop!"

"That was you?" Dark brows rose, but he didn't appear regretful.

Sam walked in with her bags and dropped them. "Are you okay, Zuria? Was there an accident?"

"She's fine, bro," Fane assured him. "As I said, she looks great to me."

Zuria rolled her eyes at him and forgot all she had intended to say. She snatched both bags before Sam could get them again and stomped toward the stairs leading to the second floor where Sam lived. Both men called out after her, but she ignored them and continued on. When she got to the top of the stairs, she paused realizing she couldn't get the door open with her hands full.

An arm reached past her and turned the knob. She muttered "thanks" and marched into the tiny but neat apartment Sam had lived in from the day he opened the shop. Fane lived in a house on the edge of town he had inherited from his grandfather, but there was no longer a home for her to return to. The place had fallen into disrepair and been sold. At the time, she had lived in the city, so she hadn't cared. Now she regretted it. How stupid to have thought the life she shared with Richard would last forever.

Thoughts of her husband stirred angry emotions, and she stopped in the middle of the living room, dropped her bags, and just stood there. She balled her hands into fists at her sides as the feelings overtook her.

Large, strong hands dropped on her shoulders, and warm breath tickled the hairs at her nape. "What's wrong?"

She stiffened. When he opened the door, she had been distracted, not even considering that it wasn't her brother behind

her but Fane. She whirled to face him, wrenching away from his touch. "Why are you up here?"

He smiled, so unlike Sam, always ready with that charming way of his. "I thought you needed help."

She glared. "You're what, thirty-five, Fane? When are you going to stop with the bad boy façade?"

"You think I'm a fake?"

"Aren't you?"

"What you see is what you get, beautiful. If you want to see more, just ask."

"Please." She started to turn away, but he caught her wrist and drew her to him. Struggling did nothing but incite him to hold her closer.

"You were about to cry. I want to know why." Once again, his breath stirred her hair, but it wasn't the only thing. Zuria knew her panties were good and soaked within an instant of flattening her palms against the hardened muscles of his chest. Why couldn't she be the one woman who was immune to his allure? *Well, at least I'm the one woman in a thirty-mile radius who hasn't spread her legs for him.* Some devil whispered in her ear—*yet!*

"Don't play games with me, Fane. I'm not in the mood."

He raised her chin and forced her to look at him. Damn, the man was fine. No one person should have sexy green eyes, dark curly hair, a sensual mouth, a hard body, and the unnecessary height of six foot four all in one yummy package. She imagined other men probably wept in the privacy of their own homes after they'd run up against Fane. Especially the men in Aves, North Carolina.

"Sam told me you were coming for a visit. That's all he said. Was there more?"

She blinked at him. Was he serious? Wait, of course he was. Everyone in this town knew everyone else's business, but if the

information depended on her brother to get out, ignorance would reign. Sam knew how to keep a secret, a trait she had always admired. Then again, maybe she was just like him. She had suffered through her husband's funeral, at the mercy of her mother-in-law's dislike, gone through the motions at the gathering to celebrate his life afterward, and then promptly barricaded herself in her apartment until she had found out just how much—or, rather, how little—was left in the joint bank account she shared with Richard. Apparently, he had either spent every dime he owned on his mistress, or he had cleared it all out and hid it somehow when he found out she was speaking with a divorce attorney. Either way, she was broke, and she had simply told Sam she was coming home. He knew Richard was dead but not that he'd been cheating, and she would rather it stay that way. Her brother had gone one step further and didn't even mention the death to his best friend and partner. She wondered if he thought it would protect her from Fane's advances if Fane thought she still had a husband.

"No," she lied. "There isn't more. Now, if you'll let me go, I'll go about my business."

She managed to get out of his hold and started to walk away again.

"Your husband was a stockbroker, wasn't he?"

She froze. *Was?*

She couldn't turn around or walk into the bedroom as she had intended. Her legs refused to move, and her breath constricted in her chest. A creak in the wooden floor said Fane had walked up behind her. His hands settled at her waist, and she felt the heat of his body lined with hers.

"Do you know the first time you wanted me?" he asked.

She forced herself to swallow.

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“It was when you walked into the storeroom and found me fucking Dixie Ann. You wished it was you.”

Zuria didn't think twice. She whirled and smacked him as hard as she could. A stain of red colored his cheek, and her chest heaved so hard she thought she would pass out. When he said nothing and didn't react, she stomped toward the bedroom.

“I wanted you long before that,” he said.

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder at him. No teasing smile lit his face or mocking light in his eyes.

“I wanted you long before my first time, Zuria.”