

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROCHELLE ALERS

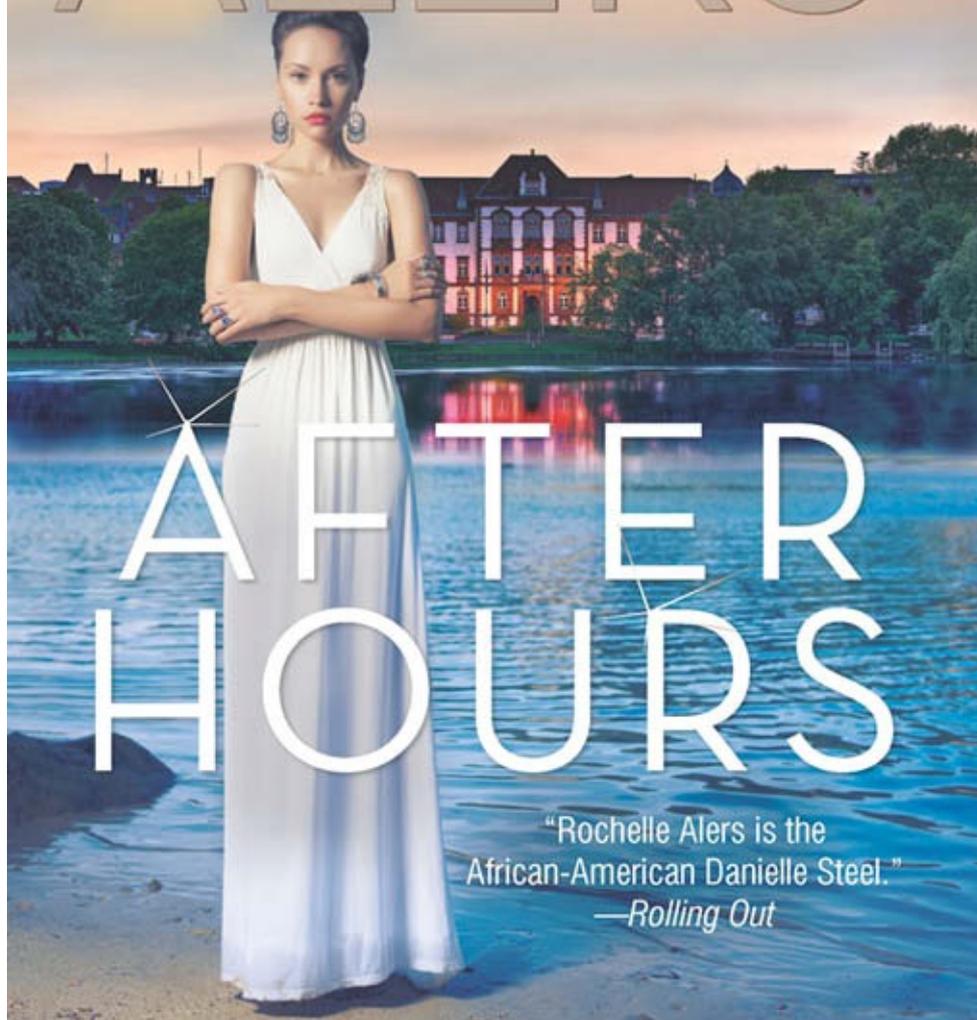


AFTER HOURS

“Rochelle Alers is the
African-American Danielle Steel.”

—*Rolling Out*

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROCHELLE
ALERS



A world of desire, seduction and scandal...

Adina's beauty and wiles have enabled her to adopt the fast-paced lifestyle of the rich and fabulous...until she learns there's a contract out on her life. She flees Brooklyn to start over in an upscale suburb, living among the pampered and polished women she's always envied. But beyond the mansions and manicured lawns lies a world she never would have thought possible....

Sybil's exclusive catering business disguises her lucrative sideline venture: she's Delectable, a dominatrix who entertains at bachelor parties. Karla lives on a multimillion-dollar estate, and she and her husband enjoy an open marriage...but her need for male attention is starting to get dangerously out of control.

And as Adina is drawn into the sizzling reality beyond her friends' perfect facades, she's also dealing with a new man, who's blissfully unaware of her not-so-innocent past. Now, each woman is about to discover that every passion has a price...and that some secrets are simply impossible to keep hidden.

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NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

***ROCHELLE
ALERS***

**AFTER
HOURS**

 **HARLEQUIN**® KIMANI PRESS™

Dear Reader,

I have a confession...

I can't take credit for the story line for *After Hours*. It was during a Thanksgiving holiday weekend that I'd attempted to jot down ideas for my next women's fiction title. Then I did something I'd never done before: I asked someone for an idea for a plot. That someone was my daughter. She came up with not only the plot, but also the character profiles. It then became her task to complete the character dossiers, and two days later she admitted she had a very healthy respect for what I do, because the prep work is very intensive.

The writing of *After Hours* forced me to take off my romance hat and replace it with one for women's fiction blended with a dash of street lit. I found myself mesmerized with the lives Dina, Karla and Sybil—three very different women who share scandalous confidences that could not only destroy them, but also their marriages. You will be given a glimpse into exclusive neighborhoods boasting multimillion-dollar mansions and manicured lawns—a world of desire, seduction, hustling, sex clubs and closely held secrets.

Writing this novel permitted me a sense of freedom because I was able to push the literary envelope. Karla, Sybil and Dina are able to define their destinies living by their own set of rules.

Happy reading...

Rochelle Alers

*With gratitude to Noemi Victoria, who saw the vision
for After Hours. Thank you for Dina, Karla,
Sybil and the men who love them.*

*Truthful lips endure forever, the lying tongue for
only a moment.*

—Proverbs 12:19

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Chapter 1

Inserting the key card into the slot, Adina waited for the green signal and pushed open the door. The motel room was small, clean and functional. It wasn't a four-star Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton, but it would serve her well until she found permanent lodging. The modest motel would become her sanctuary and temporary home.

She wasn't certain why she'd gotten off the bus in Irvington, New Jersey, but there was something about Irving that called to her. Perhaps it had something to do with the boy who'd sat next to her in third grade. He was the kindest boy she'd ever met or known. There wasn't anything Irving Gordon wouldn't do for her, and that included sharing his lunch and letting her cheat off his paper during a test.

The neighboring state of New Jersey was far enough away from Brooklyn that she wouldn't have to keep looking over her shoulder or duck out of sight when spotting someone who could possibly recognize her.

Dropping her bag on the floor near the closet, Adina hung the Do Not Disturb sign outside the door, closed it, then slid the security latch into place. She hadn't slipped the backpack off her shoulders when the telephone rang. Going completely still, she stared at the instrument, her heart pounding painfully against her ribs. Had someone followed her from Brooklyn to Irvington?

The backpack hit the carpeted floor with a soft thud. Moving over to the bedside table, she picked up the receiver. "Yes?" Her query was a whisper.

"Ms. Jenkins, this is Ravi at the front desk. Do you find the room to your liking?"

An audible sigh escaped her as she sat on the side of the bed. "Yes—yes. It's very nice."

"Remember, if you need anything, just call the front desk."

"Thank you. Good night, Ravi." She hung up, smiling.

The woman covering the front desk when she'd arrived had refused to rent her a room because she didn't have a credit card. Short of making a scene, Adina had asked to speak to the night supervisor. She became the consummate actress when she told Ravi that she was running from an abusive boyfriend, that she hadn't taken her credit cards because he would've been able to trace her whereabouts and that she'd left everything behind except money she'd hidden from him and a week's change of clothes.

It was only after she offered to show him the burns on her thighs where the abusive monster had put out his cigarettes that the manager took over and checked her in. She paid a weekly single-room rate—in cash. Of course, there were no burns or boyfriend, but she'd counted on not having to substantiate her passionate lie with physical proof.

She'd spent the bus ride from New York to New Jersey reinventing Adina Jenkins and rehearsing her script: she was a battered woman who'd finally gathered enough courage to flee her abusive drug-addicted boyfriend after he kicked her in the belly and she miscarried. She'd told the police and emergency room doctor that she'd fallen down a flight of stairs because he'd threatened to kill her. After leaving the hospital

she knew she had to leave because the beatings were becoming more frequent and brutal.

Lying came easy to Adina. Most times the lies rolled off her tongue without thought or hesitation. After a while she'd acknowledged that she was a pathological liar, but it was quick thinking and falsehoods that'd kept her alive for the past decade and she knew she would tell more lies before she achieved her lifelong dream.

She didn't need a psychologist to tell her why she'd taken to hustling men with the ease of a duck taking to water: every man she hustled became her father, and it gave her extreme pleasure to set him up to be stripped of his worldly goods.

Adina had envied the girls who held the hands of their fathers when walking along the sidewalks, those who escorted their children to the ice cream trucks and paid for whatever they wanted. She'd hated Father's Day because if she made a handmade card with her favorite crayon colors, she had no one to give it to. The men who'd come to *visit* her mother and who'd occasionally spent the night were always Uncle So-and-So but never Daddy.

Even when she'd sought to seduce flamboyant hustler Terence Yancey she'd known he eclipsed her tender age of thirteen by fifteen years. At twenty-eight, he would've been charged with statutory rape for sleeping with her, but Adina had refused to tell her mother or grandmother his name.

A wry smile twisted her mouth as she stared up at the swirling designs on the stucco ceiling. Unknowingly Terence had given her life *and* had saved her life. She lay across the bed until her breathing deepened and her eyelids fluttered as she struggled not to fall asleep. Reluctantly she sat up and prepared herself for bed.

Tomorrow was another day—the first day of her new life.

Chapter 2

Adina stared out the train window each time it made a different stop before reaching her destination. Before boarding the train, she'd dropped the PDA down a sewer, severing all communication with Payne Jefferson.

It had taken only three days of hiding out in Irvington for her to devise a plan that would eliminate Adina Jenkins—forever. The idea had come to her after countless hours of television viewing. Aside from taking her meals at a diner half a mile from the motel, she'd spent all of her time dozing and half watching late-night infomercials, news and talk shows, soap operas, documentaries and cartoons.

A documentary on the History Channel chronicling American gangsters captured her undivided attention. It was footage of a mobster who'd cooperated with federal authorities where he'd identified members of his syndicate, giving up names and dates of robberies, murders and contract hits. His reward for selling out his former cohorts was a new identity in the Witness Protection Program. The government relocated him to an undisclosed location and set him up with a new name, birth certificate, driver's license and social security number.

It had taken hours to search through telephone books to find a law firm willing to give her an appointment to talk to an attorney about a "personal matter." The one willing to grant her a consultation was based in Trenton. The only thing she knew about the Jersey capital was that it wasn't far from Philadelphia, a city she'd visited several times as mistress to a man who operated a prostitution ring in Atlantic City and Philadelphia.

Adina got off the train in Trenton and took a taxi to the address she'd programmed into her BlackBerry. When the driver pulled up outside the law offices of Siddell, Kane, Merrill and King, housed in a two-story stucco building painted a soft sand color with black shutters, she was prepared for the performance of her life. She'd rehearsed what she intended to say over and over until she could repeat it verbatim.

The building was one of several along a bucolic tree-lined street claiming a post office, a florist, a sweet shop, a bank, a dry cleaner, a mom-and-pop-type luncheonette and a gift shop. There was no litter in the gutters, abandoned cars, boarded-up storefronts or vagrants sitting on parked cars, lounging against buildings or loitering on street corners. Those wishing to linger sat at tables shaded by umbrellas outside awning-covered businesses.

And what affected Adina more than seeing young mothers pushing baby strollers and elderly couples greeting each other was the dearth of loud noise. There were no honking horns from passing vehicles or raised voices. Even the dogs on leashes walking along the immaculate sidewalks stopped frequently to sniff at a tree or shrub. She noted from the smiling faces and serene expressions on those who either lived or worked in the hamlet that the lack of noise, dirt and pollution—and, no doubt, a low crime rate—attributed to a comfortable existence.

She hadn't been living but existing; an existence that included ear-shattering

decibels of loud voices and music, dirt, grime and the stench of rotting garbage, weed, crack, discarded baby diapers and unwashed human bodies. Most times she prayed for colder weather so she wouldn't have to navigate the residents hanging out in and around the projects where she lived. It was only during the frigid weather that most of them stayed indoors. The exception was the dealers selling their illegal shit to addicts who believed they couldn't survive without their drugs.

Adina walked up to the gleaming black door and opened it. An attractive brunette sitting behind a cherrywood workstation smiled at her. "Good morning. I'm Adina Jenkins and I have an appointment to see Mrs. King."

The receptionist glanced at a telephone console on her desk. "Mrs. King is on a call, but I'll let her know you're here as soon as she hangs up. Please have a seat, Ms. Jenkins."

She sat and glanced around the reception area. Recessed lighting cast a soft glow on walls covered with a wheat-colored fabric. The black leather love seat on which she sat was like butter. The rosewood table cradling a large bouquet of fresh flowers was exquisite. The furnishings in the law office's reception area were more tasteful than what she'd seen in some living rooms.

The receptionist had addressed her as *Ms. Jenkins*. Adina couldn't remember the last time someone had referred her as Ms. or Miss. But, if luck was with her, then she wouldn't be Adina Jenkins much longer.

Chapter 3

Karla King drew interconnecting circles on the legal pad in front of her, half listening to the whining of a client she'd inherited from an older senior partner. The voice was akin to fingernails on a chalkboard. Now she knew why she'd been given the case. The client, whose grandfather had set up a trust for her, wanted to give her latest boyfriend a quarter of a million dollars to start up his own business.

"I'm sorry, Miss Evans, but your grandfather's agreement stipulates you can only invest in Wall Street-traded companies." She rolled her eyes when the woman started to cry. "Yes, I know it's not fair, but..." Her voice trailed off as she waited for the woman to compose herself. It took all of a minute. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to hang up because I have another client waiting for me."

As soon as Karla ended the call, her intercom buzzed. "Yes, Valerie."

"Ms. Jenkins is here to see you."

"Please send her in."

Reaching for her suit jacket draped over the back of a nearby chair, Karla stood up, slipping her arms into the sleeves. She'd moved over to the door and opened it at the same time she watched Adina Jenkins approach. Her sharp gaze took in everything about the woman in one sweeping gaze.

She was young; Karla doubted whether she was thirty. Adina Jenkins was blessed with a beauty that most men, regardless of their age or race, would find attractive. Her petite figure was shown to its best advantage in a black pencil skirt, tailored white silk blouse and a pair of high-heeled sandals. As she came closer, Karla saw that her raven-black wavy hair, secured in a ponytail with a narrow black grosgrain ribbon, ended inches above her tiny waist.

Karla hadn't made it a practice before she consulted with a prospective client to prejudge them but a sixth sense told her that Adina was unlike most clients represented by Siddell, Kane, Merrill and King because Valerie had reported that Ms. Jenkins had been very evasive when she'd called for a consultation. Yet she'd set aside time to see her.

She extended her hand, studying the tiny woman. Up close, Adina's bare face made her appear as if she were barely out of her teens. "Good morning, Ms. Jenkins. I'm Karla King."

Adina grasped the slender, well-groomed hand of the tall woman with flawless sable-brown skin, prominent cheekbones and blunt-cut, chemically straightened chin-length hair. Karla King's penetrating dark brown eyes glowed with an intensity that appeared to miss nothing. The lawyer's grip was firm and confident.

Adina's smile was slow in coming. She took a quick glance at the rings on the lawyer's left hand. "Good morning, Mrs. King. I'm hoping you'll be able to help me."

Karla pointed to a round table with several pull-up chairs. "Let's sit down. After you tell me what you want, I'll let you know whether I'll be able to help you."

Adina sat down, placing her purse on the table. Leaning over, she left a shopping

bag on the floor beside her chair. She'd gone to a mall to buy an outfit she felt suitable for discussing business with an attorney. While there, she'd stopped at a nail salon and had the silk wraps removed. Colorful airbrushed nails no longer figured in her future.

Sitting opposite Adina, Karla reached for a legal pad and a pencil from a supply on the table. "Would you like something to drink before we begin?"

"No, thank you," Adina said, shaking her head. Crossing her bare legs at the ankles, she took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. She had to play it just right to get Mrs. King to believe her.

"I need to change my name from Adina Jenkins to Dina Gordon."

The pencil in Karla's hand was poised over the blank page. "You need to change your name." The question came out like a statement.

Adina nodded, her gaze fixed on a tray cradling bottled water and cellophane-covered glasses. "I need a new identity because I'm hiding from my boyfriend." She glanced up, her gaze meeting and fusing with Karla's. "I'm tired of him using me as a punching bag. If I say something he doesn't like, he slaps me. If I cook something and it doesn't come out the way he thinks it should, he punches me. And if I don't let him...touch me, then he rapes me. The last time, he beat me so badly that I couldn't get out of bed for a week. It was when I lost my baby that I realized I had to get away before he got me pregnant again. I waited until he went to visit his mother and left with whatever I could carry with me."

Everything she'd said was a lie, including miscarrying a baby. After giving birth to one child, she'd made certain it would never happen again. She'd had a procedure that assured her that she would never conceive again. This was not to say that she didn't practice safe sex. Getting pregnant was preferable to contracting an STD or, even worse, HIV. No matter how much the men she slept with professed to be disease-free, she didn't trust them enough to engage in unprotected sex. And her distrust of the opposite sex forced her to use her own condoms.

Karla leaned closer. "Where does your boyfriend live?"

"Brooklyn."

"Have you reported him to the police?"

Adina paused. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because he said he'd kill me." Adina saw Karla King jot down *O.P.* on the pad, deciding it was time she go on the offensive. "I get an order of protection and then what, Mrs. King? Once he's released for violating the order, then he'll beat me again."

Karla sat up straighter. "I'd like to help you, Ms. Jenkins, but I can't. What I can do is refer you to someone I know in New York City who'd be willing to take your case."

"Why can't you take it? You're a lawyer, aren't you?"

A lifting of her eyebrows was the only indication of Karla's reaction to the younger woman's acerbic query. "I am an attorney, but you've come to a firm specializing in wills, taxes and estate planning."

"If that's the case, then why did you agree to see me?"

"I didn't know if I'd be able to help you. When you called the office you didn't disclose your reason for a consultation."

Adina glared at the conservatively dressed woman. Although understated, the cut of her navy-blue linen gabardine suit was as exquisite as the diamond solitaire and

eternity band giving off blue-white sparks on her left hand.

“That’s because I was afraid to say anything over the phone. I’m still afraid and I don’t know when I’ll ever stop being afraid.” Tears filled Adina’s eyes and trickled down her cheeks; she swiped angrily at them.

Karla’s closed expression didn’t change. She didn’t know why, but she felt Adina Jenkins’s pain. “Does he know where you are?”

“No.”

“When did you leave him?”

“Friday.”

“Where are you staying?”

Adina peered at Karla through moisture-spiked lashes. She said a silent prayer that the attorney would change her mind. “I’m staying at a motel in Irvington.”

“How long do you plan to be there?”

“Until I run out of money.”

“When do you predict you’ll run out of money?”

Biting down on her lower lip, Adina mentally calculated how much it would cost to spend a month at the motel. “I have enough for at least another month,” she lied. How much money she had would remain her secret. “I’m going to need a new identity so I can get a job and rent an apartment. I have to start over, and that’s not going to happen unless I change my...my name.” The last word came out in a sob and the floodgates opened. Heart-wrenching sobs shook Adina as she buried her face in her trembling hands. A full minute passed before her hands came down and she stared at Karla. The tears had turned her brilliant eyes a mossy green. “I’m sorry,” she apologized before biting on her trembling lower lip. “May I use your restroom?”

Pushing back her chair, Karla came to her feet and rounded the table. She’d witnessed domestic abuse firsthand as an adolescent when she walked into a neighbor’s apartment to find it ransacked and her best friend’s mother on the floor in a fetal position after she’d been beaten by her son looking for money to support his drug habit.

Anchoring a hand under Adina’s elbow, she eased her from the chair. “Of course you may. It’s down the hall, on your left. Meanwhile, I’ll call someone I believe can help you.”

Adina gathered her purse, sniffing as she walked out of the office; she hid a smile that mirrored supreme triumph. She’d rolled the dice and had come up a winner yet again. Despite her protests, Karla King was going to help Adina to not only change her name but also her life.

Chapter 4

Karla, waiting until Adina left her office, moved over to her computer; she pulled up her mailing list and scrolled through the names until she found what she wanted. Pushing the speaker feature on her phone, she dialed the number. Unfortunately the person to whom she wanted to speak was in court. She left a message on his voice mail to return her call. No one had saved her friend's mother, who'd eventually been murdered by her son. But if she could, then she would do all she could to help Adina Jenkins.

Leaning back in the leather executive chair, Karla stared at a wall filled with diplomas and citations chronicling her life as a tax attorney. She'd earned degrees from New York University in accounting and law and an MBA. At forty-one, she'd come a long way; she grew up in a low-income Newark neighborhood as an only child of a single mother who'd worked two jobs because she hadn't wanted her daughter's life to mirror hers.

Karla didn't want to think of what she'd sacrificed to get what she wanted from life; but she differed from her mother because now she was able to give back. She'd accepted personal cases pro bono, volunteered her services to organizations serving at-risk youth. And if she couldn't get a former fellow law school student to take on Adina Jenkins's case, then she would do what she could to help the young woman.

Glancing at the clock on her desk, she noted the time. Adina had been gone more than fifteen minutes. She buzzed the receptionist. "Valerie, could you please check on Ms. Jenkins. She's in the ladies' room."

"No, she isn't," said Valerie.

A slight frown creased Karla's forehead. "No, she isn't what?"

"She isn't in the ladies' room. She left about ten minutes ago."

"Are you certain she left?"

"Yes. In fact, she thanked me on her way out."

Karla's dark eyebrows slanted in a frown. "Thank you, Valerie."

Perplexed, she hung up wondering if Adina had changed her mind and decided going back to her abusive lover was preferable to being on the run. Or perhaps she hadn't believed Karla when she said she would get someone to help her. Expelling a soft breath, she closed her eyes. It would stand to reason that trusting wasn't easy for a battered woman and that Adina was wary of everyone she met or confided in; after all, she hadn't trusted the receptionist who'd taken her call to let her know why she was seeking legal counsel.

Karla swiveled on her chair—and then she saw it. Adina had left without taking her shopping bag. She got up and picked up the bag. "Dammit," she swore softly. She hadn't gotten the name of the motel in Irvington where Adina was staying, so how could she return it to her?

Sitting down in the chair her elusive client had occupied, she opened the bag and removed several sheets of decorative tissue paper. Her jaw dropped as she stared at the

bag's contents, her heart pounding a runaway rhythm. It took Karla several minutes before she was able to reach into the bag again. This time she took out a single sheet of paper addressed to her with Adina Jenkins's contact information. She'd written down the name and telephone number to the hotel. She'd also included a cell phone number with a nine-one-seven area code and her proposed new name. Ignoring the stacks of bills bundled in denominations of tens, twenties and fifties in plastic Ziploc bags, she removed a large white envelope. Inside the envelope was an official copy of Adina's birth certificate.

A slow smile softened her wide mouth. "Why, the sneaky little minx," she whispered. Adina Jenkins had come prepared to bribe her.

Rising to her feet, Karla walked over to the door to her office and locked it. She returned to her desk and buzzed the receptionist. "Valerie, please hold all of my calls until further notice."

Her step was resolute, her hands steady as she entered her private bathroom, locking the door behind her. The corner office and private bathroom was only one of the perks that came from making partner. She'd worked hard, harder than any of her male counterparts at the firm, but the results were more profitable than mentally rewarding.

She'd decided to take on Adina as a private client even before discovering the money; however, despite her passion for luxury, she wasn't about to let greed jeopardize her license to practice law.

* * *

The hands on the clock had made a full revolution by the time Karla had counted the cash and put it back in the bag. She'd been given ten thousand dollars to make Adina Jenkins disappear. Methodically, as if preparing to take a case to trial, she stored the money in a cabinet under the vanity, unlocked the door to her office, then returned to her desk to make a telephone call.

A broad smile softened her round face when she heard a familiar greeting coming through the earpiece. "I need a favor, darling."

A deep chuckle caressed her ear. "Does your husband know you're flirting with strange men?"

Reaching for a pencil, Karla made squiggly lines on the pad filled with other doodling shapes. "No, but Ronald doesn't have to worry about us."

"Are you sure about that, Karla? Surely you've told the poor man that I've been lusting after you since the first day we walked into the lecture hall at law school."

"I told him, but he knows nothing will come of it."

There was a pause before the ADA at the Mercer County prosecutor's office said, "I know you didn't call to talk about Ronald. What's up, darling?"

"I need you to run a trace on a potential client."

"Has he been indicted?"

"No. I'm talking about a woman who's hiding from her abusive boyfriend."

"Give me her name and address and I'll call you back."

Karla gave him the information she'd gleaned on Adina. "Please run her through the Bureau's database while you're at it."

"What do I get for this?"

“Are you trying to bribe me, counselor?” she teased.

“Damn straight, counselor. How about dinner?”

She smiled. “You’re on.”

“I’m paying this time, Karla.”

“Remember, Henry, that I’m the one with the expense account.”

“That’s because civil servants don’t have the luxury of expense accounts.”

“That’s why I’m paying.”

There came another pause on the other end of the line. “I’ll call you when I get the info on your client, then we’ll set up a time to reconnect.”

“Thanks, Henry.”

Karla hung up, tucking several strands of hair behind her right ear, her mouth tightening into a hard, unattractive line. Henry had continued to come on to her even though she’d been married to Ronald for the past six years. Perhaps if she hadn’t admitted, when she’d had too much to drink, that she and Ronald were swingers, then perhaps Henry would have given up his relentless pursuit.

She occasionally slept with other men and Ronald other women, but only with the other’s consent. Even if she wanted to sleep with Henry, she wouldn’t because she didn’t want to shit where she had to eat. She’d learned a long time ago to never mistake business for pleasure.

The phone rang, startling Karla. She picked up the receiver when she saw the display. “What do you have, Henry?”

“She’s clean.”

She resisted the urge to jump up and cut a dance step. “Thank you, Henry.”

He chuckled softly. “You’re quite welcome, Karla. I’ll be in touch.”

“You know where to find me.” She ended the call, then retrieved her cell phone and punched in the numbers on speed dial. The man who answered her call was one Ronald would approve of her sharing his bed. It took less than five minutes to tell him what she needed.

All she had to do was messenger the birth certificate to make the impossible possible with a single telephone call. Adina Jenkins was about to become Dina Gordon.