



ALISON GREY

CONTRACT FOR *Love*



Chapter 1

DUST HIT SHERRY IN THE face and made her blink. With one hand, she tried to hold her worn coat together while reaching for her keys with the other. She really needed to repair the zipper on her coat before fall arrived. Maybe Rita Mae could buy her a new one tomorrow at Walmart. She would give her the money back as soon as she could.

The three steps up to her trailer felt as if she were climbing a mountain. Sherry opened the door with a loud squeak. Yawning, she dragged herself through the dark trailer. It was warm and smelled like cleaning agents. Rita Mae had cleaned. *What would I do without her?*

Even though the trailer was rusty, the toilet barely did its job, and the windows didn't close as they should, this place was still home. Not everybody could have the white picket fence after all.

She peeled off her coat without turning on the light. Taking a shower to warm up would feel heavenly, but she would have to be quiet so as not to wake Jake.

As if he had heard her thoughts, the bedroom door opened. "Mom?" Jake asked in a sleepy voice, rubbing his eyes.

With a smile, Sherry bent down and wrapped her arms around Jake's small, warm body. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Mom."

"Go ahead and tuck yourself in." Now that he was awake anyway, she'd allow herself a quick shower. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Mm-hmm. Okay, but hurry."

Sherry grinned. "Promise."

Jake let go of her and shuffled to their bed at the end of the trailer.

Sherry's gaze followed the most precious thing in her world. If only she could give him the life he deserved. But she was already doing everything she could—the same as Rita Mae. *She almost raises him without me.* A glance out of the window revealed that her best friend was obviously awake because the lights were still on in her trailer. For the past couple of months, while Sherry was at work, Jake had been sleeping alone in their trailer. At six years old, he had gotten too heavy to carry between their places, so they had agreed that Rita Mae would check on him with the monitor while Sherry was at work.

Rita Mae had probably seen her come home, because her stern features gave way to a smile and she waved through the window.

Sherry stepped closer to the glass and waved back. *Time for my shower.* She dragged herself down the narrow hallway to the shower stall, where she shed her much-too-short waitress uniform and threw it into the laundry basket. Finally, she switched on the light in the bathroom, stepped into the tiny shower stall, and pulled the folding door closed. When the water eventually warmed, a moan escaped her lips. Slowly, her aching muscles started to relax.

“Mom?”

“I'm coming, baby. Just a second.” Sherry shut off the water, opened the door an inch, grabbed her towel from the hook on the wall, and wrapped herself in its folds. Steam smelling like shampoo engulfed the trailer as she stepped onto the bath rug.

In the cool hallway, she put on her pajamas, switched off the shower stall light, and headed to her bedroom.

Jake was tucked in. Grinning as if he had gotten a candy bar, he held up the blanket for her to get in.

Sherry giggled at his antics. Hard to believe that she still had something to giggle about after the day she'd had. *Actually, the week. Scratch that, the year.*

She switched off the light and slipped under the warm blanket. Relief washed over her as she snuggled up to Jake. “Why are you still awake?” No matter how tired she was, she wanted to talk to Jake for a few minutes to check in before she allowed herself to fall asleep.

“I've been waiting for you to come home. I missed you.”

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Sherry pulled him even closer. “Me too. But, honey, it’s almost two.” She yawned. “You should be asleep.”

Jake was silent.

“How was your day?” Sherry suppressed another yawn.

“We visited the zoo today.”

“Really?” She hadn’t given Rita Mae money for that. The few bucks she paid her for watching Jake certainly didn’t cover things like that.

“Mm-hmm.” Jake snuggled closer. “We saw elephants and penguins.”

As much as Sherry tried to keep her eyes open, they seemed to have other plans. A smile played on her lips nevertheless. Jake had had a nice day.

“Mom?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Penguins have no wings.”

She heard the words but couldn’t process them.

“But the man...and then he said...birds.”

“Yeah, honey.” Had that been the right answer? Her mind was fuzzy, and all she could think of was sleep.

“But...swim so good?”

When Jake nudged her, she tore her eyes open. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Why can’t penguins fly but swim so good? I mean, they are birds, so...”

Sherry blinked. “Um, their wings are too small to fly. That’s why they use them to be good swimmers.”

“Oh, okay. It’s like Rita Mae says, right? Always make the best of what you have.”

Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm Sherry, but she struggled to stay awake for another moment. Lovingly, she caressed his soft hair and kissed his forehead. “Right. I love you, Jake.”

He gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “I love you too, Mom.”

Holding him close, she finally allowed sleep to claim her.

Chapter 2

THE FIRST THING MADISON NOTICED when she woke up was her splitting headache. “God.”

“That’s exactly what you said last night,” a voice beside her whispered in her ear as a naked body pressed against her. “So, does that mean you want more?”

Groaning, Madison pushed the young woman away. “No.” She forced her eyes open. Thank God the shutters were down to protect her from the no doubt glaring sunlight. She fished a bottle of aspirin out of the drawer in the nightstand, popped a couple of pills into her mouth, and washed them down with the remains of a beer sitting there. “Ugh.”

“Can I have some too?” the woman behind her asked.

Madison dragged herself out of bed. “Be my guest.” She stood, tossed her the bottle, and trudged toward the bathroom. Halfway there, she stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Last night was nice. See you around.” Without waiting for a response, she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. Hopefully, the woman would take the hint and be gone by the time Madison was out of the shower.

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When Madison returned, dressed in a fluffy bathrobe, the woman—whatever her name was—had disappeared.

A noise from the living room made her groan. *Damn! Shouldn’t have counted my chickens before they’d hatched.* As she walked into the living room, she shielded her eyes with one hand against the light streaming in through the half-closed shutters. Finally, she could see the chaos surrounding her in

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all its glory. Bottles of beer, wine, champagne, and tequila, as well as empty bags of potato chips and pizza boxes, were lying everywhere.

Phil was sprawled out on the couch, and a half-naked blonde lay across the shag rug. She was holding an empty wine bottle between her huge fake boobs, which were barely hidden under a skimpy bikini top.

Clunking and muffled cursing came from the kitchen to her left. The blonde from last night was rummaging through the fridge.

“Searching for something?”

The young woman straightened and smiled at her hesitantly.

She looked young in the daylight. Too young. *Damn, I hope she’s legal.* The last thing Madison needed was trouble because of—

“I thought I put my eye mask in there.”

“Eye mask?” She squinted over the kitchen counter into the living room at the chaos and then back to blondie. How could anybody mistake the wild party last night for an introduction to a beauty-product party?

The blonde shifted her weight from one leg to the other. “I told you last night. Karen will have my head if she finds out I partied too much again.”

When had she said that? And who was Karen? Last night was foggy to say the least.

“My flight is at six thirty, and I have to get back to the hotel to shower and change.”

“Flight?” Then it came back to her. Blondie was a flight attendant and twenty-one. Madison breathed a sigh of relief.

Her guest tilted her head. “Yes. I want to put the mask on when I’m in the cab on my way back to the hotel. So Karen, the colleague I share a room with, doesn’t see what a wild night I had.” A smile lit up her face. It seemed she had enjoyed their night.

If Madison could have recalled any of it, she probably would have felt the same, but—

There was a knock on the door.

“Shit!” Was it two already? If Grandmother Eileen saw this place now, she’d throw a fit and give Madison another lecture about what a failure she was. “Don’t move.” Madison made a beeline for the door. A glance through the peephole confirmed her worst fear.

Madison opened the door just an inch. “Grandmother, how nice to see you. Um, would you mind waiting in the lobby? I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Grandmother Eileen totally ignored her and pushed the door open. “Nonsense. Why should I wait outside?” She had barely passed Madison when her steps faltered. “What is this? It smells like a bar in here, and why are the shutters halfway down in the middle of the day?” She whirled around to face Madison, who closed the door. “I demand an explanation.”

Madison’s blonde bed bunny chose that moment to show up in the hallway. “Hi there.” Her smile gave way to a frown when she saw the older woman’s stern features. The girl snatched her purse from the hall closet and stepped toward the door.

That gave Madison the chance to stare at the sexy ass under her tight skirt. *Not bad.* Grandmother Eileen cleared her throat, and Madison swiveled back to her. With her arms crossed in front of her chest and her face set in a disapproving frown, her grandmother stood there like a statue.

“See ya,” blondie mumbled as she left the apartment, her heels clicking in a fast staccato until she disappeared into the elevator.

Madison closed the door and shut her eyes for a moment. She was in deep shit.

Grandmother Eileen climbed over the evidence of last night’s wild party and pressed the button to raise the shutters.

Blinded by the sudden brightness, Madison, Phil, and the girl on the shag rug all groaned.

“Don’t you have any self-respect?” Grandmother Eileen snapped.

“We just had a little party last night, and I—”

“Little?” Her grandmother gestured at the trashed living room. “This is what you call a little party? Your apartment is completely destroyed.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“You mean understating.” Grandmother Eileen stepped up to the floor-to-ceiling window and faced the city’s skyline. “You are twenty-six years old and have accomplished absolutely nothing.”

Madison rolled her eyes. *Not this again.* “I graduated from business school like you wanted.”

Grandmother Eileen whirled around. “That was a year ago. And what have you done since then?”

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Madison inspected her bare feet. “I got the damn bachelor’s degree you wanted me to get. That should count for something.”

She laughed humorlessly. “A fine degree you have. It took you seven years to complete a four-year degree, and you finished last in your class. Congratulations.” She took a dramatic breath. “Your parents would turn over in their gra—”

Madison’s head snapped up. Her skull was pounding painfully, but she didn’t care. “Don’t you dare mention them to me,” she growled. “What are you complaining about anyway? You were the one who forced me to study that boring crap and then didn’t give me a job after I graduated.”

Grandmother Eileen’s stern gaze roamed over the room.

Madison winced. How had the remains of a pizza ended up on the floor?

“And what position exactly should I have given you? Slut on call?”

Her pulse was racing, and with every heartbeat pain was pumping through her skull. *Calm down. Calm down.* Her grandmother would leave in a few minutes, and everything would be back to normal.

“You might have a business degree,” Grandmother Eileen said, “but you have no skills except for throwing parties, getting flat-out drunk, and luring women into your bed.” Her face contorted as if she had sucked on a lemon. “Just like your grandfather.” She pointed to the closed door. “Did you even know the name of that woman?”

Madison held her head high and said the first name that came to mind. “Stephanie.”

For a moment, her grandmother regarded her as if trying to decide whether Madison was lying or not. But then she shook her head—either because she realized that Madison had made that name up, or because she’d decided that it didn’t matter. “As if being a lesbian wouldn’t be bad enough, you’re a good-for-nothing spoiled brat on top of that. And I won’t allow you to ruin everything I have worked my whole life for.”

It was best to ignore the swipe about her sexual orientation, but Madison couldn’t ignore Grandmother Eileen’s other words. “What *you* worked all your life for?” She knew it would have been better to keep her mouth shut, but Madison never did what was good for her. “What exactly have you worked your whole life for? If Grandfather hadn’t picked you up from the streets, you w—”

Grandmother Eileen gasped. “How dare you!”

“You always pretend to be a businesswoman who comes from old money. Be honest just this once. You never worked for anything you have; it was served up to you on a silver platter when you married. And you’re about as old money as—”

“Madison!” Grandmother Eileen shot a look to Phil, who was stirring on the couch, and shag-rug girl, who was still blinking against the beaming sunlight.

She knew she would regret her words later, but she couldn’t help herself. “When it comes to me, you seem to have no problems calling things as they are. So let’s call a spade a spade for a change. Your father was a truck driver, and your mother didn’t even finish high school because she opened her legs for the first guy who paid her any attention! So what’s your problem? In a way, I’m following family tradition.”

“Um, I’d better go.” Phil waved his hand at Grandmother Eileen. “Hello, Mrs. Fielding.” He pulled up the girl from the shag rug. “Get up.”

The girl looked around. “Have you seen my shirt?”

“The dog ate it.” He grabbed his leather jacket from the couch, covered the girl with it, and dragged her to the door.

“Dog?” Shag-rug girl blinked. “I haven’t seen a dog.”

Phil pulled more forcefully. “Who cares? Let’s go.” After opening the entrance door, he shouted back, “I’ll call you!”

“Yeah, see ya.” For a moment Madison stared at the closed door. Hopefully, everybody had left. But with her luck today, Phil had probably slept on the couch because the guest room had already been taken. She turned back to her grandmother.

“How could you say such things in front of your”—Grandmother Eileen wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something foul—“friends?”

“We both know it’s true.” Madison knew the story her grandmother loved to ignore. Just a few weeks into the big city, then sixteen-year-old Eileen had worked as a maid in a hotel, where she had met Madison’s successful grandfather. They had both spoken of love at first sight, but Madison couldn’t imagine that her grandmother was even capable of love. Yes, she played at being a head honcho now, but she’d had nothing to do with the success of Fielding Inc. “Grandfather and Father built the company

while you sat at home all this time, drinking your scotch.” Madison stepped closer so that their noses were almost touching. “Every damn day.”

Grandmother Eileen’s eyes were as cold as ice. “That’s enough.”

Madison wasn’t done yet. “It’s ridiculous that I’m not allowed to work in my own company.” Not that she wanted to do any kind of work, but that wasn’t the point here.

“It’s not your company. Your mother had almost nothing when she married your father. And Mortimer barely had a couple of million to his name when he died. The company belonged solely to your grandfather, and now that he’s gone, it belongs to me. You know that. Of course your father would have inherited everything if he hadn’t...”

Madison was actually glad her grandmother didn’t finish the sentence. Feeling raw, she stumbled to the couch and grabbed an open bottle of vodka. She emptied the remains of it in one big gulp. The burning calmed her nerves.

“You’re a drunkard.”

Madison shrugged. “What can I say? You were a good role model.”

Grandmother Eileen sniffed. “You’re a degenerate through and through. Don’t expect to get even a cent from me when your trust fund runs dry. Flinton recently told me that you’re not investing and that—”

“He has no right to talk with you about my financial affairs. That’s none of your business. Besides, he should have given me everything a long time ago instead of this ridiculous allowance every month.”

Grandmother Eileen shrugged. “The arrangement was set up to protect you from yourself. But it’s obvious that nothing can stop you from dragging yourself down into a black hole.” She stalked toward the door.

“You won’t live forever,” Madison blurted.

Madison’s words rooted her grandmother to the spot. Without turning around, she said, “You should know that I’m intending to cut you out of my will.”

Madison sucked in a breath. Was that a miserable attempt at a joke?

Grandmother Eileen sighed like a bad actress in a B-movie. “I’ve tried. Again and again.” Over her shoulder she scowled at Madison. “You refuse to grow up. You never take responsibility for anything or anybody. Not even for yourself. And it seems that will never change. It’s bad enough that

you're blowing through your trust fund. I won't allow you to do the same with the family fortune."

"You can't do that."

Her grandmother opened the door. "Oh, but I can. You are a disgrace to the Fielding name, and as God is my witness, I did my best to raise you well. But my patience has run out."

Shit! Why hadn't she kept her mouth shut? She needed that money. How else could she afford her lifestyle when her trust fund was spent? "Wait!" She followed her grandmother into the hallway.

"What? Haven't you said enough?"

Now good acting skills were needed. If she just played the remorseful sinner convincingly, everything would work out fine. "I'm sorry. I really have no idea what came over me."

One of Grandmother Eileen's brows hiked up, but she kept silent.

She obviously needed to up her game. "Um, tell me what I can do to make it up to you."

"Grow up," her grandmother said. "Take responsibility. Show me that you're worthy of the Fielding name. That or live with the consequences of your actions." She paraded away, not sparing her another glance.

Two women in wrinkled clothes chose that moment to step out of the guest room. "Morning," one of them mumbled. "Did we miss breakfast?"

Madison harrumphed, stomped into her bedroom, and slammed her door shut.

* * *

"Let me get this straight." Janice set down her coffee cup on the diner's plastic table and swiped a loose strand of her long auburn hair behind her ear. "You want to know how you can contest your grandmother's will before she's even died?"

"Well, I want the money I deserve, and you are my lawyer, so do your magic." Even though Madison couldn't do anything about the will at this point, there had to be a way to make sure she'd get the money eventually, preferably sooner rather than later.

"It's impossible."

"There has to be a way."

"Are you serious?"

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The bench under Madison squeaked when she leaned back. The smell of fries, burgers, and coffee invaded her nostrils, while the clinking of dinnerware and the chatter of other customers surrounded her. She let her gaze roam across the diner.

The waitress at the other side of the room was a real cutie. A little bit too skinny and the shadows under her eyes weren't all that sexy, but otherwise she could be a nice distraction.

“Mad?”

“Huh?” Madison focused on Janice again. “Of course I'm serious. I deserve this inheritance.” She leaned on her elbows. “After the death of my parents, I basically grew up alone. Yeah, I had nannies, but they changed more often than I could count. My grandmother ignored me except for the times she paraded me around at events. I deserve her damn money.”

Janice nodded thoughtfully, opened her briefcase, and slipped out a small stack of paperwork. “Okay. You can't do anything about her will right now, but what we could try is—”

“Damn it!” a middle-aged fat guy at the next table shouted. “Can't you be more careful?”

Madison turned.

The cute waitress wiped some spilled coffee off the man's table. “I'm so sorry,” she said in a hushed tone.

The guy grabbed her waist with meaty hands and pulled her closer. “You can apologize by keeping me company.”

The waitress tried to shake him off, but she had no chance against his physical strength.

“Fred, keep your hands off Sherry,” the guy behind the counter called. “I've told you a thousand times to leave my girls alone or you will not be welcome here anymore.”

The guy squeezed the waitress's behind before holding up his hands. “Okay, okay. Sherry doesn't mind. Do you, honey?” He winked at the waitress, who ignored him. She cleaned up the remaining spilled coffee and scurried away.

Madison couldn't take her eyes off the plain waitress. Nothing about her explained Madison's interest. She was a petite, dark-blond woman, and her breasts couldn't have been more than a small B-cup. Okay, she had nice legs and a pretty face, but it was almost haggard. Just like the rest of her.

“Mad? Mad, did you hear that?” Janice sounded as if she had asked her this question more than once.

“I’m sorry, what?” The waitress the burly guy behind the counter had called Sherry was now walking around, filling up the coffee cups.

“Could you get me the sugar, please?” Janice pointed to the table behind Madison on the other side of the aisle.

Madison nodded and stood. On her way to the table, she passed the waitress, and their arms fleetingly brushed against each other.

A tingling sensation spread throughout Madison’s body. *What the hell? Two days without sex and you’re going through withdrawal already?* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the fat guy extend this hand again toward Sherry, no doubt to grab her.

A hand stopped him.

It was Madison’s. *What the fuck?* Since when did she help strangers? It was none of her business.

Sherry and the fat guy both stared at her.

Wow. Sherry’s eyes were anything but plain: they were a blazing green, tired but intense. *What the hell is going on here?* Madison let go of the man’s hand.

Hastily, Sherry filled the guy’s coffee cup. Without sparing Madison a glance, she murmured, “Thanks,” before rushing away.

“What was that?” Janice asked when Madison placed the sugar in front of her.

Madison regarded the waitress’s retreating back. “No idea.” It was the truth. All this crap with her grandmother had obviously thrown her off track. She stared at the stack of paperwork Janice had placed in front of her. “Um, so if you can’t fight the will, what exactly do you want to do?”

Janice pressed her lips together. “You haven’t listened to one word I said about my plan, have you?”

No sense in denying it. Madison shrugged.

Huffing, Janice leaned forward. “I will get Gerald to take a closer look at the exact ownership of Fielding Inc. and the setup of your trust. He’s a colleague of mine specializing in trust funds, so if there’s something, he’ll find it.”

“Something?”

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“If I’m not mistaken, the only person laying eyes on your finances is this weasel Flinton. I wouldn’t be surprised if we find there’s more money than he or your grandmother told you.”

It was better than nothing. “Sounds like a plan. Okay, where should I sign?”

Janice pointed at the stack of paperwork. “This basically allows me to speak on your behalf. Take your time reading the de—”

“Nah, it’ll be fine. So, I guess on the last page?”

Janice nodded. She flipped through the paperwork and tapped on a line. “Here.”

Madison signed and tossed the pen aside. “So now that we’ve taken care of this, want to tell me why we had to meet in this shabby place?” Again, she glanced around and found Sherry within seconds.

The waitress carried four plates at the same time to various tables.

“...and because of that I thought it best to meet here.”

Madison hummed.

Sherry swept an unruly blonde strand of hair behind her ear.

“I think I’ll invite her for a drink,” Madison said, interrupting Janice. “What do you think?”

“Who? The waitress?”

Madison leaned back. “Sure, why not?”

Janice’s brows hiked up to her hairline. “I had no idea that gray mouse was your type.”

True. Usually, she wasn’t interested in pale and exhausted-looking waitresses, but there was something about her.

“Sherry,” a guy with a Mexican accent shouted from the kitchen. “There’s a call for you. It’s Rita Mae. Something’s wrong with Jake.”

The already pale features of the waitress turned stark white as she made a beeline toward the kitchen.

“She needs a real man,” the other waitress—a redhead in her fifties—said to the guy behind the counter. “One who will take care of her and the boy.”

He nodded. “Without that neighbor of hers, she would be totally lost. A woman needs a man; that’s just how it is.”

The redhead patted his shoulder approvingly as if he had spoken the gospel truth. “Let’s hope nothing serious is wrong with the boy.”

The waitress was a single mother? It hit Madison like a baseball bat. “I have the solution.”

Janice stopped to close her briefcase and her eyes crinkled as if Madison had spoken Mandarin. “Solution for what?”

The witch wanted her to grow up and take responsibility? Piece of cake! Grandmother Eileen would get the show of her life. Madison grabbed the contract and ripped it apart.

“What are you doing?”

Sherry rushed out of the kitchen. “Hank, I gotta go. Jake is burning up. I have to take him to the hospital.”

The guy behind the counter growled. “Again?”

Sherry threw her apron on the counter. Without it, her pink mini skirt revealed her fragile build. She fetched a worn coat from a hook on the side of the counter. “I’m really sorry. I’ll make up the hours tomorrow, I promise.”

He raised a finger in warning. “This is the last time. You hear? I get that it’s tough for you, but you’re leaving Betty all on her own.”

“It’s fine, Hank.” The other waitress patted his burly arm.

“I’ll make it up to you. Really,” Sherry called, already halfway out the door. “The bus will be here any moment. If I hurry, I might catch it.”

If she couldn’t talk to the waitress now, she had to come back later. *Hell no!* Madison jumped up. “Be right back.” She ran after Sherry and caught up with her in the parking lot. “Wait!”

Sherry jerked to a stop and whirled around. Fear shone in her eyes but made way for something that looked like recognition. A hesitant smile formed on her lips. “Thank you so much for your help earlier.” She peered at the end of the parking lot. “I don’t want to be rude, but I have to hurry to catch my bus.”

“I can drive you.”

The waitress blinked. “What?”

“I, um, heard that you have to get home quickly, and I have a car. So I could drive you.”

Sherry tilted her head, her expression guarded. “Why would you do that?”

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Out of the corner of her eye, Madison saw the bus approaching. If she kept Sherry occupied long enough, she'd miss it and would have to accept her offer. She gave the waitress her best flirty smile. "Because I'm nice."

Just when the bus stopped, Sherry turned and ran toward it without sparing Madison a second glance.

Madison ran after her but wasn't fast enough. "Damn!"

Sherry stepped through the doors, and the bus pulled away.

Madison bent forward, gasping for breath. She worked out multiple times a week and had fun in bed just as much but had been outrun by a pallid waitress. Madison had to laugh.

"What the hell was that?" Janice asked when she reached Madison. Along with her briefcase, she also held Madison's jacket.

Madison still struggled to get her breathing under control. "I have the perfect solution to how to get back into my grandmother's will." She grinned. "It's brilliant."

"And what does that have to do with the waitress?"

"Everything." Madison winked at her long-time friend. "Let's go back inside."

"I paid already."

"Doesn't matter. There's something I gotta do in there."

"Where?" She pointed at the diner. "There?"

"Yup."

"And what's that exactly?"

"Join me and you'll see."

Chapter 3

SHERRY BURST BREATHLESSLY INTO THE trailer. “How is he?”

Rita Mae looked up from where she sat at the table. Her features were somber. “I’m sorry I called.”

“No problem.” Sherry pulled the door closed and peeled off her coat. “How’s his fever doing?”

“It’s actually higher than when I called. And his throat is full again of those white thingies. Just like last time.”

Tears threatened to fall, but Sherry wouldn’t allow it. Instead she straightened like a soldier about to march into battle. Jake shouldn’t see how worried she was. Determined, she made her way to the bedroom and slid open the folding door.

Rita Mae had darkened the room, but Jake’s weak form was still visible under the blanket.

“Mom?” Jake’s voice was hoarse.

“Hi, honey.” She sat on the edge of the bed and engulfed him in a tight hug. His pajamas were drenched in sweat, and his skin felt hot. “God, you’re soaked.”

“I had to change my clothes two times already. Please, Mom, not again. I’m so tired.”

Rita Mae appeared in the threshold. “There’s only one clean pair of pajamas left. The others are in the laundry.”

“Mom, am I so sick that Hank sent you home?”

Sherry’s eyes burned. “I was working a half shift today.” She let go of Jake. “Be right back.”

Jake barely nodded and closed his eyes.

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He's exhausted. We need to see a doctor. After she had pulled the door closed, she turned to Rita Mae. "Do you think Andy will lend me his car?"

"I wouldn't go over to ask if I were you. He and Chloe were fighting earlier."

Sherry swallowed. "Is he drunk?"

"I'm afraid so. Chloe kicked him out after he tried to beat her up. Same old story. They woke Jake up with all the ruckus."

Dammit! Andy wasn't just her neighbor, but also her landlord and the only one who had a car in this run-down part of the trailer park. But he had lent her the car in the past, and it wasn't as if she really had a choice. "Do you know where he is?"

"Guess he's with Steve. But I bet both are drunk as skunks."

Sherry slid onto the bench at the table. "What am I supposed to do? There's not enough money for a cab, and in his condition, I can't walk with him the two miles to the bus stop." If only she had accepted the offer of that woman at the parking lot. Maybe she could have taken Jake to the hospital.

Sherry sighed. *I should have thought about that earlier.* Now was not the time to think about what could have been. She took a deep breath to steel her resolve. "If you don't have a better idea, I'll head over."

"I could go," Rita Mae said, but they both knew that it wasn't really an option.

"No." She patted Rita Mae's shoulder. "I appreciate it, but I have to do it. He hates your guts as it is. I don't want him to kick you out." Andy was a racist and had threatened to evict Rita Mae more than once because of the color of her skin. But Rita Mae always paid on time and kept her place immaculately clean, which was the exception rather than the rule around here, so Andy let her be.

"Sherry..."

"There's no other way." She slipped into her coat—more to cover herself than because the warm September air required it—and opened the door before her resolve could shatter.

Her legs were shaking when she marched toward Steve's trailer. When she made it to the front of the stairs, her steps faltered. "Do it," she whispered. Hesitantly, she raised her fist and knocked.

"Get lost, Chloe!"

Sherry swallowed against her suddenly dry throat. “It’s not Chloe. It’s me, Sherry.”

The door was pushed open, and Sherry stumbled back to avoid getting hit by it.

Andy squinted past her, probably to make sure that his wife wasn’t hiding behind her. Then he took a deep drag of his cigarette stump and threw it somewhere behind Sherry. Smoke poured out between his yellow teeth and from his nose. “Hey, Sherry. Wanna join our little party?” He opened the door a little more.

“Shut the damn door,” Steve barked from inside. “The wind is blowing the shit off the table. Come on in, Sherry.”

“No thanks, Steve. I...” She fought the urge to shout out her frustration. “Andy, could I borrow your car? Jake is sick and—”

“In or out!” Steve yelled. “Now!”

“Fuck off and give me a sec,” Andy called over his shoulder. “It’s my trailer you’re sitting in, so shut the fuck up!”

“s cool,” Steve grumbled. “I just thought you might wanna have another drag. And with all this wind going on in here...”

Andy clumsily stepped out and closed the door.

Sherry took another step back so she wouldn’t collide with him.

“My car? We could drive around if ya want.”

His stale breath almost made Sherry gag.

“Andy, Jake is really sick. I need to take him to the hospital.” Sherry folded her arms in front of her chest when Andy kept staring at her breasts.

Andy’s gaze jerked to Sherry’s face. “Jake’s sick? I can drive you.”

“That’s really nice of you, but you’ve been drinking.”

“D’you think I can’t drive?” He moved closer, but Sherry sidestepped him again.

She had to be careful what she said, or he wouldn’t lend her the car. “I don’t want to interrupt you or Steve.” She forced a smile. “Of course I will fill up the tank to compensate for any gas I use.”

“Will ya join me later?”

“Huh?”

Andy leaned against Steve’s camper, obviously not caring about the dark stains on it. “We really would be good together, ya know?”

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She had feared that he would hit on her again. Hopefully, he would still lend her the car when she turned him down. After all, she'd told him repeatedly that she wasn't interested. "That's, um, nice of you to say, but I really have no time for this. And Chloe—"

"She's a fucking slut! Forget her." He winked at her. "I already have."

To try to talk reason into him was going to be useless. "Andy, my boy is really sick. Will you give me the keys or not?"

He inspected the gravel yard before focusing on her once more. "For a kiss, you get 'em."

Oh, God! The thought of kissing him brought bile to the back of her throat. She swallowed. "Please give me the keys."

"Kiss first."

"Please, Andy."

"Totally up to you," he said in a singsong voice as if this were all a big game.

While she peeked over her shoulder to her trailer, one thought kept repeating itself: *Jake needs me.*

Andy was already bending forward to seek his reward, but Sherry held him back by laying her trembling hand on his filthy shirt. "First give me the keys."

Andy, who had pursed his lips, frowned. "Don't trust me, huh?"

She wanted to smile, but her lips probably formed a pained expression at best. She just wanted to cry.

He hesitated, but then he rolled his eyes and dug the keys out of his greasy pants. "Here."

Sherry gripped the keys as if her life depended on it. Who knew how sick Jake really was this time? It could be that his life depended on these damn keys.

With any luck, it would be over soon. When his face came closer, the stench of cigarettes, cheap booze, and the weed he and Steve smoked threatened to make her gag.

Andy's rough lips and scruff were on her before she could take another breath. His slimy tongue stabbed inside her mouth while one of his hands grabbed her butt hard.

He pulled her closer and moaned.

"Let go of her, you brute," Rita Mae shouted.

Sherry lurched away from him and held on to the trailer to stay upright. Her stomach roiled. But if she retched, it would make Andy furious for sure, and she couldn't risk him taking the keys away from her. She took a deep breath, then another.

Rita Mae's salt-and-pepper hair flew in the wind. She stood on Sherry's doorstep like an overweight avenging angel.

"Damn, bitch, we're busy. Can't you see that?"

Sherry took a deep breath. Then another one. She wouldn't vomit, she wouldn't vomit—

"So, where were we?"

Sherry stumbled backward. "Thanks for the keys," she croaked, and tried to walk back to her trailer.

Andy grabbed her arm. "Not so fast."

"You said one kiss."

"Doesn't count. That bitch ruined it."

"Andy, please. My boy needs to go to the hospital."

Andy stared at her with his cold eyes. Finally, he nodded. "You can pay me later." His yellow teeth became visible when he grinned. "But try better next time. You kiss like a dead fish." He laughed at his own joke and started coughing. Then he took a rattling breath and repeated, "That's it. Like a dead fish."

Sherry pulled away and ran toward her trailer as fast as her shaky legs would allow. On her way, she spat a few times on the dusty underground beneath her to get rid of the horrible taste in her mouth. "Thank you so much." She wrapped her arms around Rita Mae's comforting form, and when they let go, she held up the keys like a trophy.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Rita Mae followed her inside the trailer.

"No. When we're back, he'll probably need fresh pajamas. Could you ask Sue if she'll let you use her dryer? Tell her I'll give her the money later." This month was turning out to be a financial disaster. *Nothing new there.*

"Okay."

"We gotta go," Sherry said. "Who knows how long we'll have to wait this time? And my shift at the market starts tomorrow at seven."

"You work too much."

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A hysterical laugh threatened to bubble out of her. “My bank account wouldn’t agree.” Sherry took a deep breath and slid open the folding door to the bedroom.

* * *

“You can’t be serious,” Janice blurted.

“Why not?” Madison shoved another forkful of apple pie into her mouth. “Mm-hmm.” After she swallowed, she said, “It tastes really good. You sure you don’t wanna try?”

“Very sure.”

“Your loss. Anyway, everybody would get what they want.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Madison paused with her fork in midair. She wasn’t sure what surprised her more: Janice’s choice of words or that she didn’t agree with her. She decided to focus on the latter. “What’s wrong with my plan?”

Janice looked at her as if she were trying to explain to a child why it wasn’t proper to scratch your butt in public. “I don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning?”

“Fine.” Janice pushed her half-empty coffee cup to the side. “Nobody will believe it. I mean, you’ve done a lot of crazy things in the past, but this—”

Madison let her fork clatter onto her plate. “There’s nothing crazy about it. I’ll pay this waitress a nice sum of money to play my girlfriend. You can buy anybody for the right price.”

“Let’s pretend for a ridiculous moment that you’ll be able to talk her into going along with your silly plan. The idea that you of all people could play a loving partner and stepmother is absurd. You wouldn’t make it through even one week without parties and booty calls.”

“You’re exaggerating.” Madison pointed her fork at Janice. “Besides, I don’t think Grandmother Eileen will live much longer. How old is she? A hundred and fifty?” She chuckled at her own joke. “And how hard can it be to play a boring family person?” Just thinking about the role she would play with Sherry brought a smile to her face. Maybe playing the waitress’s partner would be anything but boring. Sherry wouldn’t be the first straight woman she had enticed into her bed.

She looked Janice directly in the eye to convey that she was serious. “There’s a lot of money on the line here. I can make it happen. Trust me.”

“I would bet a year’s salary that you’ll fail.”

“Sure, why not?”

“Stop making fun of me. Even if the waitress does accept your offer and you stop being, well, you, how will you get a job and—”

“Wait! I didn’t say anything about getting a job.”

Again, Janice looked at her as if she were a little child. “How are you planning to convince your grandmother you’re taking responsibility without getting a job? Believe it or not, responsible people have responsibilities. You’ll never be believable as a housewife or stay-at-home mom, so that means you need a job. Don’t tell me you didn’t think of that in your oh-so-fantastic plan.”

The apple pie sat like lead in her belly. It wasn’t that she was lazy by any means—not really. But working? She’d never had to work and never wanted to either. “So, um, you think a job would be a must to make it believable?”

“Your question alone proves that you have no chance of convincing your grandmother.”

Anger bubbled up deep inside of her. She would prove Janice wrong. At any cost. “What do you make in a year?”

“Why?”

“Come on. How much?”

“Seventy plus bonuses. So about a hundred. Why?”

“What? That’s all?”

Janice inspected her hands. “It’s just my third year after graduation. In smaller firms, I would make even less.”

“Your father is a partner. Shouldn’t he pay you more?”

“He said I have to make it on my own. I was lucky he got me a job at his firm at all.” Janice stared into her half-empty coffee cup.

They had known each other since their last year of high school. It was the longest friendship she had ever had with anybody. *Besides Danielle*. Madison shook her head to get rid of the memory and focused on Janice instead. They had never slept together. Maybe that was the reason why their close friendship had lasted so many years. *Close friendship? Really?* In this moment, she had no idea what Janice might be thinking. *It doesn’t matter what she thinks. Focus!* Madison extended her hand. “I bet you one hundred

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thousand dollars that not only will I go through with it, but I will also get what I want in the end.”

Janice’s eyes widened in an almost comical way. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Why? Afraid to lose?”

“Ha. Never.” Janice hesitated but then grabbed Madison’s hand. “Ten. I bet you ten thousand dollars that something will go wrong. Either you don’t get the waitress to do it, you mess up, or your grandmother won’t fall for it.”

“Deal.” Madison pumped Janice’s hand wildly. After she let go, she ate the rest of her pie. A giggle threatened to escape her lips. Yes, this would be a piece of cake or, in this instance, perhaps a piece of pie. She stood up.

“Where are you going?”

“Where do you think? I have to ask where I can find my better half.” Madison strolled to the counter.

Less than five minutes later, Janice couldn’t stop her snickering while they walked across the parking lot. She stopped abruptly and tapped one finger against her lips.

“What?” Madison growled.

“Oh, I was just thinking about what to do with my ten thousand dollars when you lose this bet.”

Madison clenched her fists. Everybody could be bought. So why hadn’t the stupid guy at the diner told her where to find Sherry? *Who cares?* She wouldn’t give up so fast. “Hold your horses. The game has barely started.”

“If you say so.”

Without giving her a second glance, Madison stomped toward her BMW convertible. She pressed the key fob, tore open the door, climbed in, and pulled the door closed with more force than necessary. As soon as the engine was running, she sped from the parking lot as fast as the car would allow, her hair flying in the breeze.

Think! Where can I find her? Her son was sick. *Yes! That’s it.* Sherry would take him to a nearby hospital. It was at least worth a try.

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CONTRACT FOR LOVE

BY ALISON GREY

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