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THE MARRIAGE AUCTION

BOOK ONE



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AUDREY CARLAN

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By Audrey Carlan



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Editor: Jeanne De Vita

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Dedication

*To future me...
Look what you're capable of.*

Episode 1

Faith No More



FAITH

I would not cry. I'd shed enough tears over the past four years to fill an Olympic-sized pool. This step, however morally corrupt, was *me* taking control of my destiny. Ensuring the ability to provide for those I held close to my heart and escape the devil who would destroy any hope I had for a future.

“Sign here, and here.” An elegantly dressed woman who looked somewhere north of fifty pointed to the newest set of signatures that would be required on the lengthy contract sitting on the table before me. Her silky black hair was pulled back into a knot at the nape of her neck. The red suit she wore fit her slinky, thin form as though it was tailored to perfection. Probably was. The woman reeked of money, clout, and an air of importance. From the slick hairdo down to the four-inch spiked black stilettos that she walked on with zero concern for balance, this woman was filled with confidence. Something that had been beaten out of me over the last few years.

I swallowed against the sudden dryness in my throat and scanned the page more thoroughly before adding my signature. It wouldn't do me any good to not fully understand the parameters to which I was literally signing my life away.

Three years.

Over a thousand days.

By the time the contract was up, I'd be twenty-seven and rich. Losing three years of my youth didn't matter to me. Losing three years with those I loved was a harder pill to swallow. I gritted my teeth and re-read one particular section of the contract. This part reiterated what I was willingly committing to for the next three years.

Faith Marino agrees to the following:

- Serve as “wife/husband” to the highest bidder for a period of three years.
- Consummate the marriage agreement within fourteen days of the marital ceremony.
- Regular sexual intercourse with highest bidder as defined in Amendment A.
- Host and attend events as desired by highest bidder.
- Travel as requested.
- Reside in dwelling(s) provided by highest bidder.
- Participate in all required public relations/networking/media events as a happy, willing mate to highest bidder.
- Serve as “stepmother/stepfather” to any progeny highest bidder may have in his/her care.

My breath caught as a scratchy, ugly sensation swirled in my gut at reading that line item. Children had been mentioned only once in the inch-high stack of papers that comprised the insanely detailed contract I was signing. However, I’d focused my attention on the references to any accidental children that might come of a marriage where regular sexual encounters were involved. I wasn’t concerned with that part as I had an IUD to prevent accidental pregnancies. My heart started pounding as I lifted my head to look at the beautiful woman who’d introduced herself simply as “Madam Alana.”

“Excuse me, Madam Alana?”

Her inquisitive dark-eyed gaze snapped to mine from where she sat behind a glass desk that had nothing but a computer and a telephone on it.

“Yes, Ms. Marino?”

“Um, this part here. About being a stepmother to the highest bidder’s child?” Acid spun around like a vortex within my gut, but I held back the need to vomit.

She didn’t say a word, waiting patiently for me to spell out what I wanted to know—which honestly was all the more intimidating.

“Do a lot of the bidders have children?” I asked.

“A few, yes. Most of the bidders are aged twenty-five to forty-five. It stands to reason those men and women in that age bracket, with such

affluence, might have children, no?” A French lilt to her answer made her explanation sound beautiful, even if the reality was frightening.

“Is it possible to ensure that I do n-not get a bidder with a child?” My voice cracked, clearly exposing my fear as much as I tried desperately to hide it.

Madam Alana narrowed her gaze. “No. If you are not willing to accept every item as highlighted and fully explained in the contract, perhaps this lifestyle is not for you.”

Dread, cold and slick, slithered over the surface of my skin.

I needed this deal.

It wasn't only my life that depended on it.

I would need the money and power behind every bidder in the auction if I wanted to survive the situation I'd found myself in. Not signing wasn't an option. I'd chosen this path as it was the surest way toward having the life I wanted, and it provided the funding I urgently needed. The initial deposit would go into my account the very minute the buyer signed and paid for his prize.

Me.

That money would go a long way, and I had to stick to the plan.

The fear, the disgust of selling myself in a way that felt very much like high-priced prostitution and self-degradation, was nothing compared to what I'd already lived through. Most importantly, it would give me what I wanted more than anything.

A way out.

The exhaustion, the endless hours of running, looking over my shoulder, and the infinite worry for the one soul who mattered more than any other would end tomorrow night.

One more day.

I skimmed over the rest of the highlights in the enormous contract. Basically, I was signing my life away for three years. I would no longer be Faith Marino, daughter to beloved father, Robert Marino, who'd lost his young wife to a drug overdose, leaving me, my father, and my younger sister behind. Instead, I'd be a trophy wife to the highest bidder.

Thinking of my father broke my heart in half. The man I adored and put on the highest pedestal would hate what I was about to do, while still being kind enough to understand and give his unending support.

Hopefully whoever chose me, if I was chosen, would allow me regular contact with my family. These men were vetted as intensely as every candidate being put up for auction. And the best part? My secret would never be discovered, as no record of it existed. I'd ensured that fact by losing a part of my soul. A part I never wanted back.

As long as I could catch the eye of a willing bidder, I had the power to generate a minimum of one million dollars per year. A deposit of \$250,000 would be delivered in good faith the night of the auction. And if the bidding went higher than three million, I and those I cherished most would be set for the rest of our lives—with enough money to disappear.

Somewhere the devil himself wouldn't be able to find us.

I looked down at the last signature line and signed it with a flourish and strength I hadn't felt until that very moment. I was the master of my destiny now.

For the first time in a long time...I smiled.

Tomorrow night I would stand on a stage with several other hopefuls. Each with their own reason for selling their bodies and souls to the highest bidder at what the clandestine company that hosted the event called...The Marriage Auction.

Episode 2

Taking Out the Trash



RUBY

“Ruby, girl, you ain’t ever gonna amount to jack shit. It’s best you take that job on the pole as your stepdaddy suggests and earn your keep ’round here!” Momma’s scathing tone rattled around my head as I rubbed my eyes, tired from the endless paperwork.

I thought ho’ing myself out to Richie Rich would be a quick wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am type of situation. Apparently, people with money liked their hundred-dollar words a whole lot. Heck, half of the damn words in the Bible-sized contract I didn’t understand. And I’d been going through this detailed process of paperwork all week.

Taking a gander at Madam Alana sitting at her glass desk with her fancy clothes, pretty red nails that matched her outfit, and those heels that cost more than six months’ rent back home at the Sunnyside Trailer Park, I figured she might not look kindly at me asking for a dictionary or a phone that had Internet. My phone was a burner. Prepaid with exactly nineteen dollars and fifteen cents left on it, only used to call my baby sister to check in. Certainly not one of those thousand-dollar mini-computers people carried around pressed to their ears while the world passed them by.

Me, I didn’t care what the world had to offer. Nothin’ good had ever happened to me. Nothin’ good ever would. I grew up dirt poor, sucking back Pepsi instead of milk from a bottle, and with a druggie whore for a mother. It’s a wonder my teeth never rotted outta my head with the lack of real nutrition in my diet. Momma claimed she tried her best. If you called a roof over your head and a meal in your belly every other day taking care of your kids, she did do that. Kind of.

What she didn’t do was protect me or my sister from the horde of “stepdaddies” she rotated through the creaky, rusted door of our two-

bedroom trailer. When the door to me and my sister's room opened in the dead of night, I'd get up and shoo my sister into the tiny closet and out of sight. When he finally left me alone, I'd cry into her hair holding on to her until we both fell asleep.

For years I suffered so that my sister wouldn't.

Then at sixteen I got a job. I made sure my sister, Opal, was never in the house alone with Momma. I walked Opal to the library every day on my way to work and picked her up on the way home. I gave all my earnings to Momma and told her if she didn't stop allowing the abuse, I'd go to the cops. She took my money and left me and my sister alone. Mostly we were roommates with my mother and her parade of twisted men who could give her what she wanted most—her next fix.

The paperwork in front of me would bind me to another three years of whoring. But this was my choice, something I could do to escape the life my mother believed I deserved. I no longer felt shame in my decision to become some strange man's wife. Ruby Dawson was a survivor. A woman in charge of her own fate for the first time. If I had to secure my future on my back, so be it. I was ruined goods anyway. Garbage nobody wanted. If a man with a fat wallet wanted to dress me up and pay me to get his rocks off, parade me around his friends and colleagues as his arm candy, I'd act the part. Because ultimately, after my sentence was served, I'd be free.

The only thing that mattered was my sister. I would break my back. Bleed. Cut off my own arm to ensure her life was nothing like mine. Just nineteen, my sister had completed her first year at Glory Springs Community College. I'd never been more proud of anyone or anything in my entire life. But she deserved a better school and her own place to rest her head at night. I intended to make that happen for her. My sister was the smartest person I knew. She should have been in one of those big fancy Ivy League universities like Harvard or Yale. If we were different people, with a different upbringing, she may have been able to.

My sister got the financial aid for the tuition itself all on her own, but I was paying for the room she rented from a nice old couple walking distance from the school. Opal was going to be the first Dawson in our entire history that would amount to somethin' special. I'd make sure of it. The quarter of a million dollars that would go into my bank account—provided I was chosen tomorrow night—would set my sister up and pay for a university tuition and dorm far, far away from the shithole we grew up in.

Madam Alana placed two sheets of glossy paper in front of me, each printed with at least thirty or forty images of men. It reminded me of the one time I was questioned by the police and was asked to identify a criminal they were chasing across state lines. Only these pages had a lot more faces on them, and they weren't mug shots. Also, they didn't exactly look like criminals. These were professional photos like you'd see on a website of doctors or lawyers.

"These are all the men who will be bidding tomorrow night. You are allowed to mark the picture of one man who you will not marry based on sight alone, if you so desire," Madam Alana announced, gesturing to the pages.

I frowned. "I don't get it."

Madam Alana pressed her lips together as though annoyed. Not surprising. I'd gotten that look and press of lips a lot from my teachers back when I was in high school. I wasn't considered the sharpest tool in the shed, but get me on the street and I knew my way around better than most people.

"Every candidate up for auction gets to refuse one man or woman," she stated softly.

"There are women bidding?" I blurted as my mouth dropped open in shock.

A hint of a smile was her only response. "Women need partners too, whatever their sexual proclivities are. At our company we cater to all needs. And no one is being *purchased*. Each couple is entering into a legally binding arranged marriage that includes specific parameters and what I like to call 'perks.'"

"You mean money," I supplied with a grin.

"I mean benefits of *marriage*." One of her eyebrows cocked as though daring me to say otherwise.

"So why don't I see any female faces on these sheets?" I pointed to those in front of me.

"Because you've already completed the paperwork regarding your sexual proclivities and checked the box for heterosexual. That automatically reduced the pool of bidders to those of the opposite sex. Our goal is to pair like with like in the hope that the next three years for you and your future husband will be pleasant ones." She stared at me in that way other smarter people did when I didn't understand something they thought was simple.

"Cool," I whispered.

That response got me an actual smile. “Agreed.” She handed me a red Sharpie pen. “If you see an individual you do not wish to marry, mark a red X over their face. No questions will be asked.”

“Okay, um, thanks.”

I scanned each photo. There was a hunky Viking-type guy with long hair, a beard, and mustache. He might have looked rough around the edges or scary to some, but it was often the guys who looked normal that were the most twisted. All the men were good-looking, with nice teeth, heads full of hair, and nothing nefarious in their eyes. There were even a couple cowboys.

At the very end I got to a pair of men with dark hair and dark, sexy eyes that looked like identical twins. Except one wore glasses and kept his appearance more buttoned up, reminding me of my intelligent, book-smart sister. However, the guy next to him, obviously his brother, was too hot for words. Smiling wide in the image, he looked exactly like the type of cocky, womanizing guy who would talk to you sweet until he screwed you, then throw you away after. Even though he was the best-looking of the entire bunch in my opinion, I scratched a big red X over his image.

Not today, not ever, handsome.

“Are you ready to be taken to the candidate room where the others are?” Madam Alana asked.

“You mean I get to meet the other people up for auction?” I blinked in surprise.

“Yes. These individuals will be the only people who know exactly what you are going through. I suggest the six of you become friends.”

Friends.

The word battled against the uneasiness swarming around my mind and heart. I’d never had any friends. Only my sister.

Suddenly this decision didn’t seem so lonely.