

Candle Ford

Episode 2



JODY

KLAIRE

Candleford

By

Jody Klaire

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Episode Two: Dubious

Chapter 1

Some kids were just messed up.

I'd say that statement was all about me but then it'd be unfair to the fifteen year old kid slumped on the grass in front of me shaking and shivering.

"Withdrawal is a bitch, ain't it?" I asked and sat next to him. Kid was like his older sister, blonde, wholesome, handsome but his eyes were red, his nose was streaming and he hugged and rocked himself for comfort.

"Go 'way," he shot at me and went back to hugging his knees.

"No but if you're looking for something you need, I can always make sure you get some." I smiled, a fake smile, and his head shot up, his eyes filled with pleading and he grabbed my arm like he wanted to yank it off.

"Please... you know where I can get some?" He tugged at my arm again.

"Depends what you're looking for." I pulled my pack of cigarettes out and slid one in my mouth. "I'm always open to helping if you make it worth my while."

He nodded. "What do you want, anything... money? I can get you money."

Good kid, well trained. "How 'bout you feed me some information I need while I think about it?"

He swallowed and his Adam's apple caught my eye. It was the size I'd expect from a guy twice his age. Then again, he had the hair growth of a guy in his thirties, was starting to thin out on top and he was built. "What do you want to know?"

"What the fuck that quack was feeding you... I could make a fortune." I lit up and leaned back onto my hands.

"Something he gave me in ampules..." Jez fished one out of his pocket. It was empty but there were remnants in the little glass container. "I inject it... well he injected me with it." He handed it to me then grabbed his face. "He said it wasn't anything illegal. He said it was good for me."

"He was lying through his teeth, kid." I sniffed at the ampule. Sweet smelling, chemically fused with something. "Good shit doesn't give you cold turkey."

I dragged on my cigarette.

"Can you get some?" He licked at his chapped lips. "Can you?"

"Yeah, relax. Give me time to source it and I'll give you as much as you want." I winked at him as he breathed out a sigh of relief. "Problem is, you got a tournament to play in soon and I don't mean to break this hard but you look like shit."

Jez groaned. "I feel like it."

"You been feeling like it a while if that hairline is anything to go by." I motioned to the top of his head. "You're a bit young for a combover."

"Yeah. I started being sick when I tried not to take the stuff. Then I got sicker when I tried to detox it. I tried even lowering the dose but it didn't work. Nothing works. I take it or I get pain right through my body. Can't breathe." He sobbed into his knees. "It's hurting me and I can't stop it."

I studied him and something I really hate happened: I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry and suddenly this rich, pampered kid was just another slave and it cut right through my gut, took a freaking hard left and slammed into the hollow where my heart should have been. Ellen was bitch enlisting my help. She knew full well how'd react. I sucked on my cigarette until I got woozy with the nicotine tainting my braincells. Fuck.

"How 'bout I don't feed you this shit but find a way to cure whatever it's doing to you?" I muttered it. I felt like throwing the ampule in protest.

"You can?" He stared at me.

"I know people." I shrugged and held up the ampule. "Did Doctor Quack find out you knew what this was doing?"

"Yeah, he went nuts. We had this huge fight, he wanted me to... he wanted... but I couldn't... he said if I didn't, he wouldn't give me the dose and then I wouldn't make it." Jez sniffed then shuddered and shivered. "I didn't though."

“Wanted you to what?” I had a pretty strong idea forming and I was going to beat Ellen.

“Stuff for him... I don’t like guys.” He sniffed again. “I didn’t think he did... it was just so weird.”

“When was this?” I finished my cigarette and lit another. Chain smoking was a speciality of mine.

“The night he died. He tried to touch me, man, like there.” He flapped his hands around then sniffed again. “I smacked him one.”

“Don’t blame you.” I’d have smacked people more if I could have but it’d been hard to as a kid and even harder seeming as they tended to shoot anyone who argued. “He didn’t make you pay him for it before?”

“No... that’s what freaked me out. I mean the guy had girls... like loads... they were always staying at his place.” He wrinkled up his mouth. “It just... it spun me out.”

“He get back up when you hit him?” I offered him a cigarette.

He took it and broke it in two. “These are bad for you.”

Waste of a cigarette. “Says the kid injecting shit.”

He hugged himself.

“So, did Quack get up or did you kill him?” I took papers from my pocket and repaired the cigarette. Easily fixed.

“He got back up, told me he’d cut me off, that he’d tell people I was doping. I said I’d go to the police and he stopped.” Jez glared at me rolling the nicotine from the broken cigarette in the nice new paper. “He said I wasn’t that stupid. I told him I was... then I felt sick and hugged the toilet all night.”

“He was alive when you left him?” I finished my masterpiece and slid it into my cigarette pack.

“Yeah. What else do you have in that. It doesn’t smell like a cigarette.” He looked me up and down.

“Again, coming from the kid with the shakes.” I rubbed at my chin. “You sure you didn’t kill him?”

“Completely. I would have if I hadn’t been so sick...” He sighed then blubbered. “Maybe... I just wanted him to leave... I just wanted to talk to Joely. She’s good, you know? She always knows what to do.”

“Yeah, older sisters can be pretty awesome.” Mine was beyond awesome. “Did you talk to her?”

He nodded. “Yeah, this morning. She went nuts.”

I stood up and shook off my legs. “Don’t blame her. Hang tight, kid, I’ll go see if we can fix your problem.”

I strolled off and pocketed the ampule. This was not going to be a fun conversation.

Chapter 2

I sat in Ellen's on the sofa with my phone in my hand. I guess I'd sat there for a good while because Ellen headed in with grocery bags and I'd sat down just before she'd left.

"You look dynamic," she muttered amidst stowing the haul of food away. She actually bought it. I couldn't ever remember buying food. You stole food. I just didn't get that someone would let you walk in and walk out with it just for money.

"Yeah." I pocketed my phone. I didn't need to be nice to Jez. I was there just to get rid of the body.

"You look like I just stole your cigarettes." Ellen threw a bumper pack onto the table. "Just a hint, but the big warning print tells you it's stupid to light up."

"I thought it was just to make it look pretty." I snatched the pack before she had second thoughts and peered over her shoulder. "Any scraps?"

Ellen pulled open the fridge and handed me a tub. "I made loads, any food that's in here is fine for you to take." She frowned. "There's no lock on this door, Aggie, we're a team."

"You'll never pull it off." I ripped open the lid and shoved my hands into the lettuce.

"I didn't mean the pretence. I meant that you kept me fed as a kid." She smiled at me as though somewhere in her head that made sense.

"Food's food." I licked the mayonnaise off my palms as she watched me. "What?"

"Nothing, I'm just glad you're eating." She turned back to her task. "So who are you finding so difficult to call. I didn't think you'd fleeced your probation officer already."

"Oh no, I did." I nodded and shovelled more salad in. "I got his savings, he doesn't get done for coming onto me, we're good."

“Did you lure him in or just opportunistic?” Ellen said it like she was sad about it.

“I lured him, duh.” I shook my head. “Opportunistic?” I laughed and licked the plastic tub clean. “Why would the guy go for me now?”

“You’re still hot.” She shrugged. “Aggie, you could have your nose splattered halfway across your face with a snot and warts all over you and you’d still rock most people’s boats.”

“Whatever, you’ve seen me naked, that marred your innocence.” I poked my tongue out and slid the box out. “Don’t suppose you got more?”

She smiled, took the box and handed me a new one from the fridge. “You didn’t mar my innocence, Sven did.”

I dropped the box and salad flew all over the counter.

“Sorry, I’m sorry...” Ellen hurried to help me pick up the spillage. “I shouldn’t have said it, I went through therapy... I...”

I shoved the salad in before it flew anywhere else. It didn’t taste so good off the floor.

“Aggie... I mean it.” Ellen stilled my hands. “You get she got rid of him... them... both?”

“Stop it.” I backed up, clinging to the box. “Just stop it.”

Ellen nodded. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

I shrugged and licked the box clean. “Me too.”

She held my gaze—I wasn’t the only one with scars—then she nodded and went back to putting the supplies away. I wiped my hands on my jeans and went to the sofa again and pulled out my phone. I knew the number I needed to call. I’d seen it posted in the right places in the same code we’d used as kids.

I didn’t want Jez to suffer. Not like Ellen or me or any of the kids who never got to walk away. Time to stop being gutless.

I dialled it, stared at the screen, hovering over the call icon.

Clunking sounds from Ellen, cupboard doors shutting, opening, bags rustling. Green call icon... screen had smudges all over it. Needed a clean.

Ellen opened the fridge and stowed something glass away... milk? It clunked against the other glass bottles.

Fuck it.

I swiped to call, my fingertip leaving a sweat mark trail.

"Jessie Frei, how may I help you?" a young voice chimed from the other side.

I cleared my throat. Frei... Frei? Locks, my sister, called herself that, didn't she? So Jessie was... I bit my lip...

"You left a message." I sounded more crochety than normal.

"Mom," Jessie Frei yelled to someone. "Mom, you got a caller."

"Frei?" Lock's tone was curt, yeah, but I could hear the urgency in it. If I was being really sentimental, I might tell you it felt great to hear her voice.

"Yo." I looked at Ellen who hugged herself. "You paged me for something?"

"Yes. You owe me a good explanation." And big sister was trying for bossy and landing at "I miss you."

"Sure, I owe loads of people good explanations, get in line." I smirked. I'd been a quiet kid, Suz was the mouthy one, I wasn't sure what Locks would make of my attitude.

"I saw. Ten countries to be exact." Locks let out a sigh. "It's impolite of you to keep leaving before I can get there to yell at you."

"You're the one who got taught nice manners." I fiddled with the tips of my fingers. They had yellowy stains from the cigarettes, Locks wouldn't like that.

"True. You are in trouble?" Her tones were ever more clipped, always a sure sign she was emotional. Locks was the deep feeling one, the courageous one, the one who could face down any foe and liberate a whole freaking barrage of slaves. I mean, how did a girl live up to that?

“Always.” I laughed and smiled as I heard her soft chuckle. Like any kid sister, when I got a positive reaction from Locks, I felt like I’d landed a goldmine. “That’s not why I called.”

“I understand.” But she didn’t and she was confused. I could see her eyes, as icy as mine, flickering. Now I wanted a hug, ugh.

“I’m attempting to be you.” I rolled my eyes at myself as Ellen beamed at me. “Blame Ellen.”

“Ah.” Yeah, Ellen was always leading me astray and making me do nice things. Pain in my ass. “And what is it that she makes you do?”

“I have a kid who is tanked up on who knows what. Supplier just got nailed or maybe he dropped... who knows... but the kid is in trouble without the supply and I’d like to get him the...” Weird but I couldn’t swear when I was talking to her. “I’d like to get him off the stuff and well.” I stared at my fingertips again. “Don’t suppose you’re still doing that doctor?”

Locks grunted. Unimpressed with that then.

“Ah, well... I heard she had your ticket... you still got her number? She’s a genius, right?” I smiled. I’d heard a whole lot about Susan Gossett and her influence on Locks. I’d hoped they were still tight.

“Susan is right here. I will bring her and Jessie with me. I need your location.” Ooh, Susan was home and with Locks’s daughter. That *was* tight.

“Uh... well...” I wasn’t banking on *seeing* Locks.

“Got it, Mom. I’ll make sure the plane is ready to go,” Jessie chimed in the background.

Ah fuck.

“What is she, freaking gold group or what?” I scowled at my fingertips. Tracking people who were hiding was sly.

“Wood actually.” Locks said it with the kind of pride I heard rarely. Who was

proud of a kid in wood group?

“Are you kidding me? I got tracked by a reject?” I grunted and Ellen laughed. She laughed like she knew why I’d been tracked and was going to have fun telling me.

“You did indeed.” Locks chuckled in that warm way that made me feel all fuzzy inside. “It’ll take most of the night for us to reach your location, please make sure Ellen has enough space for us to work.”

She cut the line.

“Bye then,” I shot at the blank screen. “Why can’t she ever finish a call normally?”

“She’s related to you?” Ellen grinned at me then walked over and kissed me on the cheek.

“What was that for?” I muttered and then blushed. I never blushed.

“You’re brave and I love you.” She kissed me on the cheek again.

“You’ll never pull that off.” I looked around for who was sneaking in or spying for her to use her cover.

“It’s not for anyone’s benefit.” She kissed me on the cheek a third time. “I genuinely mean it.”

“And I need whiskey.” I stalked over to the liquor cabinet and poured a double. “I need a lot of whiskey.”

“She’s going to kick your ass, huh?” Ellen said from beside me and hugged me from behind.

“Yup.” I slammed back the glass. “Should be interesting.”

Chapter 3

A car roared up the road before it got light and my gut flipped, rolled and danced around as it slid to a neat stop next to my knees. I hadn't seen Locks for any length of time since I was captured. I'd seen glimpses of her when the slave owners threw parties and it had been like a bullet of hope fired my way. She'd stride into the room and no slave owner would dare look away. Tall, white blonde, short spikey hair and a "fuck you" attitude. Fearless.

The car door opened and that white blonde hair appeared first. She eased upward, gaze locked on mine. She shut her door and stood there like she owned the place. Yeah, she'd never been anyone's slave.

She flicked her gaze up and down me just once and nodded a curt nod.

I broke into a run and dived at her, tears pulsing out.

She gripped me back. "You scared me."

I clung onto her. I'd never heard her admit that she so much as worried. "I'm sorry."

"*Bitte.*" She rubbed over my shoulder. She smelled like cookies. She'd always weirdly smelled like some comforting treat but no, that was definitely cookie dough. "Don't ask," she said with a soft chuckle. "I have a friend whose mother likes to bake."

I peered up at her. "Does her owner let her?"

Locks brushed the fringe away from my eyes. "She has no owner."

"Guess she got clever then." I sighed. Some slaves were so valuable they bought their freedom. I was about two hundred million off my asking price... could take a while to raise that.

"No, she was never a slave." Locks smiled at me in the way she had when she'd snuck me food. "And you're no longer one so why are you running?"

"Actually, I am." I stepped back and reached for my cigarettes.

Locks didn't yell nor did she narrow her eyes, she just watched me light up. "How so?"

"I got sold... about five times in all... skipped out on the recent idiot by drugging him with his own produce." I grinned and took a long drag. "He's not really the forgiving type."

"Then give me his name and I'll make sure he finds his sense." Said like Locks would remove his anatomy if he didn't.

"It's fine, I'm good. Anyway... you been busy." I chewed on my lip but she just watched me, like she always had: calm, reassuring, strong and silent.

"Yes." She pulled me into another hug, squeezed, took the cigarette from me and smelt it, then stubbed it out with her boot. She tapped the top of the car. The passenger door opened and a woman with mousey brown hair stepped out and waved.

"Guess you're Susan, huh?" I said and waved back.

"Depends who's asking, I've made a lot of friends." She pulled forward the seat and a lanky teenager got out with hair like a bush.

"You're definitely related." I grinned at the familiar smile, the awkward stance, the utter beauty. We knew how to look good in this family.

"Oh wow - you're like the Aeron version of us." Jessie strode over and gawked at me. "How cool are you?"

"Insanely." I shrugged. "Who's Aeron."

"The hero that basically pulled mom from herself, brought down all the slave scum and she gives the best cwtches." Jessie nodded. "Oh, we're so gonna have to send her postcards. She'd love it."

Whoever Aeron was, she was clearly cool.

"Ellen," Locks said with the gentlest smile. "Thank you for assisting. Where can we set up?"

Assisting? I turned and narrowed my eyes.

Ellen shrugged. "I kinda didn't just find you but the problem was a real one?" She smiled up at Locks. "Hi, Locks."

Yeah, Ellen would have been way more convincing saying she was hot for my sister. She didn't need any face for that. Hah.

"Hi, Locks," I shot at her in a whiny voice. "I love you, Locks." I made kissing sounds then stuck two fingers in my mouth in protest.

Locks smacked me across the back of the head.

I narrowed my eyes. I hadn't missed that part of our sisterly love.

Ellen scurried to pick bags from the car helped by Jessie who had launched into Dutch – wasn't sure why – and Susan who went between Dutch, German and French alternately.

"English too boring?" I mumbled at Locks as she took my elbow and guided me toward the house.

"You ever worry me like that again and I will introduce you to Renee. She is very good at making people do extreme fitness drills." She glared down at me and gripped me by the collar. "I am not impressed with this decoration or your habits and I'm unimpressed with your behaviour."

"Thanks for the support." I shook her off. "I like my ink."

"I meant the scars they are hiding." Locks took my arm and held it for me to examine it. "What made you try such a foolish thing?"

I tugged my arm free. "I felt guilty, okay." I shoved my sleeve down. "It was my fault the kid got shoved in that room and I wasn't letting him get cut to shreds."

"Yes, but that doesn't explain why you did the same thing several times and didn't learn." Her voice wasn't as hard now but like a mother trying to reason with a child.

"Because I had you as a big sister and that meant I had dumb ideas about rescuing people." I glared up at her. "I learned my lesson."

"I doubt that." She kissed me on the forehead. "You just need to be quicker."

She turned me around and marched me to the door. "Getting rid of the habit will help."

"I'm happy with my habits, thank you." I grunted it then shot another glare at Ellen carting the luggage up the narrow steps. Jessie and Locks studied them for a moment, then exchanged a look of understanding and Jessie headed up next.

Susan was in the living room having a conversation with the chair or at least it looked like it.

"That one speaks Norwegian," I said and pulled it out for her. "That's why it's not listening."

Susan examined me in the way only doctors truly could. "Is that so? I don't know any Norwegian."

"Me neither." I pulled out my cigarettes. Locks took the pack, crushed it and threw it in the recycling.

Did I say I missed my sister?

"You have a sample of the substance you called about?" Locks said and pulled out food from the fridge, she put it in the microwave and pulled out five plates.

"Yeah." I pulled the ampule out and handed it to Susan. "There's some left in the bottom. Nothing I recognise by the smell."

Susan studied me as Locks set the table and added cutlery. "You use substances?"

"Trust me, I got pumped with a lot of things... some were worse than others." I pulled out a chair but Locks hauled me back up by the scruff.

"You wash before you eat." She shoved me at the bathroom. "And don't think I'll let you eat with your hands."

"Hey, I'm..." I didn't really know my age but it was older than I'd been when she told me what to do. "You can't tell me what to do."

"I can and I will. Move."

I folded my arms.

She needed one look, *that* look. The look she gave me as a kid when I messed up. I hated that freaking look.

“Going,” I muttered and stomped toward the bathroom and a staring Jessie. “You get this...” I glanced back at Locks who was eying me. “You get heckled too?”

Jessie pulled an “eh” face. “Not really, I’m housetrained.”

“How, you were in wood?” I was in silver and I never got housetrained.

“Aeron and Renee,” Jessie said with a smile. “Oh and Aunt Bess.”

“Who the fuck are all these people?” I felt the smack to my head before Locks hit me with it, I swear. “Yeah, yeah, no using strong language.”

Jessie patted me on the shoulder. “You’ll get there.”

“That’s if I don’t lose all my braincells first.” I shot Locks’s way and headed into the bathroom. I washed my hands and scrubbed at them, then stopped. Felt good Locks was around. I beamed and leaned my head to the mirror. Really good.

Chapter 4

I headed by the tennis courts and threaded my fingers through the mesh border. Joely was busy in a rally with her coach, Laney. Joely's physio was sat on the side next to the water bottles examining his phone. I pulled out my phone and scanned for his, then hacked and downloaded everything from it. Easy.

Sergio was in his late forties, French and Italian heritage yet he had an Eastern European accent. He had been a physio on the circuit for a good fifteen years. He had no money to steal – disappointing – and he had been investigated for an inappropriate relationship with a female player five years before he was hired by Joely. There was no outcome to the investigation listed.

Perfect.

I strolled over and stopped behind him. He shifted in his seat like he could feel me there and was trying to ignore me.

"You know, it'd be funny if Joely ever found out you should be in jail." I nodded to Joely who snapped her head up at my voice and blushed. If my sister could charm Ellen, I was onto a winner with Joely. I didn't even have to try. Where was the challenge in that?

Sergio's shoulders hunched but he kept staring at his phone.

"It'd also be funny if I gave the investigators the evidence that you killed Doctor Quack to stop him telling on you and Joely." I was fishing, time honoured sport for my kind of trade.

Sergio turned to glare at me. "I did not kill him."

And he'd lost his accent and turned into an Italian. "No? Because I'm happy to let the police figure that one out."

"Joely, concentrate," Laney shot across the net.

"Sorry," Joely mumbled.

“They have nothing to figure out. I had nothing to do with him dying.” Sergio’s feet shifted like they disagree – leakage as psychology would call it – probing was required.

“I think they do. I mean, you’re very protective of your client... maybe in case someone realises you have your dirty hands all over her.” I raised my voice enough that Laney glanced over. “Maybe some thorough investigation will provide more answers?”

“Keep your voice down.” Sergio glanced over at Laney and offered a tight smile. “If Laney thinks anything of the sort, I’ll be fired.”

“Yeah, and your client is a real meal ticket.” I pushed off the mesh. “Would be a big blow to your non-existent finances.”

Sergio’s feet shifted again. They could do a dance all on their own. “Who are you?”

“Someone who likes to keep their own meal ticket happy.” I popped a cigarette in my mouth, half expecting big sister to smack me over the head. “Spill it or I tell Laney you’re doing her.”

“I’m not doing her.” He hissed it at me. “I married the girl, okay.” He glanced both ways then leaned forward. “She wasn’t underage, she was eighteen, I was twenty two, but her parents wanted her listed as younger so she got more attention.”

How sly. Sounded like something I’d do.

“We were happy. I still love her but she was forced into a corner: either she stayed with me and told the truth or we had to annul the marriage as if I had married a fourteen year old.” He rubbed at his scraggly facial hair. “She chose tennis.”

“Ooh, bet that hurt.” I took a drag of my cigarette and groaned in relief.

“It did more than I can say.” He rubbed at his hair again. “I had to pay the detective off... I have nothing but she has her dream so...” He shrugged and dropped his hands into his lap. “She is engaged to some slick basketball star now.”

“Doctor Quack threaten to rat you out?” I winked at Joely who, with her back to

the net, hit the ball between her legs which flew past a stretching Laney and into ad court beautifully.

“Yes, he threatened a lot of things but he was a charlatan and I told him that if he tried it or went near Joely with his treatments, I’d have Jez tested properly and see him in jail.” Sergio swiped his long finger through the air just to emphasize it. “He was a slug.”

I’d never heard that insult before but it worked. “Well someone threw salt down and if I’m going to make it disappear I need the truth.”

Sergio nodded. “I argued with him, I knocked two of his teeth out when he said he’d have Joely over his knee.” He screwed up his face. “Disgusting man.”

“Yeah, turns out he had a thing for Jez too and Jez thought he’d knocked his teeth out.” I grinned. “So one of you is a big fat liar.”

“Jez is extremely homophobic. I can assure you Doctor Roland was very like minded. He just wants you on side.” Sergio shook his head. “Do not take anything that boy says at face value.”

“Because he’s doping?” I asked. Jez could have been lying, that was always a certainty, especially if he thought it would get him a fix but he hadn’t been lying about wanting to get away Doctor Quack.

“He is cheat and he is happy to cheat. He knew what was being done. No honest athlete injects themselves.” He wagged his finger.

“Oh so you know he injected? Because Joely just thinks he eats plants.” I raised my voice a touch again and Joely looked over this time. She missed a shot in the process.

“Joely!” Laney barked.

“Yeah... sorry...” Joely held my gaze then wandered off to retrieve the ball.

“It starts with the diet. That is good sense any nutritionist could provide. Then come tablets and infusions and injections.” Sergio folded his arms then wagged his phone. “It happens so much. Jez is nowhere near the player Joely is and will never be.

Joely trains hard, pushes her body but wisely; she focused and single-minded... usually." He pursed his lips at me. "She is a true athlete with a brilliant mind. Jez is a brat with a big serve."

"I'd have a big serve if I looked forty too." I stubbed out the cigarette with my boot. "When did you see Quack the night he died."

"I punched him around eleven when I caught him near Joely's room. Creep had a camera." I took it from him and he stumbled toward the kitchen.

"Joely, you need to focus!" Laney was getting mean.

I held up my hands. "I'd better run before we get another fight." I winked at Joely once again and strolled back toward the house. Camera, we'd need that camera and I knew just the thief to steal it.

Chapter 5

Dinner at Ellen's was a busy affair. You know, five grown women huddled around a laptop in the middle of the table. Common practice for Locks, Susan and Jessie it seemed because they were waving forks and tapping without dropping a piece of rice.

I wasn't having as much luck. I wasn't good with a fork. I wasn't sure how you used a knife and fork at once without food going everywhere. I could pick locks, pick the minds of people, hack a bank account but eating with utensils... why?

"It's simple algebra," Jessie muttered to Susan. "Don't you think?"

"I can give you simple algebra," I said as my rice flew over the table, again. "Y equals WTF."

Jessie snorted, then schooled her features as Locks glared at me.

"What does that mean?" Locks studied Jessie who was gonna cave.

"It's text speak." Jessie flashed me a cheeky smile and went back to her food.

"That was not my question." Locks narrowed her gaze.

"What the... fluff," Jessie mumbled, stifling another grin and went back to the laptop. Susan was pulling her mouth into a thin line.

"You would get on with Renee," Locks muttered and went back to the screen.

"Are you sure this is a certain result?"

"Yup." Jessie tucked her hair behind her ears.

"I would add that the substance is aimed at strengthening the ion channels in order to sustain the oxygen absorption and therefore enhance strength, recovery and of course, lengthen stamina." Susan wagged her fork through the air. "The issue is that somehow it then damages the channel which needs a stronger supply of sodium or potassium to function."

I had enough trouble eating my rice let alone figuring out WTF Susan was saying.

“But to hide the substance from any test, there is a separate process that seeks to lower the levels after exercise,” Jessie added.

“Again, how were you in wood?” I gave up with my knife and fork and just stuck my head in my rice. “I’m not eating with my hands.”

Locks raised an eyebrow.

Gravy stung when it got up your nostrils.

“Will a spoon help?” Ellen handed me one with a smile. “I started with a spoon.”

“Swot.” I snatched it off her and tried with the spoon... then got more on the table than I did in my mouth. I threw down the spoon, snatched up my plate and stalked up the stairs. I camped on the floor of Ellen’s bedroom – Locks, Susan and Jessie had taken the others – and ate the good old fashioned way, with my hands.

“You are more angry than you were back then,” Locks whispered from the doorway.

I kept eating. She might steal it or slap me and I’d lose more rice.

“I tried to get to you,” she said and said opposite me, cross-legged. “I tried to get you back.”

“I know. You were never going to win. He told me that if you raised the money, he’d shoot me in front of you, then he’d shoot you for the insult.” I finished my plate and burped. “You were close to getting the funds, I knew it, so I ran. It was the only way to protect you.”

“And yet you pretend you have no conscience.” Locks pulled out a tissue from that battered old jacket of hers and wiped over my face.

“No, I have a conscience, I just ignore it.” I shrugged.

“I don’t think that is the truth.” She beamed at me.

“Whatever.” I waved it off and pushed my knees down to the floor with my elbows. “You get that one from Aeron or Renee or Aunt whoever.”

“Yes.” She smiled at me and pulled the same stretch. “Renee and Aeron are

beyond family. They are like Ellen is to you.”

Some connection. “They are?”

“Yes, I’d love you to meet them sometime.” She eased up onto her palms and stretched out her legs to hold herself off the floor. “You would enjoy working out with Aeron.”

“She got muscles too?” I followed her into position.

“Bigger.” She winked and eased her body upwards to a handstand.

“Cool.” I wobbled up. I wasn’t as steady as her. That was a good description of how we differed: She was steady, I was unstable and nowhere near as strong.

“So what is your assessment of the situation?” She lifted one hand from the floor.

“Doctor was killed. No way he died without help. We have seven suspects... There’s the three siblings: Jez who is the addict with a grand slam to win; Joely is either seriously in love or hoping I think so to hide something; James is bitter. I would guess Jez is too but we’ll see.” I rolled onto my finger tips. “Then you have Laney, the coach, she’s an ex-player and protective. She hated the doctor or at least was passionately against his cheating. There’s Sergio, the physio, who was married to Joely’s biggest rival and James’ wife who is some model.”

Locks smiled at me. “But that is only six.”

“The other one is the blusher downstairs.” I tried to lift one hand free but kept wobbling. “She’s called me in because she’s worried. I don’t get how if she was feeding you information because if she’s still a slave, you’ll have pulled her free.”

“I only do that if I’m asked to.” She met my eyes and took my hand, lifting it free yet holding me steady. “I can only offer my hand but you have to take it.”

“And she hasn’t?” I linked my fingers with hers.

“No, she feels some loyalty to this man. He’s worked her.” Locks sighed. “Much like whoever you run from is working you.”

I nodded. “Guess we will just have to figure it out ourselves, huh?”

Locks held my gaze and gave my hand a squeeze. "Yes, but unlike before, now you have me to hold you steady."

She let go of my hand and I was able to hold my balance in a way I hadn't since I'd been dragged away; since I'd seen Suz gunned down; since I'd heard gunshots and watched Locks buckle next to Suz.

I thought they'd killed Locks too. I thought I'd lost them both. That moment had changed me, scarred me, forced me to stand alone and look the men who'd ripped my family from me in the eyes.

And Locks had stopped them; Locks had faced our monster and kicked his ass. Now she was here, quiet, strong, doting and bossy.

Guess I don't have to repeat that I really loved my sister.



About The Author

Jody Klaire has been everything from police officer to musician before finding her home in writing. She has published eleven books including the award winning *The Above & Beyond Series* alongside romantic comedies such as *Best Maid Plans*. She lives in South Wales with her golden retriever, Fergus, and other furry friends.

You can find her in a few places:

Website: jodyklaire.com

Facebook: /jodyklaireauthor

Twitter: @jodyklaire

Instagram: Jody Klaire

Other works by Jody:

Thrillers/Crime/Action

-*The Above & Beyond Series*

1. *The Empath*

2. *Blind Trust*

3. *Untrained Eye*

4. *Hindsight*

5. *Noble Heart*

6. *Black Ridge Falls*

7. *Full Circle* [Due for release Autumn 2019]

- *The Whistleblower* FREE downloadable series – Both series are available at:
jodyklaire.com [Look out for the book version soon!]

Romances

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Love's Bridge