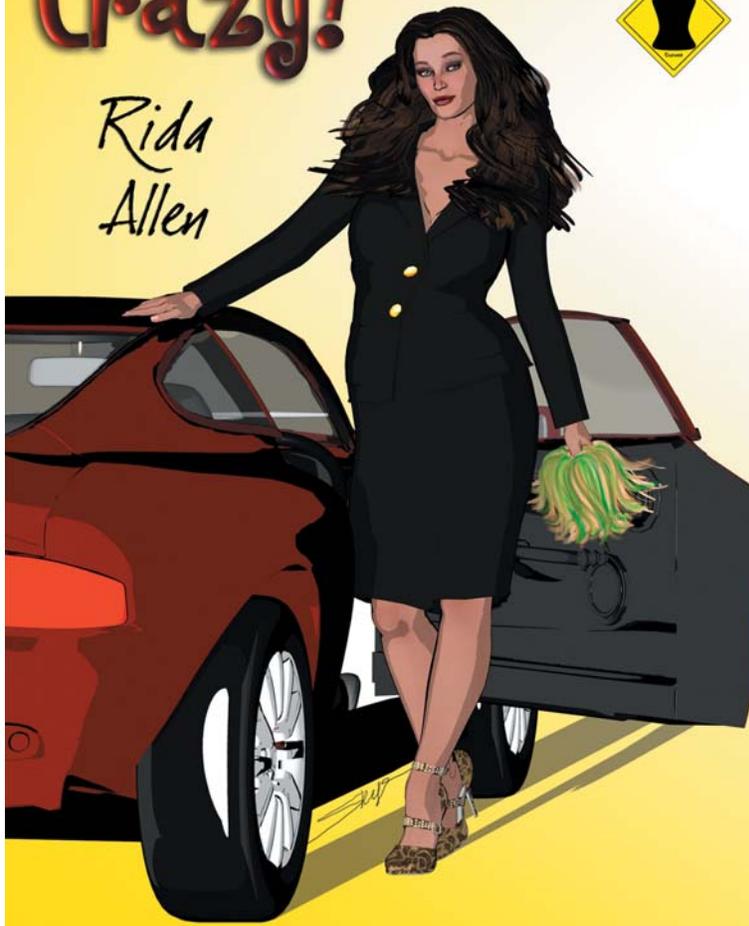


Driving Adam... Crazy!

Rida
Allen



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Crazy!**

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Rida Allen

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Dedication

To my husband, Rob, who thinks he doesn't make me
laugh anymore. In truth, I'm laughing on the inside,
honey. If I laughed out loud every time,
I'd never stop laughing.

I know, I know, would that be so bad?
But then your ego would be as big as...
well, you get the idea.

Love you.

Chapter One



Melinda Kowl ran her hand through her long unruly locks as she checked her reflection in the mirror. Her wavy brown hair seemed to be sticking out in all directions—that’s what she got for sleeping on wet hair—making her look a bit like Medusa on a bad hair day. The troll would have a fit if he saw her like this. Grabbing a nearby wig, she made quick work of tucking her own curls under the cap of sleek black hair. With a few strokes of dark eyeshadow over her eyelids, she looked clean and presentable. But after a moment’s study of her reflection, she ran some heavy eyeliner around her eyes to add a touch of sex appeal.

Down the stairs she flew, knowing she was going to get the evil eye for being late. The drive to work was short and within about five minutes, she was standing outside the troll’s office. Throwing back her shoulders, she rapped twice on the door, then pushed it open.

“Just because you knocked don’t mean you can waltz in without permission.”

She rolled her eyes and came to a halt right in front of his desk. “Yeah, yeah. What’s the deal today?”

Without looking up, he passed her a slip of paper. “Nice wig, by the way.”

Shrugging, she checked the address he had written down. She smoothed a hand over the silky hair as she asked, “Which one?”

“Seven,” he grunted.

With a nod, she turned away.

“And don’t think I didn’t notice you were late!” he called after her.

Her back to him, she rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t be late for your pick-up.”

She closed the door on his growl, the image of his balding head reflecting under the fluorescent lights lingering in her mind. Lucky for her, the troll had been in a *good* mood. Taking long strides down the hall, she found the keys to the number seven car and headed for the back door.

According to the troll’s note, she had enough time before her pick-up to get the car washed. As she walked past several cars, her gaze lingered on number three...the black Jaguar. The troll would never give her the J. He barely let black beauty out of the lot let alone place it in her hands.

Number seven, one of the several Town Cars on the lot, was a dark blue number, understated in its timeless elegance. She didn’t mind the Town Car, but what she wouldn’t give to get her hands on the J.

At the local carwash, Mel waved to the attendant as she handed number seven’s keys over to one of the employees. While the car was being washed, she checked her reflection in one of the windows. With her dark wig and the makeup, she almost resembled Katherine Zeta-Jones. Well, if KZJ were five eleven in flats and weighed twice as much as she had during her last pregnancy. Okay, maybe not quite that, but close enough. Still, her figure had nice round curves and in her black outfit, she looked tall and stately.

When the car was cleaned and dried, she slid behind the wheel and headed out.

At the upscale hotel, Mel spoke briefly with the doorman, then stood at attention next to the rear passenger door. She had

arrived on time, as she did for every assignment, but her pick-up was late. Her duty was to wait where she was until they arrived. This was almost as bad as airport pick-ups, but at least she didn't have to hold up a sign. The doorman would inform her client she was there.

A few minutes later, a dark-haired man came through the doors wearing what looked like casual business-wear. Normally, she was used to seeing men in suits and ties, but this client was wearing dark colored khakis and a maroon button-down shirt tucked into the pants. A brown belt and matching shoes completed his attire. Mel watched as the doorman pointed to her, and she leaned over to open the car door.

"Good morning, Mr. Wells," she greeted him.

He stopped and looked her over, a smile playing over his lips. Without a word, he ducked inside the car and she closed the door behind him.

After a quick nod to the doorman, Mel circled the car and slid in behind the steering wheel. "Mr. Wells, my name is Melinda and while you're in town, I'll be your driver." Looking at his reflection in the rear view mirror, she smiled when he met her eyes. "I understand your appointment this morning is at ten, so we have a few extra minutes if you need to stop anywhere."

"Stop?"

She turned the key in the ignition and the engine purred to life. "Yes, sir. If you'd like, we can stop to pick up some coffee, a newspaper, anything else you might want or need."

"I had a cup of coffee in my suite this morning, thank you," he said before dropping his head.

As she pulled the car into traffic, she covertly studied him in the mirror. Seeing him outside the hotel, she'd barely had a chance to notice he fairly towered over her, which meant he had to be at least six foot four. Other than that, she'd only registered he had short dark hair. What she hadn't seen before now were the streaks of gold shot throughout his brown hair, or the dark blue eyes that shone with intelligence and a hint of humor.

"You said you're going to be my driver for the entirety of my stay?"

"Yes, sir. So if there's anything I can do for you while you're

here, let me know. If you'd like, I can have coffee, pastries, and a paper ready for you in the morning to take along on the drive. If you need something picked up or delivered while you're in your meetings, I can take care of that for you," she explained.

"And will this be the car I'll be using the whole time?"

Nodding, she slowed to a stop at a traffic light. "Yes, sir. You can feel free to leave things in the car during the day. If you have presentation equipment, I can store it back at the office overnight so you don't have to remember to bring it down from your room every morning."

"You'd have to remember my equipment instead of me?" he asked almost incredulously.

"All part of the service, sir."

Adam watched Melinda for a minute, seeing the jet black hair caressing her pale cheek. "Well, luckily for both of us, I have no presentation equipment. I don't even have a briefcase."

She threw him a smile that lit up her eyes. "I noticed. That's sure not like any businessman I've driven around before."

Leaning forward, he studied her for a moment before settling back on the plush car seat. "So, Melinda, how long have you been driving limousines?"

"Actually, what I do is called 'car service,'" she explained. "And I've been doing it for seven years."

He was surprised. "Seven years? I'm assuming, then, that you enjoy your job?"

"Absolutely. And at this point, I have many return clients," she told him, pride evident in her voice. "I take care of my clients, and in return not only do I get great referrals to new clients, but the old clients ask for me specifically. I've even had a few change their business plans in order to have me drive them."

"Really?"

"Absolutely." She winked at him. "I bet after this trip, you'll be back and begging for more."

After her statement, she laughed, her eyes crinkling at the corners. The laugh bounced around the car, settling over him like a wispy cloud. She had a good voice, low and husky, and her laugh matched it. He watched as she whipped through the traffic, never

once frowning or scowling at other drivers. “While I’m up in my fancy shmancy, and boring, meeting, where will you be?”

“I’ll give you my beeper number so if you’re done early, you can page me. I can be back in front of the building within five minutes, otherwise I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.” She glanced at him again. “And by the way, if you find you need a larger vehicle, just page me with three zeroes and I’ll come back with a limo.”

He frowned, aware that she didn’t really answer his question. “Why would I need a bigger car?”

“Well, some clients like to take *their* clients out to lunch. If that’s the case for you, I can trade in the old TC for a limo so your ride can be taken care of. Makes for quite a fun three-martini-lunch when no one has to worry about driving.”

Once again, the laugh bubbled up out of her and wavered around the car’s interior. “I see. Well, I don’t anticipate having lunch with these guys, but thanks for the offer.”

She slid the car up along a curb, turned off the engine, and practically leapt out. His car door was opening before he even had the chance to register they had arrived at his destination.

As he straightened up outside the luxury vehicle, he noticed Melinda was no slouch in the height department, so to speak. Although he usually towered over people, in her short heels, he could touch his lips to her temple without bending. Shock slid through him almost immediately at the involuntary thought. Forcing himself to take a step away from her, he accepted the business card she was extending toward him.

“That’s my beeper number and my cell, too. If you find you’ve finished your meeting before the expected noon time, beep me on the way down the elevator and I’ll be waiting in front of the building,” she instructed. “If you’ve been delayed, you can beep me with three nines and I’ll wait to hear from you when you’re done.”

“Three zeroes means bring me the big guns, three nines means cool your heels,” he repeated.

“I knew you were a quick study.” She closed the door behind him, then leaned in closer to say, “Otherwise, you can always call my cell. I have it on twenty-four hours a day.”

Her spicy scent swirled around him and he wasn't even aware she had moved away until he heard her own door open and close. Without looking back, he rolled his shoulders and stalked toward the building and his first appointment.

Mel watched Adam walk away, thinking there was not a bad view on that man from any angle. Up close, she'd seen the dark, almost navy blue, of his eyes, along with the fine lines around them that told her he did indeed have a good sense of humor. His lips had looked firm and sensuous, and they too looked like they could dish up a hot smile.

Although she'd never gotten involved with any of her clients, it wasn't exactly forbidden. For the most part, she drove around older men who either treated her like a granddaughter or a brainless bimbo. No matter which, she knew how to play the part to make their trips fun and comfortable. The troll had never had a complaint on her timeliness or attitude, and she was going to make sure it stayed that way. He could bray and bluster about her arriving late to the office in the mornings, but she'd never missed a pick-up or had someone call him to say she'd been rude. And what she'd told Wells was the truth, she'd do his errands, bring him coffee, and even offer him a pair of slippers if that's what tickled his fancy. Not only did these actions bring her referrals and repeat customers, it often brought her the tips that helped to pay her bills.

Speaking of tips, she had some phone calls to make tonight to make sure her track record stayed in tact.

As promised, Mel was waiting for Mr. Wells when he finished his meeting. He looked exactly as he had that morning, crisp in a pair of dark khaki slacks and a dark blue button down shirt. Even his sun-kissed brown hair was unmussed, as if he had stood very still inside the front door of the building for the past two hours.

She had his door open by the time he reached the curb. "Afternoon, Mr. Wells."

"Melinda." He nodded and folded his tall frame into the backseat.

Waiting until he had tucked himself into the car, she shut the

door and rounded the hood to the driver's side. She started the car, then looked at him in the rear view mirror. "You're not due back until 2:30, sir, so where can I take you now?"

He blinked, almost as if he didn't understand what she was saying.

"Mr. Wells? Did you want to stop somewhere for lunch or go back to the hotel?" she offered.

"Would it be possible for you to call me Adam?" he requested.

"Oh, well, the thing is, Mr. Wells, it's policy that I address you respectfully. And if the troll, I mean, if my boss found out I called you by your first name, he'd have my head on a pike," she told him. "So your choice is 'sir' or 'Mr. Wells.'"

"I'm really uncomfortable with you calling me either of those things, and I think that's more important than whatever your boss might have to say. After all, my comfort is your responsibility, yes?"

Grinning, she shook her head. "Sorry, sir, but I have my orders."

"Even if I promise not to snitch on you?" He held up one hand, saying, "Scout's honor."

"Somehow I doubt you were ever a scout, sir."

With what sounded like a long-suffering sigh, he muttered, "Adam. Call me Adam."

"Did you want me to drop you off somewhere for lunch?" she asked again, avoiding the whole topic by refusing to address him at all.

He shrugged. "Why don't you pick someplace out, casual, and take me to it."

"Burgers?"

"Sounds good."

Nodding, she flicked on the turn signal and headed for her favorite haunt. "There's a joint right around the corner. Clean, food's good, beer if you want one, and reasonably priced."

He looked out the window as she made several more turns, then guided the big car into a small parking lot. With confidence borne of years of experience driving large cars, she zipped the car into a parking space and hopped out to open his door.

“Just tell the bartender I sent you and he’ll take care of you,” she instructed him.

“Whoa, wait a minute!” He grabbed her forearm as she tried to turn away. “You’re coming in with me.”

“Oh, no way.” Tugging at her arm, she frowned when he tightened his hand. His fingers burned straight through her shirt, making a tingle shoot up her arm and down to her breasts. Another jerk and she was freed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t eat with clients.”

“You’re telling me all those repeat clients, the ones you treat like kings, you never have a meal with them?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.” She inconspicuously rubbed the spot he had just released. “There are rules and policies I have to deal with, sir. And I have a job to keep.”

“Adam, it’s Adam,” he reiterated. “And I think you can spare a lunch without losing your job. Come on.” He wrapped his hand around her upper arm, practically dragging her across the asphalt parking lot and into the building.

It was darker inside, but light enough for them to see the bartender wave them toward the mostly empty booths lining the far wall. Without letting go, Adam made his way across the room and basically dumped Melinda into the booth. “Besides, you can’t leave poor little old me in a dangerous place like this.”

“Dangerous?” She laughed, great gulping guffaws. “The most dangerous thing here is the Cobb salad.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he muttered, pushing one menu across the table to her and taking the second for himself.

She played with the menu but didn’t bother to look at it. “Best thing here is a burger and a big plate of fries. I’d suggest the crispy seasoned onion rings, which are mm-mm fine, but you have a meeting later.”

“Then I’ll go with your first suggestion and get a burger and fries.” Without any further perusal, he replaced the menu and folded his hands on the table.

“Cheeseburger?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“What do you want to drink?”

He laughed. “Are you our waitress?”

Pushing out of the booth, she stuck her tongue out. “Coke?”

Beer? Coffee?"

"Coke." He watched her, amusement lighting his features, as she crossed the room to speak to the bartender.

When she returned, she was carrying two sodas and a clutch of napkins. "They've got great food, but their service stinks." Dropping the napkins, she set down his drink, then returned to her seat. "Zub's a nice guy, he cooks a mean cheeseburger and his onion rings are to die for, but his demeanor sucks."

"Good food, bad bedside manner. Got it."

They chatted briefly about the bar's decor, which was early garage, then someone called Melinda's name. The shout was accompanied by the loud clatter of dishes, which made her roll her eyes.

"Ketchup, mustard?" she offered.

"Both. And does he have any extra pickles?" Adam asked.

She pressed a hand to her chest. "A man after my own heart." She could feel his eyes following her as she crossed the dimly lit room to grab their plates. Setting their food on the table, she then disappeared behind a swinging door, only to return with condiment bottles and a bowl of round pickle slices for their burgers.

When she was settled back in her seat, he looked over the table. "You said no onion rings!"

She cocked an eyebrow at him, then pulled the bowl to her side of the table. "I said *you* shouldn't get onion rings. *I* don't have a business meeting this afternoon." With that statement, she snatched up a light and crispy ring and popped it in her mouth, whole.

They ate in relative silence, only stopping to discuss drink refills and the quality of the food they were consuming. Once they were finished, Melinda hailed the bartender with a wave.

"We're done here, Zub." Getting to her feet, she took one last gulp of her soda. "Excellent, as always."

The big bald man grunted and jutted out his chin. "Check?"

"I'll catch Nina next time 'round," she told him, ushering Adam toward the door.

"No, it's my treat," Adam argued. "I dragged you in here, I can certainly pick up the tab."

Melinda only waved at Zub and continued pushing Adam,

almost bodily, out the front door. "I'm here at least once a week, I'll pay Nina the next time I see her."

"That's ridiculous, let me go pay him!" He reached for his back pocket and froze. "Oh hell, I left my phone on the table."

She narrowed her eyes, then held out her hand. "Fine, then give me your wallet."

"What?"

"Give me your wallet," she repeated. "I don't want you going back in there and paying Zub for lunch."

He gave her a look, but handed over his wallet without comment. A second later, he disappeared back into the bar.

She waited for him outside in the sunshine and when he returned, he was holding up his phone. Flipping him his wallet, she led the way back to the Town Car. "So, you paid him, didn't you?"

"Of course not, I picked up my phone and came right back outside," he said as he slid his wallet back into his pocket.

"What did you give him? Twenty? Thirty?" Reaching the car, she unlocked the doors with a click and yanked the back door open. She turned to face him, leaning one arm across the top of the car. "How much?"

"Thirty bucks," he said sheepishly. "I couldn't leave without paying him, it's against my nature."

Tapping one finger against her bottom lip, she looked him over. "Don't you think I had a reason for doing what I did?"

"I guess I assumed you didn't have any cash with you. I sort of sprung this lunch date on you, so I was more than happy to pay for it. It's no big deal, Melinda. Thirty bucks is nothing for a lunch out." He patted her hand and ducked into the car.

She slammed the door, then spun around to sink into her own seat. "You assumed wrong," she said after sitting silently for a moment. "And I'm sure you'll be happy to know your thirty bucks are winging their way to the race track as we speak. And Nina, that's Zub's wife and the business owner, is going to be out the money."

Adam sat in silence, a stunned look on his face, as the car roared to life.